CONTENTS

1

DISCIPLINARY ANXIETY AND THE COMPOSITION OF COMPOSITION

From the start, then, this field has been marked by its multimodality and use of starting points from a variety of disciplines, all marshalled to investigate a unique and pressing set of problems.

But what are the criteria by which a field may be judged a functioning discipline? The question is an important and tough one to answer.

—Janice Lauer, "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline"

Determining who "we" are is no easy matter, but what "we" do may be one means of getting closer to that end.

—Brad Lucas, *Histories of Research in Composition and Rhetoric*

To declare oneself *a compositionist,* as I learned to do in grad school, is to risk a blank stare. The term shares something, I suppose, with *contortionist,* and maybe aptly so: it takes a few steps of untwisting to recover its origins in the act of *composing,* and I've never heard anyone talk about an intermediary of composition*ism* that might make it feel more natural. But more than that, the terms of the field it refers to—call it composition/rhetoric for the moment—are mostly not well known outside the field.

One reason, surely, is that what compositionists study—to keep it simple, we might call it writing—already seems familiar to nonspecialists. People write in nearly every profession; children learn to write in elementary school (or sometimes before), and, in short, writing is everywhere. It may not occur to some people that one *could* specialize in studying it, or, if they stopped to think about it, that some specialist somewhere would be able to say more about how it works in their life without actually living their life. (Indeed, not everyone who *does* specialize in composition/rhetoric would agree it could do that.) It's easy to see the need for, say, trained medical experts, and thus to attend to those

experts, and thereby to pick up some medical language for use when interacting with (or avoiding) medical doctors. It's harder, I imagine, to see the need for trained composition experts, and that makes trained compositionists harder to see.

But another reason, I think, is that the nature of the training, and the terms with which to describe it, are themselves subject to rather a lot of debate, apprehension, and misapprehension.

Consider these three recent encounters.

Scene One. I greet a senior member of the literature faculty in the hall, and he asks what I am working on. I describe this book—a study of dissertations, to better understand my field's disciplinary parts and proportions, and possibly some central hub connecting its expanding spokes—and his curiosity is piqued. "And what *are* the lines of theoretical inquiry in your field?" he asks. It feels to me, in the moment, that *theoretical inquiry* is for him synonymous with *inquiry*, and this surprises me. While I am able to point to rhetorics of power or the role of digital media in identity formation, I sense I am leaving more out than in with such a description. How does theoretical inquiry encompass, or not, writing program assessment, or longitudinal studies of students and their writing across and outside of coursework? Is statistical analysis of a textual corpus a theoretical inquiry? Does it matter if it's not?

Scene Two. In students' weekly posts in the online discussion forum for my graduate seminar in composition studies, one question has been surfacing under various guises: how to apply the scholarship I've assigned to their teaching, which is then mostly of first-year writing, plus a few professional communication courses. Finally, after a week of readings about genre and activity theory, the frustration seems to reach a head. When I ask what they're thinking about, one student sums up why the readings don't feel meaningful to them: "What does this actually give us that we didn't have before? How useful is it to a student writing an essay or brainstorming or analyzing texts?" Though I do see connections to their teaching, especially for thinking about what motivates an audience to read on, or how writing "moves" circulate and change (and thus how brainstorming writers need to apply them in flexible ways), I can also see how the moves in these theory texts feel mismatched and unmotivating for this audience. But if these graduate students training as compositionists (if that's the right word) aren't part of the target audience, who is?

Scene Three. After an English department meeting, I am talking with a colleague, a fellow member of the graduate composition faculty, about programmatic identity. She asks, "What would you say is the big

idea that drives our program? Not a work-in-progress, not a particular publication, but an idea we put out in the world?" When I hesitate, trying to encompass the wide range of projects I've seen from faculty and students, she continues: "See, and if *we* can't say that, what do people come here for?" I want to say: with all the MFAs in our student and faculty ranks, maybe it's not a big idea, but a little one: the idea that the wording of things matters, that we move in lots of different directions but always with an eye on writing *as writing*, as rhythmic and sonic and worth attending to, even at the sentence level. But that doesn't address her larger point: left only with words and sentences, without articulating our separately written sentences together (whether they add up into a poem or a paragraph, and so on into larger structures and socializations), how can we support each other, let alone our students? And even if I've come to that conclusion, privately, she's right that we haven't had a programmatic conversation about it. It's implicit, tacit, assumed, and for all I know assumed differently by each of us.

Each of these encounters highlights the challenge of explaining to the world, or even to ourselves, what it means to be "in composition." But it's less that the field has nothing to say, and more that we have too much to say; it's hard to synthesize simply. Taken together, they raise questions about identifying an academic field through research method or research focus, and even whether research is where we should locate identity at all. They also point to the importance of shared referents: without common language to talk about goals, our multiple goals feel atomized, rather than engaged in a push and pull for an overall direction. It's possible to form a complex whole out of many moving parts (even when some parts are moving in opposite directions), but it's difficult to see that whole from inside of it.

Discussions trying to encompass the big picture—to explain composition/rhetoric as a *discipline*—have often presented newcomers with either overly simple or overly chaotic understandings of "what counts." For example, to declare composition *A Teaching Subject* (Harris 1997) elides the work of researchers who study literacies and literate practices beyond the classroom, not to mention theorists and historians of such practices; to say, on the other hand, that it is a "dappled discipline" (in Janice Lauer's oft-quoted phrase), that is, to say it has many variations and influences, but to then stop there, doesn't tell anyone *how* it varies, or in what proportions.

How, then, do we talk about what's being credentialed by the PhD in composition/rhetoric? It's important that we're able to do so: the uncertainty has contributed to difficulty communicating the value of the field

to stakeholders within the academy and without—and writing, being ubiquitous, has quite a few stakeholders willing to claim authority over it. It has also engendered concern about mismatches between graduate preparation and post-graduate responsibilities, whether in faculty positions or elsewhere.

The field *has* long been marked by a multitude of methods and interlocking purposes, as Lauer noted back in 1984. It partakes of not just humanities approaches but social scientific ones, too, with data drawn from interviews and surveys alongside historical and philosophical arguments, corpus analytics in large-scale collections jostling against small-scale case studies of individuals. And these areas of study aren't always cleanly separable. But rather than see this shifting of modes as a mark of shiftiness, I would suggest (like Lauer) that they mark us as open, welcoming the influx of a lot of currents. That does pose a challenge at times, to be sure. In order not to be buffeted by the waves, we need to put them into circulation: an ecosystem of complementary exchanges, rather than a single settled currency. And that requires some degree of familiarity with methods beyond those that any of us, individually, will use.

In order to improve our sense of what counts, we need to know what has counted—at a larger scale than direct experiences "inside" the swirl of the field can afford. In this book, I use algorithmic visualization of disciplinary metadata to better equip us to articulate how work done locally fits into larger contexts. Such visualization work, repeated over time and with varying datasets, can bridge across scales, advancing or expanding our sense of what a comp/rhet degree entails, and enabling more fruitful collaborations and thus more wide-reaching conclusions.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

For now, we don't even agree on what the field itself should be called. The journal *enculturation* dedicated a double issue in 2003 (http://enculturation.net/5_2/) to "the relationship between rhetoric and composition," which engendered a series of meditations on rhetoric/composition (and rhet/comp); composition/rhetoric (and comp/rhet); rhetoric and composition studies; composition studies; composition-rhetoric; composition and rhetoric studies; writing; literacy studies; composition, literacy, and culture; and more. Around the same time, Charles Bazerman (2002) was making "The Case for *Writing Studies* as a Major Discipline" (emphasis added) alongside Susan Miller's (2002) separate argument for "Writing Studies as a Mode of Inquiry," both in

the collection *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work.* As the shifts even within conversations and collections suggest, while some authors insist on distinctions among these terms (Sharon Crowley's [2003] *enculturation* article was titled "Composition Is Not Rhetoric," for example) or express preferences for one formulation or another (e.g., Cynthia Haynes [2003] meditated on the appropriateness of the slash, versus the hyphen or "and," in signaling both closeness and division), in many cases it seems clear that they are talking about the same basic areas of study, with the many terms not necessarily signaling different perspectives, or at least not consistently signaling the *same* different perspectives. For instance, some advocate for *writing studies* as a broad umbrella term, to signal that it's not just student writing in first-year composition courses that are being studied, while others resist the same term as too restrictive, directing attention only to alphabetic texts.

And the naming question hasn't been resolved, nearly twenty years later. A footnote disclaiming the use of multiple terms is a recurring feature of books in the field, including in the recent collection *Composition, Rhetoric & Disciplinarity*, in which, despite the book's title, the editors offer numerous points in favor of "Writing Studies" (Malenczyk et al. 2018, 4) before acknowledging that "throughout the book, chapter authors refer to the discipline in a range of ways: as Rhetoric and Composition, as Writing Studies, as Writing and Rhetoric" (that last a new one compared to my earlier list). They "felt these differences in nomenclature reflected the current state of the discipline, and so didn't attempt to regularize" them (2018, 11, fn1).

In this book I, too, will shift among these names for what I will also sometimes call, simply, "the field." In part, this serves purely to provide sonic variety—and I will often need to refer to the field as a whole, so there would otherwise be quite a lot of repetition. Beyond that end, I'm somewhat taken with Brad Lucas's argument that the fluidity of names for the field is metonymic to fluid and hybrid identities claimed by its members, which he suggested they (we) may adopt for pragmatic reasons—for example, to negotiate shifting cultural values or institutional positions (2002, 1–2). (That includes, I would add, to address confused responses when people don't recognize a descriptive term you start with, such as *compositionist*—or, for that matter, *rhetorician.* In such circumstances, taking a flexible stance on labels can give one a better chance at a strong second impression.)

But the term for the field I come back to most often is *RCWS*, an abbreviation that conveniently points to not one but two prominent organizational designations: "Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing

Studies," which is a forum (major division) of the Modern Language Association (MLA), and "Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies," a recognized field of study in the federal Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). As Louise Wetherbee Phelps and John M. Ackerman (2010) have noted, the linking of *rhetoric* with *composition* in one phrase is probably "the most distinctive to the field and . . . the least likely to produce confusion with other disciplines" (190). Adding *writing studies*, though they did not put it in these terms, has the benefit of improving search engine optimization: whichever combination of terms are searched, there's a good chance RCWS (in either expanded form) has at least one.

That RCWS is included in the SED at all is the result of extended efforts by the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition (hereafter "the Consortium"), through their Visibility Project (Phelps and Ackerman 2010, 194, 199); data under that label goes back only to 2012. The MLA forum structure is even more recent: recognition of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies as a major area was still being contested in 2013 ("Draft Proposal, 11 September 2013: An Open Discussion of MLA Forum Structure" n.d.). Phelps and Ackerman's account makes clear that the process of attaining this recognition was far more complicated than simply asking to be included: codes in the SED, it turns out, are dependent on another list of disciplines, the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), a list whose instructional focus in turn inflects how disciplinary self-definitions in published scholarship are interpreted and valued (or not). Moreover, the CIP's oversight within the National Center for Education Statistics also means that stakeholders outside the field can decide (and did), independent of the Consortium's wishes or requests, to add "Creative Writing" as a subfield of "Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies" (Phelps and Ackerman 2010, 199) or to reject their proposed "literacy and language studies" as an alternate term for "rhetoric and composition" (200). Still, RCWS is a useful umbrella, even without attempting to annex creative writing, and its adoption in the SED makes it particularly apt for thinking about doctoral education, as I will throughout this book, in the fields and subfields of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies—however you imagine nesting them.

THE LOCAL IS NOT THE ONLY CONTEXT THAT MATTERS

One of my core goals in writing this book is to help build a macroscope through which to see the system out beyond any one of our local eddies, and thereby to help readers build what Derek Mueller (2017) calls a

"network sense" of doctoral training in RCWS: "incomplete but nevertheless vital glimpses of an interconnected disciplinary domain focused on relationships that define and cohere widespread scholarly activity" (3). Ordinarily, our experience of these domains is limited to direct experience: people we interact with, texts we read, conference sessions we attend, classes we take or teach. But left as the *only* way we experience the discipline, those direct experiences are varied enough to also lead to a highly varied sense of what the discipline seeks to do and how it works.

Cindy Johanek (2000), in *Composing Research*, called out the way highly localized storytelling—anecdote—had, between the 1980s and the turn of the century, become the dominant form of evidence used in a wide range of composition studies journals. One outcome, she wrote, of "the rapid rise of anecdotal evidence, story-telling, and qualitative research" outside of a shared research agenda is to have "multiplied the ways in which the field can define itself" (21). In effect, by focusing on only local experience as a way of understanding writing studies, the field had by that time largely reduced a shared network sense of what everyone else was doing.

Resistance to scalable sources of evidence may explain the sustained anxiety around disciplinary status in RCWS—a longstanding pattern of worrying about whether it is a "real" discipline, usually framed as a question of whether it has a collectively shared research paradigm (in the sense of Thomas Kuhn). Richard Haswell, in a much-cited 2005 article with the provocative title "NCTE/CCCC's War on Scholarship," analyzed journal articles to demonstrate that "for the past two decades, the two organizations have substantially withdrawn their sponsorship of one kind of scholarship," scholarship that he called "RAD: replicable, aggregable, and data supported" (198). Throwing a gauntlet to the field, he wrote,

> What happens when a professional organization is at war with its own scholarship? What happens when the flagstaff organizations of a disciplinary field stop publishing systematically produced knowledge? The answers to these questions are not known because nothing like these events has happened in the history of academic disciplines. (Haswell 2005, 220)

In other words, Haswell claimed, "systematically produced knowledge" is part and parcel of disciplinarity in the academy:[1] without it, composition is not a discipline, no matter how many graduate students or tenured professors.

Similarly, Kurt Spellmeyer argued in 2003 that "comp, in spite of its expressions of contentment, is still not much of a discipline" (84). To become one would, for Spellmeyer, require two things: first, "an

adequate *systemic* understanding of how [its] knowledge fit within a larger constellation of knowledges, some rising in value and influence, some declining, some moving to the center, and some moving to the periphery" (85, italics in original); the second, dependent on the first and a sign of its success, is that "the work we do [would] ever travel[] outside of the field" (84). Without being able to articulate to the outside world the nature of what Comp/Rhet's researchers, scholars, and practitioners know and do, the field renders itself irrelevant, if not invisible, to the rest of academia.

Spellmeyer and Haswell are far from the first to shed ink on the question of rhetoric and composition's disciplinarity, and they weren't the last. (Nor will I be.) Writing scholars have struggled in professional publications to articulate a disciplinary core since at least the mid-1980s, when two major studies of composition's collective efforts appeared in consecutive years, reaching opposite conclusions about the field's trajectory: George Hillocks's *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching* (1986) and Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (1987).

Calling his work a "meta-analysis," a term signaling a social-scientific perspective, Hillocks (with the help of a team of graduate students) aimed to aggregate the findings of empirical studies of writing process and writing pedagogy, to gain predictive power through increased sample size. Despite the absence of a grand unified model of how writing works and how we know it, he insisted, "Systematic and thorough reviews of research can help us to identify variables which might prove significant" (Hillocks 1986, 97)—and while "such variables can never be completely controlled, . . . the more teachers involved, the more reliable will be the generalizations emerging from the research" (99). At the core of Hillocks's study was the assumption that the research being done in composition could (and should) be compiled and aggregated, with homogeneity of findings across multiple contexts the measure of a given conclusion's strength. And, given the findings, he was hopeful: "We have a body of knowledge about the composing process which suggests something about teaching and which raises very interesting questions for further research," he declared in his introduction (xvi). "The climate for improving the teaching of writing has never been better. In short, although many problems remain, we have reason for optimism" (xvi–xvii). For Hillocks, then, the field's central concerns were clear, and they were twofold: gaining "knowledge about the composing process" and, by virtue of that knowledge, "improving the teaching of writing."

North was less sanguine on both the clarity of those goals and the prospects of achieving them. In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987), he called into question both the aggregability of research in the field and the centrality of teaching in that research. Motivated by a student's failure on their doctoral oral exams to produce a synthetic view of composition's knowledge-base (iv), North drew on his own experience and reading to survey the "modes of inquiry" by which knowledge is produced in the field (1), and thus "to provide that image of the whole" for himself (5). Working in this way, he located eight such modes of inquiry, clustered into three major "methodological communities":

- *Practitioners*, concerned with what works in classrooms on a day-by-day basis, sharing ideas mostly through storytelling (what North calls "lore" [23]);
- *Scholars* (historians, philosophers, and critics), working dialectically, primarily from texts, drawing on humanistic traditions; and
- *Researchers* (experimentalists, clinicians, formalists, ethnographers), working primarily from empirical observation, drawing on social-scientific traditions.

Each community, North claimed, held to an epistemology that was fundamentally at odds with those of the other two. Rather than working together toward a composite understanding of how writing "works," then, North saw these groups as talking past each other, at best, and at worst, competing unproductively for status (321 ff).

He concluded on a note of dire prophecy:

> If Composition is working its way toward becoming a discipline in any usual sense of that word, it is taking the long way around.
>
> It might not be too much to claim, in fact, that for all the rhetoric about unity in pursuit of one or another goal, Composition as a knowledge-making society is gradually pulling itself apart. Not branching out or expanding, . . . but fragmenting: gathering into communities or clusters of communities among which relations are becoming increasingly tenuous. . . .
>
> It is not difficult to envision what will happen if, as is most likely, these forces continue to operate unopposed in Composition. Quite simply, the field, however flimsily coherent now, will lose any autonomous identity altogether. (North 1987, 364–65)

More than three decades later, it seems clear that this dissolution has not come to pass: with over ninety doctoral programs identifying with rhetoric and composition ("Members" n.d.; Ridolfo n.d.), dozens of long-running academic journals,[2] and yearly attendance at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in the thousands, RCWS seems alive and well—if still actively debating the nature of its disciplinary status and direction.

How has this happened? Has composition/rhetoric overcome the methodological conflicts North identified by settling on one dominant mode of knowledge-making? Have we instead somehow attained an "inter-methodological peace" (North 1987, 369) based on the mutual understanding North hoped his book would help achieve? Or have we simply fragmented without noticing it, retreating into adjacent but separate rooms at shared conferences, maintaining several conversations that never meet?

Johanek, writing in 2000, seemed to suggest it's been more the latter, expressing with some dismay that "if it is possible for a field to become 'more preparadigmatic' as time goes on, composition seems to have done so" (22). Quoting Robert Connors's 1983 diagnosis that "as a research discipline we tend to flail about" (Connors 1983, 10, qtd. in Johanek 2000, 26), she voiced the hope that if we strive "to listen to each other and to create an inclusive research paradigm," it would "help[] us (at the very least) flail about less often and (even more importantly) understand why we flail about at all and (most importantly) help[] us find new ways to appreciate and engage in not just the kinds of research we like but also the kinds of research we need" (Johanek 2000, 26). In that sense, she was trying to push the field back from separate rooms into a shared space, centered on mutual understanding of disparate research methods—to foster the "inter-methodological peace" North had envisioned.

A similar motivation may be behind a recent effort to establish widely shared research-based claims in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (hereafter NWWK), edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2015). The NWWK project invited twenty-nine leading scholars to participate in an extended conversation on a wiki, with the aim of determining what declarative statements of transformative knowledge they could agree on. All together they proposed fifty-one statements, edited them extensively, and put into the book thirty-seven "final-for-now definitions of some of what our field knows" (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015, 3–4). The list draws on a broad understanding of "research," incorporating the conclusions of not only observational studies (undergirding concepts such as "Writing is informed by prior experience" and "Habituated practice can lead to entrenchment") but also philosophical reasoning (as in "Writing addresses, invokes, and/or creates audiences"; "Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies"; "Writing involves making ethical choices," and many more) and reflections on writerly practice and lived experience ("Failure can be an important part of writing development";

"Writing involves the negotiation of language differences"), including teacherly experience (which seems to underlie, e.g., the threshold concept that "Text is an object outside of oneself that can be improved and developed"). Despite this variety, and despite the hedges of "final-*for-now*" and "*some* of what the field knows" quoted above, the book's reception seems to have involved some misapprehensions that empirical studies were privileged above other forms of knowledge-making (Sánchez 2018, 118) and that the very act of compiling a shared knowledge-base was dangerous: a "sedimentation of ways of thinking into norms" that would "foreclose too quickly on how our understanding of writing may change and develop over time" (Alexander and Rhodes, in Wardle et al. 2020, 20–21). In other words, NWWK's effort to bring people into the same room was met, in some quarters, with pushback—and, especially, pushback against methods that aim to systematically document writing practices.

The irony is that only a small part of NWWK derives from empirical evidence; much of it is, instead, based on reasoned (and therefore disputable) argument, in keeping with its framing through *threshold concepts*, characterized as both "transformative" and "troublesome" or "counterintuitive" to those not yet involved in the relevant communities of practice (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015, 2). In other words, then, the problem of methodological mistrust is at heart a problem of misrecognition. After North's *Making of Knowledge in Composition*, as Mueller (2017) points out, while "scholars have continued to produce discipliniographies,[3] or accounts of the field, . . . such accounts have resorted in large measure to localized cases" (8). It's as if decades of preference for direct, personal experience as the grounds for claims had made it difficult even for people steeped in the field to comfortably describe what others in RCWS do or how. "What we know" depends a lot on where we're looking from.

This problem of misrecognition compounds significantly when extended beyond one collection to the rapid flow of new growth, new studies, new arguments, new perspectives: there is simply no way to read it all, let alone to read all the precedent literature that engendered it, and so it's easy to get the wrong impression about what's out there. Mueller's proposed method of dealing with this "reading problem" (Mueller 2017, 7), which I take up and run with in this book, is what he calls—combining Franco Moretti's "distant reading" and Heather Love's "thin description"—a *distant/thin methodology* for disciplinary inquiry (Mueller 2017, 25–31), centered on the development of visual models built from databases to find patterns at scale (68). Framed in opposition

to Geertzian "thick description," which builds from direct observation of scenes and extended narratives of events, and to New Critical "close reading," which examines single texts in isolation from others, a distant/thin approach compresses large quantities of source materials to data *about* the materials—that is, *metadata*—so they can be summarized and described succinctly: so they can be, in a word, abstracted.

Visual models, that is, function much like abstracts appended to articles: they simplify in order to amplify, and give us some indication of what to look for if and when we read on more closely (Mueller 2012, 197–98). And like any data graph, each abstracted visualization of disciplinary metadata enables us to see a great deal of information at a glance and therefore can often reveal or suggest systemic patterns that are not easily discernable at more fine-grained levels of detail. In short, visualizing metadata enables new metacognition.

DISCIPLINARY DESCRIPTORS

In one way, these techniques are thoroughly modern in that they are built on digital tools for compiling and analyzing large swaths of data (see, e.g., Lang and Baehr 2012; Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015; Johnson 2015); in my particular case, the visualizations and accompanying statistics in this book were programmed in the R language (R Core Team, n.d.), and my code is available for inspection or modification on GitHub.[4] In another way, though, the core idea is actually an old one, making a bit of a comeback in the last few years. Concluding their write-up of the 2007 *Rhetoric Review* survey of doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition (still the most recently published, as of this writing), Brown, Enos, Reamer, and Thompson (2008) called for further large-scale research into graduate student identity and training. Noting the "many impediments to gathering accurate data in a timely fashion" through surveys, they nevertheless "strongly encourage everyone to *engage directly with data*" (339, emphasis added) when and where it can be found. Doing so from as broadly cumulative a perspective as possible, they argue, "will allow for our disciplinary identity to emerge" (339).

In writing about disciplinary identity, rather than rely on my own anecdotal readings, in this book I draw on the large-scale data and metadata of a core knowledge-making genre in our field: doctoral dissertations.

As a measure of "disciplinary identity," dissertations have much to recommend them: as Todd Taylor (2003) argued (citing Joseph Moxley), dissertation authorship affords a more democratic view of the field's

membership than articles or books: whereas "it is estimated that about 10 percent of the professionals in any field are responsible for publishing about 90 percent of the journal articles and book titles" (Taylor 2003, 143), nearly everyone pursuing a career in the field writes a dissertation.[5] Moreover, a journal article is a momentary intervention in a particular argument, whereas a dissertation—given its role in academic hiring, especially at research-focused institutions—is a statement of how one wants to be seen, as what kind of scholar.

What's more, as Rosanne Carlo and Theresa Enos (2011) have found, the subjects of dissertations tend to be predictive of future changes in graduate core curricula: comparing areas of specialization between the 2000 and 2008 *Rhetoric Review* surveys of graduate programs with a follow-up survey in 2011 focused on core course revisions, Carlo and Enos found that "core curricula change is first displayed in the work of graduate student dissertations as they anticipate the flow and direction of the field" (2011, 210). Thus, to the extent that "graduate core curricula give a clear indication of the trends in our field and shape our disciplinary identity" because "curricula reveal the knowledge(s) we value" (2011, 210), dissertations even more so can help us anticipate the revisions and reshapings of that disciplinary identity if we observe shifts in dissertation practices over time.

Although dissertations, being a training genre—with real constraints on graduate students' time—do not encompass the full scope of what is possible in RCWS research, I see their constraints and status as learning instruments as a point in their advantage. By definition, dissertations are written by committed scholars who have sought out training in the discipline and sustained effort over a length of time (now averaging over 5 years). Conference presentations, though perhaps the more common form of disciplinary contribution—many people will present multiple times per year—do not require the same sustained engagement. For good or for ill, dissertations serve a gatekeeping function: before it can pass, a dissertation must be approved by a team of established scholars who recognize its work as being relevant to—and advancing the knowledge of—"the field," as locally construed.

The dataset I'm using can't capture everything about the field; nothing could. It's limited to one slice of time, 2001–2015, and my source of full-text dissertations, the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (PQDT), is fairly US-centric (though not exclusively so). In addition, it cannot show what (and, especially, who) is missing. Of particular note are the many students who intended to complete dissertations but did not; the scholarship they would have produced is not represented in the

data I have to write about. And, as Xiaoming Li and Christine Pearson Casanave (2008) point out, doctoral student attrition is high, and likely to be especially so "for the so-called marginal groups: non-native speakers of English, the 1.5 generation of immigrant students, minority students, and other non-traditional students" (3), making the absence even more hard felt: we might have expected these students to take the field in directions not anticipated by more "traditional" voices. The metadata I received also did not include demographic information about the writers that were included, and in this study I did not undertake the formidable task of adding a layer to the data that would make an analysis by race or language background possible.

But one advantage of a programmed, database-driven method is that the data can be updated later, whether with additional documents or with additional attributes on which to filter or construct a new view. Mueller (2017), arguing for methods that go beyond anecdote, points out that a distant/thin approach does not replace but rather coordinates more local accounts of the field with each other, "re-associating them with the other perspectives on the ongoing, ever-shifting terrain" of the discipline (22). This is necessary "because the discipline is sufficiently complex that no one vantage point can claim an omnipotent, ascendant view of its totality" (22). But neither can any one distant/thin reading claim such a view; each new model is only an approximation, rather than an absolute truth, which is ultimately unreachable. In that sense, as Mueller puts it (citing Gregory Ulmer's *Heuretics*), "The visual models are not proofs, finally, but provocations; not closures, but openings; not conclusions or satisfying reductions, but *clearings* for rethinking disciplinary formations—they stand as invitations to invention, to wonder, as catalysts for what Ulmer described as 'theoretical curiosity'" (Mueller 2017, 4, emphasis in original).

IF THE TRUTH IS UNKNOWABLE, WHAT'S THE POINT?

By now, some readers may be wondering what's at stake in constructing such openings and vistas of network sense. Why do we need to rethink disciplinary formations? And haven't we tried enough times already? After all, the field has now produced so many articles and chapters and collections debating what composition is that even the backlash has a long history. As far back as 1993, Russell Durst was complaining that we'd spent "an inordinate amount of time defining the field, cataloging it, classifying it, and critiquing it" (qtd. in North 1997, 196). Why, the argument goes, should we care whether composition is a discipline?

Aren't we beyond the need for some shared paradigm? Doesn't post-modernism teach us that everything is radically fragmented anyway?

For example, Stephen North (1997)—in a dramatic turnabout from his earlier book—has urged composition researchers to give up the search for "some (imagined) cumulative disciplinary effort," which he refers to as the "founding Myth of Paradigm Hope" (195): a myth that compositionists invoke, he claimed, so as to summon or create an illusory collective body. Instead, he called for a proliferation of place-based studies of writing in practice, predicting with apparent enthusiasm, or at least relief, that "we will have more research more accessible more quickly, but it will also be both far less transportable and—though the term may seem unpleasant—far more disposable" (205).

Along those lines, Thomas Kent (2002) directly contradicted the findings and assumptions of Hillocks's meta-analysis: under the heading "*Writing Cannot Be Taught,*" Kent argued that "if writing cannot be reduced to a process or system because of its open-ended and contingent nature"—a postmodernist premise he had spent the previous several pages defending, albeit one dependent on emphasizing *a* singular process over a plural set of process*es*—"then nothing exists to teach as a body-of-knowledge" (149).

Echoing North, David Smit (2011) called on the profession "to capitalize on the fact that it is now localized, historicized, and contingent, both theoretically and pedagogically" (230) by openly declaring that we don't—and can't—know anything cumulative or transferable about writing. Metaphorically speaking, says Smit, "there is no such thing as 'tree-ness'; there are only particular trees" (230).

Tempting though these isolationist positions might be, it remains the case that an oak is more like a pine than a porcupine. That is, despite infinite local variation, too-close attention to local details can mask larger patterns and trends—and ignorance of those patterns, to extend Spellmeyer's (2003) argument above, could have serious local consequences if it leaves us no way to argue for the value of our work.

Without a sense of what people do and have done in RCWS, even avowed members of the field may have trouble justifying the research agendas that so many graduate institutions require. Kristen Kennedy (2008) worried that graduate training in composition/rhetoric has been fairly consistently divorced from the work that most graduates will undertake (mostly teaching of undergraduates, especially in two-year colleges), and that, forced to choose between her research interests and her teaching interests, she chose teaching. But, she asked, doesn't the need to make such a choice signal a problem with the field's research

agendas, which often center on arcane matters of self-definition *and repeated naming of crises* (without action to resolve them)? Invoking John Trimbur's lament about the field's "painful self-consciousness" and "nearly narcissistic fascination with self-scrutiny," Kennedy writes:

> Those lines, coupled with a reading of the fall 2003 special topics issue of *Enculturation*, nearly drew me over the edge. The questions debated by contributors: Do I teach rhetoric? Or composition? Or is it rhetoric-composition? To some, these questions are still of great importance, and ruminating on whether to use the dash or the hyphen and what that means served as the theme for a series of lively, engaging, and myopic articles that all tried to answer whether rhetoric—as art and theory—has lost its connection to composition—as craft and skill. Why, I thought, is this question still important? And perhaps more telling, why wasn't this question important to me anymore? (Kennedy 2008, 528)

In response, I would concede that the names of the field aren't especially important; it's one reason I've chosen to vary them throughout this book. But the substance behind the names is very much related to the question of how we frame graduate curricula, because it speaks to the question of what we expect PhDs in composition to *do*—which, in line with Kennedy's larger argument, has a lot to do with the conversations and interconnections among teaching, teaching-related research, and research unrelated to teaching.

Jillian Skeffington (2011) has argued that the mismatch Kennedy points to is largely a function of most rhet/comp programs' position within departments of English: the research backgrounds of program-founding faculty, and the research interests of other faculty in those departments making decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion, tended more toward theory than toward pedagogy (62–63). With these programs now more established, we have an opportunity to decide, program by program, whether we are happy with the status quo or want to change it. As Rita Malenczyk et al. (2018) write in the introduction to their collection *Composition, Rhetoric & Disciplinarity*, one benefit of embracing disciplinarity would be "the opportunity to be intentional in our actions" (7), rather than accept our assumptions as commonplace and leaving them unexamined. To establish disciplinarity, though, requires a sense of the broader landscape of both teaching and research. This book offers one series of maps, constructed from one approach to that landscape, through the lens of what graduate students have researched.

A MORE CAPACIOUS DISCIPLINARITY

What North (1997) most criticizes in the "invocation" of paradigm hope is the Mosaic voice decrying composition research as bad science in need of reform (195)—a voice he identifies first in Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), but which is just as surely visible in his own *Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987). Unlike those earlier efforts to map the field, which tried to pin down and purify the field into a single shared direction, recent calls to examine the discipline are trying to pull multiple things in, and hold them up to the light—to celebrate diversity even as we look for common ground.

This more recent movement shows that "paradigm hope" never really disappeared, despite North and Smit and Kent, but rather evolved, and, if anything, seems to be experiencing a recent surge. Following on *Naming What We Know* (NWWK) (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015), we've seen several books in rapid succession aimed at building a shared language for articulating difference in pursuit of mutual goals: *Network Sense* in 2017; *Composition, Rhetoric & Disciplinarity* in 2018; and *(Re)Considering What We Know* in 2019, which acknowledges critiques of NWWK but then pushes forward to explore "*Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*"—the new volume's subtitle, now adding a wider array of disciplinary labels to the earlier "writing studies." What all these books suggest is that what we know influences us, wherever we know it from, and it would be good for us to notice it.

I am issuing no jeremiads. Rather than bemoan something missing or worrisome or impure, in the pages that follow I aim to document what has been present in the recent past. Only with this shared broader context can we begin to make informed decisions—about curriculum, about research agendas, about how we represent the field to newcomers—in our own local contexts. And if we can better understand what we already have, we may find we already have what we thought we would need.

The question of whether Comp/Rhet has achieved "disciplinary status," as it has sometimes been framed, seems to assume there's some critical point at which a field achieves a sort of academic apotheosis, like a nuclear reaction becoming self-sustaining: it wasn't a discipline, and then it was, and is. But disciplines, like genres, are more varied and less cleanly bounded.

Writing in *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity*, Gwendolynne Reid and Carolyn R. Miller (2018) advocate for an open approach to classification, "organized around socially perceived similarities based in

multiple shared traits, with no rules defining membership and no single feature necessarily shared by all members" (89). Closed categories, they argue, "may lead to counterproductive debates over the criteria for inclusion and exclusion"—for example, how much teaching, versus theory, versus empirical research, should be required. By contrast, the lens of open classification allows us to instead think of disciplines "as continually emergent intellectual categories of networked interests, goals, and practices" (89), with "the scope and relations between research areas . . . historically contingent, [and] with divisions more provisional than 'real'" (91). Similarly, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs (2018), in the same volume, suggest that disciplines are best understood as *radial categories*—George Lakoff's Wittgensteinian term for groups whose "membership is determined by closeness to or difference from" some underlying prototype: birds, say, or dogs, which vary widely in size, coloration, and behavior, but are recognizable nonetheless. As Wardle and Downs put it, this lens means "that it is fairly easy to establish participation in a discipline but more difficult to map its boundaries. A sociolinguist may clearly be a linguist but also look a lot like a sociologist or an anthropologist" (2018, 113).

In other words, *it's not just okay to have different members of the same discipline doing different kinds of work; it's the normal, expected state of affairs.* Sometimes these different strands of work will align in their goals, while at other times shared practices will pursue different interests, but so long as we can read across the strands, we'll continue to be able to knit them together in response to both familiar and new contexts.

At the same time, Wardle and Downs are not ready to shed all semblance of common ground. Drawing on the work of social theorist Andrew Abbott, they suggest that while disciplinary boundaries are permeable and shifting (and, especially, expanding), such boundaries "define what it is permissible *not* to know" (Abbott qtd. in Wardle and Downs 2018, 114, emphasis added): they set an outer limit of expectation. In other words, "disciplines specify not what one is *allowed* to read, but the bare minimum one *must* read for disciplinary participation" (Wardle and Downs 2018, 115, emphasis in original).

All the attempts to locate those boundaries, therefore, or to identify the prototype(s) at the heart of the radial category called rhetoric and composition/writing studies, are less about policing others against going too far and more about orienting ourselves toward one other. Robert Connors (1997), in the introduction of *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, described his project as trying "to build a fire around which we can sit and discover that we do know the

same stories, and dance the same dances. Historians," he went on, "may not be the shamans of the field, but we are the storytellers, spinning the fabric that will, we hope, knit together the separate, private stories of the researchers, the theorists, the teachers in classrooms" (18). To say we have a discipline is a way of saying that we are not laboring alone, that we matter to each other. Even if we're doing very different things, we can still be doing them together . . . or not. What's at stake is solidarity.

I would add to Connors that to effectively spin this fabric, which is to say, this disciplinary network, takes more than storytelling, important as histories are. We also need to know the present,[6] and to do so broadly we need ongoing access to data. As I have argued elsewhere, following Johanek (2000), "If we take seriously the value of individual, contextualized experience, we should also value the contextualizing power of large-scale, aggregate experience" (Miller and Licastro 2021, 7).

Thus, North's (1997) attempted absolution of the field's "paradigm guilt" hasn't taken hold in all quarters. Writing in the same collection as Smit (2011), Kristine Hansen (2011) prominently positions the ongoing quest for disciplinarity in her title, "Are We There Yet? The Making of a Discipline in Composition." The fact that her answer remains that "we haven't arrived yet" (237) doesn't undermine the element of hope in the word "yet," or in her concluding call to "conduct more and better research to build a stronger body of knowledge" (260). But we also need to build an index to that body of knowledge, lest it sit inert.

WHERE WE'VE BEEN, WHERE WE ARE, WHERE WE'RE GOING

I began this introduction by suggesting that even those who identify with rhetoric, composition, and writing studies don't know, necessarily, what it means to study rhetoric, composition, and writing. The chapters that follow bring the field closer to that knowledge, based on what a broad swath of scholars identifying with the field have recently decided should "count."

In chapter 2, "So What's Your Dissertation About? Subject Expertise in the Aggregate," I challenge the dueling hypotheses that graduate students in the field are either wasting their talent by being forced to apply their work to students and classrooms, or wasting their time by developing theories that do *not* hew closely to pedagogical applications. Using topic modeling to identify strands of discourse running through the collection of documents, I find that neither claim really has the full support of the evidence: a cluster of topics theorizing writing and language does form the biggest single cluster, but that cluster accounts for only

a quarter of the corpus. Teaching-related topics form a content cluster of almost the same size, but it's less widely distributed than theory, suggesting that it's not simply forming the final chapter of all or even most dissertations. At the same time, close to 90% of dissertations include at least a little attention to both theory and applications.

Chapter 3, "How Do You Know? Unevenly Distributed Dappling in Dissertation Methods," takes up the question of whether research methods can serve as a unifying principle for the field: that is, if we are not all focused on the same content areas (as I show in chapter two), do we share frameworks for inquiry, kinds of evidence, or ways of evaluating that evidence? This question—which arguably could be traced to *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987)—has often been framed as a distinction between humanistic, text-based approaches (the group North called "Scholars") and social-scientific, empiricist methods ("Researchers"). While North claimed that these two camps were by and large opposed or in competition, later scholars (e.g., Johanek 2000; Hesse 2018) have generally argued that RCWS necessarily draws on both social-scientific and humanistic approaches to research.

My analysis affirms, but complicates, this split: graduate student training, at least as reflected in dissertation projects, is greatly skewed toward "Scholar" approaches, and even within empiricist "Researcher" approaches, the phenomenological (presumed-unique, i.e., nonaggregable) methods of ethnography and case-study greatly outnumber more aggregable methods such as discourse analysis or survey. At the same time, while this pattern may hold at the majority of graduate programs, the data visualization makes clear that there are indeed locations where data-driven and aggregable methods are more common, and that a smaller number of dissertations engage in these methods even at more humanistically focused institutions.

The two chapters just described demonstrate the capacity of a distant-thin approach to intervene in longstanding debates in the field. Contradictory claims about the state of research can persist, unresolved, when they are based only in direct and local observations; while such perspectives are an important source of ethos and authority, they are also, by necessity, limited in scope. Moving to a more distant approach, and thereby incorporating more data, can surface not only large trends but also the less common areas of concern that could otherwise be hidden by the majority.

The analyses in chapters two and three are based on a set of dissertations known to have been completed within the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, roughly 1,700 dissertations over

fifteen years. But in the same time span, another ~1,900 dissertations were also submitted and tagged "Language, Rhetoric and Composition" in the ProQuest database by students in other programs, such as communication, education, history, and political science. What, if anything, is different about the kinds of training and focus developed in RCWS PhD programs?

In chapter 4, "But Doesn't Everyone Know about Writing? Distinguishing RCWS from Allied Fields," I highlight the combinations of topic and method that mark a dissertation as more likely to be from an RCWS program. From this angle, it becomes clear that a focus on pedagogy, collaboration, and even rhetoric is only modestly predictive of work in the field: these subject areas are roughly as common outside the consortium as within it. Narrative descriptions, too, are broadly acceptable within the academic genre of the dissertation across the programs in the dataset. Seen from departments outside the consortium, more distinctive topical features of RCWS graduate-level research include what I call a "move to the meta," a tendency to shift attention from individual writers to structural forces and systems, or from the thing studied to how we study things; this manifests in differential treatments of literacy, of rhetorical analysis, and of disciplinarity. Looking at aggregate methods, there are again more similarities than differences between RCWS and non-RCWS dissertations, with "scholar" approaches much more common than others; however, aggregable "Researcher" methods, such as Discourse Analysis and Experimental/Quasiexperimental studies, are significantly more likely to occur in departments not affiliated with RCWS. This pattern extends the one Haswell observed in journal articles and sharpens the contrast of aggregable versus nonaggregable program focus I discuss in chapter 3.

Though I have so far presented the fifteen years of these dissertations as a single object of study, changes and fluctuations are visible even within this span, such as increased attention to embodied rhetorics and collaboration, with a corresponding increase in the use of rhetorical-analytical methods. Chapter 5, "A Map Is Not a Manifesto," centers the ways that the data remains in motion, exposing the granularity (and the surprises) afforded by data-driven analysis. In so doing, I end with two important arguments about discipliniographic studies such as this one.

First, we don't need the field to be just one thing: we just need to be able to find our way. In a complex and dynamic landscape, large-scale mapmaking can enable "productive intersections for collaborative dialogue," as Whitney Douglas et al. (2018, 239) argued recently, even or especially when we feel like we "each [hold] pieces of a map of Rhetoric

and Composition," but we cannot "see how they coalesce[] into a whole" (229). In other words, while analysis of metadata cannot promise to perfectly define the present state of a discipline, nor predict its future, it does offer a widely integrated view as opposed to a purely anecdotal one. What's more, the patterns we abstract from distant reading enable us to better contextualize the local findings of more traditional reading: they can corroborate—and sometimes challenge—what we have learned to expect through more direct, personal experience.

Second, maps like those in this book are not intended to be drawn only once. The disciplinary terrain is in constant flux, as individuals and departments negotiate their ways through overlapping and diverging interests. But to say that these maps of the field are impermanent does not erase their value. On the contrary, a core strength of an algorithmic approach is that we can repeat the experiment with different starting values. Thus, even if our answers aren't true for all time, they are at least demonstrable, updateable, and comparable to similar studies.

To make a map, then, is not to put up fences and raise the stakes but rather to record positions as they were at a moment in historic, moving time. And in comparing the present to the past, we clarify—for ourselves and for others—the choices we make going forward.