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Rewriting Composition: Moving beyond a Discourse of Need

Bruce Horner

If oppositional strategies are conducted from within the same framework as that which they oppose, they run the danger of reproducing those same positions.

—Alastair Pennycook (“English as a Language Always in Translation” 43)

Just because [compositionists] have been funded with a reductionist notion of our task has not meant that we have been bound to follow through in a reductionist way.

—Charles Bazerman (“Response” 252)

Composition is an ongoing historical project: the name given to work done in colleges and universities, mostly in the United States, by students and teachers as they engage and mediate differences in written language. That is the definition I am willing to offer, knowing that it is at best only a beginning and necessarily incomplete.

Composition’s difficulties arise in part out of the tension built into the term itself as a referent for not only an activity and the product of that activity, but also the material social conditions of that activity: not only what is understood to be the composing process(es) of individual students or groups of students (or other writers) and the textual products of these processes, but also the full panoply of material social conditions and practices out of and within which such processes and products appear—the “field” of composition, composition programs, and the history of these. Hence *composition* may be used to refer not only to a kind of text and the means by

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which such texts are produced, but also and at the same time to the authors of such texts, the courses in which they deploy particular means to produce such texts, the programs responsible for such courses—their design, staffing, and maintenance—and the professional academic disciplinary participation in and study of the programs, courses, students, texts, and activities by which those texts are produced in relation to one another—*Composition* writ large.

The undeniable location of the work of *this* Composition in material social history (compare, for example, *biology*) distinguishes the difficulties besetting it—its lack of academic institutional status and the working conditions and perquisites attending such status—from the difficulties of definition and purpose experienced by other disciplines as they revisit, redefine, and defend their terms, aims, procedures, and value (see, for example, Burawoy; Firth and Wagner), in keeping with their own location in material social history. For although every discipline faces on occasion the challenge of self (re)definition (think of the range of scientific fields that have arisen in the last century), few are *defined* in terms of their material social location within academic institutions or identified with that location, as composition is. Instead, following the ideology of professional academic disciplinaryity, most deny that location in defining themselves.¹

Dominant efforts to respond to the very real difficulties of those working in composition (as students, teachers, scholars), rather than engaging composition's location and character as material social practice, have followed the lead of these other fields. In so doing, they have accepted dominant culture's limited conceptions and valuations of composition as low, limited, preparatory, illegitimate. Such efforts produce and maintain a "discourse of need" about composition itself, defining it as lacking what dominant culture identifies as legitimate disciplinary characteristics and therefore as in need of either abandonment or supplement.² So, for example, graduate programs to prepare teachers of courses in composition are themselves dubbed not programs in composition but, instead, in Rhetoric and Composition; Writing Studies; Writing, Rhetoric, and American Culture; Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies; Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy; Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric; or Composition and Cultural Rhetoric (compare Hesse xii).

Clearly, there is use in exploring interrelationships between composition as I have defined it earlier and work identified with these other terms. Nonetheless, it is worth questioning the assumptions driving a discourse attempting to identify, or replace, composition with these other terms. In that discourse of need, the work of composition serves as foil to the alternatives (or supplements) that are proposed, and both the work of composition and the proposed alternatives are removed from their location in time and (social) space as always emergent, fluctuating, material social practices. Thus ideological misrecognitions (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense) aligned with dominant cultural identifications of both composition work and the proposed

alternatives are achieved, as evidenced in the gap between, on the one hand, representations of either and, on the other, actual practices and locations: the ongoing history of composition work in the United States and elsewhere of students, teachers, scholars. And, thus, both the promise and ongoing daily accomplishments of work in composition go unrecognized, while alternatives occluding these are heralded. Commodifications of knowledge and learning are substituted for the ongoing work of knowing and learning, and dispositions of flexibility in keeping with fast capitalist dictates are pursued as ideals.

I argue that to break with this discourse of need and give full play to all that might and does get accomplished in the work of composition, we need to rethink terms used to define, and limit, composition: *writing, pedagogy, theory, modality*, and *composition* itself. This is difficult insofar as it entails engaging dominant representations of composition to call them into question: to think of both the existing terms of our work and also the terms we would exchange them for differently, lest we unwittingly lapse into accepting what the dominant predisposes us to recognize as the “new,” “alternative,” and “different” *as* new, alternative, and so on, and, more significantly, as preferable to what the dominant predisposes us to recognize as the old and inadequate, and thereby to operate within the very terms of exchange set *by* the dominant. Moreover, rethinking the terms used to define composition is difficult insofar as it requires that we acknowledge both the effectivity, on the ground, of dominant representations of composition work (and their officially designated alternatives) and, simultaneously, their inadequacy. Finally, this is difficult insofar as many of us are disposed, by our misrecognition of the very material social conditions enabling our participation in such rethinking, to conceive of both our task and the subject of our task in immaterial terms. In other words, rethinking the terms of work for composition necessarily requires rethinking the work of theory itself as material social practice, a “process in society” and “social intervention,” as Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff put it (2, 3), not opposed to material social practice but instead itself a particular form of material social practice.

To illustrate the depth of the reach of the discourse of need over the last decade and its limiting characteristics, I first consider as a case in point the operation of that same discourse in two seemingly opposed calls for ending composition that have appeared during the past ten years—David Smit’s *The End of Composition Studies* and Sidney Dobrin’s *Postcomposition*. Smit’s book calls for an end to composition studies in light of its apparent failure to fulfill its official institutional charge of writing skills transmission, whereas Dobrin’s book calls for moving “post” composition as a way to abandon the attempt to do so. But for my purposes here, what is compelling about these two works is their alignment in accepting the dominant’s definition of composition, despite their opposition to one another, and thus their joint participation in that discourse of need, demonstrating its reach across apparent divides. I analyze

the apocalyptic rhetoric found in both to help bring into sharp relief the assumptions and moves driving not only their arguments but, as I will show, those deployed in seemingly less apocalyptic, but increasingly pervasive, calls to expand or move beyond or supplement composition in light of its perceived lack—the participation of all such arguments in that same discourse of need.

That discourse can be identified by the following interlocking assumptions and moves:

- Writing, at least as practiced in composition, is treated as a stable, internally uniform entity.
- Teaching is treated as the transmission of the ability to produce that stable entity “writing.”
- Power relations are treated as set rather than subject to and in constant need of reworking, with hegemonic relations of power what the argument is either resigned or aligned to, leading consequently to change being understood in apocalyptic terms as tragic resistance, revolution, and/or violent breaks with the past.
- The past itself is treated as a known, finite, and stable entity discrete and different from what is claimed to be current or new.
- Difference is understood as deviation from a norm of sameness rather than an inevitable characteristic of all writing, including writing that is conventionally identified as “the same.”
- Theory is treated as an escape from practice rather than a practice itself with material social effects, encouraging blindness to the alignment of theoretical practice aimed at the “different” with dominant ideology and its reinforcement of that ideology.

These assumptions govern efforts to understand and address composition’s difficulties, shaping not just the solutions various such efforts provide but also the definitions of the problems to be addressed. As I will argue, these assumptions thereby perversely reinforce the very difficulties prompting these efforts. Drawing on the strategies deployed in J. K. Gibson-Graham’s critique of “capitalocentric” (*Postcapitalist 2*) discourse in economics and Theresa Lillis’s critique of the treatment of writing in sociolinguistics (*Sociolinguistics*), I outline an alternative approach to addressing real limitations in disciplinary discourse, using James Slevin’s argument for composition as intellectual work (*Introducing English*) to illustrate such strategies, and I sketch a reworking of the seemingly “ordinary” in composition as one means of deploying such strategies.

It’s worth emphasizing that the challenges facing those working in composition to which this discourse of need responds are real, hence there is genuine exigence for the efforts of all those participating in that discourse, whatever questions arise about the specific directions those efforts take. These challenges include, among many others, the perduring poor working conditions for those teaching composition; highly questionable staffing of course sections and student placement and exit procedures;

conservatism in program administration and pedagogy; and the seeming impotence of those working in composition to withstand institutional and larger sociopolitical pressures on the definition, conduct, conditions, and valuation of their work. But, ironically, the discourse of need ends up leaving these unchallenged: understood at best as “problems” rather than problematics. Alternatively, I argue for engaging the ongoing, necessary, inevitable rewriting of composition, a possibility that appears once we recognize its always emergent, varied, and changing character.

COMPOSITION AS FAILED DELIVERY OF MARKETABLE WRITING SKILL

Smit’s *The End of Composition Studies* offers one permutation of this discourse of need. In his book, Smit defines composition strictly in terms of pedagogy, understood as the transmission of knowledge of how to write (*tout court*) to students, in the form of general writing skills, in a first-year composition (FYC) course, that will be applicable to future challenges students face elsewhere: “Broadly speaking,” he asserts, “the goal of composition studies is to promote the use of writing: to help people acquire the knowledge and skill they need to convey what they want to say when they put pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard” (1). However, given the apparent inability of research to date to demonstrate any general writing skills and the apparent tendency of writers only to “acquire” skills at writing in particular ways through immersion in specific communities of practice, Smit concludes that composition needs to end. In other words, the work of composition is understood in terms of the official charge assigned to it by institutional and other authorities, a charge that it appears unable to meet and so should resign from attempting; instead, it must redirect its energies toward facilitating the kind of acquisition of skill in writing in particular ways, in specific disciplines, that Smit thinks does occur.

Although it might seem, from this account, that Smit recognizes the instability and variability of writing, in fact Smit uses *writing* in two contradictory senses.³ On the one hand, he uses it in the singular as a noncount noun condensing all activities and products associated with the term into a single, uniform entity: writing. This is the meaning he invokes in the “basic” questions that he argues composition needs to return to—“What is writing? How is writing learned? Can writing be taught, and if so, in what sense? And if writing can be taught, how should it be taught?” (2). On the other hand, he also uses *writing* to refer to a broad range of highly differentiated practices and products—what scholars of writing (including “composition” scholars) have for some time now documented (see, for example, Lea and Street, “Student”; Thaiss and Zawacki). Smit defines composition as tied indelibly to the first understanding of writing, hence the need for composition to come to an end. In other words, because he defines pedagogy as the transmission of a single codified and fixed set of skills and knowledge, whether through explicit instruction or through scaffolding or

some other means, the inability of researchers to identify a universal set of these for writing (or, conversely, researchers' findings of myriad shifting kinds of skills and knowledge involved in writing) leads him to the conclusion that composition is at a (dead) end: there appears to be no single set of forms and skills, or even knowledge about these, to transmit, and worse, even if there were, they don't seem to "transfer" to sites beyond FYC.⁴ Thus, Smit's assumption of a transmission model of pedagogy and a uniform concept of writing at odds with what compositionists in fact recognize paints him (or the field) into a corner: as he puts it, "[N]o one ever learned to write primarily by completing a two-course sequence in writing at a college or university" (182). So he proposes a WID-like alternative as the only viable option.

Smit's concluding position is aligned with an acceptance of status quo power relations as set. His argument thus exemplifies what Mary Lea and Brian Street have identified as an *academic socialization* model of academic literacy, characterized as being

concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified [*sic*] members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The academic socialization model presumes that the disciplinary discourses and genres are relatively stable, and once students have learned and understood the ground rules of a particular academic discourse, they are able to reproduce it unproblematically. ("The 'Academic Literacies' Model" 369)

As Smit himself puts it, "[W]riting is a process of *socialization*, of novice writers learning to use writing as a tool in order to accomplish particular tasks that they find meaningful and useful or in order to belong to social groups who can use writing as a means of participating in the group" (61, emphasis in original; see also 182). Smit thus adopts what social theorist Anthony Giddens has identified as a normative functionalist reading of institutions and social practices: things are as they are and operate as they do because that is what their appropriate function is.⁵ In this reading, official accounts of apprenticeship models are taken as both the full and normative representation of them: the conditions and practices that we should aspire to. Such an approach ascribes to institutions and institutional processes the nature and value of what they officially claim to be, and thus reinforces status quo relations of power and the practices maintaining these. While the institution and institutional practices of composition are defined as dysfunctional, work in disciplines outside composition and outside the academy is treated as functional, its processes and contours right—functioning normatively—by virtue of being as they are.

This alignment of Smit's position with a normative functionalist perspective can best be found in his invocation of the (free) market as the criterion against which we can judge writing and its teaching. So, for example, he contrasts classroom instruction in composition (defined as dysfunctional) with the expert-novice model. In his representations, whereas writing in the composition classroom is not real writing

but instead merely an exam (147) or “practice” (165) for what might come later, in the novice-expert socialization process,

Novices [. . .] receive help in writing as they need it or want it, or it is forced on them. If they have a particular problem with writing, they will find out about it all too quickly and “naturally.” They will not accomplish with their writing what they set out to accomplish. Their boss will send back their memos for revision because they have not adequately addressed the issues they were assigned. Their editors will reject their essays because they have not been sufficiently literary or insightful. The city commission will reject their petitions because they have not been sufficiently persuasive. The members of their community will provide the responses, the feedback, the criticism they need. (148)

Here the invisible hand of the (free) market is implicitly invoked as an explanation of why some writers and writing receive praise and others don't. In this fantasy, writing simply is or is not persuasive, literary, insightful, effective, as determined by its “buyers” or consumers: bosses, the public, editors, those whose authority to know what is and isn't good writing goes unquestioned, like that of purchasers of stocks and other commodities: the market, here as elsewhere, decides, and its decisions are by definition right in determining the value of what is purchased. Or, as Smit claims, “[T]he only way to determine whether novice writers write adequately is to see if their writing accomplishes their purposes outside the classroom in the larger ‘marketplace’” (156). Smit follows this claim with a demurral—“not all writing must accomplish real effects in the world analogous to a company selling a product”—but then reasserts the rightness of the marketplace: “[W]ithout the constraints of that larger marketplace, how do instructors go about determining what students need to know in order to become better writers?” (156).

In keeping with free market ideology, students themselves are also identified as the free agents of the learning marketplace: the consumers who by definition are always right and whose desires are both fixed and entirely their own.

[S]tudents are responsible for their own choices, their own goals, their own values, and we are bound to respect those choices, those goals and values. [. . .] [W]e cannot set ourselves up as experts in ends, in what students might choose to do with their lives. We can only offer our judgment of means. [. . .] give them as much help as possible in choosing the ends they wish to pursue. (Smit 192)⁶

Hence Smit argues that course descriptions should “specify the purpose of the writing required in the course, the theoretical or ideological framework of the course, and the discourse community to which the course is designed to introduce students” (192). But while it seems indisputable that course descriptions should not deliberately mislead students, and that students, like their teachers, should have their current views acknowledged and taken seriously (not to be confused with being taken uncritically), it is also patently obvious that, once we relocate work in composition as

material social practice, no course description can fully represent what students, or their instructors, will encounter or produce in a course, and that individual as well as collective student needs, desires, views, and beliefs, like those of other humans, are inevitably in flux, diverse, often contradictory, and not fully or readily available either to them or their instructors for inspection.

It is Smit's free market fantasy model that requires a transmission model of pedagogy, which in Smit extends to the demand for a "truth in advertising" of course descriptions whereby teachers must tell the student consumers what those enrolling will be getting, and, of course, teachers must then deliver what's promised, and students are assumed to know what they want and will need. This is the same assumed model behind the current wave of demands for (school) accountability, requirements for statements of "learning outcomes" for all courses, and so on. It is a model that elides the overdetermined character of any educational work in favor of a simplistic model of learning as information or skill transfer, and of knowledge as commodity. As in those demands, Smit treats the complexity of such work not as a problematic but as a problem, something to be avoided or eliminated rather than engaged. Thus, although Smit makes the occasional nod toward the possibility of change and difference resulting from student apprenticeships with the discourse communities they have somehow chosen to join, his general argument is to make writing instruction more efficient in delivering specific writing skills demanded by employers and therefore, it is assumed, desired by the students as (simply, only) future employees. Having established for himself that no general writing skills exist to be transmitted, he argues for transmission of writing skills specific to particular disciplines and work sites and is disturbed at the extent to which composition courses fail at this task, asking rhetorically,

[I]f school genres lack sufficient context to help students grapple with all of the rhetorical constraints they will confront in the world at large, just how useful are they in preparing students to write for that world? [. . .] [W]hat sort of "real-world" genres are writing classes supposed to be training students to write? Or what sort of skills are school genres supposed to be honing that will transfer to writing outside of the classroom? (148)

The fact that "what students write in college does not sufficiently prepare them for writing in the workplace or in other nonacademic settings" (153) is seen as a flaw in composition pedagogy to be corrected or lamented, not an inevitability to be engaged, explored, embraced.

We thus see in Smit's argument a treatment of writing as a stable entity and pedagogy as (ideally) the means to transmit skill in producing it efficiently, in alignment with status quo power relations and hegemonic ideals. Composition's past, and its knowledge, are treated as knowable and known; difference is understood

not as the norm of writing but as deviation from a norm of sameness, with varieties of writing as each internally uniform rather than in flux and in fluctuating relation with one another. Practice is something following research and theory rather than in dialectical relation with it: classrooms are where theory and research are to be applied rather than the site of theorizing and (real, versus a simulacrum of) research.

REWRITING COMPOSITION AS HEGEMONY IN STUDENT TRAINING AND MANAGEMENT

On its surface, Dobrin's *Postcomposition* would seem to represent the complete counterargument to Smit's *The End of Composition Studies*. In fact, Smit had positioned his argument against earlier arguments Dobrin (in *Constructing Knowledges*) and others had made against a concern with pedagogy as evidence of the field being "mired in a Hamlet-like ambivalence about what it knows, what it ought to do, and whether it has the means or the will to decide" (Smit 7). And in turn, in *Postcomposition*, Dobrin positions his argument against Smit's (and similar arguments) insofar as Smit concerns himself "within a rubric of classroom and student" (Dobrin, *Postcomposition* 10). A full consideration of Dobrin's argument in *Postcomposition* is beyond the scope of this essay. For my purposes here, what merits attention is the continuation in Dobrin's argument of the same discourse of need by which composition is deemed lacking, a discourse that accepts the dominant's terms for composition and its alternatives, landing Dobrin's argument, like Smit's, firmly in the lap of the hegemonic, notwithstanding his efforts to the contrary.

Like Smit, Dobrin declares composition as at an end, something we should abandon in light of its putative limitations. But while, for Smit, composition is at an end because of the failure of composition pedagogy to meet the needs of the dominant, Dobrin calls for composition studies to break with the "pedagogical imperative" (as well as the "administrative" imperative) and with student subjectivities altogether in favor of pursuing writing/theory. For Dobrin identifies composition itself as defined (limited, hobbled) by its commitment to pedagogy and the administration of pedagogy and of student subjectivities. As he puts it, the difficulty with composition is its "inability to articulate an intellectual focus *beyond* the training of teachers, an activity set in service of the continued management of student bodies rather than in pursuit of understanding of writing in the formation of the signifier 'student'" (18; emphasis added). Given a view of pedagogy as "training" and "management," composition, for Dobrin, is not worth keeping to. In place of composition, so defined, Dobrin argues for the study of writing, defined as a "producing machine" of subjects and subjectivity, a study that will "reconfigur[e] [. . .] the subject as posthuman, non-autonomous agent" (17).

At various moments in *Postcomposition*, it appears that Dobrin's project is meant

to spur rethinking of the terms defining composition in ways aligned with the argument I am making here. For example, Dobrin explains that postcomposition is not “no-student” but, rather, “post-student as student is currently conceived” (15), and that postcomposition is meant to enable us to “think ‘differently’ about writing than disciplinary limits have previously allowed or encouraged” (189). In such statements, there is the potential to rethink conceptions of *student* and, by implication, pedagogy (and, of course, writing). But that potential is undercut by Dobrin’s acceptance of dominant conceptions of pedagogy.⁷ For in the same breath as he argues for being “post-student as student is currently conceived,” he insists that postcomposition is “certainly postpedagogy.” This acceptance of dominant conceptions of composition pedagogy is confirmed by his call for the work of theorizing writing, understood as “not the work of a teaching subject nor dependent upon the role students play in making writing an object of study” but as something that “is—and must be—bigger than the idea of students” (15).

Thus, although Dobrin’s argument is clearly opposed to those, like Smit’s, concerned with producing a more efficient composition pedagogy for students, and would seem to share the aim of my argument for the need to rethink the field’s discourse, his argument, like Smit’s, assumes a debased view of the work of composition—most prominently, pedagogy and work at the pedagogical scene. His argument differs from Smit’s only in choosing to abandon that work rather than replace it with WID. And so, while he offers no idealist or fantasy portrait of how writing pedagogy should work, what he does propose is no less idealist—that is, removed from material social history—than Smit’s proposed “solution.” In place of composition, with its “neurosis of pedagogy” (28), Dobrin advocates what he terms “writing studies” (25–28). But it is a “writing studies” largely removed from the material social realm.

We can see this removal by comparing his articulation of what writing studies might be to otherwise similar calls for a shift from composition studies to writing studies (see, for example, Bazerman, “Case”; Trimbur, “Changing”). For Dobrin’s references to writing studies ignore large swaths of scholarship that can already lay claim to such a name, and he dismisses much of the theorizing of writing affiliated with composition while conflating particular writing practices associated with digital communication technologies with writing *tout court*. For example, given Dobrin’s hearty “Amen” to Charles Bazerman’s call to broaden composition’s focus to attend to the full panoply of writing practices (Dobrin, *Postcomposition* 25–26), we might expect Dobrin will consider at least some instances drawn from the hefty reams of scholarship in literacy studies focusing on these practices.⁸ But in fact, no such instances make any appearance in *Postcomposition*. Instead, writing studies appears to be only just emerging *ex nihilo* in the work of a handful of theorists: something new and at odds with all that has come before—one reason Dobrin postulates for the difficulty of the work of theorizing writing.

Likewise, the theorizing of writing in terms of such matters as “ideologies, politics, subjectivities, agencies, identities, discourses, rhetorics, and grammars” is dismissed from consideration insofar as these are issues “composition studies has come to be so invested in,” on the supposition that talk about such issues serves merely to enable composition theorists to talk “about the things that other theorists in English studies talk about” and thereby “gives claim to legitimacy” (Dobrin 25). This dismissal effectively clears the field of theorizing by deeming (at least some) extant theorizing something else. That is, although we must theorize writing, not all theorizing counts as such. The theorizing of writing in which composition students engage, for example, remains invisible. And in Dobrin’s own theorizing, *writing* is more invoked than defined, except in tautological terms (“writing as writing”), and largely as a singular, noncount abstraction, not as the diverse set of material social practices documented in, well, writing studies scholarship.

At certain points, Dobrin appears to recognize the corner into which he’s painted himself, complaining of the frustration and difficulty of “trying to identify writing as independent from other phenomena and the dangers in trying to essentialize writing as a scientific (positivist) thing devoid of ecological/textual/network connection to other phenomena” (24–25). Encouragingly, he rejects the idea that “the phenomena of writing can be/should be identified in an a-contextual, vacuous state not related to other phenomena.” But he then insists that we cannot understand writing’s relationships to these until we “understand what the phenomena of writing are and, in turn, how writing functions to produce other phenomena”—that is, writing as distinct first cause (25).

Dobrin accounts for his frustration and difficulty as the consequence of “a discursive encampment in the boundaries of composition studies” (25). But I am arguing, instead, that it is the theoretical framing of writing that leads Dobrin into difficulties, for that framing simultaneously grants to writing a purely abstract significance, like God, on the one hand, and, on the other, anchors it in what has already become a stale set of beliefs about the role of global digital communication technologies in redefining what constitutes “writing” and “what the phenomena of writing are” (25). As in Smit’s treatment of writing as a noncount, internally uniform and discrete entity, Dobrin treats writing as similarly singular in its essence. “Writing,” Dobrin asserts, “resists metaphor as a means of explanation both in its complexity and in its instability” (134), for “writing is *unique* in its systemicity in that theorizing it does not require a metaphor to explain what it carries or represents, as what it carries or represents is either not as important as writing itself or else writing does not carry or represent anything beyond or outside itself” (150; emphasis added). Simultaneously, the one reference to writing as material practice that Dobrin repeatedly reiterates identifies writing specifically with the “current hyper-circulatory condition of writing,” a condition that, it is claimed, “now demands more complex

theories than composition studies has previously provided,” such as “ecological or posthuman rhetorics” (142).

The contradiction between Dobrin’s call for writing studies and his failure to acknowledge or engage the plethora of extant work in writing studies points to significant limitations in the theorizing of theory itself. For while Dobrin offers postcomposition as a response to real, often seemingly intractable, difficulties of pedagogical and administrative work, theory is used not to rethink these but, instead, as a means of leaving the seeming difficulties of pedagogy and administrative work behind. This is in sharp contrast, for example, to Lynn Worsham’s description of theory as the “never-ending work of making ‘really free’ places, lives, and identities,” “a deadly serious matter” that, in composition, takes the form of “both the writing that scholars in composition studies must do and the writing that we must teach,” “driven by a passionate political consciousness [. . .] that seeks the conceptual tools, the explanatory frameworks, to engineer social change,” “[c]oming to terms with the real world” by bridging “the chasm between the actual and the possible” (104, 103; see also Resnick and Wolff 37). Likewise, in “Toward a Theory of Theory in Composition,” James Zebroski sees theory as a practice to be engaged *through* teaching, observing that characterizations of composition as merely the object of critique by Theory (*sic*) fail to do “justice to the complexity of thinking that occurs when a composition teacher works with a student on the production of a text” (31).

For writers like Worsham and Zebroski, theory is not an escape from places, lives, and identities but imbricated in and a means of acting on these. Conversely, as Dobrin himself puts it in his postscript to *Postcomposition*, “Postcomposition moves forward, *not* bound by *rethinking*, *reassessing*, or *reworking* the past but by looking to *new frontiers* for composition theory” (210; emphases added). Pedagogy, rather than being rethought, is simply left to its own (old) ways, ostensibly at best as the site for application of research, in exchange for the new, relatively unexplored and hence relatively unknown world of “theory.” While aligning himself with Paulo Freire’s famous critique of the “narration sickness” of banking pedagogy, Dobrin does not, as Freire does, rethink and propose an alternative (for example, “problem-posing”) pedagogy but, instead, washes his hands of pedagogy altogether, advising us to “stop talking about teaching” (Dobrin 191, 190).

As suggested by Dobrin’s metaphors of moving “forward” to “new frontiers,” and his identification of his abstracted theorizing of “writing” as open complex system with what he repeatedly identifies as the “hyper-circulatory nature of writing and the drastic technological shifts we are witnessing regarding the (re)circulation of writing” (160; for reiterations, see 83, 133, 137, 142, 185), Dobrin’s project of moving postcomposition lands him firmly in the ideology of dominant discourses heralding a communicative globalism aligned with fast capitalist ideals of constant and rapid change, flexibility, complexity, and above all, the inevitability of these and

their break from what has come before.⁹ So, for example, Dobrin insists that “the whole world—or, more specifically, writing—*is* in the Web because the Web/writing is (in) the whole world, whether an individual or society is consciously aware of it or not” (144).¹⁰ Citing approvingly Mark Taylor’s warning that “those who are too rigid to fit in rapidly changing worlds become obsolete or are driven beyond the edge of chaos to destruction” (Taylor 202; qtd. in Dobrin 168), Dobrin explains that “[a]s the complexity of networks with which we interact increases and as the speed of network-changes accelerate, the ability to adjust to rapid shift becomes necessary” (168). That is, we must adapt or risk being obsolete or destroyed.

Further, in only a decade after Margaret Syverson’s warning that “[a]s contexts and technologies for writing continue to change at an ever accelerating pace, we cannot cling to our familiar, comfortable assumptions about writers, readers, and texts, or we will find ourselves increasingly irrelevant and even obstructive” (27; qtd. in Dobrin 177), it seems to Dobrin himself that “the situation of writing has changed even more dramatically/radically than even Syverson suggests” (177). We have, we are told, reached a “tipping point” (177, 185) that has rendered common ways of thinking about writing “outmoded” and that requires “creative destruction,” “wiping the slate clean and starting anew” (188, though Dobrin then demurs that “there is little possibility or need [. . .] to start from a completely blank slate” [188]). Those who resist will be doomed as “obstructive,” “outmoded,” “obsolete,” “irrelevant,” and therefore quite justifiably “driven to destruction.” To *this* imperative, it seems, There Is No Alternative.

This is not, of course, to deny changes to communication technologies, the pace of these changes, and the importance of attending to these, any more than we should deny the fact of “market pressures” on writers. But it is to insist on also acknowledging (1) the ongoing, incomplete, varied, and uneven distribution and “development” of these changes; (2) the simultaneous presence and interaction of other, competing technologies; and (3) consequently, the indeterminate character of the effect of these changes on writing and culture more broadly, with, as complexity theory itself insists, unintended, even unimaginable consequences as communication technologies interact in overdetermined ways with other phenomena. In short, it is to refuse to accept pretensions of the hegemonic to hegemony.

RETHINKING TERMS OF DISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE

By way of illustrative contrast to the discourse of need in Smit’s and Dobrin’s arguments, I turn briefly to the strategies deployed in two disparate critical works: Gibson–Graham’s project against capitalism and Lillis’s project for a sociolinguistics of writing. Both, like Dobrin’s and Smit’s, respond to significant limitations in an existing field: economics and sociolinguistics, respectively. Both can be characterized

as intensely theoretical. However, in these works, theory (and research) are taken up not as an alternative to but an engagement in and with the material social realm. Or to be more precise, these projects theorize in order to rethink, re-represent, re-write, rework, and change, rather than escape from or leave behind, the terms (and practices) of the disciplines they critique.

In a series of papers and in two books whose titles eerily echo those of Smit and Dobrin—*The End of Capitalism* and *Post-Capitalism*—Gibson-Graham seek not so much to escape capitalism per se but, as the full title of *The End of Capitalism* suggests, change the way in which capitalism is known: to put an *End to Capitalism* (*as We Knew It*) so that “capitalism per se” can be known, and thereby responded to, differently.¹¹ (The subtitle, *A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, suggests the kind of difference that will be made.) Toward that end, Gibson-Graham reject the terms in which capitalism is traditionally thought by both its apologists and its critics: as not only dominant but total in its hegemony. Arguments operating within such governing terms, including those opposed to capitalism, participate in and thereby contribute to “capitalocentric” discourse that reinforces capitalism’s hegemonic position. As Gibson-Graham observes of her own earlier work opposing global capitalism, “the image of global capitalism that I was producing was actively participating in consolidating a new phase of capitalist hegemony” (*End*, Introduction xxxix). To intervene in this dynamic, she explains that, without eschewing acknowledgment of the dominant position of capitalist formations currently, she had instead to

depict economic discourse as hegemonized while rendering the social world as economically differentiated and complex. [. . .] Thus one might represent economic practice as comprising a rich diversity of capitalist and noncapitalist activities and argue that the noncapitalist ones had until now been relatively “invisible” because the concepts and discourses that could make them “visible” have themselves been marginalized and suppressed. (*End* xl–xli)

What dominant discourse had represented (and thus perpetuated) as the full story of the economy could be counterposed to alternative, and fuller, representations of (economic) activities. Failure to do so, as Gibson-Graham go on to demonstrate, acquiesces, and thereby perpetuates belief, in the legitimacy of the terms of argument postulating capitalism as not merely hegemonic but hegemony, total in its reach (see *End*, Chapter 1).¹² In such arguments, even alternatives to capitalism are defined in advance as always already capitalism’s “*feminized* other [. . .] lack[ing] efficiency and rationality [. . .] its productivity [. . .] its global extensiveness, or its inherent tendency to dominance and expansion” (7). It is thus that dominant discourse, including, significantly, discourse opposed to capitalism, is, as Gibson-Graham put it, “capitalocentric.” Gibson-Graham combat this by “cutting capitalism down to size (theoretically) and refusing to endow it with excessive power” (*End*, Introduction xxiv).

The subject of Lillis's argument for a *Sociolinguistics of Writing* is more recognizably related to questions of composition. For my purpose here, however, what is most relevant are the strategies by which Lillis calls for a significant change to the focus, assumptions, and practices of sociolinguistics, a change that radically repositions writing, rather than only or primarily spoken language, as a legitimate and significant area of sociolinguistics. The challenge of making this argument resides at least in part in dominant conceptualizations of writing in sociolinguistics, for it is those conceptions that have relegated writing to the margins of sociolinguistic research. These include the notion that writing is primarily concerned with codifying and maintaining specific standard varieties of language use; that it exists in binary opposition to speech; and that it is permanent, monomodal, formal, lexically dense, distant, context independent, monological, detached, and impersonal whereas speech is transient, multimodal, informal, grammatically complex, local, context dependent, dialogic, involved, and personal (Lillis, *Sociolinguistics* 8–10). As Lillis observes, it is this framing of writing (and speech) by dominant discourse in sociolinguistics that needs to be rethought, its “paradigmatic imaginary” that defines “what its objects of study are, and importantly, can or should be” (10). So, for example, “[t]he focus on writing [in sociolinguistics] in processes of standardisation and codification hides other ways of noticing and understanding what writing is and does in social context, thus potentially limiting our understanding of ‘everyday’ writing” (8).

While Lillis refers to empirical evidence to demonstrate the invalidity of how writing has been framed in sociolinguistics, she also cautions that such research alone is inadequate insofar as it can easily be accommodated to the dominant terms. For instance, when examples of speech are presented that have characteristics ordinarily assigned to writing, dominant discourse in sociolinguistics does not rethink its framing of speech and writing but, instead, dubs these examples to be not “genuine” speech (and writing with attributes associated with speech are dubbed “speech-like”) (*Sociolinguistics* 9). Hence Lillis must retheorize the binary framing itself to enable as legitimate a sociolinguistics of writing.

The projects of both Gibson-Graham and Lillis are motivated, like Smit's and Dobrin's, by dissatisfaction with “the field.” But unlike either Smit or Dobrin, both Gibson-Graham and Lillis proceed not by declaring the field to be at an end, or abandoning the field in pursuit of some other “end” or “frontier,” but by pursuing ways of thinking that field differently: for Gibson-Graham most obviously, rethinking the hegemony of capitalism; for Lillis, rethinking the position of writing in sociolinguistics. And both Gibson-Graham's and Lillis's projects are explicitly located in a wide range of ongoing research and theory, rather than pretending to leave behind the old as a finite, known entity at an end, in order to seek out and produce something entirely new. So, for example, Gibson-Graham do not propose to abandon political economy (or the study of capitalism) for some other pursuit,

or declare these fields to be at an end, nor does Lillis propose to abandon sociolinguistics. Instead, they theorize—find ways to think—the governing terms (*economy, capitalism, sociolinguistics, writing*) differently.

Were Smit and Dobrin to follow their example, they might see that the difficulties they wrestle with are not to be understood in terms of pedagogy versus theory, or FYC versus writing studies or WID, or writing versus composition, but, rather, how *pedagogy, theory, FYC, writing studies, WID, composition, writing* have come to be understood and practiced. Theory, for example, far from being a stable monolith, beneficent or maleficent, in tension with an equivalent monolith of “practice,” itself denotes an enormous range of emergent practices taking an enormous range of forms, some of which we might want to encourage and some not. The same can be said of teaching, administration, FYC, and so on. But it would be wrong to conclude from what we deem to be poorly theorized or practiced theory, pedagogy, or administration that we should abandon work identified by such terms for something else, because to do so would accede to the impoverished definitions shaping that work in a futile effort to leave behind composition as material social practice. What is needed instead is a reworking: better theory, pedagogy, administration, and so on, with what constitutes “better” of course inevitably a matter of debate and, well, work.

It might be argued (though I will not) that the consequences of the rethinking of a field’s key terms of the sort Gibson-Graham and Lillis engage in are not as “revolutionary” as the consequences envisioned by either Smit or Dobrin. But ironically, to argue thus would be to remain subject to the very terms, conditions, and criteria set by the dominant for what counts as, in fact, revolutionary. I have already suggested that Smit’s envisioned change amounts to little that is different from WID curricula already on the books, inflected with dominant free market ideology.¹³ Dobrin’s envisioned change, insofar as it promises to abjure composition as a “teaching subject,” would seem to be more radical. On closer inspection, however, his proposed escape to the beyond of composition is fully consonant with a dominant discourse of fast capitalism.¹⁴

That Dobrin’s desired move to escape what seem to be the limit-situations of composition should land him so unwittingly in a far more troubling position illustrates the role of *hegemony* in maintaining the hegemonic. Composition studies, for Dobrin, is treated as an undifferentiated and stable entity (identified as and with “the WPA”), a monolith to which he ascribes an all-encompassing power: not merely hegemonic but hegemony.¹⁵ And, accordingly, the only route out would appear to be the same apocalyptic (impossible) escape imagined by opponents of capitalism who accord it a similar identity. It is no wonder, then, that, faced with such a conception of composition, the only option and hope would appear to be “violence” (113), “total revolution” (188), or at the very least the appearance of some heroic “critical wpa,” someone who is not merely being critical but who disrupts (114). For,

as Gibson-Graham warn, “Once we have created a theoretical monster and installed it in the social landscape, our thinking and politics will tend to orient themselves around its bulk and majesty and our emotional outlook will reflect the diminished likelihood of displacing it” (*Postcapitalist* 199; compare Chaput). Nor is it surprising that Dobrin’s proposed alternative lands him so firmly in a position aligned with a dominant discourse of globalism condemning to destruction all those who resist its good intentions. Thus, just as the treatment of capitalism as monolith, as Gibson-Graham warn, leads to it “be[ing] seen to operate as a constraint or a limit [. . .] that to which other more mutable entities must adapt” (*End* 14), so Dobrin’s treatment of composition perforce renders any efforts in response, Dobrin’s included, merely accommodative. Indeed, we can best understand claims to the violent, revolutionary, or disruptive character of such efforts as rhetorical ploys to obscure their actual status as adaptations, their acquiescence to the terms governing thought, just as the ostensibly apocalyptic “end” to composition studies advanced by Smit turns out on inspection to be a curriculum well in the mainstream of composition studies.

In other words, hegemony is not so much something against or beyond which Dobrin’s and Smit’s opposed projects move but, rather, the homeplace they inhabit. Alternatively, following Gibson-Graham’s and Lillis’s strategies, we can recognize, in order to break from the hegemonic misrecognitions of, the governing terms of arguments and the established frameworks for those terms. This would involve challenging commonplace distinctions iterated in both Smit’s and Dobrin’s arguments (albeit from ostensibly opposed perspectives): that between intellectual work and pedagogy; that between a concern with what the dominant identifies as material concerns, such as labor and administration, on the one hand, and, on the other, theory; and that between writing and composition. It would involve relocating all work intersecting with composition studies, including theoretical work, in the material social—including the academic institutional—realm so as not to stake out as “new” territory fields that are, in fact, already long under cultivation. And, following Raymond Williams, it would require refusing to accede to the hegemonic’s false claims to being not merely hegemonic but hegemony: the exclusive, total story. For, as Williams warns, “[N]o dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy [. . .] [Rather] they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice” (125; emphasis original). In line with this, instead of treating composition, or composition studies, in the singular, we would need to recognize composition as both (1) multiple, and (2) always emergent, contingent. We can cut Composition down to size, theoretically and practically, by refusing to assign it status as an all-powerful, stable monolith and rejecting the accuracy of dominant representations of its work.

COMPOSITION AS INTELLECTUAL WORK

Slevin's critique of dominant work in composition and representations of that work, and his heralding of different work in and for composition, provide a useful contrast to the efforts of Smit and Dobrin. Like Dobrin, Slevin rejects conservative "academic" discourse demanding conformity to community norms through deployment of terms such as "engagement," "collaboration," and the "common good" (*Introducing* 235), identifying it with the project of colonization (6). Slevin identifies intellectual work as by definition opposed to such discourse: as "the critical examination of the truthfulness of knowledge created, received, and exchanged" (236). However, whereas both Dobrin and Smit locate intellectual work outside the material realm—for Dobrin, part of its appeal as escape from the merely academic; for Smit, the basis for rejecting it—Slevin locates intellectual work insistently in the material social realm, including the academic institutional realm and, most notably, the scene of pedagogy.¹⁶ So, for example, Slevin argues that

teachers of writing [...] can bring into being a radical reorganization of the professional hierarchy. The very concerns that locate us at the base or bottom of the prevailing power system need to be elaborated, so that we can alter both the theory and practice of English studies. Our aim, then, should be not simply to resituate ourselves within institutions but, in doing so, to *reconceive* and *reconstruct* those institutions. ("Depoliticizing" 10; emphases added)

And he identifies the pedagogical scene as the site of intellectual work, crediting the emergence of a "writing movement" not to theorists or researchers but to "the presence and intellectual energy of *students* who questioned the hegemony of received ways of reading and writing" (*Introducing* 2; emphasis added).

In seeming alignment with both Smit and Dobrin, Slevin rejects "promoting the 'field' of composition studies and within it composition specialists," but he identifies such promotion not with composition per se but with "current *representations* of composition" (*Introducing* 3; emphasis added). Hence his aim is not to retreat from, put an end to, or move beyond composition represented thus but, rather, to offer "a different way of representing the work and workers of composition, not as a field one works 'in' but rather as a set of activities and practices one works 'with'" (3). Such reconceptualizing, he suggests, "refines the meaning of disciplinary work to include teaching and learning and broadens the meaning of workers to create alliances of literacy teachers *and learners* across conventional educational boundaries and even beyond educational institutions as ordinarily conceived" (3). So, whereas Dobrin calls for bringing the attention of "intellectual and scholarly inquiry and speculation" to writing phenomena "beyond composition" because "[w]riting is more than

composition (studies)” (*Postcomposition* 2), and whereas Smit argues for abandoning such inquiry altogether in favor of settling for what is officially on demand by disciplines and workplaces, Slevin argues for expanding those recognized as fellow scholars engaging in the intellectual work of composition to comprise not only college writing teachers and students but all those engaged with composing, including seven-year-olds composing thank-you notes (see *Introducing* 50–51). And instead of aiming to meet composition students’ ostensible disciplinary and vocational needs, as Smit insists, Slevin argues for composition to make “other needs imaginable and their realization possible” (*Introducing* 239). So, whereas both Smit and Dobrin work within established academic institutional categories and hierarchies to extend, end, or move beyond the present “field” in what are ultimately quite familiar ways, Slevin calls for making composition a “*movement* for institutional change within and among all levels of education and many different fields of study and learning,” one “concerned not with remediating lack but with examining and understanding differences as they enrich education” (*Introducing* 52; emphasis original).

This is a far cry from either Dobrin’s view of attention to students and the management of curricula as at best a way to “attract the attention of local resources, garner support from local administrations, and often solve local problems” (26), or Smit’s view of these matters as service to those higher up in the academic and social hierarchy and the marketplace. That Slevin’s proposals appear to have garnered significantly less attention than Smit’s and Dobrin’s can be accounted for by the very familiarity of the thinking to be found in the latter two, their apocalyptic rhetoric notwithstanding, and the difficulty of recognizing Slevin’s thinking, given the deviation of Slevin’s proposals from the terms and frameworks of dominant, hegemonic discourse on composition.¹⁷ Familiar terms—*theory, pedagogy, service, discipline, writing, composition*—are in Slevin assigned unfamiliar meanings and thus pose genuine difficulty, the difficulty of thinking composition differently.

This is not to say that Slevin’s own arguments are beyond dispute—an impossibility for any argument—but rather that his efforts to rewrite composition, like Gibson-Graham’s efforts to rewrite economics and Lillis’s to rewrite sociolinguistics, work against dominant representations of these fields rather than accepting (and thereby promoting) the legitimacy or inevitability of dominant definitions and valuations of these. And, unlike Smit and Dobrin, Slevin locates composition firmly in the material social realm—in academic institutions and the work of students, teachers, and scholars—as practices in, with, and on these as “intellectual work”—a phrase paradoxical in its root sense. Difference, for Slevin, is not something to be pursued in lieu of composition but rather an inevitable, pervasive, and defining feature of composition as a material social practice, located in space and time.

RHETORIC, WRITING STUDIES, AND THE MULTIMODAL:
REPLACEMENT THROUGH SUPPLEMENT

If Smit and Dobrin argue from the position of an ostensible present of “composition” to a prospective future beyond, or following the end of, composition, others have attempted to resolve the difficulty of work in composition—its irredeemable location in the material social realm—by aligning it with, or broadening its reach to include, traditions, forms, and materials seen as other than or additional to the practices traditionally identified with the work of composition. While adopting less apocalyptic rhetoric than we find in *Postcomposition* or *The End of Composition Studies*, advocates for these changes are aligned with them in assuming a deficit in composition for which the presumed addition or substitution is offered as solution. Traditional frameworks for and definitions of composition, pedagogy, academic disciplinarity, and value are left unquestioned—the very frameworks and definitions by which composition must be seen as lacking—and the solutions or improvements that are offered are aligned with and work within these frameworks and definitions.

One difficulty in assessing these efforts is that, in one sense, many of the proffered changes call for doing what in fact is, or has been, already part of traditional work in composition, but that dominant conceptions of this work have blinded us to (see, for example, Palmeri’s demonstration of composition’s traditional attention to “multimodal” composition [Palmeri, *Remixing*]). Hence we might agree with the appropriateness of the activities called for while rejecting the claim that engaging in them somehow constitutes a radical break. Simultaneously, however, the performative effects of these representations of composition as lacking, in need of something else that’s “new” or “alternative,” cannot be denied: the hegemonic may not be total or exclusive, but it is by definition hegemonic. This complicates efforts to retrieve what the hegemonic denies and to learn to recognize, in forms and practices we are predisposed to understand in limited ways, the accomplishment of more and other than what is claimed. Further, we have to contend not only with dominant ways of conceptualizing composition, but with dominant conceptualizations of what constitute the alternatives to it—conceptualizations that are, in fact, themselves manifestations of the dominant.

I’ll offer three quick examples to illustrate the difficulties, and possibilities, of breaking from dominant frameworks for conceptualizing composition: efforts to identify, or link, composition with rhetoric; efforts to change, or add to, the forms and materials students are to work with and produce in composing, most commonly by focusing on what is termed *multimodal* composition; and efforts to rename composition “writing studies.” Efforts to identify composition with rhetoric posit rhetoric as the antidote to what ails composition, eliding the fact that rhetoric is and long

has been, in at least some sense, already subsumed by work in composition, if taking forms not recognized as “rhetoric.” So, for example, Sharon Crowley has described rhetoric as something with which to “inoculate” composition to give composition “respectability,” albeit without success (“Composition Is Not”). In such arguments, rhetoric is presumed to be discrete from composition yet necessary to the health of the latter (but not the reverse): a means of enabling composition to (finally) attain status as a traditional academic discipline, if only by linking it with one imagined to already enjoy such status. The possibility that such disciplinary status itself may be suspect rather than something to be aspired to is not, in such arguments, entertained.¹⁸

We can see a comparable set of assumptions in arguments that composition needs to expand the range of types of composition addressed to include multimodal composition. Often these arguments are couched in terms of yielding to an imperative like the imperative Dobrin invokes, one issued by rapid changes in the communicative technologies dominating contemporary (and, it seems, future) culture, locally and globally, that demand we adjust to or risk being annihilated by.¹⁹ But framing the issue as a new technological imperative either to resist or embrace assumes the radically new—yet, somehow simultaneously known, knowable—character of what is coming to composition (or has arrived), the fixed and limited character of what has been, and the lack of alternative to this framing of what we face: an ideological misrecognition of modality in alignment with dominant neoliberalism’s insistence on valuing what is claimed as new, its account of limitations (or advantages, for that matter) to the (stable, finite, settled) “old,” the necessity of “creative destruction,” and above all, flexibility in adapting to and providing what the dominant demands.²⁰

Most damagingly, such framing accepts dominant ascriptions of the modalities of particular forms, and the actual and potential modalities engaged in with those forms, suggesting that multimodal composition is a (different) choice rather than an inevitability, something other than the norm rather than the norm itself. Such ascriptions reinforce dominant conceptions of composition—as opposed to multimodal composition—as modally singular monolith. But, as John Trimbur and Karen Press have recently observed, “[M]ultimodality itself is not new, nor is it a break from the past. Multimodality is new as a *term*, a *conceptual terrain* that surfaced at a particular historical conjuncture, goaded by the need to understand dramatic changes in the means of communication” (Trimbur and Press; emphasis original). Likewise, “monomodality” is not an accurate characterization of print texts but, rather, a set of “ideological claims” about such texts (Trimbur and Press): a misrecognition of those texts as (modally) less than those deemed multimodal.²¹ Accepting such misrecognitions renders modality not an open question for composition students and their teachers to work on and with, but, rather, as at best a matter of a set of predefined menu items bestowed (or newly “permitted”) by teachers for students to select from: a matter of no more than market “choice” among what are understood as commodities.

Calls for composition to somehow merge with or be renamed as writing studies appear to align with calls to add rhetoric or multimodal forms of composition to (mere) composition insofar as they seek to add consideration of other kinds of writing to the writing traditionally identified with composition, or insofar as, by giving composition a more traditionally recognizable academic subject matter (content), it will garner composition, now renamed writing studies, more academic institutional respectability. As Trimbur explains in his review of these calls, if composition has heretofore identified writing primarily as “participial”—something people do—writing studies seems to render it a noun, a phenomenon one studies—“the material manifestations and consequences of writing as it circulates in the world” (“Changing” 18). This nominalization would seem to broaden the kinds of writing studied while simultaneously giving composition a recognizable subject matter and a justification for “verticalizing” its curriculum—given the enormous range of kinds of writing available for study, a major in writing studies would itself seem to be imperative once writing is accepted as a legitimate subject of inquiry.

But as with arguments for linking composition with rhetoric or adding multimodal composition, these arguments elide the fact that writing studies, far from representing a new identity for composition, has always been part of composition—not only in the conventional form of scholarly contributions to studies of writing (though there are plenty of these) but also in the ongoing, daily writing and study of writing by composition students and their teachers. That such work is not recognized as writing studies is a consequence of the fact that this work does not follow methodologies, nor lead to the production of textual forms, conventionally recognized as manifestations of writing studies. So, as with calls for linking composition with rhetoric or exploring multimodal composition, we might respond to calls to transform composition into writing studies as welcome and unremarkable, on the one hand, and yet also impertinent, asking for work to begin that in fact has long been underway, though taking forms dominant culture fails to recognize as such work. Worse, in asking that composition take up work that it already engages in, such calls risk maintaining, and even strengthening, dominant culture’s rendering of composition itself as lacking, its work as not work at all—as, in and by itself, illegitimate.

REWRITING COMPOSITION

It would be contradictory to this argument’s insistence on the always emergent, varied, and variable character of work in composition to identify a different end to its work—to argue for a specific set of practices that, instead of or in addition to those just discussed, would somehow resolve composition’s difficulties.²² But one might imagine projects that, like Slevin’s, pursue composition work outside hegemonic expectations both for what is conventional and for what constitutes a break from

the conventional: projects, for example, that take as their focus work in composition that the dominant typically deems insignificant, when it does not dismiss it from consideration altogether, precisely because it is ideologically unrecognizable as either conventional or unconventional. We can see the contours of such work in David Bartholomae's declaration that he teaches first-year composition as "a certain kind of intellectual project—one that requires [him] to think out critical problems of language, knowledge, and culture through the work of 'ordinary' or 'novice' or student writers" ("What" 24). For although Bartholomae aligns this work with the project of "criticism," he cautions that it is not criticism as conventionally recognized but, instead, a "practical criticism (or criticism-in-practice)" (21). Such work, he acknowledges, requires a willingness to "pay attention to common things" (28) and appears ordinary in the extreme. As he further cautions, this is "professionally difficult. [. . .] [I]t ends with revisions that are small, local, and difficult to value. It assumes the direct intervention in specific projects where (from a certain angle of vision) the gains are small" (21).

But while those revisions may well appear, from dominant perspectives, to be "local, and difficult to value," with "gains [that] are small," we accept such perspectives at the peril of losing sight of the actual work accomplished through such small, local gains. Even those gains that appear purely idiosyncratic, restricted to the individual student discovering what everyone around her seems to already know, are, from the argument I've been advancing, real and new, once located in time and space, and the writer producing a difference, however slight, even if the writing appears highly conventional.²³

Moreover, and conversely, there is a use to the ascribed ordinariness and "smallness" of such gains. In his debate with Bartholomae, Peter Elbow has called for preserving the writing course as a place to "cultivate [. . .] some tufts of what grows wild outside," protected from the academic ("Response" 90). This accepts dominant understandings of the academic as hegemony, something from which students (and others) need protection. But we can instead see the composition course as a preserve for what can grow "inside" the academic site as material social realm, somewhat, if not entirely, removed from the otherwise incessant pressure for commodification. The fact that work in composition courses can appear useless, not relevant, insignificant, not mattering, can allow for experimentation, thinking, and reflection of real use-value, once we come to understand these as themselves material social practices more easily engaged in when there is an allotted space, meeting time, and the possibility of collaboration and a project: the briar patch we can, after all, make ourselves at home in.²⁴

This is aligned with Bartholomae's earlier description of composition itself as not a traditional discipline but, instead, a "site where English [has been] open for negotiation (or renegotiation)," and that has "enabled the expression of a funda-

mental anxiety about ‘required English’” and “produced new ways of talking about language, writing, and pedagogy” as what “we can never simply study” (“Freshman” 44, 45). Composition, he suggests, is not only or merely “an abstract subject” but also “something materially present, a course and its students” (47). I am suggesting that in the familiar forms of ordinary work in composition, represented in, for example, a composition course in which students produce seemingly insignificant writing circulating only within the confines of that course, work of real, if always contingent, use-value can take place, and that the material social conditions typical of the site of such a course make possible academic intellectual work that cannot take place elsewhere, outside such conditions.²⁵

Likewise, at least for some of us, similar conditions make possible pursuit of what, from dominant perspectives, seems useless, irrelevant research: reworking, by rewriting, the known and common (and commonly known), in myriad ways, to make it new (again). Granted, there are significant barriers that would seem to justify despair at engaging in such research in light of the lack of support for it and the lack of recognizable impact it may have on policy and practice.²⁶ But I am suggesting, too, that such despair is in part a consequence of allegiance to a mythical notion of academic professional disciplinarity and the function dominant culture has assigned it. To abandon allegiance to that notion does not mean we stop researching, nor is it to hearken back to suspect calls for knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but, rather, that we adopt a more humble perspective on such work: to take up (again and again) “basic” research, and to do so in a manner that embraces all the pejoratives associated with that term. It is to identify the work of composition—in the twin sites of teaching and research—as learning, which (fortunately) is an inevitability but always with unanticipated consequences and results always local and contingent.

* * *

I began by asserting that composition is a historical project, the name given to work done in US colleges and universities by students and teachers as they engage and mediate differences in written language. Dominant, limited conceptions of composition deny that work (and its value), posing instead a “discourse of need” about composition itself as lacking and, therefore, in need of either abandonment or supplement. Against this discourse, I have argued that what is needed is not something ostensibly new or different, either as alternative or supplement to composition, but instead a new understanding of composition: a rewriting of composition as something other than gaping need. Such rewriting requires rethinking the terms used to define, and limit, composition: *writing*, *pedagogy*, *theory*, *rhetoric*, *modality*, and *composition* itself. To fail to do so, I have argued, is to align oneself with dominant ideological constructions of these that consign composition to mere service to the dominant, or worse, and

of what might constitute legitimate alternatives or “improvements” to it. It is these constructions, not composition per se, that threaten to keep composition shackled. We need to break with the misrecognition of both composition and the proffered alternatives and improvements to it in order to give full play to all that might and does get accomplished in the work of composition.

As this suggests, we need, if not a new language, then a different way of inflecting the existing language to rewrite composition—a politics of language in composition theory, scholarship, teaching, and learning. This will demand the energy of us all at every site and instance of our work, in our teaching and study. Such work is difficult, to be sure. But once we abandon the attempt to abandon composition, we may learn to recognize what composition might be.

NOTES

1. On the ideology of professional academic disciplinarity, see Richard Ohmann. For a critique of the failure of scientific disciplines to locate themselves as material social practices, see Evelyn Fox Keller. On the politics of composition’s “professionalization” as a discipline, see Chris Gallagher; Jeanne Gunner; Slevin, “Disciplining”; Trimbur, “Writing Instruction.”

2. I am of course poaching and twisting the notion of a “discourse of need” from Crowley (“Composition’s Ethic”), who has critiqued the field of composition for its reliance on a discourse of *student* need to justify the universal first-year composition requirement. I differ from Crowley in identifying a discourse about composition itself as in need, and in challenging traditional academic disciplinarity as a goal for composition to aspire to.

3. For a different analysis of Smit, see Erin Herberg.

4. The issue of transfer is beyond the scope of this essay. For recent discussions, see Rebecca Nowacek; Elizabeth Wardle; and Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak.

5. In *Terms of Work* (126–31), I critique the normative functionalist approach taken by several writers whose arguments align with Smit’s.

6. Smit is explicitly reiterating a position articulated earlier by Jeff Smith.

7. For a critique of the history of reductive conceptions of pedagogy, see Mariolini Salvatori.

8. I’m thinking here, for example, of works by Deborah Brandt, Ralph Cintron, Ellen Cushman, Anne Ruggles Gere, Harvey Graff, David Barton and Mary Hamilton, Gail Hawisher, Shirley Brice Heath, Roz Ivanič, Gunther Kress, Theresa Lillis (*Student*), Beverly Moss, Paul Prior, Mike Rose, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Cynthia Selfe, Brian Street, and Bronwyn Williams (among countless others).

9. On “globalism” as distinct from globalization, see Ulrich Beck 9–11. For a recent critique of the immateriality of globalist discourse, see Thomas Sutherland.

10. Dobrin is disputing Nedra Reynolds’s statement that “the whole world is *not* in the Web” (35; emphasis original; qtd. in Dobrin 144).

11. J. K. Gibson-Graham is the name and identity taken by Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham in their coauthored writing. In that writing they alternated between self-identifying in the singular (“I,” “my,” “mine”) and the plural (“we,” “our,” “ours”). I have adopted the latter practice except where quotations from their work make it less confusing to use the singular, but some ambiguity is inevitable.

12. On the distinction between hegemony and the hegemonic, see R. Williams, *Marxism* 113, and discussion that follows.

13. In saying this, I echo Bethany Davila's review.

14. For a quite different but compelling analysis of Dobrin's argument along these lines, see Gunner.

15. We can see this invocation of an undifferentiated, stable, all-powerful monolith in the following statements from Dobrin: "In the local place of the wpa, hegemony becomes the very mechanism of control manifest in managerial presence: curriculum, policy, orientation, practicum" (96); "In no way can the local wpa operate outside of the context of the WPA. The wpa and the WPA are inseparable parts of the larger complex administrative system" (97); "There can be no composition studies without the WPA in the same way that there can be no WPA or wpa without composition studies" (100); "[N]o local wpa can exist outside of the formation of the WPA Empire, that all wpas feed the WPA Empire. Any local work toward emancipation is always work in support of the Empire's homogenization" (110); "The wpa is the occupied body used—not empowered—by the WPA. The WPA, then, is constituted by multiple wpa bodies giving subjectivity and authority over to the WPA" (219); "Theory attached to classroom practice is necessarily, always already co-opted and cannot, by definition, be emancipatory since classroom practice is sanctioned by the institution" (13).

16. For a similar perspective, see Zebroski, 32 and *passim*.

17. According to *Google Scholar*, as of the time this essay was being written, Slevin's book, published in 2001, had been cited in twenty-seven sources; Smit's book, published in 2004, had been cited in seventy-three sources, almost three times as many. Dobrin's book, published in 2011 (ten years after Slevin's) had already been cited in twelve sources, almost half the number accrued by Slevin but in one-sixth the time that Slevin's book has been available.

18. For a fuller discussion of conceptions of the relations between rhetoric and composition, see Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu.

19. We can see the pressures of this imperative leading Kathleen Blake Yancey, for example, to admit, in her CCCC Chair's Address, to wondering "if in some pretty important ways and within the relatively short space of not quite ten years, we [in composition] may already have become anachronistic" (302). For a critique of ideologies of modality and an argument for the need for an ideological model of modality, see Street, "Future" 29–32.

20. On notions of flexibility in the ideology of fast capitalism, see Zygmunt Bauman 104–5.

21. Compare Kress's observation that "no text can exist in a single mode, [. . .] all texts are always multimodal" (187; see also Shipka 11–13). Cindy Selfe, Tim Lockridge, and I explore the implications of taking multimodality—or, rather, transmodality, along with translanguality—as the norm of composition in Horner, Lockridge, and Selfe, "Translinguality, Transmodality, and Difference."

22. Further, it must be acknowledged that insofar as any and every iteration of any traditional or seemingly unconventional practice in composition (teaching, learning, study, writing) produces difference, it merits critical attention. So, for example, practices seemingly aligned with the calls critiqued here might well engage, in given locations, the always emergent work of composition despite the justifications offered for such practices by these calls.

23. As Alastair Pennycook observes, even "small, unintentional slippages, changes to the ways we do and say things," may start to be repeated and become sedimented practices (*Language* 49).

24. If this seems to counsel retreat, and admittedly may risk mere retreat, it is equally likely that the appearance of retreat constitutes a further misrecognition of what counts as of real potential use (*pace* Gibson-Graham's caution against the dominant's restricted definitions of revolutionary work, discussed earlier), signaled by the implicit derogation of the significance of teachers and students putting composition (once again, yet inevitably differently) to work under conditions of such retreat.

25. I present a more developed argument for this understanding of composition teaching in "Re-Valuing Student Writing."

26. On the challenges of such research, see Julie Lindquist.

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