

## CHAPTER 2.

# THIRTY YEARS AFTER *INTO THE FIELD*

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In 1987, I was flying home from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (the Cs) meeting in Atlanta and happened to sit next to Winifred Horner. I knew her son, David. We'd been undergrads together at the University of Iowa, both of us in the marching band and, later, both performing in the Old Gold Singers, a small show choir for which he played drums, and I sang and danced. We talked mostly about Dave and the sessions we'd seen in Atlanta, but I've lost any details to the residue of time.

In fact, I'd forgotten that encounter altogether until I was re-reading *Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies*, which Anne Gere edited in 1993. In the third sentence of her introduction, Anne situates her volume in philosophical contrast to Horner's book of a decade earlier, *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*. Rather than "bridging," in which composition borrows from other disciplines (literary studies, of course, but also psychology, linguistics, and rhetoric), Anne suggests the better metaphor is "restructuring," in which "composition shapes as much as it is shaped by other fields because questions about the nature of discourse, writing, and subjectivity emerge from mutually defining stances" (4). Curious about what Win Horner had been doing at the Atlanta Cs, I learned that she was chairing a session on "The State of the Discipline," with speakers David Chapman, Gary Tate, and Nan Johnson. One of many striking things about Anne's introduction for *Into the Field* is her confident stance that "questions about the status of composition—whether it possesses the features of a discipline, whether it merits a place in the disciplined academy—give way, in these essays, to new ways of talking about composition," rejecting a "totalizing disciplinary narrative" (3).

Concerns about the status of composition have occupied our field for the past 40 years. At one level, the motivations have been political, with desires for respect and fair material resources. Composition has been largely defined through much of its history as the activity of required first-year courses, staffed especially at larger schools by teaching assistants or adjuncts on their way to "something better." Faculty with scholarly commitments to the field resented

how composition was dismissed as a site of scholarship deserving the staffing, status, funding, and autonomy that literary studies enjoyed. (My, how literature's times have changed.) The stakes were trenchantly and brilliantly outlined in the Composition Blues Band song, "Scorned by the MLA," set to the Springsteen tune, "Born in the USA": "In my profession now I'm just a slob / Cause I teach composition to the human mob / Scorned by the MLA / Scorned by the MLA" (Diogenes).

At another level, though, concerns about status have been motivated less by defensive positioning for academic turf than by intellectual curiosity. Given a baggy collection of epistemologies, objects of inquiry, and pedagogical practices, is composition studies actually a discipline? Or does it rather have the status of Wittgenstein's games? Just as chess, baseball, bridge, catch, and pin-the-tale-on-the-donkey have a family resemblance to one another as games, not a limited shared quality, so might composition be a federation of activities rather than a discipline, an assemblage united by family resemblance of its members. I appreciate the philosophical puzzle of disciplinary definition, smartly enacted in books like *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity* (Malenczyk et al.). And I appreciate the strategic value of being able to articulate our identity in the higher education firmament, even though recognition as a discipline has relatively less value than it once might have had. These are days of program closures even at flagship universities, from political science to languages, from English even to mathematics. I worried a few years ago that people were unrealistic about disciplinary strength in current conditions (Hesse). My worries have accelerated.

It's both nostalgic and refreshing, then, to peer thirty years back, at the world invoked by *Into the Field*. I remember two reactions to getting my copy of the book, published the year I was tenured. The first and most immediate was that it had been published by the Modern Language Association (MLA), for some in the profession the avatar of inequality for rhetoric and composition. I understood the rancor, but by then I'd already been an MLA member nine years and will soon retire as a lifetime MLA member, so I've generally been charitable. Still, serious books in rhetoric and composition (rhet/comp) then came from publishers like the National Council of Teachers of English, Southern Illinois University Press, or Boynton/Cook, not MLA. It was a few years before composition-friendly scholar Bob Scholes would become president of MLA, and it was twenty-five years before Anne herself would be the first modern composition studies scholar elected to that role. I still remember Rosemary Feal, then MLA Executive Director, confiding in excitement to me during a hotel breakfast, that the upcoming ballot would feature Anne and Michael Bernard-Donals. Back in 1993, I figured it would do rhet/comp good to have a book with such exemplary scholars in the MLA catalog. Many of its chapters originated in convention

sessions organized by the MLA Division on Teaching Writing. The field benefited from MLA as another publishing option; 1994 would bring another MLA book, *Writing Theory and Critical Theory* (Clifford and Schilb).

My second reaction was to the tenor of *Into the Field*. Rather than defensively wanting turf, its dozen authors were confidently doing intellectual work in a field they assumed needed no justification or borrowed status (an implication of Horner's earlier book). Unlike a fine volume roughly its contemporary, *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, edited by Richard Bullock and John Trimbur (in which Anne has a chapter), *Into the Field* more directly engages theory-building, in approaches alternatively philosophical and essayistic. The orientation is clear from Anne's distinction between the common usage of "field" as connoting "a bounded territory, one that can be distinguished and set apart" and her preferred less common usage, out of physics, of field as "a kind of charged space in which multiple 'sites' of interaction appear" (4). The book's work, then, was not to demand attention but to articulate ideas in the intellectually energetic space of composition.

To accomplish this work, Anne gathered a dozen prominent scholars. Here's her table of contents:

Anne Ruggles Gere, "Introduction"

Part One: The Philosophical Turn

Kurt Spellmeyer, "Being Philosophical about Composition:  
Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Writing"

Brenda Deen Schildgen, "Reconnecting Rhetoric and Philosophy  
in the Composition Classroom"

Judith Halden-Sullivan, "The Phenomenology of Process"

Barbara Gleason, "Self-Reflection as a Way of Knowing: Phenomenological  
Investigations in Composition"

Richard J. Murphy, Jr. "Polanyi and Composition: A Personal  
Note on a Human Science"

George Dillon, "Argumentation and Critique: College Composition  
and Enlightenment Ideals"

Part Two: Postmodern Subjectivities

James A. Berlin, "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies:  
Collapsing Boundaries"

John Trimbur, "Composition Studies: Postmodern or Popular"

Irene Papoulis, "Subjectivity and Its Role in 'Constructed' Knowledge:  
Composition, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalysis"

Rosemary Gates, "Creativity and Insight: Toward a Poetics of Composition"

Derek Owens, "Composition as the Voicing of Multiple Fictions"

David Bleich, "Ethnography and the Study of Literacy: Prospects for Socially Generous Research"

"Not a Conclusion: A Conversation"

The section headings, "The Philosophical Turn" and "Postmodern Subjectivities," reflect a certain historical moment. English studies in the 1980s and early 1990s were characterized by what got shorthanded as "the theory wars." Continental theorists disrupted traditional ways of reading and writing by foregrounding the economic, ideological, and political nature of texts. Textual meanings of value were constructed (and thus, amenable to deconstruction) rather than immanent or natural. In literary studies, syllabus real estate occupied by fiction and poetry gave some way to works by Lyotard, Althusser, Derrida, Jameson, Eagleton, Foucault, Kristeva, Spivak, Deleuze and Guattari, and so on. Theory wars were fought over this displacement; many people were appalled by reduced attention to the kinds of creative works that were central to English. They believed most theory dealt with interests outside or peripheral to literary studies. Most—but not all—of the fights were public and led by conservatives like Allan Bloom, whose book *The Closing of the American Mind* protested that theory disparaged Western civilization, with detriments not only for individual development but also for the larger social good.

While most English professors rejected those critiques, some others agreed with them, including a few notable compositionists who thought teaching writing was plenty complicated, important, and interesting without the larger social and political freight of theory. Maxine Hairston controversially articulated this position in her 1992 article, "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," which warned against indoctrinating students at the expense of teaching them writing. Just as some worried that literature-based writing courses focused less on teaching writing than on teaching about literature, so others shared Hairston's view that theory-forward writing instruction eclipsed teaching writing itself.

Other compositionists at the time welcomed theory both as a point of engagement with colleagues in literature but also as an extension of rhetorical theory in, say, the tradition of Kenneth Burke. This was the atmosphere in which Anne published *Into the Field*. New theory challenged Aristotelian and formalist ideas about naturally desirable features of texts by arguing that what seemed inevitable was, in fact, a function of convention. Conventions derived from social and political power and tradition rather than from universals of language

and thought. Some writing teachers did, of course, embrace postmodernism's critique of metanarratives, often for political purposes, as happens in James Berlin and John Trimbur's *Into the Field* chapters. Less controversially, postmodern theories helped advance the idea of discourse communities, accounting for epistemological and rhetorical differences among academic disciplines.

In a wise 2018 chapter defining composition's disciplinary status, Kathi Yancey reviews several turns in composition studies over the past several decades: the social, the public, the queer, the archival, and the global, for example (15). To these, we might add the political, the multimodal, the technological, and, from *Into the Field*, the philosophical. Yancey locates these turns against a larger backdrop of five "episodes" in the discipline, starting in the 1940s and 1950s, contemporaneous with the founding of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (17). The first applied linguistics to teaching writing to new types of students; the second embraced the rise of process pedagogies and research; the third turned to cultural theory that "displaced research while underscoring the field's commitment to students and making the field look more like its literary cousins"; the fourth returned to teaching as the *field's* subject matter, informed by the three previous episodes while emphasizing students; the fifth episode celebrated disciplinarity (17–21).

In Yancey's terms, *Into the Field* exemplifies composition's theoretical episode. Many of its ideas and artifacts have morphed into a later emphasis on teaching as a subject matter, just as a glacier (or an avalanche) uses gathered rock and ice to shape new terrain. We don't much see a heavy deposit of theory perse in composition scholarship these days. The high theory of thirty years past has rather composted into the loam of contemporary composition. No serious teacher or scholar accepts that there are universally natural features of writing. None would see "good" writing as innocent of historical forces: ungendered, unclassed, unraced, in ways unproblematically achievable by all students through standard pedagogy. We assume the critique of old assumptions and focus more on applications—particularly in course design and practices like grading and assessment. We analyze specific writers or writerly identities, often to the ends of social justice. In composition studies' current phase, high theorizing has given way to more applied or empirical approaches, including to studying itself. More on that later. So it is, for example, that David Bleich's *Into the Field* chapter on ethnography seems nearly quaint, though I'm reminded how fresh these ideas were thirty years ago. Yes, Steve North had defined the qualitative tradition a few years previously, so while Bleich was hardly tilling unbroken ground, he wrote while the social turn was still being theorized.

Another residual of *Into the Field's* theory is how writing courses currently get defined. A version of cultural studies (or at least a soft version) has largely

triumphed in first-year composition (FYC), where course descriptions often foreground topics and themes. While writing about writing has strong advocates, other practices demonstrate the appeal/value/advantage of writing courses being about cultural phenomena, ostensibly through a critical lens, sometimes warranted by a prefixed “rhetoric of.” So, for example, current offerings in a FYC program I know well include “Food and Culture,” “Tattoos,” “Horror,” “Student Life and Campus Space,” “Craft, DIY, and Maker Movements,” and so on. These cultural studies-inflected FYC courses may not use the overtly economic lenses shaped by Berlin and Trimbur in their *Into the Field* chapters, and they may have traces without knowing it of the hermeneutical or phenomenological interests of Spellmeyer and Schildgen in theirs. But their justification for being about something can mostly stay tacit, for better or worse, because of that earlier theory. Perhaps the field might explore, in light of its attraction to thematic courses, whether FYC might cede more fully to writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID).

## THIRTY YEARS FORWARD

I wonder what a 2023 *Into the Field* volume might contain, imagining it had an editor as masterful as Anne Gere. I’m thinking here not of a Dick Fulkerson-like axiological analysis, nor of Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick’s catalog of pedagogies, nor of Linda Adler-Kassner and Liz Wardle’s distillation of threshold concepts. I’m imagining, rather, an exploration of how composition practices and needs interact with and shape other research traditions. Such a book would look vastly different from *Into the Field*, not only in topics but also in gaze. Among other things, it would have to look extensively beyond the field, at seismic changes in higher education’s status and in technology’s relentless ubiquity.

In February 2023, I was flying to Amsterdam, on my way to the Writing Without Borders conference in Trondheim, Norway. Sitting next to me, alas, was no one of the stature of Anne Gere, and of course Win Horner had passed a decade earlier. The window seat held the CEO of a company called Causal Design, a consulting firm for NGOs, staffed by economists and data scientists, “with a vision of making evidence-based programming affordable for NGOs, practical to field workers, and digestible to policy makers and the general public” (“Causal”). The company might analyze how, say, food distribution in Yemen or small-business stimulators in Madagascar achieve their goals. The CEO was on his way to the Middle East. When he learned I was a writing professor, he asked my opinion on generative AI, and I asked his, which was highly enthusiastic. He said that reports to clients inevitably require sections analyzing broad social, political, and economic conditions surrounding specific projects. In his experience, generative AI drafted those

sections not only more quickly but also more effectively than did recent hires from graduate programs in international studies. Drafts require editing, but they are solid enough starts. Plus, there are no egos. He also saw promise for the “tedious” work of “writing up” statistical findings into prose. I was interested to learn the evolution of a practice I’d started following in 2011, when a Chicago company called Narrative Science started offering to turn data into stories.

Clearly, any new site of composition, in the spirit of Anne’s book, might involve considering how GenAI informs (or should inform) the process and status of writing, whether as invention or revision. That discussion might draw from ideas raised in the Postmodern Subjectivities section of *Into the Field*. Among several intriguing issues has been the concern that GenAI will flatten style, producing unleavened prose lacking traces of writers’ lived experiences, scrubbed of their identities. In the spirit of Anne’s 1993 characterization of composition studies not only as absorbing ideas from other disciplines but also as shaping them, a new chapter would insistently explore how composition studies should inflect understandings of GenAI. Certainly, our field could do so far beyond the meager lenses of plagiarism. Recently I had an undergraduate composition theory class look at a GenAI product called Sudowrite, targeted for fiction writers. Its home page promised in fall 2024 to “write a novel from start to finish. In a week” by generating “1,000s of words, **in your style**.” My students could understand why people might want to have an AI do mundane, obligatory writing, but they had a harder time imagining why people wouldn’t want to write their own novels. Why not have an AI just write their personal journals, while they’re at it? (Actually, this is not far-fetched; some people are having ChatGPT write wedding vows.) We figured there was something about the appeal of having written or, better, “having writing attributed to me” over the act of writing itself. We connected this desire to the influencer imperative, the desire to be noted (and paid) as a content producer, the source and nature of that content being immaterial.

In any case, GenAI re-complicates subjectivity and identity in ways that would benefit from theorizing through a philosophical lens polished through composition studies, beyond the practical, educational, or economic analyses now rampant. I’d love to see a set of thinkers equal to the bunch that wrote thirty years ago address the fundamental question of how writing stands in relation to self and identity—its constitution and comportment—in the 2020s versus in the 1990s.

A second chapter might be about how composition has broadly shaped general university pedagogy. Writing classrooms were flipped decades before folks in teaching centers “discovered” the idea, Columbus-like. In fact, many teaching centers were themselves significantly shaped by WAC workshops and initiatives that started in the 1970s and accelerated through the 2000s. I speculate that a disproportionate number of people directing university centers for teaching and



learning have come from composition. (I held such a position myself at Illinois State, years back.) The concepts of teaching being student-centered and learning-centered; of active engagement; of learning as a knowledge-making activity, not simply as a knowledge-receiving one; of teachers as coaches and collaborators; of peer interaction; of teaching assistant (TA) training; of the very spirit of “across the curriculum”: all these and more had roots in composition studies before being taken up in centralized teaching centers. A chapter examining composition’s relationship with the pedagogical turn in higher education would trace our field’s historical pedagogical lineage. Such a chapter would also theorize the implications of teaching centers taking up composition studies, as well as composition’s long commitment to pedagogy being reframed by this recent enterprise. At one institution I know well, the writing program nearly twenty years ago began offering intensive professional development activities in WAC. Workshops, seminars, and research projects reached hundreds of faculty across campus. Those efforts have now been largely re-housed under the university teaching center. Writing’s disciplinary expertise is incrementally effaced.

That raises a third potential area for theorizing. I’ll call it composition’s Status Turn or, perhaps, its Inward Turn. I mean something other than articulating recognition as a discipline. I’m pointing to how much our field has made itself, its practices and practitioners, the object of study, over students and writing. We increasingly describe issues of labor (including faculty status, teaching loads, and course sizes). We survey faculty and writing program administrator (WPA) experiences, attitudes, and practices. Requests for interviews and program/course documents or policies are pervasive. Perhaps research *about* the field is simply more visible than is research *in* the field. Perhaps this turn is magnified by current crises as higher education sinks under tuition costs and public skepticism about its value and values. To be fair, the ninety composition studies books published in 2023 (Lockridge) reflect more projects about writing and writers than about status and institutional formations. But the general trend is toward the empirical, whether quantitative or qualitative, rather than the theoretical or historical. Perhaps the latter epistemologies were more attractive to an earlier generation of scholars formed substantially out of literary study, the generation of *Into the Field*. A chapter in an imagined new volume would theorize how the educations and circumstances of current scholars versus their ancestors have shaped attention and practices.

## NEGLECTED, NOT LOST

In 2023, Deborah Holdstein edited an anthology published by the MLA, *Lost Texts in Rhetoric and Composition*, in which several authors discuss articles or books in the field that have fairly disappeared from current interest but merit



renewed attention. Anne Gere wrote a chapter as did, from the 1993 collection, Kurt Spellmeyer. (I'll disclose that I did, too.)

Every discipline continually sorts and resifts its history. There's a strong imperative to focus on the recent, to keep the cutting edge sharp. Earlier publications and ideas get namechecked or summarized in a few sentences that perhaps send readers back to earlier sources but more likely have them quickly nod in recognition. Composition studies is not yet to the point of the sciences and social sciences, where a summative single sentence often spawns a parenthetical list of a dozen or more citations, gestured by author and date. Our field still values paraphrase and summary, but with 90 books published a year, plus hundreds of articles, decisions are made.

Steve North's dictum may still be true: nothing disappears from the house of lore (27). But that doesn't mean everyone knows how it got there or how to find it. *Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies* remains important as a reminder of where foundational theories in our field came from and, importantly, of the contexts in which they were generated, a time of high theory and of high confidence, as composition studies could assume its status and get on with exploring heady ideas. Individually and collectively, we may feel the subconscious tug to Marie Kondo-ize our professional bookshelves and memories. The task is made easier by not re-reading a book when you pull it off the shelf to ask, "Does it give you pleasure?" The question for *Into the Field* gets answered yes, as does the question, "Does it make you think?" The lucky thing about books is that you needn't rely on a chance airplane seat assignment to encounter Anne Gere's profound ideas and generous contributions, still decades after.

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