On the Rhetoric of Theory in the Discipline of Writing:  
A Comment and a Proposal

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This much we know: theory has dramatically altered the university's intellectual, if not its institutional, landscape over the last three decades, moving through the humanities and social sciences to remake knowledge in its own image. Once characterized by W.J.T. Mitchell as the "glamour field" in literary studies, theory has now become part of the grammar of literary and cultural study, where it no longer needs any qualification of its reference (literary theory or theory of discourse). Grand Theory has given way to what sometimes appears to be a kind of grandiose theorizing, where, for example, rather inflated claims are made about the far-reaching political power of, say, English studies—claims grounded, oddly enough, in an appeal to the privilege of partial perspective (see Fish; Haraway). In the eyes of many commentators, "the age of theory" has ended rather indecorously, which puts us in a "post-theoretical age" where the emphasis is on politics and history. Still, the legacy of the turn to theory remains—so much so that we have seen a spate of publications that catalogue and inventory theory and assess its effects in the humanities and social sciences—for example, Bothamley's Dictionary of Theories; Nelson's Academic Keywords; Kreiswirth and Cheetham's Theory Between the Disciplines; Arac and Johnson's The Consequences of Theory; Bove's In the Wake of Theory; and Docherty's After Theory.

Yet, in all the attention given to theory in such publications—many of which focus on literary studies—there is little mention of the role it has played in shaping the discipline of writing. Likewise, most recent histories and portraits of composition studies have inadequately observed the rhetoric of theory in the discipline (and disciplining) of writing—specifically, the role theory has played in furnishing new claims about the field and thus in shaping a new rhetoric and a new identity for composition studies that arguably becomes possible only
through an interest in theory. I refer, in particular, to recent efforts to draw composition studies into the postmodern age and redescribe it as a locus for social and political change. This new rhetoric may represent the latest effort to lift the persistent stigma that clings to composition studies—its definition as a service component of the university charged with doing the hard (because often "remedial") labor no one else wants to do.

In light of the fact that theory constitutes what John Rajchman calls "the world market of ideas," the influx of theories into composition studies may secure for the field what other efforts (and there have been many over the years) have failed to achieve: its place and recognition as an intellectual field. Theory may underwrite claims that once were not possible; however, there are enduring interests within the field that may also appropriate and deploy the terms of theory according to a logic that not only remains undisrupted by theory but that may also run contrary to its native interests. The interest in theory is really relatively recent. The first tentative and sporadic engagements with poststructuralism occurred in the early 1980s, and Marxist, post-Marxist, and feminist vocabularies have oriented inquiry for little more than a decade. Perhaps for this reason, we have not yet seen a sustained and meticulous effort to read the rhetoric (and the rhetorics) of theory in composition studies (notable exceptions are Dobrin and Schilb).

What we do see quite often is a conceptual introduction to various theories that have achieved some presence in the field (Bakhtin comes to mind here) and practical advice for implementing such theories in the writing class. The theory-boom has made increasingly popular, if not necessary, what I will call "the pedagogical introduction." NCTE's Teacher's Introduction Series, for example, has published five such books, including Sharon Crowley's *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* and, more recently, Ray Linn's *A Teacher's Introduction to Postmodernism*. Apart from its local uses, the pedagogical introduction inevitably makes a case for theory—for example, by supporting its movement from one place to another, by translating its foreign terms into a given disciplinary vernacular, and by securing the promise of its practical effects in the classroom. The pedagogical introduction takes on a gatekeeping role, in other words, operating as a kind of discursive Ellis Island, so to speak, naturalizing and domesticating theory's alien terms. The existence and need for the pedagogical introduction suggests to me that in composition studies there operates a form of intellectual and emotional blackmail that extorts a stance "for" or "against" theory that is both deeply divisive and, at this stage in the field's development, rather beside the point. Instead of wasting energy and resources in an effort to limit or extend the commerce in theory, we might profit from an investigation of theory's movement through composition studies. Today, writing is a discipline forged out of appropriations from a
surprisingly diverse and even dissonant array of discourses. This situation, to my way of thinking, makes urgent a study of what our appropriations reveal about the enterprise of writing, about the pedagogy of the field.

Here pedagogy refers not to specific instructional methods and classroom practices but to the general instructions a discipline issues, more or less explicitly, about what shall count as appropriate knowledge, instructions that express and safeguard the material and symbolic interests of the field, or the interests of the dominant group or groups that possess the power to set the terms of debate and discussion. We still have much to learn from the pedagogical places that arise from and form around our appropriations of theory—places that organize and differentiate "what might be said" from what must remain "unthinkable." Needless to say, this view of composition studies contrasts sharply with what I take to be the popular (and dominant) view, voiced by leading scholars, that the field operates in an open, inclusive, non-hierarchical, and radically democratic way because it opposes a unifying, dominant discourse.

The popularity of and preference for this claim alone suggests to me that we need a greater focus on the disciplinary discourse of composition studies, on the discourse that disciplines writing, on the discourse that writes the discipline. Insofar as theory has given our disciplinary discourse a distinctive inflection and accent, I would like to propose that we practice a particular relation to theory—one that is critical, rhetorical, resistant and, ultimately, thoroughly theoretical. "The rhetoric of theory" actually abbreviates my conviction that theory can (and should) be read rhetorically. My commitment to a particular way of reading arises from a sense that, in general, our disposition toward theory is not yet sufficiently rhetorical—on either side of the theory/practice divide. A rhetorical reading allows us to move beyond the resistance to theory, which has been a persistent and recurring feature of our discourse, but it does so without making us theory's unblinking constituents. Put simply, the critical advantage of a rhetorical reading is that it substitutes one form of resistance for another. It also produces resistance where apparently there is none.

Resistance to Theory, Resistance to Rhetoric

The resistance to theory has always been a matter of curiosity to me. I admit I have never felt roughed up by the one-two punch delivered in theory's often plodding jargon and wild abstractions, though I have suffered what Paul de Man has called "the vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" ("Semiology"). In other words, I have not always immediately grasped what a given theory is really "about" or if what it is "really" about makes much difference (practical or otherwise) in my life or work or in the lives of others. And theory should make a
difference, it always seemed to me, or the two extremes of adulation and hostility toward theory must be deemed truly abstract. Perhaps because I grew up in a world where people rarely said what they mean, or where they rarely said only what they mean and nothing else, theory has always seemed a little like one of the family—more or less strange, even slightly lunatic—rather than a menacing stranger, not to mention a menace to society. As a result, I have learned to listen longer and more closely or with a different ear, as one typically does with a difficult relative. The danger in such listening is not that one might go “theory-mad beyond redemption,” to borrow a phrase from Edgar Allan Poe, but that one might too quickly find redemption, so to speak, without having heard the range of possible questions that could be asked.

In what must now be a canonical essay on the subject of pedagogy and resistance, de Man makes a distinction between the resistance to theory and the resistance in theory (Resistance). This distinction is actually a Trojan horse of sorts, for it allows him to refigure the resistance to theory—which he identifies as a resistance to rhetoric, to the tropological “ground” of language and its vertiginous inevitabilities—and relocate it in theory. Resistance, in other words, is inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself because, given the rhetorical ground of language, theory cannot blanch its logic and free itself from trope and persuasion (17). A rhetorical reading, if it would keep itself honest and resist its own claims to truth, must therefore acknowledge that it is a form of advocacy; more importantly, it must actively resist the reading it advocates (18-19). In what is now a standard deconstructive view, theory is a kind of anti-pedagogy, a discourse of resistance and self-resistance; its overarching obligation, to keep the critical process open and moving. Thus, it must remain a principal place of struggle and refuse its commonplace limitation as a repository for instruments or methods of explanation and interpretation. In making a theory an instrument for interpretation—a set of conceptual tools that are ready-to-hand—we place its terms outside the critical process where they enjoy the privilege of determining the process. To the extent that theory goes unquestioned as the eyes with which we see, its terms are confirmed and we find precisely what we are looking for—ultimately, our own image confirmed in the symbolic mirror provided by theory.

This view complicates the practice of appropriation immeasurably, for it means that a rhetorical reading of theory must go beyond even the comprehensive explanation and compelling interpretation, beyond the vigilant demonstration and the useful application. This view poses what I think is a crucial difficulty that composition studies must confront—which, as a field, increasingly invests in the discourse of theory, especially in theory’s practical implications for writing instruction. In the last decade, the alien terms of theory have met with less and less
resistance and, although they are not always entirely familiar, they have nevertheless passed into the common sense of composition studies where they shape the content and conduct of inquiry.

An investigation of the language and logic of theory as a convention of scholarship in composition studies might take its initial instructions from the rhetoric of inquiry, an interdisciplinary field or movement that redescribes the humanities and social sciences in rhetorical terms— for example, through recurrent figures of research and argument; characteristic claims and warrants; conventional narratives of discovery; typical invocations of authority and appeals to audiences (see Nelson et al. 4). In taking as its central premise the primacy of the category of rhetoric, the rhetoric of inquiry seeks a new metalanguage, though one that does not commit the errors of foundationalism. The rhetoric of inquiry represents a turn away from the objectivist disposition of philosophy and science in the modern era and moves toward the idea that reason is rhetorical, that thought is always situated by its interests and investments. The rhetoric of inquiry replaces modernist aspirations to a transcendent (and disinterested) criterion for truth with what it sees as a postmodern epistemology (or what is also called a rhetorical epistemology) that recognizes not only the contingency of its enterprise but also its intersection with aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Against modernist notions of method as the secure path to truth, the rhetoric of inquiry articulates its project, finding assistance in various antifoundationalist, postpositivist critical theories in an effort to redescribe method as one (historically privileged) path to persuasion and theory as a set of tropes that structure inquiry. The rhetoric of inquiry goes further than the deconstructive insight that the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language undermines straightforward grammatical meaning or that everything (from a specific behavior to an entire historical epoch) can be read as a text. Its most important intervention, in my view, is its effort to locate and situate a discourse in the place and time from which it emerges as a function of that place and time, as a response to it and as an expression of the constraints of that circumstance.

According to this view, then, disciplines are historical products—rhetorically constituted, that is, by distinct and changing investments in particular tropologies, structures of argumentation, and discursive objects. Just as a culture may be said to preserve itself in its language, an academic field constitutes itself around figures of research and argument that have the power to concentrate energy and propel inquiry. Traces of a history of a discipline can be read in changes in these authorized figures. Furthermore, in the process of generating its own rhetoric, a discipline develops and organizes a set of interests that are the condition of its functioning. A discipline is itself a site of struggle
over the interests that shall prevail. Behind a given figure of research and argument lies the interests that govern its invention or appropriation, and an inquiry into the rhetoric of a discipline will question whose interests are served by the continued use of an accepted figure. At a more general level, the governing interest of any field or discipline, as Pierre Bourdieu so acutely observes, is the interest in gaining recognition (Other Words; Language). Recognition is, in fact, the instrument and object of competitive struggles within a field. Bourdieu also identifies recognition as the specific form of symbolic capital that constitutes the currency in every academic field. Members of a field possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital—that is, in proportion to the recognition they receive from others.5 Symbolic power is not mere name recognition or even fame and celebrity; it is, first and foremost, the power of acting on the world (or some piece of it) by acting on representation (Language 106). The struggle for power in a discipline is always a struggle to define its limits and boundaries, a struggle to possess the legitimate terms of recognition and representation. This struggle over the legitimate terms of representation and recognition is what links (in a "family resemblance" relationship) the politics of English departments to the world outside the academy and the struggle of underrepresented peoples for political and social enfranchisement.

**Discipline and History**

The history of modern composition studies might be read as just such a struggle to establish the legitimate terms of recognition and representation, and our engagement with theory, it seems to me, represents the latest chapter. But this history might begin with the idea of process, to name a key example, which increasingly became a figure of thought and argument after Janet Emig's 1971 study *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Composition studies has generated itself from and sustained itself through an epistemic commitment to the concept of process which alone possessed sufficient strength to challenge the doxa of the field, to shatter habitual assumptions about writing and writing instruction. Process effectively dissolved the dominance of current-traditional rhetoric and its product-centered pedagogy of imitation and stylistic propriety, which made writing unteachable, and replaced it with a new representation of writing-as-process (developmentally staged or recursively enacted) and a new process-pedagogy. From the figure of process came numerous competing ways to represent composing that were recognized precisely because they promoted the figural possibilities and thus the value of the idea of process—for example, writing as a cognitive process of learning and discovery; writing as a collaborative process of negotiation and exchange; writing as a psychological process of self-realization and expression; and writing as a product, so to speak,
of social and political processes. Although no shared definition of the composing process emerged, or is likely to emerge, to bring unity and coherence to the field, there is a clear sense today that composition studies is itself a product of the influence of the figure of process. While a history of modern composition studies would include other figures that also propel inquiry, my contention is that today *theory* is not simply a name for a body of texts and approaches but is an important new figure of research and argument, one that defines the legitimate terms of representation and recognition in composition studies. If hegemony means the power to set the terms of debate, then today theory, and those who possess its terms, increasingly claim hegemony.⁶

At the very least, the increasing influence of theory in composition studies means that the field has joined a symbolic economy governed by theory which, in Rajchman's words again, is like the "Toyota of thought" ("produced and assembled in many places and sold everywhere"). As a new discipline (or subdiscipline) that emerges in the 1970s and 80s, writing should be (though it has not been) of general sociological interest to observers of academic culture and historians of disciplinarity who are otherwise fascinated by what the epistemological crisis wrought by theory has done to redraw the lines of inquiry in the humanities and sciences. Composition studies is, after all, one half of the story of the transformation of the discipline of English since the 1960s. Recent efforts to examine and to assess the changes in English typically account for the role that theory has played in changing the nature of literary studies in the last thirty years but leave composition out of the account altogether or give it only the briefest mention.⁷ Likewise, those principally involved in the rhetoric of inquiry, though they claim to represent most of the disciplines in the human sciences, show a willful disinterest in composition studies. Herbert Simons explains: "One hoped-for consequence of the new movement is that rhetoric will be taken up as a field of study at more and more universities, not just as an art of composition (as in all too many English departments) but also as an art of invention, judgment, and argumentation (*Rhetoric x*). Composition studies nevertheless offers an especially productive place for studying the many ways a field constitutes itself rhetorically—in general, through strategies of invention, judgment, and argumentation that are writ large in part because its relationship to literary studies has been so utterly vexed, when it has not been openly hostile, a relationship that is at times even more fraught by the increasing professionalization of both domains in the last fifteen years. Yet in this context, theory becomes both a key strategy and an important site of struggle, for in the 1980s it plays a crucial role in negotiating and securing the field's intellectual alliances with literary and cultural studies.
There will always be more to the story of composition studies than the internal workings of its language and logic, more than its struggle to establish affiliative relations with other fields. Its social and political formation should also be of general sociological interest, for composition studies is a visible effect of the transformation of higher education since World War II. This change is a response to the expansion of corporate capitalism and the corresponding expansion and proletarianization of the white-collar workforce (see Bowles and Gintis). To meet changing economic demands, higher education underwent a change in its social and economic role in which it shifted from a school for the elite to a place for training a new workforce. The restructuring of higher education involved both stratification (with Ivy league universities at the top and the junior and community college system at the bottom) and vocationalization and increased specialization of academic knowledge. Composition studies emerged at an important juncture in the history of capitalist modernization and in the context of the restructuring of higher education, a reorganization that might be described as the feminization of the university due to the greater number of women and minorities who become students and faculty. Composition studies represents a discursive formation—and, I would say, a compromise arrangement—made necessary by the further stratification (a.k.a. "democratization") of American society after World War II. Its position makes it, on the one hand, uniquely situated to undertake a sustained and serious confrontation with its role in reproducing and extending the social and economic order and, on the other, uniquely vulnerable to mystifications about its adversarial role in relation to dominant interests. Until very recently, composition studies has remained, on the whole, relatively disinterested in—perhaps even resistant to studying—its own social and political formation. Yet, today recent publications in the field have made the esoteric vocabularies of theory the indispensable instrument both of critique and mystification.

A focus on the social and political formation of composition studies, as well as its intellectual alliances, is crucial because it presses the rhetoric of inquiry beyond an internal study of the field's language and logic, beyond an examination of its knowledge-making practices, to a critique of its rhetoric and its relation to university culture and to society at large. The rhetoric of inquiry must go beyond setting itself up as a new metalanguage, beyond applying a rhetorical method to the study of a field of knowledge, and become a form of cultural critique—in particular, a critique of what Michel Foucault calls the disciplinary system of knowledge, or what Louis Althusser calls the ideological state apparatuses (especially educational systems) that support and perpetuate the distribution of power in a highly stratified society. Foucault's view is instructive here. Discipline is the great discovery of the
eighteenth century, and from this discovery emerges the formation of modern society as a disciplinary society. He argues that discipline works "on the principle of elementary location or partitioning. Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual... Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed" (Discipline 143). Discipline differentiates, measures, and hierarchizes; it creates docile and useful subjects who understand themselves as individuals equipped with free choice but who, by virtue of the position given them by myriad disciplinary technologies (including gender, race, and class), are always subject to surveillance and control. Foucault goes on to observe that discipline is a procedure "aimed at knowing, mastering, and using."

Foucault might have made more of his observation that discipline not only provides for the semantic organization of space, and individuals within social space; it also provides for their affective organization. Disciplinary society, he suggests, is a shame-culture that gives a punitive and humiliating function to even the apparently innocent elements of the disciplinary apparatus. Thus, each individual—but especially whoever does not conform and thus is figured as Other—is, like a child, caught in a "punishable, punishing universality" where everything is capable of humiliating and confusing (qtd. in Rabinow 194). With its focus on the individual, disciplinary society achieves its goals of obedience, docility, and utility through the shame-effects resulting from the application of disciplinary procedures, but it also organizes what philosophers used to call moral emotions, such as pride and guilt (or, in the popular idiom, self-esteem and responsibility), to locate every individual in social space and control her or his conduct. Thus, what we take to be the most private and personal of phenomena—emotion and the body—are effects of social organization and are made available for public administration through the techniques of discipline. Foucault argues that writing, and specifically the written examination, increasingly becomes a key instrument in the disciplinary technology of modern society, for making individuals available as subjects and objects of knowledge. Accordingly, to understand the discipline that has evolved to study and teach writing, we must understand the way it works at both the semantic and affective levels to produce and organize knowledge and experience (see Worsham, "Working"). "The domestic sphere," Gayatri Spivak observes in another context, "is not the emotions' only legitimate workplace" (103).

I am suggesting, then, that a synecdochic relation obtains between academic disciplines and disciplinary society and that this relation pressures the study of the rhetoric of a discipline or field to become a form of cultural critique, for when it stops short of this task it supports this disciplinary system as one more expert discourse, one more site for
knowing, mastering, and using. Put bluntly, rhetoric (or the rhetoric of inquiry) simply replaces philosophy as the queen of the human sciences.

This last point should finally tear the veil from the place of my own principal theoretical affiliation—namely, feminism and feminist critique—and its importance to the general project of the rhetoric of inquiry, which thus far has managed to almost completely ignore the role feminism has played in exposing the foundational sex-gender system in the human sciences as well as the gender-bias in the human sciences. So disciplined is the rhetoric of inquiry by the panoptic eyes of patriarchy that it does not recognize the sense in which its own gender-blindness may in fact constitute a counter-move against the successes of academic feminism and feminists in altering disciplines and their knowledge-making practices. The rhetoric of inquiry, however, is not alone in its lack of vision. Theory moved away from a rarefied poststructuralism and, increasingly in the 1980s, turned to politics, history, and ideology critique as a consequence of the largely unacknowledged pressure of feminism. This is another way of reading theory’s so-called political turn. At one level, then, I would like to press the rhetoric of inquiry to recognize its own interests and seek to transform it through feminist inquiry. At the level of explicit argument, what is needed is a feminist critique of the disciplinary discourse of composition studies, one that challenges the claim that through the appropriation of various theories and approaches the field escapes the disciplinary apparatus of modern patriarchal society into a nondisciplinary or postdisciplinary and postmodern (read egalitarian) place. Composition studies may be situated at a transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary threshold of intersecting discourses and interests, but this situation makes it potentially more, rather than less, disciplined. Diversity may be “our strong point,” as Donahue and Quandahl insist, for it “has the power to disturb normative methods,” but diversity, treated as a key figure that organizes (affectively and semantically) the discourse of composition studies, may also function as an instrument that insinuates another, a more subtle normativity (6). Various critiques of multiculturalism have already made this point in a sobering way (see Olson and Worsham 15-16).

A Propaedeutic to Future Theorizing

The task now is to learn to treat theory differently than it has been treated thus far in composition studies—specifically, as an intervention in a particular historical conjuncture and therefore as an event and as a practice made available and necessary by a particular historical moment. This move gives the question of identity a different emphasis (and an historical specificity) by shifting attention to what constitutes the modernity of modern composition studies. Modernity carries a
complex set of historical and cultural connotations and references that, for the most part, have gone unexplored in the discourse of composition studies. Of particular importance is the debate about modernism and postmodernism (a key feature of which is a debate about theory), for this debate offers a way to figure the conflicting rhetorics that today claim composition studies. Modernity also refers to the social and cultural experience of modernization associated with developments in capitalism—developments that, to my way of thinking, are part of the largely unwritten history of composition studies. The challenge, then, is to bring the theoretical enterprise of composition studies into a sustained dialogue with the discourse on modernity and thereby create a more nuanced understanding of the complex forces that locate and determine the interests of the discipline.

Composition studies, especially in the way that it reads and deploys theoretical discourse, offers a principal site for staging a re-vivified modernist project and its gendered subtext. This view directly challenges what the so-called postmodern turn in composition studies, represented, for example, in recent claims by leading scholars that writing is a postmodern discipline or that it has (or should have) a postmodern sensibility. At issue here is a question of the limits of the claim to postmodernity. Motivating this line of questioning is a need for a more complex understanding of composition studies, though the desire is not for truth as a coherent and consistent system of rhetoric. Instead, I think that what needs to be made more visible is the fundamental condition of the field—its contradictory nature—and, in the process, suggest that the claim to postmodernity operates ideologically to obscure those contradictions and make the rhetoric of composition studies appear more self-consistent than it actually is. Most of all, what should motivate this line of inquiry is a desire to return to the necessity of the topos of questioning—the question, certainly, of history (of modernity and postmodernity) but also the question of identity, especially as it intersects the question of rhetoric.

In exploring the limits of the claim to postmodernity, we must remember that there is an important sense in which composition studies can only be considered postmodern, but we did not need the vocabulary of postmodern theory to make this claim. Although composition studies has a history that extends well before the mid-twentieth century, it receives its institutional warrant as a distinct field (or discipline or subdiscipline) as a consequence of the historical shift to late capitalism that many identify with postmodernism—the shift after World War II to an information and service economy that drove many more students than ever before into higher education (through the GI Bill and through open admissions policies). One important institutional place opened up to receive these (mostly nontraditional) students and to prepare them
for higher education, and presumably for a place in a postmodern economy, is the writing classroom. Given the historical role of literacy in reproducing a disciplined workforce, the writing classroom is perhaps the most important site in higher education for placing the postmodern subject, culturally as well as economically. Yet, the claim to postmodernity did not begin to circulate in the discourse of composition studies until the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it often represents not a belated recognition of what we have always been but a claim about what we have only just recently become. I am particularly interested in the timing of this claim, in what it means to say at a particular moment in the history of composition studies that it is postmodern. In other words, I do not think we should approach composition's postmodernity as a description of a state of affairs; rather, we should question it as a figure of thought and speech that becomes persuasive for particular reasons at a given moment in the life and times of composition studies. This approach does not preclude the view that writing is an object of the historical process of modernity that shapes its interests—most recently, its interest in postmodernism and politics.

What I would like to see, then, is a form of inquiry that accounts for the appropriation of several key theories associated with postmodernism in the context of the prevailing interests of the field. This form of inquiry would necessarily be a comparative and evaluative effort, one that understands theory generally as a form of rhetorical discourse and situates a given theory historically as a response to the social and cultural experience of modernity and compares this situation to the local situation of composition studies into which the theory is introduced and employed. Because the question of disciplinary identity has been a fundamental and motivating question for research (indeed, it has been the field's predisposing interest and anxiety), this question puts a characteristic spin on the appropriation of various theories and the question of identity, especially as it intersects the question of disciplinarity. But the question of identity cannot be isolated from the question of history, the question of knowledge, and the struggle to produce the knowledges and practices appropriate to the discipline's institutional and social warrant. Yet, this distinction calls attention to the sense in which the discipline of writing is the object of an historical process and to the recent attempt to take what history has made of writing and articulate a sense of social and political agency.

The kind of inquiry that is needed would be comparative and evaluative, but it would also be rhetorical, for ultimately it would seek to influence the way that the postmodern turn occurs in composition studies. It would provide a general conceptual vocabulary as well as initiate an interrogation of the rhetoric of postmodernism by putting pressure on three pivotal ideas: the idea of theory, the idea of modernity,
and the idea of appropriation. The postmodern turn would not be possible, of course, without the appropriation of various theories, but it is also unthinkable without a change in the status of and our disposition toward the idea of theory itself. It is time to problematize the way we understand theoretical discourse by carefully examining different rhetorics of theory that have been conflated in the postmodern turn. Further, we need to problematize the way postmodernism enters the discourse of composition studies—that is, unencumbered by much of its history before the late 1970s and its academic institutionalization as theory. Thus, to make sense of the postmodern turn, it is important to recover some of the history and controversy that attends postmodernism through a discussion of the idea of modernity and its two interdependent but conflicting rhetorics: cultural modernity (including philosophical and aesthetic modernism and the European avant-garde) and bourgeois modernity (and modernization). A discussion of the idea of appropriation is timely, for the practice of borrowing has been treated as the key instrument of postmodern thought (see Harkin and Schilb). Yet, the specific content of the idea of appropriation, its history and its patterns of operation, remain unstudied and undertheorized. We need to remedy this situation by examining the provenance and meaning of appropriation in the discourse of hermeneutics and in the history of rhetoric, an examination that must be further complicated by a feminist critique of the “will to appropriate.” The aim of this discussion would be to illuminate the metaphorical (and ideological) operation of appropriation as a disciplinary habit and convention of scholarship, its role in creating and maintaining disciplinary boundaries rather than in creating interdisciplinarity (see Klein). Although the idea and practice of appropriation has gone substantially unquestioned in our disciplinary discourse, it is time that it come under scrutiny, for the issue at stake in any of our appropriations is the ethos of intellectual work that will prevail in composition studies.

I date the interest in postmodernism in composition studies to the early 1980s and the first engagements with French poststructuralism and specifically with Derridean deconstruction. The conditions necessary for the introduction of deconstruction are clearly evident in what at the time was the growing success of cognitive psychology in organizing the field’s interests and in the crisis of the 1980s over disciplinary identity. This crisis focused the issue of the field’s intellectual affiliations, figured as a choice between science and the humanities (and literary studies). But behind this choice lies the figural possibilities offered in two senses of theory (foundationalism and antifoundationalism) and two different routes to (disciplinary) maturity. Furthermore, while writing theorists continue to suggest deconstruction as a way to depose the paradigm of current-traditional
rhetoric, it was introduced as an alternative to the increasing popularity and influence of cognitive psychology and science as a paradigm for the mature composition studies. The field needs a larger historical understanding, on the one hand, by linking the rhetoric of cognitive psychology to the interests of bourgeois modernity and the history of modernization associated with science and technology and, on the other, by situating deconstruction within the trajectory of aesthetic and philosophical modernism.

More specifically, cognitivism succeeds in pushing past an impasse created by two definitions of writing, both of which are the legacy of modernist aestheticism: writing defined as a mysterious art, which is the act of genius and therefore cannot be taught; or writing defined as a mere knack or rudimentary skill, which cannot be a subject worthy of research. Cognitivism, and the appeal of scientific and technological rationality, saves the discipline of composition studies from this twin despair by making writing a process of learning and discovery and an object of knowledge and instruction—in particular, through heuristic procedures and theories of invention. Deconstruction, if it is to present a viable alternative to cognitive psychology, must pass through the pressure of interests organized by cognitivism and bourgeois modernism, but before it does so it must pass through the pressure of the modernist institution of American literary studies. This double pressure on the appropriation of deconstruction produces a conceptualization of the composing process and of invention that in some ways rivals and in other ways reiterates the interests of cognitivism. In general, though, the language of deconstruction re-aestheticizes writing as the play of signification and produces efforts (my own included) to create a "poetics" of composition.

Also needed is an examination of the revival of interest in historical work in the 1980s, specifically the debate about historiography. The revival of interest in historical scholarship arguably is part of the effort to consolidate an intellectual alliance with the humanities and to minimize (or at least balance) the ideology of science in writing research by linking composition studies to the history and tradition of rhetoric. The revival of historical research initiates a debate about historiography which began in the mid-1980s, a debate that questions the kind of history (and historical practice) that is appropriate for writing and thus the kind of intellectual work that should prevail (see Vitanza). While the theorization of writing and the question of invention are important points of entry for poststructuralist theory, the question of history provides the place where poststructuralism makes its strongest, its most noteworthy and longlasting intervention in the field. Specifically, what is needed is a reading of the debate about historiography as it has developed in composition studies that is situated in the larger
context of cultural modernity, arguing that while the influence of historiographical questions has been read as clear evidence of the postmodern turn in composition studies, it can also be read as the legacy of modernist aestheticism, even when it makes its most radical, postmodern, or anti-modernist gestures.

Also needed is an examination of the introduction and acceptance of political theories (various Marxist, post-Marxist, and feminist theories) that have been identified with postmodernism and which have been, for much of the last thirty years, a matter of relative indifference in the field as a whole. More specifically, we need to examine the appropriation of various Marxist and post-Marxist ideas used to construct a political identity and a sense of social and political agency for composition studies. Traces of the recent history of the discipline can be read in the terms through which the field names its members. The symbolic power of social agents depends on the position they occupy in social space, and different names open up different positions for composition professionals, not only within the field but also in the university culture and beyond. While the space of composition studies may offer many names and positions—Stephen North includes, for example, "practitioners," "scholars," "critics," "historians," "experimentalists," and "clinicians"—this plurality typically and habitually reduces to an opposition between "theorists" and "practitioners." To move beyond the impasse of this reduction, we need to construct a vocabulary of subject positions that includes three terms, "teachers," "specialists," and "intellectuals," for these are the names that have figured most enduringly in constructing and revising composition's disciplinary identity. An analysis of the logic of naming would focus on the apparent ideological difference between "specialist" and "intellectual," and it might profit from a focus on this difference in the context of the emergence of the "new class" in the 1960s, which coincides with the emergence of writing as a distinct field of research, and recent debates about the political efficacy of intellectuals and intellectual work. The discipline of writing arose and coincided with the restructuring of world capitalism in the 1970s and 80s and the demise of the cultural idea of the traditional intellectual as philosopher and social critic. This figure finds its successor in the cultural idea of the scientist or technician who claims no independent political expression. In the context of recent political claims for composition studies, and specifically for its activist and adversarial social role, it is crucial that we put pressure on the idea of the composition "specialist" and the choice, made by the profession, to develop a bureaucracy for the management and administration of writing skills (see Strickland).

A political reading of the idea of "specialist" would necessarily be part of a critique of the scientific and technological rationality that still
pervades the field, but it must also examine the more recent effort to claim an activist role for composition specialists as oppositional intellectuals. This effort of redefinition involves what I would call a form of ideological proletarianization, a discursive process that appropriates the perspective and epistemic privilege of the disenfranchised and oppressed. In recent discourse, the process of ideological proletarianization explicitly opens up for writing specialists the positions of “underclass” and “proletariat,” both of which operate as metaphors deployed to achieve the symbolic interests of a dominant group within the field rather than as representations of any material reality (see Brooke; Trimbur and Bullock). The homology that has been claimed between position and condition—between the (symbolic) position of academic professionals and the (material) conditions of workers in a class stratified society—represents a metaphorical operation that actually mystifies the ideological work of the field. Behind ideological proletarianization lies its contrary—namely, the process of ideological embourgeoisment, which deploys the metaphor of “underclass” or “proletarian” to acquire symbolic power for an elite professional class. Working together, these two processes offer evidence against the so-called declassing (or democratizing) power of postmodernism. Such a critique, then, must question the claim that composition studies is, in some fundamental sense, nonhierarchical and radically democratic.

Consuming Questions
To return to the idea of the pedagogical imperative as a site of struggle over the social role of education in a late capitalist society, let me say, in conclusion, that this imperative expresses itself in two conflicting rhetorics, although both claim to be postmodern. One version of the pedagogical imperative reorganizes priorities in literary and cultural studies and claims the classroom as the place to re-create the ideal of the democratic citizen and the role of education in developing critical consciousness. Here the pedagogical imperative is the latest expression of the adversarial stance of avant-gardism, and it is the legacy of the academic institutionalization of theory which, by the mid-1980s, abandoned an exclusive focus on language as such and began to emphasize questions of history and politics. The turn to pedagogy as a form of radical cultural politics coincides with an effort to give postmodernism the political vision it lacked in the 1970s and early 80s by linking it to the “anti-colonial” projects of feminism and multiculturalism. Some versions of postmodern pedagogy are, however, best understood as a modernist end run against postmodernism, for they yoke the insights of postmodernism to a traditional modernist agenda—if not at an epistemological level, then at an affective level. Thus, these pedagogies make the postmodern another moment within the trajectory of the modern (and patriarchal social order) rather than offering a new organization and experience of time and space.
These efforts claim to stand in opposition to the conservative version of the pedagogical imperative which expresses itself as a demand to abandon the role of education as an agency for social melioration and define the classroom exclusively as a place for individual learning. Here the pedagogical imperative represents the legacy of bourgeois modernization as it refigures itself for a postmodern, late capitalist society which demands that workers continue to learn all their lives and that schools provide a kind of continuing education never seen before. In this society, literacy will consist not only of subject knowledge but also of process knowledge—or, the ability to learn how to learn. Schools will no longer be the sole providers of education but must join in partnership with business and media. The economic imperatives of late capitalism will increasingly hold schools accountable for the achievement and performance of individual learners. This focus on individual performance and merit will undoubtedly mystify the structural injustices that became visible once again and for a brief time in the late twentieth century. The pressure of these two conflicting imperatives may outline the future for composition studies which, at the present time, seeks an affiliation with the oppositional stance formulated for intellectuals in literary and cultural studies while it will increasingly find it necessary to respond to the demands of the information society and a new definition of universal literacy that may make writing instruction, as we currently conceive it, obsolete. In the foreseeable future, these pressures will ensure that the rhetoric of composition studies will remain contradictory, that the struggle will intensify over different directions for the field. Ultimately, however, the future of composition studies will be secured through structural changes in higher education that are already underway rather than through struggles internal to the field. This view does not discount our ability to respond to these changes, though our response is likely to reflect a deep and abiding ambivalence.

To the extent that we might question (and resist) the claim to postmodernity, this line of inquiry may seem more than slightly anti-postmodern and sometimes even modernist. Admittedly, it is. Yet within the perspective offered by these terms, I propose that we seek to recover the rhetorics that possess composition studies, its past and future, and to highlight their contradictions through the critical leverage of a perspective that is not easily assimilated to either modernist or postmodern rhetoric. These rhetorics might be figured otherwise, in other terms. Yet, given current debates about intellectuals and intellectual work, I can think of no other terms that are more appropriate or timely. Still, if it were possible to determine in advance how a line of inquiry were to proceed, I would hope that this one would be read as a question, or a constellation of questions, rather than as an answer in the
form of a fully developed argument. Certainly, it should be informed by a set of questions—for example, questions about the ways in which "postmodernism," "theory," and "politics" signify and circulate in our disciplinary discourse. I realize that the pursuit of these inaugural questions may too often read as an answer. What remains important, however, are the questions that set the writing in motion. Intellectual work should be propelled by a rhetoric of discovery more often than a rhetoric of demonstration, even though the pressure in this most postmodern age is to offer answers that are more or less easily consumable. "Commodify or die," Meaghan Morris suggests, is the revamped version of "publish or perish" and the motto that governs professional academic life. But it is the questions that consume us much more than the answers, and these questions, if they are theoretical questions, are always in the best sense rhetorical—that is to say, they are questions that both do and do not have answers, answers that resist their status as such. My interest in theory has never been in the answers any theory can be made to offer; my interest has always been located in the questions a theory poses and in the limits trailing every question.\(^{10}\)

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\section*{Notes}

1 The charge of intellectual blackmail may seem overly harsh, but I believe it comes close to expressing an important affective valence in the field—at least, some of the more extreme forms of the theory/practice debate. It was suggested to me by Foucault, who argues in "What Is Enlightenment?" that we should not fall victim to the intellectual blackmail that requires we take a stand for or against the Enlightenment but, rather, that we understand its hold on us. See Gregory and Bartholomae.

2 Related to pedagogy in this broad sense is the ancient Greek idea of \textit{paideia}, or the general education a culture provides for its citizens. This view of pedagogy receives its contemporary formulation in Foucault's notions of discipline and disciplinary society and in Althusser's conception of ideological state apparatuses. Unlike more traditional views of pedagogy, these contemporary formulations recognize and theorize the relationship between power and knowledge.

3 I draw the idea of "pedagogical places" from an essay with the same title by David Black that redefines education as a place for general (and liberal) learning. I transform the meaning of this term and use it to refer to those sites established by a disciplinary society for the education and regulation of individuals. More specifically, it refers to those sources that have been instructive to me and to which I am indebted for the conceptualization of this study.

4 See Simons' introductions to both his edited collections on the rhetoric of inquiry. My characterization of the rhetoric of inquiry actually simplifies its range of reference, for it includes those who maintain loyalty to an objectivist credo. The influence of objectivism, however, in no way dominates this movement, which only becomes possible through the critique of foundationalism in philosophy and especially in the philosophy of science.

5 Compare, in this context, Benjamin's fascinating discussion of the crucial role recognition plays in the development of individual identity and a sense of personal agency. Working from psychoanalytic and feminist theories and German critical theory, she argues that
individual identity is intersubjective in its very origins, and our ability to act in and on the world is determined by the quality of the relationship of recognition established with primary caretakers during infancy. The point I want to make here (working from Bourdieu to Benjamin) is that, however special or specialized academic disciplines seem to be, their principles of operation may be the most familiar thing to us.

Here "hegemony" refers not to a relation of domination and oppression, but to the social and moral leadership to which we consent. See Olson and Worsham for Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's extension of the Gramscian concept of hegemonic struggle.

See, for example, Graff and Bove. Recent publications from the Modern Language Association on the state of the discipline of English are particularly important for assessing the status of composition studies. See, for example, Gibaldi's anthologies which assess the state of scholarship in literature and related fields. The 1992 edition differs from its 1981 predecessor, for it includes an essay on rhetoric and composition written by Lunsford. Greenblatt and Gunn's 1992 anthology includes two articles on composition studies: a sympathetic essay written by Donald McQuade and a second essay with a quite different in tone, written by Richard Marius, who directs expository writing at Harvard but whose research is literature, not composition studies. Marius opens his essay with this damning criticism: "An optimistic tone pervades the discipline, but I find myself among the pessimists. I maintain that, against the background of the practical state of the discipline, all the research going on in composition and rhetoric matters not at all" (466). Marius goes on to say that all the scholarship is merely ornamental," that "the most important books are not about theory or research," and that "the most important books are textbooks." Absent from his bibliography, which offers suggestions for further reading and also annotates key texts in composition studies, are most of the names of leading composition theorists—for example, Sharon Crowley, James Berlin, Susan Jarratt, John Trimbur, Patricia Bizzell, James Clifford, Elizabeth Flynn, David Bartholomae, Lynn Bloom, and so on.

Of the three publications most directly associated with the rhetoric of inquiry movement (Simons, Rhetorical and Rhetoric; Nelson et al.) only Nelson includes an essay on feminist scholarship (written by Elshtain). Arguably, the rhetoric of inquiry seeks to recuperate the explanatory power and privilege of science, albeit one made rhetorical and antifoundationalist. See Harding for a feminist critique of science.

I do not mean to suggest that feminism somehow escapes the mechanisms of discipline. On the contrary, feminism has achieved its most significant gains in the last two decades by moving into the university. But its relation to the university and to disciplinary society has remained critical and resistant. See Messer-Davidow.

My focus on questioning comes from the tradition of hermeneutics, particularly the later Heidegger and Gadamer. See also Worsham and Brodkey on the importance of theory as a mode of questioning.

Works Cited


—. Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures. New York: MLA, 1981.


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