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## *In the Turbulence of Theory*

IN MAY 1968 I remember watching images of the student revolution in the streets of Paris on the CBS *Evening News* with friends who were active in protesting the Vietnam War. Although we had seen American demonstrations reach violent intensity at Berkeley and Columbia, we realized that the barricades across the streets in the Latin Quarter represented a much more serious challenge to the established order. Some of us had been to Europe the year before, we had talked with students there, and we thought the causes of student unrest were similar to our own. It was obvious we were wrong.

While radical French students despised the hypocrisy of their government, which condemned American aggression in Vietnam while refusing to allow the tribunal on war crimes chaired by Bertrand Russell to convene in Paris, their causes for revolution were different from ours. They reacted against an outdated, hierarchical, and authoritarian educational system that served as a machine for social selection. As the students battled in the streets of Paris, for a few days thousands of workers went on strike throughout France. The coalition between students and workers threatened to topple the French government and send an 1848-like shock through the rest of Europe. But this last storm of revolutionary fervor in Western Europe quickly dissipated, partly because it threatened the establishment Left as well as the Right. The leaders of organized labor and the French Communist party were as scared of the prospect of a "people's union" government as the Gaullists, and they took a law-and-order stance against the students. When police ejected the last of the students from the Sorbonne on June 16, few outcries were heard. The students' strongest allies among the workers—the striking metalworkers at Renault—returned to their jobs the next day (Schnapp 395). The revolution was over.

The immediate effects of the May revolution were small outside of France, but the long-term effects of the revolution on academic disciplines have been

enormous. The May revolution denounced the content of the academy as well as its structure. The revolution did not begin among elite students at the Sorbonne but among students in the social sciences at Nanterre, a new "concrete jungle" university in the Paris suburbs. The students were dissatisfied with a curriculum that made them, in their words, into "stuffed geese." In a pamphlet titled "Why Sociologists?" distributed in the spring of 1968, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other student leaders at Nanterre charged, "The study of society has managed the *tour de force* of depoliticizing all teaching—that is to say, in legitimating the existing politics" (Schnapp 118). The students found that what was called knowledge and technical progress in the university was "subordinated to the struggles between firms for profit (or, which is the same, for monopolistic hegemony), and to the military and economic confrontation between East and West" (119). They concluded, "The hypocrisy of objectivity, of apoliticism, of the innocence of study, is much more flagrant in the social sciences than elsewhere, and must be exposed" (120).

The students' challenges to the traditions of "objective" scholarship in the university came at the end of a decade when French philosophy and, more generally, the foundations of Western thought were undergoing a radical questioning by a diverse group of theorists who later came to be known in Britain and in North America as *poststructuralists*. The May revolution intensified this intellectual agitation by forcing theorists to confront social practices, leading to more broadly construed critiques combining the analysis of knowledge with social practice. The most discussed shift of attention to practice came in the work of Michel Foucault, who in his "genealogical" period of the 1970s (*Discipline and Punish; Power/Knowledge; History of Sexuality*, vol. 1) focused on the rationalized practices of systems of social control and their complicity with discursive formations. Opposed in many respects to his pupil Foucault, Louis Althusser in the aftermath of the May revolution also reinterpreted his structuralist Marxist position in his important essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," that rejects the older epistemological notion of ideology as "false consciousness" in favor of one that explains how ideology offers ways of being.

The work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida also changed after the May revolution, and a generation of new theorists appeared including those more identified with postmodern theory—Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Gillès Deleuze, and Félix Guattari—and the "new" French feminists Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the 1970s, poststructuralist theory penetrated literature departments at British and American universities, and during the 1980s postmodern theory spread across disciplines and diverged. The new theory exploded: feminist theory divided into feminisms, Marxist theory became various neo-Marxisms and post-Marxisms,

Freudian theory was reinterpreted once again, African-American, gay/lesbian, and postcolonial theory appeared, and new theories were advanced that we have entered an era of postmodernity.

There have been so many accounts of this explosion of theory that it now has the contour of a boulder that has tumbled a long way down a mountain stream, grinding off its edges until it has become as smooth as an egg. For example, David Lodge began a talk in 1986 ("After Bakhtin") with the story polished down to two sentences:

We are all familiar with the story, and with its sequel, when the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign, and the serene, deductive logic of the structuralist enterprise which it supported, began to be undermined or deconstructed by the critiques of the two Jacques, Lacan and Derrida. Thus was ushered in the era of post-structuralism, which we now inhabit, a noisy and crowded bazaar in which many different, competing voices are to be heard, peddling their wares. (89)

The outline of the story is so familiar that Lodge can portray the "wares" as characters in his novels, "wares" that elicit recognizing smiles from his academic readers. But if the story of the rise of poststructuralism among Parisian intellectuals has become a familiar one, there is also an increasing realization that in spite of its French cast of leading players, poststructuralism, as it has become incorporated into a more general movement of postmodern theory, is more hybrid and nativized than most Anglo-American commentators acknowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Several recent versions of the spread of poststructuralism have focused on how poststructuralist theory altered as it crossed national boundaries rather than how it developed in response to structuralism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology within France. Anthony Easthope, for example, explores why British and North American poststructuralisms took on such different characters, with British poststructuralism proceeding initially from Althusser and Foucault, and North American poststructuralism from Derrida. Easthope attributes this difference in reception of French poststructuralism to differences in the ways theoretical discussions were housed and conducted in Britain and North America. The larger political implications of poststructuralism were more strongly felt in Britain, where a consensus about national culture was breaking up during the 1970s and where there was an active tradition of Left scholarship. Poststructuralism was introduced into an ongoing political opposition within the academy in Britain. In the United States, by contrast, poststructuralism appeared on the scene as deconstruction in elite English departments, stimulated in large part by Paul de Man's appropriation of the pre-1968 work of Derrida for the reading of literature.<sup>3</sup> By 1980, when Colin MacCabe was

being fired from his lectureship at Cambridge and denounced in the British press for his radical poststructuralist views, the "Yale School" critics—Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller—brought deconstruction to the forefront of literary studies in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1980s the labels *poststructuralism* and *deconstruction* became too restrictive to describe a vast international and multidisciplinary enthusiasm for theory which I refer to as postmodern theory, and while there is no shortage of overviews of this spread, the pretense of offering a comprehensive overview is becoming more and more difficult to assume.<sup>5</sup> In recognition of the diversity and multiplicity of postmodern theory, more local narratives of the coming of postmodern theory are being written for specific disciplines, including disciplines such as literary studies and anthropology, where there has been a major rethinking of the foundations of the discipline, and disciplines such as economics, which are only beginning to consider the degree to which scholarship relies on tactics of persuasion (McCloskey).

Composition studies now stands somewhere between literary studies and economics in terms of the magnitude of the impact of various lines of postmodern theory and may be only at the beginning of major dislocations and reformulations. The coming of postmodern theory to composition studies is too much a phenomenon in progress to attempt an overview that would be out of date before it could be printed. What I am more interested in addressing is the paradoxical situation in which composition studies now finds itself: why when composition studies rests on much more secure institutional foundations at the beginning of the 1990s than at the beginning of the 1980s—witness many new graduate programs, conferences, journals, book series, and other signs of scholarly activity—and why when "rhetoric" has been proposed by many as a conceptual framework that might bring the many factions of English studies into conversation, the intellectual foundations of composition studies are more disputed and its future course more difficult to predict.<sup>6</sup> The circumstances of this paradox are complex, but certainly the turbulence that postmodern theory has brought to architecture, the visual arts, dance, film, literature, and philosophy is beginning to be felt strongly in composition as well.

### Postmodern Theory Comes to Composition Studies

Some perspective on how much the scope of theory has changed for composition studies in less than a decade might be gained by comparing a book and two essays that were published in 1982: Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*, a popular introduction to Derrida for literary studies; Maxine Hairston's "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of

Writing," a proclamation of the triumph of the process movement in composition studies; and Patricia Bizzell's "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," which anticipated the trajectory much theory in composition studies would follow during the 1980s. Culler's *On Deconstruction* and Hairston's "The Winds of Change" serve today as high-water marks for deconstruction and writing as process, the two revolutions that were surging through American English departments simultaneously in the late 1970s without reference to each other.

Culler's *On Deconstruction* is a more ambitious book than its title suggests because Culler does more than discuss Derrida and his applications to literary study; he attempts a general survey of new developments in theory, including reader-oriented criticism, feminist criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism, and he relates how each of these developments shares certain concerns of deconstruction. The heart of the book is a careful elaboration of the philosophical critique in deconstruction and why that critique invites charges of both anarchism and conservatism—the former because of the subversive potential of deconstruction, the latter because it remains implicated in the system it criticizes.<sup>7</sup>

Culler raises several issues in Derrida's writings that would become as salient for composition studies as for literary studies by the end of the decade. Perhaps most important is Derrida's critique of intentions in texts. His reversal of the hierarchical opposition of speech and writing exposes and challenges "the metaphysics of presence," the belief that the intentions of a self-present writer can be expressed in a text and can be identified by competent readers of that text. The deconstruction of other oppositions such as thought/language, meaning/expression, literal/figural, central/marginal, and clarity/obscurity exposes the extent to which the teaching of college writing is tied to logocentric hierarchies that privilege the first term in these binary oppositions.

Maxine Hairston's "The Winds of Change," published in *College Composition and Communication*, also surveys new developments, but Hairston is much more confident that a new consensus has emerged in composition studies than Culler is for literary studies. She describes the shift in the teaching of writing from an emphasis on the product of writing, especially form, style, and usage, to an emphasis on the mind of the individual writer—a shift Hairston places as analogous to the paradigm shift from a Copernican to a Ptolemaic model of the solar system.<sup>8</sup> Adherents of the traditional paradigm for teaching writing, according to Hairston, "believe that competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; thus their most important task when they are preparing to write is finding a form into which to organize their content" (78). This critique of the traditional paradigm would seem to be leading in the same direction as deconstruction in questioning the unity of a writer's

intentions, but Hairston, like most other advocates of writing as process, stops well short of allowing a text inevitably to exceed a writer's intentions.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the new paradigm, which Hairston says is informed by cognitive psychology and linguistics, emphasizes strategies for helping student writers to discover their intentions. The strategies are to be based on a profile of the strategies of effective writers abstracted from research in the composing process.

Hairston looked back on a decade of research on composing beginning with Janet Emig's 1971 monograph, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, that redefined the process movement from a pedagogical trend to a research agenda. By the end of the 1970s much cognitive theory was imported into composition studies, especially cognitive-developmental theory by researchers such as James Britton and Barry Kroll and problem-solving theory in the work of Linda Flower and John R. Hayes. Anticipating another fruitful decade in process research, Hairston speculates that "we are beginning to find out something about how people's minds work as they write, to chart the rhythm of their writing, to find out what constraints they are aware of as they write, and to see what physical behaviors are involved in writing" (85). In Hairston's vision of the new paradigm, instructors use this knowledge to "intervene in students' writing during the process," and they "evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer's intention and meets the audience's need" (86).

The very different notions of writing and reading proffered by Culler and Hairston suggest how far apart were the scholarly front ranks in composition studies and literary studies in 1982. Three years later, Hairston angrily denounced the neglect of composition studies by those in literary studies in her chairperson's address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In this speech she compares the relations between the two camps to an abusive marriage and urges the "female" partner, composition studies, "to make a psychological break with the literary critics who today dominate the profession of English studies" ("Breaking" 273). She cites as a sign of disciplinary insecurity those in composition who would turn to scholarship in deconstruction and semiotics: "By bringing in the magic names—Cullers [sic], Fish, Hartman, and Derrida—they signal that they have not abandoned the faith" (274). Theorists are in her view the enemy: "The politically active literary critics . . . are 'full of passionate intensity' and have an effect that belies their numbers. If we are going to hold our own against them, the question we must face . . . is 'How can we rally our forces against this intimate enemy?'" (276–77).

But even in 1982 when Hairston was confidently predicting a consolidation of a new process paradigm, other scholars in composition studies began introducing the new lines of theory that had led to vehement controversies in literary studies. The "intimate enemy" was perhaps even closer than Hairston

realized. At the margins of composition studies in the then obscure journal, *Pre/Text*, Patricia Bizzell's review essay, "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty" begins with the question: "What do we need to know about writing?" Bizzell contrasts two kinds of answers to that question: one kind from "inner-directed" theorists such as Flower and Hayes who "seek to discover writing processes that are so fundamental as to be universal" (215); the other from "outer-directed" theorists who believe that "thinking and language use can never occur free of a social context that conditions them" (217).

Bizzell uses "outer-directed" theory to demonstrate the shortcomings of cognitive "inner-directed" theory that Hairston claimed as the basis of the new process paradigm for teaching writing. Because "inner-directed" theorists seek to isolate the "invariant" thinking processes involved in composing, Bizzell claims that "inner-directed" theorists consider the *how* of composing at the expense of asking *why* writers make certain decisions. Answers to the latter question, Bizzell insists, must come not from the mind of the individual writer but from the ways of making meaning in a particular community. She concludes that when students have difficulties in writing, they should not be assumed to be cognitively deficient, but rather their difficulties "should be understood as difficulties with joining an unfamiliar discourse community" (227). Bizzell mentions the work of Stanley Fish, one of the theorists on Hairston's "enemies list," as one example of how the ethical and political dimensions of writing instruction might be explored.

Bizzell was not the first person to criticize the aims of the cognitive research program, but she was prescient in sensing a turn in composition studies away from the modernist focus on the autonomous individual and toward understanding writing as operating within socially and historically produced codes and conventions.<sup>10</sup> The shift in research methodology that Bizzell anticipated in composition studies was already well under way in the social sciences in what Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan described in 1979 as the "interpretive turn." A number of anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists had abandoned the ideal of objective science and recognized that for the human sciences both the object of investigation and the tools of investigation are inextricably bound up in webs of meaning. By the mid-1980s several lines of scholarship in composition studies developed that investigated the situatedness of writers within webs of meaning.

First, the desire to explore in more detail the contexts for writing led a number of researchers to use ethnographic methodology as a means for understanding the cultural practices of classroom writing and writing in the workplace. The popularity of Shirley Brice Heath's insightful ethnography of literacy and schooling in three southern communities, *Ways with Words*, augmented the considerable interest this line of inquiry had gained and inspired many

dissertations employing ethnographic methodology.<sup>11</sup> Heath's active participant role in the sites where she observed exemplifies the interpretive turn that denies privileged status to the researcher as detached onlooker.

At the same time, genre analysis emerged as a major topic of study, with some scholars developing genre theory (for example, Carolyn Miller; James Slevin, "Genre Theory"), while others were busy studying the writing of academic disciplines, combining interpretive social theory with rhetorical analysis. In the latter endeavor Charles Bazerman ("Scientific Writing") and Greg Myers ("Social Construction") drew on work in the sociology of science for studying writing in the sciences, Gay Gragson and Jack Selzer brought reader-oriented literary theory to scientific texts, while Jeanne Fahnestock ("Accommodating Science") used traditional rhetorical concepts for analyzing how scientific discourse is adapted for nonspecialist audiences. Such efforts became the scholarly companion of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement in college classrooms, and they have been followed by considerable work taking a variety of theoretical perspectives on writing in academic disciplines and in other professions.<sup>12</sup> The discourse of composition studies itself became an object for study in Stephen North's self-reflexive examination of the methodological communities in composition research.

Besides opening new territory for scholarship in composition studies, the influence of social constructionist theory and antifoundationalist theory led to a broad reinterpretation of notions of the writer and writing. One influential effort was Kenneth Bruffee's claims for collaborative learning pedagogy as representing the social nature of knowledge. Bruffee gained much acclaim in composition circles during the 1970s for training peer tutors to cope with the large numbers of students entering the City University of New York through the policy of open admissions. The success of peer tutoring led him to develop a method of writing instruction based on student interaction called "collaborative learning." In the 1980s Bruffee interpreted collaborative learning as acting out the philosophical position that knowledge and authority are socially negotiated, and he advanced the metaphor of conversation for the production of knowledge through writing ("Collaborative Learning"; "Liberal Education"). Bruffee uses the neopragmatist philosophy of Richard Rorty, in particular Rorty's notion that to learn something requires a shift in a person's relations with others, to explain the workings of a collaborative classroom.

Other scholars offer differing interpretations of the social nature of writing. Marilyn Cooper ("Ecology") and Linda Brodkey ("Modernism") critique writing pedagogy that reproduces traditional images of the literary artist working alone; Gregory Clark argues for Bakhtinian dialogue as the practice of democratic rhetoric; and Karen Burke LeFevre asks writing teachers to consider a "collective" view of invention based on a recognition that acts of writ-



ing are social acts taking place in a particular culture. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford in *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* also examine the social nature of invention, using their own collaboration as an important source of data in addition to historical and theoretical scholarship and empirical research to argue for a model of collaborative writing that is dialogic and relational. "Scenes of writing," they maintain, "are peopled, busy—full of the give-and-take of conversation and debate" (42).

Beyond inspiring these new lines of scholarship, theory emphasizing that acts of writing occur in ongoing streams of discourse came to influence conceptions of teaching writing among rank-and-file instructors. The university was described as an unfamiliar discourse community that students seek to enter—a notion that provided an alternative to explanations of cognitive deficiency for students judged to be poor writers. Rather than being assessed as lacking in certain cognitive processes, students came to be viewed as foreigners in an established discourse community, and the writing teacher's job was reinterpreted as a guide to the customs and conventions of that community. Even though the assumption that the academy constitutes a single community was quickly contested, the metaphors implied by a notion of community proliferated in discussions of writing pedagogy.<sup>13</sup> These metaphors came to influence classroom practice through the rapid expansion of the use of writing groups in writing classrooms. (See Gere, *Writing Groups*.)

By the end of the 1980s some were announcing that another major transformation had occurred from the consensus on process that Hairston describes to a consensus based on social constructionist theory. Donald Stewart writes that "the era of the cognitive psychologists is waning; the era of the social constructionists is just beginning" (58). Geoffrey Chase observes, "We have watched the emphasis in composition studies swing from product to process. . . . Now another shift seems to be underway, one toward an emphasis on discourse communities" (13). And Martin Nystrand notes, "there has been a shift in perspective from things cognitive to things social" ("Social-Interactive Model" 67). None of these articles, however, exudes the confidence and enthusiasm of Hairston's celebration of the process movement; indeed, Stewart regrets the fading of the process movement, charging social constructionists with neglecting the individual.<sup>14</sup>

For those commentators who look more favorably than Stewart on the move toward social constructionism, the predicament has been that no single theory or even two or three theories of the social have become widely embraced by writing teachers. Consequently, what is meant by "social" and "social construction" differs from theorist to theorist. Because of the lack of a dominant theory of the social, the notion of a "discourse community" became a way of acknowledging of the social quality of writing, but that notion has

proven inadequate. In examining the use of the term *community* in composition studies, Joseph Harris writes that "recent theories have tended to invoke the idea of community in ways at once sweeping and vague: positing discursive utopias that direct and determine the writings of their members, yet failing to state the operating rules or boundaries of these communities" ("Idea of Community" 12). The vagueness, Harris claims, results from conflation of the "speech community" of linguistics—referring to speakers living in close geographical proximity—and the notion of an "interpretive community" from literary theory in which dispersed readers share certain assumptions about particular kinds of texts.

Similar complaints have been made about the use of *social* in relation to writing. James Reither and Douglas Vipond argue that the ambiguity in the use of the term in discussions of writing is unresolvable (856). C. H. Knoblauch is even more skeptical in his remark,

When roving, and normally warring, bands of cognitive psychologists, text linguists, philosophers of composition, historians of rhetoric, Marxist critics, post-structuralists, and reader-response theorists all wax equally enthusiastic about 'the social construction of reality,' there is a good chance that the expression has long since lost its capacity to name anything important or even very interesting. ("Some Observations" 54)

What Harris finds wrong with the notion of community in composition studies is that it often presents the language and conventions of writing as unproblematic and cohesive, minimizes or ignores competing discourses, and glides over the question of how membership in a discourse community is defined. Bizzell anticipates these problems in "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty" where she sees the suppression of political and ethical issues in an allegedly neutral pedagogy applying to both individual and community conceptions of teaching writing. She points out that schools transmit many assumptions from the larger culture that some refer to as the "hidden curriculum" and that students who are assigned to remedial classes known as "basic writing" often have different cultural backgrounds from those in regular sections.

The displacements forced upon students entering the discourses of the academy are examined in detail by David Bartholomae, who observes that basic writing students are not so much trapped in a "writer-based prose" of personal language as they are aware of the privileged discourses of the university but unable to control these discourses. Bartholomae brings a poststructuralist perspective in describing acts of writing as always taking place in relation to previous writing and writers' selves as always shaped by the selves of other writers. He argues that becoming an "insider" in a privileged discourse community "is not a matter of inventing a language that is new" but rather

"a matter of continually and stylistically working against the inevitable presence of conventional language" ("Inventing the University" 143).<sup>15</sup>

Other scholars used theory concerning the workings of ideology to expose the politics of discourse communities. In "Reality, Consensus, and Reform" (1986), Greg Myers questioned Kenneth Bruffee's goal of consensus in collaborative learning from a Marxist perspective. Myers asserts that privileging the notion of reality as a social construct without giving students any means of examining the structure of this construct risks reproducing the inequalities of the existing social order.

More extensive critiques of the ideologies implicit in the teaching of writing are made by John Clifford and John Schilb, James Berlin, and Linda Brodkey. Clifford and Schilb discuss the implications of Terry Eagleton's claim in *Literary Studies: An Introduction* that the center of English studies should be rhetoric. Schilb also examines how political questions are suppressed in composition research ("Ideology"). In an essay discussed in the introduction, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin shows that rhetorics contain ideological assumptions about what exists, what is good, and what is possible. Berlin advocates placing the questions of rhetoric and ideology at the center of a writing class.<sup>16</sup>

In "On the Subjects of Class and Gender," Brodkey analyzes issues of writing and social class in letters exchanged between white middle-class teachers and students enrolled in an adult basic education class. She finds that the teachers were unable to acknowledge differences of class and fell back into an educational discourse that denies the existence of class, and (by extension) race, ethnicity, and gender. Brodkey makes clear that the teachers in this study had good intentions, but in spite of their energy, dedication, and commitment to universal education, they could not admit that their lives were very different from those of their correspondents because there was no space in their discourses for the subjectivities that their working-class correspondents presented.

Feminist theory added another dimension to theories of ideology by focusing on antagonisms within communities. During the 1970s and 1980s different lines of feminist theory challenged the assumption that acts of writing are similar for men and women. Radical feminists such as Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich argued that women's experience is distorted by language that purports to be objective and disinterested. Language in their view does not merely name inequality, it reproduces it. In a frequently reprinted essay, "Taking Women Students Seriously," first delivered in 1978, Adrienne Rich speaks of the connections between feminist theory and the teaching of writing as a result of her experience as a teacher in the SEEK program at the City College of New York in the late 1960s, a program that was a forerunner to the

open admissions policy made familiar to those in composition studies by Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* (1977). Rich sums up eloquently the challenge these nontraditional students presented for writing teachers: "How can we connect the process of learning to write well with the student's own reality, and not simply teach her/him how to write acceptable lies in standard English?" (239). Rich continues that when she later began teaching at a women's college, she found striking parallels to teaching the so-called disadvantaged minority students in New York, since even at the women's college the educational system was set up to "indoctrinate women to passivity, self-depreciation, and a sense of powerlessness" (240).

But in spite of the burst of feminist writing and theory, in the introduction to a collection titled *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity* (1987), Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing write, "[When] we began to search for scholarship on the relationship between feminist theory and the teaching of writing, . . . we discovered it was a relatively unexplored area" (xi). Elizabeth Flynn makes a similar observation in "Composing as a Woman" (1988) about the scarcity of feminist critiques in composition. The situation has changed rapidly since then.<sup>17</sup> One example of how feminist theory has affected composition studies is Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's account of how their own view of collaboration has changed. In "Rhetoric in a New Key" (1990), they write:

In the six years since we began what we originally thought of as a fairly straightforward data gathering project, we have come to situate the issue of collaborative writing in a much broader historical, political, and ideological context and to contemplate the ways in which our society locates power, authority, authenticity, and property in an autonomous, masculine self. (234)<sup>18</sup>

A second generation of feminist scholarship in composition studies has now begun to appear that emphasizes politics. Susan Jarratt notes that some feminists in composition have rejected argument as being inherently patriarchal in its aspiration to dominance ("Feminism"). These feminists align themselves with proponents of "expressivism" such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow because both positions seek to provide a supportive environment that suppresses conflict and encourages narrations of personal experience. Jarratt points out that Elbow himself recognizes the affinity between his "believing game," which invites listening with acceptance and compliance, and feminist theory that rejects conflict. Jarratt praises both the feminist rejection of argument and the expressivist conception of writing as process for shifting power from teacher to students, but she faults both for ignoring the differences of gender, race, and class that exist among teacher and students. Jarratt writes: "Demanding that our female students listen openly and acceptingly to every response from a mixed class can lead to a discursive reenactment of the

violence carried on daily in the maintenance of an inequitable society" (110–11). By foregrounding differences rather than pretending they are suspended within the space of a classroom, Jarratt believes that students can come to identify how their personal interests are implicated in larger social relations and, as a result, they will be better able to develop a public voice as well as a private one.

The entrance of deconstruction into composition studies meanwhile followed a path similar to other lines of postmodern theory, where after initial enthusiasm the political stresses soon came to be felt. By the beginning of the 1980s, a few informed members of English departments recognized that both deconstruction and writing as process undermined the fixed, authoritative text and that literary theorists and composition scholars were in some respects allied against traditional literary critics, even if they rarely acknowledged their shared positions. Both revolutions attacked the privileging of the written product.

Deconstructionists held that while what is written is apparently fixed, its meaning is open to a "big bang" of ever spreading readings, while process theorists subverted the fixed text from the other direction by emphasizing that a text can be endlessly revised; a text is never finished, but at some point the writer decides to quit. In 1984 Edward White observed that composition teachers welcomed "poststructuralism as if it were an old friend" (186).<sup>19</sup> White says of deconstruction that "once we strip away the jargon," it "has an almost eerily familiar sound" (190). He sees the insights of recent literary theory as describing "with uncanny accuracy our experience of responding with professional care to the writing our students produce for us" (191). White advises that writing teachers should be pleased that literary theorists support their insights, but writing teachers shouldn't expect to be outraged or astonished when they read theory.

A similar view on composition and deconstruction can be found in the introduction to *Writing and Reading Differently* (1985), a collection of essays on deconstruction and the teaching of composition and literature. The editors, G. Douglas Atkins and Michael L. Johnson, acknowledge that they "run the risk of dulling and weakening what deconstructionists sometimes regard almost as a finely honed intellectual and even political weapon" (10), but they argue that "deconstruction is teaching as well as an interventionist strategy" (11), implying that politics and teaching are somehow separate and thus erecting a boundary while seeming to demolish one.

By the end of the decade, more disturbing versions of deconstruction had come to composition studies, questioning the advice given in composition textbooks to use thesis statements, topic sentences, headings, and other cues to the reader. Such advice, from a Derridean perspective, gives writers

a false sense of confidence that their meanings can be readily intelligible, and, more insidiously, teaches them to ignore other meanings and other perspectives. In an essay in *Reclaiming Pedagogy: The Rhetoric of the Classroom* (1989), Nina Schwartz points to the paradox that arises "when we direct our students to read complicatedly but to write clearly. . . . How can we invite students to see so much but to say so little?" (63).

In another chapter in the same volume, Randall Knoper explains how this theoretical sleight-of-hand is accomplished. The magic act of applying deconstruction to composition while maintaining "product" as usual is achieved by equating deconstruction with invention. Interpreting deconstruction in this way also suits the containment of process theory to how students write rather than to *what* they write. Knoper compares this view of invention to "a contractor's litter, [which] is cleaned up and hidden before the final, balanced, centered edifice is presented to view" (131).

Other scholars in composition studies, however, have not sought to contain deconstruction by cleaning up the litter of oppositions in a text, but instead, as John Schilb proposes in "Deconstructing Didion," to use deconstruction to make students "increasingly conscious of how contemplating the act of writing might involve grappling with philosophical issues germane to their own lives" (283–84). Jasper Neel and Sharon Crowley have used deconstruction to critique the assumption in both traditional and process-oriented writing pedagogy that writing begins with an originating author. The hope of Neel's call for liberating composition studies from philosophy ("the notion of the forever-absent truth toward which discourse moves" 203) or Crowley's call for shifting attention away from authors and toward language is to recognize the role of rhetoric in a participatory democracy ("Derrida").<sup>20</sup>

### **The Habermas-Lyotard Debate**

For those who have followed this succession of theory in composition studies, the situation is not much different from that of other disciplines which have come to view all forms of cultural representation, whether high art or mass media, literary or nonliterary, visual or aural, as actively involved in political and social relations and as thus politically invested.<sup>21</sup> This turn in composition studies is a recognition of the mutuality of theory and practice—a recognition that, as Foucault argues in a conversation with Gillès Deleuze reprinted in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, "Theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice, it is practice" (208). This revised notion of theory situates the practices of composition textbooks that encourage the orderly application of reason in a long theoretical tradition of the advancement of reason

dating from the Enlightenment (see chapter 5). Much of the work of Foucault explores how the Enlightenment conception of rationality is inextricably bound up in the exercise of power, and it presents a strong challenge to the commonplace assumption that society has progressed as the result of the development of rational knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Foucault chronicles a double movement of liberation and domination in the reforms of prisons, schools, hospitals, and asylums brought about by the humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment ideals inspired numerous disciplinary technologies that shape individuals through continuous observation, supervision, and training.<sup>23</sup>

Postmodern theory has not produced, however, a broad theory of agency that would lead directly from these critiques to political action. Indeed, the incisive critique in much of postmodern theory is inimical to such efforts, viewing them as a way of closing off critique too quickly and short-circuiting its radical potential, even replacing old structures of domination with new ones. There is deep suspicion of theory among postmodern theorists, who question any effort toward universal description and especially attempts to regulate on the basis of such descriptions.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (*La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur la savoir*, 1979), Jean-François Lyotard defines *modern* as discourses that legitimate themselves with reference to the *grands récits*. He argues that these grand narratives are no longer capable of even legitimating themselves, and that, moreover, we have lost our nostalgia for these narratives. By grand narratives Lyotard refers to the overarching narratives of history such as Enlightenment humanism, scientific progress, and Marxism, each characterized by a belief in reason and science and a faith that we are advancing toward human emancipation. Because grand narratives deny their own historical production of first principles in their aspiration for universality, Lyotard claims that they inevitably become oppressive. They deny their status as narratives in their aspiration to represent themselves as universal truth. For Lyotard such totalizing truth entails closure, and the striving for the certainty of reason brings about authoritarianism. Lyotard sees the autonomous, rational subject of liberal humanism and the collective subject of the proletariat theorized by Marx as not only outmoded but even sinister concepts because over the past two centuries they have been used to justify wars, arsenals of nuclear weapons, concentration camps, gulags, social engineering, assembly lines, and other forms of centralized social control. Lyotard concludes *The Postmodern Condition* with a cry of outrage against the suffering caused in the name of truth: "The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one. . . . Let us wage war on totality" (81–82).

The gap between postmodern critique and a theory of agency was raised

prominently in the 1980s in what is now referred to as the “debate” between Jürgen Habermas, a philosophy professor at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt-on-Main, and Lyotard, now professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Paris VIII. The “debate” was not a debate but an exchange of critiques, of which the most prominent examples are Lyotard’s 1984 afterword to *The Postmodern Condition* and Habermas’s Adorno Prize address, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” (1981), in which Habermas defended reason and the project of modernity from the critiques of the French. In the early 1980s Habermas continued his attack on postmodern theory in lectures that formed the basis of *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (1985), translated as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in 1987. The work presents a philosophical history of the critique of reason and places the postmodernists in a tradition of philosophers who have rejected modernity, most notably Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Habermas the postmodernists are actually anti-modernists, and he refers to them as “neoconservatives.”

Habermas is the recognized heir of the Frankfurt School of critical theory following from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.<sup>24</sup> But Habermas’s defense of enlightened rationality is a significant revision of Adorno’s move toward aesthetics, which many take as the Frankfurt School position. Throughout his career Habermas has argued that a just society must be based on a comprehensive notion of reason, which he identifies as the project of modernity. In “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” he sees this movement consolidating in the eighteenth century:

The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. . . . The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life—that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. (9)

Contrary to the French postmodernists, who view the Enlightenment belief in reason as a project that came to disaster in the twentieth century, Habermas sees the Enlightenment as a great unfinished project. Habermas admits that “Foucault did indeed provide an illuminating critique of the entanglement of the human sciences in the philosophy of the subject” (*Philosophical Discourse* 294). But Habermas faults Foucault for following the exhaustion of the philosophy of consciousness to its dead end. Habermas finds the underlying cause for the massive and extensive kinds of institutional oppression in the twentieth century not to be the excesses of reason, as Foucault contends, but rather the insufficiency and abandonment of reason. Habermas accuses the French postmodernists of giving up the fight.



Habermas feels that the postmodern critique of modernity is made at the expense of any beneficial concept of reason. By rejecting general standards of truth and goodness, postmodern theorists leave no basis for a social formation other than the struggles of antagonistic groups—a situation according to Habermas that invites the rise of fascist governments in the name of restoring order. Habermas would preserve some standard of truth and goodness, and he continues to insist on the emancipatory potential of modernity. But the foundation Habermas builds on is not that of liberal humanism. His defense of rationality is not a call for the return of the autonomous, rational subject, but instead he relocates rationality in the potential for communicative action. In his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas separates what he calls “instrumental reason,” the insidious rationality of bureaucratic power that Foucault describes, from the possibility of “communicative rationality,” which allows people to question the claims of others in a movement toward consensus. Habermas would preserve the project of the Enlightenment by shifting rationality from the unified, self-present subject to the pragmatics of language use. True rationality is claimed to be achievable in the ideal speech situation, which is a precondition for a genuinely emancipated society. Even in less than ideal conditions, social reproduction to some extent depends on the ability of individuals to negotiate consensus over competing claims.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard allows that Habermas’s goals are worthy but his method and analysis misguided. He says that what Habermas requires is a grand theory of human experience, one that would “bridge the gap between cognitive, ethical, and political discourses, thus opening the way to a unity of experience” (72). Lyotard strongly questions the wisdom of attempting to homogenize the heterogeneity of language games into a “soft imperialism.” He attacks Habermas’s argument for its goal of rational consensus and accuses Habermas of attempting to stifle what is most liberating in postmodern culture—the splintering of culture into a multiplicity of differences. Lyotard asks:

Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jürgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy. (xxv)

This statement expresses the argument of *The Postmodern Condition* in miniature. Lyotard disputes the assumptions underlying Habermas’s goal of a universal consensus in a dialogue of argumentation. First, Lyotard argues that

Habermas assumes a unified rational discourse is possible when discourses are emphatically heterogeneous, employing different sets of pragmatic rules. Second, Lyotard faults the goal of dialogue as consensus, which he maintains is but a temporary condition in discourse and not its end. Lyotard argues that the result of discourse is not consensus but paralogy and a "multiplicity of finite meta-arguments" (65). Consensus is precisely what we should not strive toward because it leads to the suppression of difference and particularity. Instead, Lyotard urges that we should celebrate dissensus and listen to the voice of the Other rather than trying to merge it into our own voice. Invention, he insists, is born of dissension, not of consensus.

### **Composition Studies in the Aftermath of Postmodern Theory**

Some of the issues in the Habermas versus Lyotard debate have also been raised in discussions of collaborative learning and the ensuing debate over the politics of consensus. In "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning" (1989), John Trimbur addresses Greg Myers's criticisms that collaborative learning occludes social conflicts in its goal of consensus. Trimbur maintains that consensus "can be a powerful instrument for students to generate differences, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak and what counts as a meaningful statement" (603). If collaborative learning is to move beyond a more efficient means of locating students within existing social structures, Trimbur claims that a rhetoric of consensus must be defined in relation to a rhetoric of dissensus. Consensus would come to be based "not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences" (610). Trimbur cites Habermas's distinction between consensus as an empirical condition and consensus as an aspiration to organize a conversation outside relations of domination. Habermas thus conceives of consensus much differently from Bruffee and Rorty in their empirical descriptions and redefines consensus as a utopian project, which according to Trimbur would "tap the impulses toward emancipation and justice in the utopian practices of Habermas's 'ideal speech situation'" (615).

In a comment on Trimbur's essay appearing a year later, Kenneth Bruffee defends the "success orientation" of instrumental reason that Habermas, Trimbur, and Lyotard reject. Bruffee says that instrumental control and rational efficiency is "not entirely a bad thing; . . . the question is not how to avoid or sabotage instrumental control and rational efficiency. The question is how

to teach other people how to exercise it and thus give them genuine access to it" ("Comment" 694). Trimbur responds, "What Habermas calls 'instrumental control' and 'rational efficiency' cannot be abstracted from the regime of the specialist and the expert, from professional monopolies which remove knowledge from the public sphere" ("Response" 699). Trimbur sees the "success orientation" as often restricting access rather than granting it and that consensus is forced by the more powerful imposing their will on the less powerful.

The debate over consensus and dissensus in collaborative learning offers a perspective different from those of Habermas and Lyotard. Trimbur, like Habermas, explores what constitutes an ideal speech (and writing) situation, but unlike Habermas, Trimbur does not fall back to a defense of universal rationality. Like Lyotard, Trimbur contests the autonomous, rational subject of the Enlightenment and instead would use arguments of historical situatedness to uphold the Enlightenment's value of civility and consensus. By relocating the debate over consensus versus dissensus to actual classroom discussion, Trimbur suggests indirectly that both Habermas and Lyotard overstate their positions. Trimbur gives the example of a typical use of collaborative learning in a literature class where students are expected to come to a consensus that the meaning is neither contained in the text nor is it entirely arbitrary, but derives from the authority of the interpretive community. Such a use of collaborative learning, Trimbur argues, accepts as a given the enterprise of interpretation. Instead, Trimbur would call into question the goal of interpretation by asking students to consider the division between literature and nonliterature—why some reading is "good for you" and other reading is "fun." The purpose of such a discussion is not to manipulate students into reaching agreement about what counts as literature but to make students aware that literature depends on a rhetoric of dissensus between what literature is and what literature is not.

Habermas, Lyotard, Trimbur, and Bruffee share many assumptions. All posit a socially constructed reality, all believe in the notion of a just society (Lyotard is unusual among postmodern theorists in this respect), and all propose discursive means toward achieving justice. All, I think, would support Trimbur's conclusion "to turn the conversation in the collaborative classroom into a heterotopia of voices—a heterogeneity without hierarchy" ("Consensus and Difference" 615).

Yet there are major differences among these theorists about how we are to achieve democracy through discourse. These differences in methodology underscore a paradox of postmodern theory: the power of critique is made problematic by how action is to result from critique. This power to fold language back on itself makes postmodern theory at once an extremely power-

ful means for exposing the political investments of foundational concepts, but the same power prevents postmodern theorists from making claims of truth or emancipatory value for this activity. Postmodern theory can resemble a terrorist bomb that demolishes bystanders and even its maker as well as the target. Few of the postmodern theorists are of much help in formulating what should be the appropriate politics for a particular writing classroom. Foucault's response is to turn away from formal theorizing that might grow out of critique. The incisive analysis of prisons in *Discipline and Punish*, for example, does not lead to proposals for prison reform. Foucault distrusted any global political theory of resistance because he believed it would inevitably reproduce what it set out to eliminate. Baudrillard more directly dismisses political efforts as fruitless continuations of modernism that seek to find some direction and order in a directionless and disorderly world (see chapter 7). His answer is to plunge into the chaos. But the binge of hyperconsumption in the 1980s was a plunge into the chaos, and it has left us with a cynical generation of young people who are pessimistic about the future.

The utopian hope of many who were in college in the late 1960s, both as students and teachers, was to create a nonracist, nonsexist, ecologically responsible, participatory democracy. Social reformers of the 1960s, however, failed to understand that history was not necessarily on their side. They believed in a metanarrative of human progress, and they believed that the desire for freedom is part of the human essence. The ending of racism and the aspiration for nonviolence, therefore, was understood as a cultural evolution toward a more enlightened humanity. What many social reformers did not appreciate fully was that the victories of the civil rights movement and the movement against the Vietnam War were fought and won rhetorically in public space. The 1980s were an ongoing demonstration that discourse is a means of power to be seized as the political Right redefined the social consensus of what is good and possible for America. Today, the goals of 1960s reformers are discredited as producing a new "McCarthyism" of "political correctness." In widely selling and quoted books, Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, and Dinesh D'Souza have sounded the alarm that radicals from the 1960s have taken over the teaching of humanities in college, aiming at nothing less than the destruction of the West.

How our situation now differs from the late 1960s might be appreciated by examining the basis for radical claims in the 1960s. I want to return not to Paris but to Miami Beach in April 1969, where the Conference on College Composition and Communication held its annual meeting. The Miami Beach convention was probably the most politically active in the history of CCCC. The Executive Committee took a public political stand by voting to move the 1971 convention, which had been scheduled for Chicago, to another city as

a protest against police violence against demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention. A statement was prepared by a subcommittee to explain this action, which was mailed to the CCCC membership later in the month. The paragraph from the statement that justifies the Executive Committee's action reads:

Since the summer of 1968 Chicago has become a symbol of much that is wrong with a society in trouble. What is wrong with Chicago, what is wrong with our society is its expression of values. As teachers of English, we are in the business of trying to improve our society's expression of values. Therefore, we choose not to meet in Chicago—gesture though this may be—in order to rededicate ourselves to our belief in just language. In doing so we state our opposition to the language of the nightstick, and we restate our commitment to the language of words in their auspicious places. (Roth 270)

At this same meeting in Miami, a group called the New University Conference Caucus of CCCC was much in evidence. The NUC was a broader radical movement within the academy, and it had disrupted the Modern Language Association convention the previous December. The NUC succeeded in covertly inserting a series of proposals into the CCCC convention program at Miami Beach, and it raised these proposals for discussion in an extended scheduled session, as well as in meeting rooms assigned to the NUC and at tables in the lobby of the main convention hotel.

In the "Counterstatement" section of the October 1969 *College Composition and Communication*, the NUC responded to the Executive Committee's statement. The NUC applauded the committee's decision not to meet in Chicago, but it criticized the explanation sent to the membership for concentrating on the expression of values rather than the values themselves. The conclusion of the NUC response is worth quoting at length:

This concentration on "expression" and forms seems to avoid the facts of our situation in the U.S. Can we deny that evil *values* are the primary problem and not the *way* in which those values are expressed? That is, the Daley and police rhetoric, both of words and nightsticks, reveals despicable values, but the rhetoric is not the source of the evil. Thus our effort should not stop at criticizing the expression, the symptoms of evil. Rather, we should look beyond these superficial symptoms of wrong to the more fundamental problem of inhumane goals (e.g., the desire to impose U.S. interests on Viet Nam or Latin American countries). . . . Let us not spend too much time and effort with the problem of "society's expression of values." Let us work primarily to foster humane values themselves as the rhetoric in college catalogs and elsewhere asserts we are doing. This requires even more action than the gesture of not going to Chicago. It requires organizing ourselves to foster change, fundamental change, in the country. (New University)

The NUC's response speaks to our situation today. Many would agree that it is not enough to focus on expression of values but that teachers should enable students to become agents for social change. Few, however, are saying now that fostering humane values will necessarily result in social change. Indeed, the discourse on values was appropriated in critiques of education from the Right in the 1970s and 1980s. With the substitution of references to Chicago, U.S. imperialism, and humane values expressed in college catalogs with ones concerning sexual permissiveness, patriotism, and the Bible as authority, this critique could have come from religious fundamentalists. Appeals to the kind of humane values expressed in college catalogs now come from defenders of the status quo like Allan Bloom.

Postmodern theory offers a sustained critique of a unified discourse of humane values by revealing how such a discourse results from a dichotomy between what is held to be universal and what is particular and contingent. A unified discourse of human values follows from the ideal of impartial moral reason, where from a disinterested and detached standpoint the particularities of different social contexts can be abstracted into universals.<sup>25</sup> Claims for universality depend on what Theodor Adorno calls the "logic of identity" or what Jacques Derrida in *On Grammatology* calls "the metaphysics of presence." The logic of identity attempts to merge different things into a single unity. By theorizing underlying principles that unite different things, the logic of identity becomes "totalizing." It denies difference by denying the particularity of situations. It denies feelings by establishing dichotomies of subjective/objective and private/public. Instead, it posits a universal subjectivity that all reasoning people are expected to occupy.

The ideal of impartiality, however, has been used over and over to justify asymmetries of power by locating reason in European men and denying reason in others. The humane values described in the Declaration of Independence, for example, did not extend to Native Americans and slaves. Postmodern theory in its many varieties emphasizes the multiplicity of subjectivities and resists the impulse to speak for the Other and to turn the Other into the same person as the speaker. "Humane values" are argued to be heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, highly nuanced according to particular situations and the particular of people in those situations. More important, heterogeneity is increasingly the social situation of North America. In states like Texas and California and in most major cities in the United States, where now over half the students in public schools are African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American, appeals to a single, unified discourse of humane values, no matter how well-intended they might be, run dangerously against the social conditions of education.

In the next chapter I construct a narrative of the relations of composition studies to political changes in the United States. I argue that composition studies has entered a very different political landscape concerning assumptions about literacy than when it emerged in the 1960s and that the theoretical disruptions described in this chapter are related to this changing landscape.