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APOLOGIES FOR CROSS-POSTING: COMPOSING DISCIPLINARY AFFECTS
AND CONFLICTS ON THE WPA LISTSERV

by

Zachary Charles Beare

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Shari Stenberg

Lincoln, Nebraska

March, 2017

APOLOGIES FOR CROSS-POSTING: COMPOSING DISCIPLINARY AFFECTS
AND CONFLICTS ON THE WPA LISTSERV

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University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Shari Stenberg

Drawing on theories of counterpublics, online communication, and affect, this dissertation argues that the Writing Program Administrators Listserv (WPA-L) functions as an important site of disciplinary knowledge-making and theory-building for the field of Composition and Rhetoric. The dissertation examines the WPA-L as a discursive space in which members of the discipline build community, debate pressing issues, and strategize how best to advocate for their individual and collective interests. At the same time that these qualities reveal how the listserv functions as counterpublic space for the discipline at large, the dissertation argues that sub-disciplinary counterpublics made up of individuals marginalized within the field (graduate students, part-time and contingent faculty, two-year college specialists) can make use of the democratic nature of this digital platform to speak back to more powerful segments of the field. Thus, I argue that the WPA-L, gives voice to individuals not often afforded access to speak in more traditionally-authorized platforms of knowledge-making like peer-reviewed journals and monographs. In crafting this argument, I investigate the rhetorical moves employed by listserv participants in the three most active WPA-L threads of 2015 (examining a total of 180 listserv email messages). The dissertation concludes by reflecting on how the WPA-L embodies many qualities valued in the pedagogical theories of the field of Composition and Rhetoric.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of Composition and Rhetoric's most deeply-held beliefs is that knowledge-making is a social phenomenon; in this field, we believe the way we read and compose texts is always influenced by our interactions and relationships with others. I draw on this disciplinary conviction in crafting my argument about the WPA-L, and as I think back over the process of composing this project, I find myself even more convinced of the truth of the idea. And so, in this spirit, I think it is important to name some of those voices who have made this project possible. I want to begin by thanking my spectacular committee members—Shari Stenberg, Stacey Waite, Debbie Minter, and Theresa Catalano. I am grateful for your support and for the thoughtful and challenging questions you have asked throughout the process of drafting this dissertation. The text is richer because of conversations with each of you. I especially want to thank Shari for the countless face-to-face, email, phone, and text message conversations about multiple drafts of each of these chapters. I cannot imagine having written this project without her guidance and, perhaps more importantly, her friendship. I am also blessed to be part of an incredibly supportive cohort of graduate students at UNL, and this project is indebted to hallway conversations, draft feedback, writing group accountability, and crying sessions courtesy of so many of my close friends and colleagues. I especially want to name Nicole Green, Marcus Meade, Katie McWain, Caitie Leibman, Darin Jenson, Bernice Olivas, Jessica Rivera Mueller, and Lesley Bartlett. Finally, I want to thank my partner, Jared Ackerman, for his love and support. Jared, perhaps more than anyone else, has witnessed the emotional rollercoaster of composing this dissertation, and without his support, I don't know if I would have made it through this doctoral program.

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CHAPTER 1

DEAR COLLEAGUES/DEAR HIVEMIND:

DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE-MAKING ON THE WPA-L

Each year, just after the spring semester ends and I have turned in grades and finished up the remaining administrative work for the term, I sit down at my desk, open up my laptop, and slowly begin the process of sifting through my email inbox, confronting the clutter that has accumulated over the last 12 months, those emails I didn't delete or archive, those messages I saved for later or couldn't process at the time they initially arrived in my inbox. This year I have 3,777 of those messages to deal with. Most will quickly be deleted, but some will take time to read and think through. Email is an inescapable part of modern life, especially for those of us working in the academy.

One of the largest sources of the email I receive is the Writing Program Administrator's Listserv (WPA-L) hosted by Arizona State University. Each year, thousands of conversation threads are started on that listserv, and each of those threads might receive a handful or even dozens of replies. In its 22 year history, the WPA-L has become an invaluable resource not only for writing program administrators (who write to the list soliciting advice about everything from budget models and assessment strategies to curricular designs and job descriptions), but also for teachers of writing at all levels and from all institutional contexts who use the space to dialogue about issues of the discipline and to brainstorm and workshop ideas for courses they are developing, initiatives they are undertaking, and research questions they are forming. The WPA-L has become a central clearinghouse for disseminating CFPs for conferences, special issues, and edited collections; for advertising jobs, programs, workshops, and events; and for

distributing surveys and recruiting research participants. And, perhaps just as significantly, the WPA-L functions as a site of conversation and community building. Members of the list celebrate colleagues' promotions and publications, they mourn the deaths of scholars in the field, they share summer reading and travel plans, and they engage in storytelling about their personal and professional lives. This relation-building function of the listserv is perhaps especially important for the field of Composition and Rhetoric because, as so many of our disciplinary histories have argued (Crowley, Miller, North), the short history of the field has regularly been marked with experiences of marginalization and with struggles for legitimacy. Additionally, because practitioners in the field are often isolated as the only (or only one of a few) Composition and Rhetoric specialist(s) in their home departments and because many in the field increasingly lack access to conferences (or sometimes even access to journals) due to funding constraints, institutional locations or adjunct or contingent statuses, the WPA-L has become an essential way for individuals in the field to find allies and advocates and to feel connected to the discipline and its current conversations, research, and political objectives. For these reasons, I argue that the WPA-L is one of the most significant and productive sites of disciplinary knowledge-making and theory building in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, one that warrants investigation.

The WPA-L is a unique site to study because it is one of the only places where one can see members of the discipline respond to and dialogue about issues *en masse* and *in time*. For me, it is profound and striking to realize that in the archives, it is possible to go back and watch the field react minute-by-minute to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, to school shootings across the country, to elections, and to a whole host of both

somber and silly pop culture and news events. It is an incredibly rich archive, one that records the type of ephemera that wouldn't have been practical to catalog or to access before the digital age.

That said, despite the richness of the archive, the space of the WPA-L is under-researched and certainly undertheorized. In her contribution to Barbara L'Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo's important book *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration: Individuals, Communities, and the Formation of a Discipline*, Shirley Rose explains that though "to some extent, the archives of the WPA listserv already provide an easily accessible repository of information about writing program administrator's work, this information has not been collected systematically, nor has it been provided in a standardized format" (238). For Rose, such work is important and necessary in order to "represent the complexity and significance of writing program administrator's intellectual work" (238). Rose, likely because of the rhetorical situation from which she is writing, positions the WPA-L as an important site for investigating knowledge-making and narratives *about WPA work specifically*. But as I have mentioned above, the conversations of the listserv reach far beyond that focus, covering topics and concerns across the broad fields of Composition and Rhetoric. In this dissertation, I take up and extend the charge that Rose outlines by collecting and analyzing material from the rich archive that is presented by the WPA. I do this by identifying and investigating three key moments from the last year (2015) on the WPA-L in which members' conversations do the important intellectual work of reflecting on and actively debating the discipline's purpose and identity, its institutional position and power, and the emotional tolls and rewards of its work. I provide more extensive discussions of each of these issues below,

but I have chosen these three foci because I believe that each represents a crisis that has been regularly manifested throughout the discipline's history (and also the history of the listserv). Over and over again, the field has turned to debate the pedagogical and research agendas of the discipline, the political and institutional identities of the discipline, and the sustainability and rewards of the discipline's work.

Though countless articles and monographs have been written on these subjects, I argue that examining these reflections and debates on the WPA-L listserv *in relation to* the more polished and authorized accounts of them that survive the peer-review process and make it to publication can enrich our understandings of the disciplinary debates, tensions, and concerns. These conversations on the WPA-L are fascinating to explore because the nature of the back-and-forth communication allows us to see numerous voices literally *in conversation*, and through that conversation, to see ideas developed, revised, confronted, contradicted, dismissed, and even attacked. With such a conversational dynamic, one is able to occasionally witness ruptures and breakdowns in the disciplinary civility that typically characterizes published accounts of the field, and I firmly believe such moments require careful interrogation and analysis. These emotionally-charged moments afford glimpses into the felt-realities of listserv participants and allow readers to witness theoretical discussions and generalizations about the field come into sharp contrast with the material circumstances and personal narratives of specific members of that field. Additionally, I would argue that these listserv discussions are especially important for us as a field to confront because, in many ways, they are the most publically accessible accounts and representations of our field. And as I argue above, unlike the disciplinary conversations that take place behind the journal

subscription paywalls of our field's publications and in the air conditioned meeting rooms of our field's increasingly unaffordable conferences, the WPA-L is freely and publically accessible to anyone with access to an internet connection.

Disciplinary-Knowledge Making

Composition as a knowledge-making society is gradually pulling itself apart. Not as a branching out or expanding, although, these might be politically more palatable descriptions, but fragmenting: gathering into communities or clusters of communities among which relations are becoming increasingly tenuous. (364)

-Stephen M. North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*

Just what counts as disciplinary knowledge-making in the field of Composition and Rhetoric has long been a contentious issue, one that has inspired debates about what exactly "research" is and what it looks like, and these debates about research are often connected to larger conflicting views about the focus and purpose of the discipline. Often, this debate about knowledge-making in the field comes down to a tension between seeing Composition and Rhetoric as a pedagogically-focused discipline and seeing the field a theory-building enterprise with an empirically-based research agenda. Though this is, of course, a false binary, it remains a tension that one remains active on the WPA-L today, as each of those visions of the field inspires the creation of conversation threads and as these varied perspectives often come to a head in more heated moments on the listserv.

While the suggestion that the field should extend beyond the domain of pedagogy does not necessarily need to construct a hierarchy where pedagogy is positioned as the less significant form of work in the field (and where theory and research are positioned at higher levels), that pattern often is inscribed. And it is inscribed in the way that certain types of intellectual work are rewarded both with economic incentives and also with

other forms of social capital such as publication, community prestige, and, of course, tenure. Such a division is even more fraught when thinking about how this creates divisions specifically connected to labor and also institutional location, further dividing non-tenure track members and tenure track members of the field, and further separating the teaching-oriented work of both tenure and non-tenure track community college instructors from the privileged work of research and theory building expected of university professors. The ways these divisions are felt have been further magnified in the rather dismal employment landscape of today's academy, where "full- and part-time adjuncts, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows account for well over three fourths of all faculty appointments" (Schmidt). And a recent MLA report shows that closer to our own disciplinary home, "60 percent of faculty in English Department work off the tenure track" and "in two-year colleges, the figure rises to approach 80 percent of English instructors." In such an environment, the division between the practice-oriented pedagogical vision of the field and the theoretical and empirically-based research visions of the field become entangled in questions of privilege, access to resources, and employment security.

In *Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of Theory-Building and Pedagogy in Composition*, Sidney I. Dobrin suggests that "the debate [between theory and practice] emerges from a young field attempting to establish its identity. It is a political, philosophical issue, an issue...of where one stands. This becomes political and philosophical in that individual participants in the field must determine how the debate affects their participation—what knowledge they privilege" (26). Though I applaud the way Dobrin emphasizes that this debate is political and philosophical, I worry that his

characterization seems to imply that both sides exist on a level playing field, that wherever “one stands,” one might be able to be heard (and “heard” in way that is counted and legitimized). In fact, this debate is much more complicated because it is not just a problem of *how* to define the field; it is also a question of *who* gets to decide *how* it is defined and *where* such definitional work gets to be done, a question of *who we remember to involve* in these discussions. The very positionality of individuals in relation to this debate can sometimes prevent them from even being a part of the conversation about what knowledge is privileged (and thus published), especially, I would argue, in more restricted locations of disciplinary discourse (like the pages of the academic journals of the field), which makes examination of these debates on (at least slightly) more open and diverse platforms like the WPA-L very important. In this way, I see this dissertation as working to address the concerns of scholars like Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano who have argued in “Occupy Writing Studies: Rethinking College Composition of the Needs of the Teaching Teaching Majority” that “not enough has been said in scholarly conversations about marginalization of open-admission and two-year campuses from professional dialogues even though such campuses are sites of engaging and essential work where almost half of all college students start their postsecondary educations” (117-118). Hassel and Giordano explain that “these often ignored postsecondary writing teachers need a more effective and extensive body of scholarship that offers research-based best practices that are relevant to the daily work that they do” (119)

“Moreover,” they explain, “our disciplinary knowledge base is incomplete if not informed by this work” (119). In their article, Hassel and Giordano demonstrate

convincingly that the peer-review practices which shape participation in official sites of all forms of disciplinary knowledge-making—whether in publication or presentations at the national conference of the field—have often been designed in ways that disadvantage two-year specialists and make them less likely to be accepted for inclusion. Even conferences—sites of disciplinary knowledge-making typically thought of as more open and accessible to individuals than the publications of the field—are found to be exclusionary in their survey of the state of the field. At the time Hassel and Giordano published their article (2013), they point out that of the 184 proposal reviewers named in the program for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, only 4 (2%) were from two-year campuses.

This alienation of teaching-focused members of the discipline from their researcher counterparts is, of course, not a new problem. Speaking rather bluntly almost 30 years ago (and relying on an incredibly problematic metaphor of indigeneity), Stephen M. North began his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* by directly addressing the conversation about who is granted the right to speak and who is silenced in the debate between defining the identity of composition and rhetoric in relation to the practice of teaching and the work of research and theory-building:

Composition has grown tremendously—has, really, *become* a field. But while this growth has been exciting, it has often seemed chaotic and patternless as well, and has had...major liabilities. The first is that the new investigators have tended to trample roughshod over the claims of previous inquirers, especially the ‘indigenous’ population that I will call the Practitioners. In other words, much of what especially teachers, and to lesser extent writers, have claimed to know about

writing has been ignored, discounted, or ridiculed—so that, despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge-makers in their own field” (3)

I want to be clear that I condemn the overly-casual parallel North constructs between indigenous populations and practitioners. However, North’s language of disenfranchisement is especially important in this quote, for it points to the way that a very large population of teachers (and also students) are not often granted the power, privilege, or access to share their knowledge or to take part in the shaping and defining of the field in ways that are recognized (a problem that continues to exist today). Though organizations like CCCC, NCTE, WPA, and others have made clearly-articulated commitments to represent the voices and interests of members of the profession whose primary role is to teach, a look at the individuals leading such organizations and a look at who is published—and even afforded the ability to present at conferences—reveals that there remains a major problem of representation. As North argued decades ago, and as Hassel and Giordano demonstrate today, the “overwhelming majority” remains too often left out of the (more legitimized sites of) conversation, and so it is crucial for us to investigate other parallel sites of disciplinary knowledge-making and conversation where a wider array of voices are able to actively participate, platforms like the professional listservs of the field.

The failure to make room for such voices in our official accounts of the discipline is unfortunate because, of course, conversations with teacher practitioners within the field might (and likely do) inspire important areas of research, theory building, and pedagogical development, areas and inquiry directions with greater relevancy to this

segment of the profession. This should, perhaps, encourage us to complicate the teaching/research binary that has been so often inscribed in the pages of our disciplinary histories, to see how these too-often divided domains of our work might always-already be mutually informing. While Sandra Stotsky argues in “Research, Teaching, and Public Policy” that “many college composition instructors are highly critical of the ‘privileging’ of researchers over teachers in the making of knowledge about composition, denying the legitimacy of the hierarchical relationship they perceive and questioning the value of what most existing research has offered them” (209), it might be more valuable to question *what research might have greater or more transferrable value to them* and how their perspectives might inform and direct avenues of research.

Certainly one of the main areas of research that would be more transferrable and useful to scholars and practitioners across the diversity of the institutional contexts of the field is work on pedagogy and teaching development. As Shari Stenberg argues in *Professing and Pedagogy*, “the feature that most distinguishes composition from its disciplinary siblings is its primary focus on pedagogy, and, more specifically, its conception of pedagogy as a mode of knowledge production, not merely a vehicle for knowledge transmission” (130). At the same time, though, Stenberg also acknowledges that “as long as the discipline functions as a gated community that opens its doors only to contributing scholars, teacher development will remain isolated from professional preparation. Changing the value placed on teaching—and thus on teacher preparation—requires a simultaneous shift in our conceptions and enactments of disciplinarity” (128). Stenberg’s text sheds light on disciplinary contradictions. At the same time that pedagogy has, from the very beginning, been part of the disciplinary identity of Composition and

Rhetoric, the field's reliance on scholarship production as the main legitimizing mechanism in service of our field's movements towards the comforts of disciplinarity (or, to use Chris Gallagher's term, "the trappings of disciplinary") has unfortunately worked to separate what we label as "the scholarship of the field" from the work of teacher preparation and teacher development.

At the same time that these debates about disciplinary identity and disciplinarity have created tensions, divisions, and even levels of hostility within the field, others specifically position these debates about knowledge-making as central to the discipline's success, rapid growth, and even core identity. In *Constructing Knowledges*, Dobrin argues that "in order for rhetoric and composition (or any field, for that matter) to evolve, debates concerning useful knowledge must proliferate" (19). Dobrin, though, positions the debates within the field of Composition and Rhetoric as dramatically different from those of many other disciplines, arguing that our field, unlike others, is at its most productive when it does *not* reach any sort of consensus or resolution. This, for Dobrin, is the radical possibility of Composition and Rhetoric as a field. And near the end of his book, Dobrin makes this point even more firmly, arguing that "as composition has searched for identity among this transformative amalgam of knowledge and within the academy, the theory debates have produced many advances in the field's recent and rapid evolution" (155-156). Even a cursory look at the dynamic and often heated nature of the WPA-L conversations illustrates the fact that these ongoing debates remain a central characteristic of the life of the discipline. And if, as Dobrin argues, this sort of antagonistic theory building is central to the field's evolution and distinctive disciplinary

identity, then disciplinary sites like the WPA-L are imperative to study because the nature of the medium is specifically designed to facilitate such back-and-forth dialogue.

In their introduction to *Under Construction: Working at the Intersections of Composition Theory, Research, and Practice* Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson echo Dobrin's arguments about the dynamic, never-settled (and even anti-disciplinary) nature of Composition and Rhetoric, describing what they see as "the inevitable burgeoning of a theoretically interdisciplinary field with a strong orientation toward self-reflection," which is "now developing, exploding beyond its boundaries, creating new allies, and locating new sites for inquiry and knowledge production" (1). If debate about identity and knowledge without resolution is, in fact, our mandate and a key feature of our success and identity as a discipline, the question, of course, becomes how such work should be conducted. Dobrin argues that since "the *debate* has become crucial for all scholars on all sides" that "the responsible position compositionists [should] take in this debate is not one of moderator, not one of having answers, but one of teachers and scholars who must participate in practice and who must engage that practice through theory" (26). In this way, Dobrin suggests that compositionists need to engage in practices of genuine inquiry, continually participating in conversations about and reflecting on their practices and conceptions of the discipline. Dobrin helps to explain the importance of such work in his earlier discussion of the nature of theory:

Most often theory is organic, receptive to new observations, additional facts, further speculation. Theory accounts for experience and allows new experience to alter or contribute to the evolution of that theory. Theory provides a framework within which one can operate, ask questions, even alter or refine principles of that

theory based on new experience, new observation. That is, theory does not allow itself to stagnate. It pushes and pulls its way to understanding how a set of phenomena, a field, a body of knowledge, operates. (8-9)

I like Dobin's account of organic theory building and knowledge-making because it so closely matches and describes the ways that really good conversations on the WPA-L progress. In those moments, queries are sent out to the list, and they are responded to with narratives of experience *and* citations of research and existing theory. Individuals come together, wrestle with ideas, and share resources. And importantly, the participants in these conversations are diverse, coming at posed questions from a range of institutional contexts and perspectives, allowing more disciplinary stakeholders to participate in the knowledge-production of the field, not just those whose job titles specifically position them as "scholars" or "researchers." Then, in light of what is shared, original posters and responders work to alter and refine their ideas, to rethink and to develop their positions. In such moments, you see individuals push on, resist, and expand their ideas and the ideas of the discipline in light of other voices.

Who Gets to Author a Discipline? (And Who Doesn't?)

While scholars have long recognized the "sociality" of scholarly "knowledge-production," they have typically ignored the material constraints on such production. (220).

-Bruce Horner, *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*

Still, the type of in-time and actively dialogic knowledge-making and theory building that is performed on the listserv is not the type that we usually imagine when we think about the official narratives of field, and it is important to question why this is the case; to consider the forces that shape whose voices are invited, recorded, heard,

archived, and remembered; and to explore the politics behind who gets to author a discipline and, perhaps more importantly, who doesn't. It might be more accurate to talk about the "politics" of these issues as *political economies* and *material conditions* that shape access, membership, status, power, and (abilities to make) contributions to the discursive landscapes of the discipline. In *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, Horner dedicates a substantial amount of time to reflecting on the material realities that enable and constrain participation in authorized forms of disciplinary knowledge-production. Drawing on A. Suresh Canagarajah, Horner explains that little attention is placed on the "nondiscursive" requirements for contributions to scholarly conversations. Horner argues that "while scholars have long recognized the 'sociality' of scholarly 'knowledge-production,' they have typically ignored the material constraints on such production" (223). Horner shows that the material realities that facilitate and inhibit contributions to scholarly work are quite extensive and, in fact, involve material factors we might not often think of:

These include, but are not limited to, requirements of access to scholarly books and journals and a community of scholars familiar with these, access to 'conventional' word-processing technology, including photocopying machines, quality paper, computer hardware and software, and fresh typewriter ribbon; reliable communication facilities, including access to electric power, telephone, fax, and electronic and (affordable) surface mail service; (political and material) freedom to travel; and quiet, stable, and peaceful living and working conditions supportive of scholarship. (223-224).

Horner's text showcases so clearly that the ability to participate in disciplinary knowledge-making (at least in traditionally legitimized ways) is, in large part, a function of privilege, and specifically privilege that is mediated by material realities, arguing quite convincingly that "lack of the availability to meet these 'nondiscursive' requirements makes it difficult for scholars to materially produce, send, and have their writing read by journals and publishers" (224). Horner calls on us as a field to recognize and confront the significance of "the small percentage of the field's membership represented by the authorship of published essays and the lopsided (over two to one) ratio of male to female authors in scholarly journals" (225). And in addition to that incredibly upsetting gender disparity that Horner points to, we should also be cognizant of the lack of representation of scholars of color, contingent faculty, and faculty in non-research roles.

Especially important for my work in this dissertation, Horner's text *also* showcases how our failure to attend to the material realities which shape participation in disciplinary conversations and the enterprise of disciplinary knowledge-making both *emerges from* and *further contributes to* a *product-based* mindset. Horner suggests that "this commodified view of scholarship provides a different perspective from which to understand the theory/practice debate" and argues that "the work of theory, or, better, 'theorizing,' is *not typically imagined as material practice but as commodity* whose properties reside in the 'theory' itself, understood as existing outside the material realm." (225, my emphasis). Theory, thus becomes treated as a product to be consumed rather than a generative and dynamic process of idea building. As Horner explains, "the work of theory is seen not as theorizing—that is, as involving specific material social relations of production, distribution, and consumption of writing—but as commodity: a theory,

opposed or accepted, current (and those possessing ‘currency’) or past (and therefore lacking value).” (225-226). Perhaps this provides some explanation of why we might not ordinarily think about conversations on the WPA-L as knowledge-making and theory-building; its ongoing, in-process nature feels counter to our typically commodified and product-based conceptions of such work.

An illustration of the typical, more product-based conceptualization of disciplinary knowledge-making can be found in projects such as Maureen Daly Goggin’s *Authoring a Discipline: Scholarly Journals and the Post-World War II Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition* which looks to the more exclusive and legitimized sites of knowledge-making (in her case, the big scholarly journals in the field) as a means of conducting disciplinary historiography. I strongly agree with Goggin that “Disciplinary histories . . . serve a crucial function in legitimizing intellectual communities and in helping to secure them a place in academia” and her explanation that disciplinary histories might be especially important for a discipline like Composition and Rhetoric due to its historic marginalization both within English departments and also within higher education more broadly. Still, I worry that some of her choices further the marginalization of some members of the field, that her methodology neglects entire segments of the discipline, and that her project continues to work under the type of *product-focused* conceptualization of knowledge-making that scholars like Horner have worked to trouble.

Goggin’s project attempts to “show how journals, as one legitimating instrument of disciplinarity, function in a dialectical relation with a discipline” (xiv). Goggin explains that she elected to study scholarly journals and their editors “because these provide an important window on disciplinary discursive practices” (xv). Further, Goggin

argues that journals function as one of the most important gatekeeping mechanisms of the field because they play a central role in determining which avenues of inquiry, methodologies of investigation, and forms of scholarship are valued and centered in the attention of the field. I certainly agree with Goggin's claims about the importance of journals in shaping a discipline, but I wish she did more to reflect on the *problems* of the gatekeeping mechanisms that journals serve and to acknowledge some of the other disciplinary discursive projects that exist. These other discursive projects might help to reveal (and allow us to reflect on) the consequences of those gatekeeping mechanisms. Moreover, though I admire Goggin's interest in "how journals...function in dialectical relation with the discipline" (xiv), it seems difficult to do that work, when, as Horner argues, so many disciplinary voices and perspectives are *not represented* in the pages of journals.

This problem seems doubly troubling given Goggin's decision to exclude from her analysis journals focused on specific subject areas or those journals with missions focused on serving narrower audiences or research/pedagogy areas in the profession. Goggin gives as examples journals focused on the work of writing center specialists or those teaching at two year colleges as that which was excluded from analysis. Given that writing center professionals and two-year college teachers continue to be marginalized within our already-marginalized discipline, her choice inevitably skews the image of the "discipline" and its relation to the scholarly journals she studies. Her argument for looking at "journals created to serve a broad and diverse readership on a wide range of topics" seems to be hinged on a conception of the field as diverse but which still sees itself as a cohesive community, and that sort of community mindset can blind one to

divisions, tensions, and marginalizing practices within groups. As Lester Faigley has argued in *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, “the idea of community is politically problematic because it tends to suppress differences among its members and exclude those who are labeled as different” (231). Faigley goes on to explain that “as it is popularly conceived, *community* provides little or no understanding of the politics of existing societies but rather is the expression of a desire to transcend a present state of alienation” and that “like the concept of the autonomous subject that denies differences among people by positing an underlying rational unity for every individual, the concept of community performs an analogous denial by presenting the fusion of its members as the ideal” (231).

The diversity of the WPA-L works to resist the overly-simplistic conceptualizations of the discipline as a cohesive community on which product-focused conceptions of knowledge-making like Goggin’s tend to rely. This, paired with the *in-time* and *in-relation-to-others* theory-building that occurs on the WPA-L, is what makes the listserv so interesting to study. It is one of the few places we get a glimpse at the type of *theorizing* that Horner describes (and that this theorizing often involves participants in listserv discussions attending to the material realities shaping their ideas—whether it is a quick comment about typos because a message is drafted in haste on the way to a meeting or a comment made about how the declining funding for a program is dramatically changing abilities to engage in theoretically-sound assessment practices or preventing an individual from attending a conference). And, as I have said before, the WPA-L is an important site to investigate because it is one of the few places where individuals whose material realities might prevent them from contributing to restrictive locations of

disciplinary knowledge-making, like scholarly journals, can have a voice, where individuals who might not have material support or extensive time can dialogue with individuals who do have those luxuries, a place where we get a greater cross section of the discipline and access to knowledge and knowledge-building is, at least slightly, more democratized.

Jeanne Gunner, who has provided the only extensive work to theorize the nature of communication on the WPA-L that I have come across, discusses what she describes as the “flattening of status” that occurs on the listserv (630) in her essay “Disciplinary Purification: The Writing Program as Institution Brand.” Gunner explains that on the listserv, “claims to special professional standing or authority are out of bounds (with a few carefully regulated exceptions), and community members, regardless of disciplinary knowledge or orientation, are interpellated as professional equals” (630) Gunner’s comments about this “flattening of status” point to yet another reason why the WPA-L is such a rich and important site of study: it is one of the few disciplinary locations where individuals with very different levels of authority come together to dialogue on topics. Though disciplinary power and academic celebrity certainly shape the discourse of the listserv (a fact that can be clearly seen by looking at the numbers of replies that different users’ threads receive), the WPA-is a location where full professors and graduate students, folks from two-year colleges and R1 institutions are all, at least theoretically, allowed the same voice.

Affects and Digital Spaces

Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our

power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers. (ix)

-Michael Hardt, Preface, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*

Gunner posits that this “even playing field” found on the WPA-L is, at least partly, “produced by the listserv’s *lingua franca*, which cloaks professional and economic inequality in a shared conversational, informal style” and explains how “the asides suggest humorous self-deprecation, [and model] the preferred voice.” (630). At the same time that this relaxed, conversational, and informal style of the listserv accomplishes a flattening of status, it is also likely what encourages or allows conversations to reach emotional intensities not often seen in more formal and traditional sites of disciplinary knowledge-making. Perhaps this discourse feature is also why Gunner argues that “the WPA listserv offers a useful environment in which to observe affective discourse, which wields a highly effective disciplining of the community” (630). Working in the tradition of Gunner, I am interested in further examining the ways that the affectively-infused nature of the discourse of the WPA-L allows for ruptures in disciplinary convention, the witnessing of alternate and marginalized perspectives, and for the ways it can be operationalized to discipline and control members of the field.

Affect and emotion have, in recent years, become of increasing interest to critical and cultural theorists, signaling an “Affective Turn” in both the humanities and social sciences, and this “turn” has also been felt in the field of Composition and Rhetoric (especially in the work of scholars like Carr; Boler, Boler and Zembylas; Micciche; Ryden; and Stenberg, among others). Much of this work has focused on how emotion mediates the processes of learning, teaching, writing, and doing administrative work, the ways that affect is inextricable from the fabric of this work. I would also argue that affect

must be considered as a significant force that shapes and mediates projects of disciplinary knowledge-making and theory building (and our understandings and receptions of those projects). As Laura Micciche argues in “More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work,” there is “an affective context [which] circumscribes how we work—how we function on a daily basis, how we envision the possibility of creating changes, and how we develop a sense of efficacy and purpose in our work lives.” (443-444). Drawing on the work of Alison Jaggar, Micciche explains that “emotion, like reason, is a vital component in the construction of knowledge and in the everyday activity of social life” (436). Expanding on this point, Micciche argues that “the interconnections between politics and emotion... elucidate the way emotional needs call forth political theories” and that “they can also show us how a given culture system produces emotional dispositions for its subjects” (436). Following Micciche’s lead, I argue that affect is a vitally important lens through which to examine the processes of invention, response, reflection, and revision that take place on the WPA-L as it exists as a site of disciplinary knowledge-making.

Reflecting on the role of affect in the work of knowledge-making in their essay “Towards a New Epistemology: The ‘Affective Turn,’” Athena Athanasiou, Pothiti Hantzaroula, and Kostas Yannakopoulos encourage us to think about what “the sociality of emotions and affectivity means in terms of multiple temporalities and historical changes in local and global power configurations” (5). Their call to historicize and consider affect as situated within power-knowledge relations pairs nicely with Horner’s argument for continually recognizing the material conditions and political economies which shape the enterprises of knowledge-making. And Micciche provides a nice bridge

between the ideas of these two texts with her insistence on remembering that “our work practices are embedded in a social framework composed not only of economic and professional issues, but emotional ones as well.” (452). As Micciche explains, “emotions express the valuations of a community, [and thus,] descriptions of how we work must address the way emotion structures our professional activities,” the ways emotion shapes our relations with others in the field, and how emotions become intimately engaged with issues of power and privilege (452).

Athanasiou, Hantzaroula, and Yannakopoulos further theorize these ideas in their text and showcase affect as a relational force, one simultaneously involved in a projective of the self and receptive of the Other:

The semantic multiplicity of the notion of “affect” emerges as particularly suggestive here: affect as social passion, as pathos, sympathy and empathy, as political suffering and trauma affected by the other, but also as unconditional and response-able openness to be affected by others—to be shaped by the contact with others. The topos of affect as social passion is the relation to the other taking place within power relations. (6).

Athanasiou, Hantzaroula, and Yannakopoulos’s discussion of affect as relationally-constructed (and constructing) is reminiscent of dialogic conceptions of knowledge-making and communication that have a long history in the field of Composition and Rhetoric (emerging from the influence of Bakhtin’s thought on the field). Their discussion also captures affect as simultaneously a *felt reality* and as *emotional and cognitive work*.

In his Preface to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Michael Hardt, picks up on this second conceptualization of affect as a type of *work*, which he refers to as “affective labor.” Hardt argues that the term “affective labor” is useful because it makes visible “the various other forms of labor whose products are in large part immaterial...to think together the production of affects with the production of code, information, ideas, images, and the like” (xii). It is Hardt’s connection of affective labor to the labor of producing information and ideas (knowledge-making) that is, of course, most significant for my purposes in this dissertation because it helps illuminate the always-existing relationships between disciplinary knowledge-making and disciplinary affects, relationships which I argue are essential to consider in an investigation of how the WPA-L functions as a site of knowledge-making.

Given the fact that most work in affect theory tends to focus on issues of embodiment and corporeality, it may seem strange for me to study affect’s impact on disciplinary knowledge-making on an online platform like the WPA-L, but as Patricia Ticineto Clough makes clear in her introduction to *The Affective Turn*, there is increasing interest in the function and circulation of affect in disembodied spaces:

Affect is not only theorized in terms of the human body. Affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to “see” affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints. The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the nonorganic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the preindividual bodily capacities to act,

engage, and connect—to affect and be affected. The affective turn, therefore, expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology and matter. (2)

Clough's discussion of technologically-mediated affects also allows for a reflection on the ways that different genres of mediated communication might encourage more and less visible (or visibly embodied) affects. For instance, email-based platforms (like the WPA-L) because of their less formal discourse conventions and the speeds at which messages are sent, can likely embody affect in ways that other forms of written communication (like journal articles and monographs) cannot. And they can also draw on different semiotic tools. The repetition of and capitalization of letters, the use of emoticons, the inclusion of images and links, for instance, are common in email communication. These varied resources point to what Sara Ahmed has described as "the emotionality of texts" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed explains that she uses the term as "one way of describing how texts are 'moving,' or how they generate effects" (13). Ahmed's reference to "movement," too, can be its own indicator of affect on the WPA-L (both in how responders to listserv queries quote and juxtapose comments for specific rhetorical purposes, and also for how the speed, acceleration, and deceleration of responses can be indicative of affect).

Adi Kuntsman also picks up on this notion of affects as moving through textual and digital spaces in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect, and Technological Change*. Kuntsman describes what she calls the "affective fabrics of digital cultures" and argues for seeing digital spaces as "archives of feelings" (6). In many ways, Kuntsman begins to theorize how affectively-loaded texts, those messages we craft and send out into the world, have lives of their own and do affective work

beyond us (sometimes much to our chagrin). Kuntsman explains that archives of emotion are “always open to (re)emergence” and recirculation (7). Kuntsman explains that “digital sites are never still: emails going viral, ‘sharing,’ postings and re-postings on social networks, and many other examples of circulation call our attention to the work of emotions *as they move*” (7).

The themes of re-emergence and re-circulation of ideas and affects are interesting to consider in relation to the WPA-L. Because people subscribe to the listserv in different ways (with some people following the list *in time* as messages are sent and others getting weekly *digest* versions), readers experience the emotional intensities of threads and the movements of ideas and discussions in dramatically different ways. Likewise, list members who have been active for a long time (and thus have longer memories of the discursive landscape) likely have different reactions to regularly reoccurring threads of discussions than new subscribers. And then there is the larger question of how the nature of the medium, of how the digital interface and the (varying degrees of) asynchronous communication, impact idea sharing and affective response differently than they might in real life. Considering this question in “Contagious Bodies: An Investigation of Affective and Discursive Strategies in Contemporary Online Activism,” Britta Tim Knudsen and Carsten Stage suggest that “the Internet creates a range of milieus where the ability to affect and be affected is altered compared to face-to-face communication and non-digital media,” and they argue that “the Internet’s deterritorialization of communication, the possibility of a high degree of immediacy and personal interactivity simply engage the making of new types of environments, where collective affective processes can be quite intense despite the lack of a common physical space” (149). They work to explain this

by arguing that “the affective potential of the Internet in other words is its intertwinement of *immediacy* (the users relate to events as they occur), its *loosening of spatial constraints* (the users can be situated all over the world) and its *interactivity* (the users can communicate with each other as individuals)” (149).

While the *loosening of spatial constraints* also exists with scholarly publishing and other forms of traditional academic knowledge-making, the *immediacy* and *direct interactivity* of the WPA-L makes it an especially important location for examining a discipline like composition and rhetoric and its spirited debates about identity and objectives. While traditional forms of academic knowledge making are slow processes that allow individuals distance from ideas, on the listserv, you can have a response to your argument in under a minute. And while we might interact with other scholars through processes of citation in our published writing, we typically depersonalize those interactions by “responding to an argument” or “taking issue with a point of view” more so than addressing or reacting to a particular person. On the listserv, though, the affective intensity (and affective stakes) of these interactions is heightened. The in-time nature and personal tone of discourse seems to keep individuals attached to their ideas to a degree that doesn’t seem to happen as much with published scholarship. The nature of the listserv also presents the possibility that you might be met with a deeply-personal counternarrative to your perspective or that you might face a public with a very different interpretation of an issue at hand (or even that you might be scolded or publically chastised).

Public Turns and Counterpublic Possibilities

Many, if not most, counterpublics emerge from *within* the discipline itself, from internal disputes about whose texts matter, whose research dominates, whose

projects receive funding, whose points of view are deemed representative of the disciplinary community at large. (122)

-Frank Farmer, *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics and the Citizen Bricoleur*

In addition to the WPA-L existing as an important site for examining the affects of disciplinary knowledge-making, I am also interested in the WPA-L because of its possibilities to function as a disciplinary counterpublic. Work on publics and counterpublics almost always locates its origins in Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* which worked to theorize the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The most extensive reflection on the field of composition and rhetoric in relation to theorizations of public and counterpublic spheres appears in Frank Farmer's *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*. Early on in his text, Farmer addresses one of the dominant critiques that is leveled against Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere: that it is overly utopic and neglects a sustained consideration of differences within the sphere and how those differences might impact discussion (and, indeed, this sort of utopic vision can be seen in some characterizations of the listserv, like in Gunner's description of the "flattening of status" that takes place across its discursive landscape). Farmer explains that "while the bourgeois public sphere never assumed an equality of status among participants" in Habermas's conceptualization, "it did assume that such differences in rank, wealth, and status could be temporarily set aside—or, to use the more familiar term *bracketed*—for purposes of rational discussion" (12). Critiques of this conception, perhaps most notably by feminist literary critic Rita Felski and political philosopher Nancy Fraser, have investigated the

ways that differences in power and status always impact individuals' abilities to participate in various public spheres at the same time that they have looked at how marginalized individuals, whose voices and perspectives may be unheard or silenced in traditional public spheres, often work to cultivate and create counterpublics in which they find community and speak back to dominant cultural narratives.

Farmer explains that “to qualify as a counterpublic, the minimal requirements are generally acknowledged to be the following: an oppositional relationship to other, more dominant publics; a marginal, subaltern, or excluded status within the larger public; and an identity wrought by, and refined through, the reflexive circulation of texts” (21). The construction of subversive texts and discourse is especially key to most conceptualizations of counterpublics. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser explains that counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (67) and argues that “the proliferation of . . . counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing” (67). Fraser explains that counterpublics are about more than just discourse, though, explaining that “on the one hand, [counterpublics] function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics” (68).

I am always intrigued and moved by Fraser's discussion of how counterpublics function as a space for withdrawal and regroupment, her recognition of counterpublic spheres as addressing the need for a safe space of respite and community building for

marginalized populations. I believe strongly that the WPA-L serves this counterpublic function for many of its members. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the history of marginalization of specialists in the field of composition and rhetoric and the fact that we are often isolated from other specialists has made this form of digital connection and support incredibly important to members of our field. One can frequently see the WPA-L is used for these purposes of regroupment and moral support, as list members brainstorm how to respond to pressures placed on their departments and programs from various levels of upper administrators, as they respond to and critique new public concerns about literacy crises that are published in the popular news media, and as they even strategize about how to respond to firings of instructors or the elimination (or take over) of programs. At the same time that I argue that the WPA-L functions as a specific site of counterpublic action, Farmer has reflected on the ways that the field of Composition and Rhetoric more broadly exists as as a sort of counterpublic, arguing that “as a counterpublic... composition shares with all other counterpublics the quality of a distinct and often fiercely defended identity. And while it is manifestly true that other academic specialties have strong disciplinary identities too, it is difficult—maybe impossible—to point to another academic discipline that is so routinely and publicly discredited as our own” (142). Farmer suggests here that the public scorn, criticism, dismissal, and misunderstanding of the work of our discipline has made the creation of spaces of safety, regroupment, and support incredibly important for practitioners.

At the same time that I would argue the field of Composition and Rhetoric itself and the broad community of WPA-L members often function as types of counterpublics, where members of the discipline come together to unify as a community and discuss

strategies for speaking back to how outside forces (whether their departments or universities, or national education policies, or public opinion) are constructing and manipulating them, I also think that the comforts of disciplinarity and the increasing institutional power of Composition and Rhetoric as a field have necessitated the creation of counterpublics *within* and *in-reaction-to* the discipline itself. There are marginalized groups within our field who now need to re-group and work to speak back to the dominant narratives that are put forth by those individuals and those perspectives in power in the discipline. And I argue that the WPA-L does on occasion (and certainly can) function, at least in part, as this type of counterpublic space, where members of the discipline who are marginalized and disenfranchised and unable to speak in more legitimized and authorized spaces of disciplinary knowledge-making (contingent faculty members, two-year college specialists, among others) can speak back and circulate discourse in response to those in power who occupy more dominant positions.

Farmer also addresses these sorts of subdisciplinary counterpublics arguing that they are not at all unusual, explaining that “many, if not most, counterpublics emerge from *within* the discipline itself, from internal disputes about whose texts matter, whose research dominates, whose projects receive funding, whose points of view are deemed representative of the disciplinary community at large, and so on” (122). At the same time, Farmer also points out the challenges that subdisciplinary counterpublics often face, explaining that they often lack resources and the authority that come with traditional mechanisms of legitimacy. Because of this, Farmer explains that subdisciplinary counterpublics often have to form partnerships with organizations and movements from outside of their disciplinary home. In this way, Farmer suggests that “disciplinary

counterpublics are somewhat Janus-faced, of necessity turned toward (at least) two audiences at once: those situated within the field and those situated those situated away from it” (123).

Though Farmer points to the challenges of subdisciplinary counterpublic work in his text, he also recognizes its political importance. Similarly, in her work, Fraser makes clear that the existence and cultivation of counterpublics is connected to important democratic objectives. She urges that we need to move beyond the all-too-appealing-but-inherently-problematic conceptions of cohesive communities and argues that “arrangements that can accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (66).

At the same time that I am arguing that the WPA-L can serve important and subversive counterpublic roles, it is also important to remember that forces work to limit those possibilities. In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, Christian Weisser reminds us that “If we agree that public discourse arises from a culture, and that social, political, and historical forces have constructed, shaped, and otherwise affected the locations, topics, and methods of public discourse, we are, in a sense, arguing that it is *ideologically interested*,” and because of that “any understanding of public discourse as a product of a particular cultural climate must take into account the ways that ideology shapes and structures nearly every aspect of what, where, and how public discourse occurs as well as who gets to speak in public settings” (96). Weisser cautions us that though sites of public discourse like the WPA-L may “*appear* to be equally open to all, existing in arenas that have overcome all social exclusions and

marginalizations” that there are “informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate” (101). This makes careful attention to questions of who gets to speak and how various perspectives are *received* on the listserv incredibly important questions to consider.

Data Selection and Progression of the Dissertation

The hugeness of the WPA-L presents both exciting possibilities and significant challenges for researchers. While I hope future projects will take on larger-scale macroanalyses of the WPA-L to examine trends over its 22 year history, this project takes a much more focused approach and zooms in on its most recent year (Jan 1, 2015-Dec 31 2015) in order to examine how the listserv responds to and engages with contemporary issues of disciplinary (and extradisciplinary) debate. This year has afforded incredibly rich data to work with, likely in part because it is a rather fraught historical moment for the field. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, the rather depressing job market and the increasing economic pressures being felt by programs and departments across the country have created multiple exigencies for (re)evaluating the discipline’s identities and purposes and the significances of our work.

I wanted to identify the threads that inspired the most active and extensive discussion on the WPA-L (and which might have the best chance at showcasing disciplinary tensions). And so, in order to identify the three threads for close analysis, I conducted an initial survey of all posts from the year 2015 to identify these conversations. I determined that there were 2,239 original messages sent out (threads started) on the WPA-L. This means that, on average, six new discussion threads are started every day. Fifty-nine percent of those original messages received zero public

responses. Some percentage of zero responses is surely expected given the fact that many users send advertisements and announcements that do not ask for or require any sort of public reply, but I think this number also indicates that there are a lot of discussions that list members choose not to reply to. Of the posts that received replies, the average number of replies was six. Below I have included a table that lists the percentage of listserv threads receiving different numbers of replies.

Table 1.1: Percentage of Threads Receiving Particular Numbers of Replies

# Comments	%
0 Replies	59.0%
1-10 Replies	34.5 %
11-20 Replies	4.10%
21-30 Replies	1.6%
31-40 Replies	0.31%
Over 40 Replies	0.17%
TOTAL	100%

It should be noted that these numbers are impacted slightly by the fact that some highly active conversation threads on the listserv occasionally are renamed or have their names altered slightly as they evolve, but I think it provides a useful illustration of just how rare threads with over twenty responses are. Just over two percent of all posts have more than 20 replies, and only a couple receive more than 40 replies. The three conversations I have

chosen to focus on and analyze through the lenses of affect and disciplinary counterpublics are all in this elite set, and I have dedicated a chapter to each of them.

Chapter 2 focuses on the most active thread of 2015, a thread that was initially titled “Video of Banks’ Talk” which evolved into “Video of Banks' talk?/aka/now how much do we really research writing pedagogy?” and finally into “writing pedagogy/“the essay” (was Banks' talk and essay writing),” which received 69 replies. This conversation represents the listerv’s reaction to the Chair’s Address given by Adam Banks at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Chapter 2 focuses specifically on how the members of the listserv responded (both excitedly and with hostility) to Banks’s call to “retire” and move past the academic essay as its primary focus and how that call surfaced debate about the research and pedagogical agendas of the field, and exposed various fissures and divisions within the field’s membership. Of particular interest to me are the listserv responders who commented on how the discipline’s movement towards multimodality and a cultural studies agenda is out of step with the local expectations faced by writing teachers (especially at two-year institutions). Working to complicate the often overly-utopic visions of the WPA-L, this chapter provides a useful illustration of the dynamic and in-process debates about disciplinary identity that take place in that space, debates which illuminate various subdisciplinary counterpublics within the field. The responses to the listserv thread analyzed in Chapter 2 showcase frequently marginalized members of the field speaking back to dominant visions and agendas for the field, and the chapter explores the significances and importances of those attempts to speak back in light of theories of disciplinary knowledge-making.

Chapter 3 examines the listserv conversation initially titled “Congratulations to Anne Ruggles Gere, Second VP of MLA” which evolved into “Congratulations to the Rank and File, and finally “Alternate Interpretations,” which received 68 replies. This conversation was probably the most colorful and heated listserv conversation in recent years, offering a window into the complexity of *disciplinary affects* as they emerged and shaped the discourse of a subdisciplinary counterpublic responding back to what it perceived as the hegemonic “establishment” of Composition and Rhetoric. The thread which started off in the most innocuous of ways with the congratulation of Anne Ruggles Gere for her election to the position of second vice-president of the Modern Language Association, quickly devolved into a heated debate about issues of labor, representation, leadership, and political action in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, one featuring ad hominem attacks, and unexpected parallels being made between disciplinary discussions and national political conversations. Working from Jeffrey Grabill and Stacey Pigg’s concept of “messy rhetoric,” this chapter considers the heated emotions of the listserv as identities of individuals and the discipline are negotiated, debated, and leveraged for specific rhetorical and political agendas. This chapter explores how the *political affects* circulating in the midst of a national presidential election (and specifically tensions on the American political Left between supporters of the “outsider” Bernie Sanders and the “establishment candidate” Hillary Clinton) became imprinted on and overlapped with *disciplinary affects* connected to the political significances of Gere’s election to that MLA position. In this way, the chapter also focuses on how this listserv episode reveals the affects of unease many individuals feel with Composition and Rhetoric’s increased

respectability and disciplinarity (territory which has been covered by scholars like Kahn; Sledd; Slevin; Strickland, among others).

Chapter 4 focuses on a thread titled “The Best Part” which evolved into “The Best Part of Being a WPA,” which received 43 replies. In light of the previous two chapters which focus on moments of significant contention and even hostility, Chapter 4 focuses on what might be called a “feel good” conversation that took place on the WPA-L, a look at the circulation and function of *positive affects* on the WPA-L where members were asked to share the best part of their work as WPAs. At the same time that this chapter provides an analysis of trends in responses to the “best part” question, it is also interested in how the motivations for the query were born out of a recognition of the *negative affects* that often shape discussion of WPA work. This chapter incorporates scholarship on emotion and WPA work and considers the shadow emotions of disappointment, frustration, anger, and sadness that accompany the descriptions of joy listserv members share in their responses to this query. This chapter also contextualizes this discussion in relation to the heatedness of a 2002 listserv thread responding to Laura Micciche’s “More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work” in order to look at conflicting affects that shape the work of the discipline.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes by reflecting on themes throughout the three main chapters of the dissertation, and makes a case for the “essayistic stance” (Qualley) of the WPA-L, arguing that if we take the Burkean Parlor as our model for what scholarship is/should be, then perhaps the WPA-L is the closest thing we have to a genuine conversation, with all its in-process messiness. This concluding chapter also works to

address the limitations of the study and to point to directions for further inquiries into the knowledge and discipline making work of the WPA-L.

Methodology Informing Dissertation

Broadly speaking, this project is an online discourse analysis, examining asynchronous communication on a listserv. While there is an increasing body of methodological work on the nature and processes of conducting online discourse analysis (Fairclough; Herring and Androutsopoulos; Jones, Chik, and Hafner, for example), this project draws heavily on Terrell Neuage's conceptualization of online discourse analysis as an enterprise which "examines the message structures organizing an online community in consensual, resistant or negotiative communication moments" (11). While the individual chapters approach their respective threads from slightly different analytical frameworks, throughout the entire dissertation, I attempt follow Neuage's model by examining how specific listserv responses intervene in their threads, how these knew communicative utterances shape the discursive relations of participants in the threads. I am interested in examining how members of the list read and respond to one another, in how conversation develops from one message to the next. Thus, it is a study of moments as evidence of conversational movement and meaning making. Neuage explains that at its best, this work "deals in broader cultural issues, and allows for analysis of deep patterns of communicative practice which engage social organizational and cultural preferential modes of thinking and acting" (285). Because I approach the discursive moments examined for this dissertation through the lenses of theories of affect, counterpublics, and online communication, it would be inaccurate to describe this project as an example of "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss), but I have tried to work in the spirit of a

grounded theoretical approach, allowing the data collected for this study to speak for itself, to generate categories of analysis and closer investigation and discussion, and to inspire my choice in the theories that now inform the project. After identifying the three discussion threads for analysis, I engaged in multiple rounds of reading and coding of the listserv conversations, initially engaging in a first-level process of open coding to identify preliminary observations and concepts and then refining those codes into connected themes and concepts through multiple rounds of axial coding. It was through these iterative processes of coding that I came to see the importance and value of theories of affect, counterpublics, and online discourse for an investigation of this space of disciplinary knowledge-making.

I see this project as embodying the type of theoretical approach advocated by Linda Flower in her essay “Cognition, Context, and Theory Building.” Flower calls for investigations of rhetorical and literacy practices that are “grounded in specific knowledge about real people writing in significant personal, social, or political situations” (283), and she advocates for “a framework that acknowledges the pressure and the potential the social context can provide” (284). I firmly believe that the theories I have chosen to use in this study help accomplish this goal. Flower posits that such a framework provides the best hope for understanding “the process of meaning making, of constructing knowledge, of working collaboratively, of planning and revising, of reading-to-writing, of entering academic discourse” (286).

A Reflection on the Research Ethics of This Project

I wrestled with the ethical implications of writing about conversations on the WPA-L for a long time and with the question of whether or not permission should be

solicited from listserv members whose words I analyze in this project. The existing scholarship in the field that has specifically examined listserv conversations (limited though it may be) has been mixed in its response to this question, with some researchers obtaining informed consents and engaging in member checking, and others simply citing listserv posts as sources in their Works Cited lists. The WPA-L archive is, unlike many other professional listservs, publicly accessible and searchable to anyone with internet access. Conversations with my committee and with representatives of the IRB at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln made clear that because I would be analyzing *existing* and *publically-accessible* data and because subscribing and unsubscribing to the listserv is accomplished through automatic email commands (rather than through approval by the list's moderator), that using the WPA-L Archive as a datasource would be classified as non-human subjects research, even though the dataset includes identifiers of actual people.

Still, the identification of research precedents and that sort of legalistic policy justification did not entirely assuage my anxieties about the ethics of this work, especially because I have serious concerns about the ethics of research and data collection in the digital age, research and data collection which is, I think, at times, exploitative. As danah boyd and Kate Crawford have argued rather convincingly in their article "Critical Questions for Big Data," "it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible. Just because content is publicly accessible does not mean that it was meant to be consumed by just anyone" (672). The arguments of boyd and Crawford are even more compelling when one recognizes that some sources of online data are likely publically accessible as a result of the limited literacies that users

have about of the accessibility and privacy settings of the digital spaces they occupy and content they share online, a recognition that is doubly troubling when one considers that it is often exploited groups of individuals (groups often protected by special IRB provisions) who lack those literacies (minors, the elderly, the poor, English language learners, those with limited educations, among others).

In “Seeking Connection: An English Educator Speaks across a Disciplinary ‘Contact Zone,’” Janet Alsup provides one of the few extensive close analyses of listserv conversations (looking specifically at a WPA-L conversation about similarities and differences of training for Rhetoric and Composition and English Education graduate students in relation to a similar conversation on the NCTE-Talk listserv). Alsup makes clear that she is aware of the sensitive nature of research on these professional listservs and explains that she “understand[s] that listservs are often considered ‘safe spaces’ for intellectual debate and that using listserv posts for research may cause discomfort” (34). Because of this, Alsup explains that she “made every attempt to be open with participants about [her] project” and that she “obtained written permission from each quoted participant and from the Purdue Institutional Research Board” (34). Alsup also “shared with list participants the exact quotes from the posts [she] intended to reproduce and in one case [she] shared an entire draft of [the] essay with a participant so that he could see the context in which his words would be used” (34). Alsup also chose to use pseudonyms for participants to protect their identities.

I greatly admire the care and deliberateness that Alsup models. As you will see in reading this dissertation, though, I did not follow her lead. But I want to be clear that it was not a decision I made lightly. What finally helped provide me greater confidence in

my final decision was situating the choice within the political project of this dissertation. Because I am arguing that the WPA-L functions as an important and dynamic site of disciplinary knowledge-making, one that should be read and valued alongside the journal articles and monographs of the field (that exist as perhaps more authorized sources of disciplinary discourse), it was important to me that I treat these listserv conversations with the same level of respect, power, and authority that I give to those more traditional sources of knowledge. Furthermore, since part of my claim is that the listserv is, at least at time and at least theoretically, a site that affords often marginalized individuals in our field (graduate students, early-career academics, adjunct faculty, instructors at two-year institutions, etc.) space and opportunity to contribute to important disciplinary conversations and to dialogue with established colleagues who might possess more institutional (and disciplinary) power and freedom, I feel strongly that it is politically important for me to recognize and name the participants in these listserv conversations. It is my hope that I have done so in a spirit of respect and generosity that reveals how seriously I take the work and thoughts of listserv participants and how important I feel their contributions are to the field.

CHAPTER 2

“CLEARLY, PERSPECTIVES LIKE MINE ARE NOT POPULAR”:

ADAM BANKS’S 2015 CHAIR’S ADDRESS AND THE DEBATE OVER
DISCIPLINARY PURPOSE AND FUTURE

Can we dispense with the pretense of the scholarly paper for a minute? I ask you for permission to do that because my message this morning is not a scholarly one, even though it is about our scholarship.” (268)

“There is just as much theoretical richness to be gleaned...from local people and organizations *whose names we don’t yet know*. The moment when we will be free or represent freedom as an organization, as a group of scholars, will be not just when the demographics of our conferences and our faculties look like the demographics of our society, but when our citation practices and works cited lists do too. (277, emphasis mine)

–Adam Banks, “Ain’t No Walls behind the Sky, Baby! Funk, Flight, Freedom,” the 2015 CCCC Chair’s Address

I was there, sipping on an iced coffee in the back row, as Adam Banks gave the 2015 CCCC Chair’s address in the Grand Ballroom on the second level of the Marriott Hotel in Tampa, FL. It was only my fifth time attending 4Cs, but this was, without a doubt, the most powerfully impactful Chair’s address I had heard in those five years, and it was likely the most inspiring and energizing public talk about the field I had ever heard. I felt the excitement in the room (in the laughs and cheers and collective sighs and moments of acknowledging eye contact with good friends), and I could see it in the quotes and images and retweets and clever hashtags that were rapidly populating the feeds of my various social media. I remember being struck by the significance of seeing Banks, an African American man, addressing a frustratingly white audience, watching him address a discipline, which, despite an espoused commitment to difference and diversity, fails to reflect that commitment in terms of its membership and leadership. As

Banks spoke, I thought about how his embodiment in the moment and his rhetorical style—drawing on conventions of the African American oral tradition—connected to the argument he was making for a vision of disciplinary change and an embrace of a broader range of genres for composing. At the same time, I should have considered how the racial dynamics of this public talk, the single black voice on the stage speaking to a dominatingly white audience, might have foreshadowed some of the resistance to the speech that would follow¹.

Despite the arresting power of Banks's talk, as happens at most conferences, the barrage of concurrent sessions over the next three days, the reunion meals and drinks with good friends from across the country, and the stress of travel had pretty much drowned out his words by the time I returned home that Sunday afternoon after the conference. It was only after I sat down to check my email early that next week that I began to realize just what an impact Banks's speech had made on individuals and on the field as a whole.

I wonder if Veronica House had any idea that the simple query she wrote to the WPA-L, asking if anyone had a recording of Banks's address, would spawn the most active listserv discussion of 2015, a thread that would once again bring to the surface longstanding debates about the discipline's identity and focus. This thread exposed fractures and divisions within the discipline's membership and afforded an opportunity for listserv members to question and debate how the genres we teach are directly

¹ I struggled some with the question of whether or not to address the significance of raced bodies in the moment of this speech, but given the explicit address of race in Banks's talk, his rhetorical style, and the way coded references to race shaped the discourse responding the speech, I believe it is important for me to explicitly acknowledge. Also, I would argue these dynamics are now even more important to reflect on given Banks's decision at the end of 2015 to resign from his post as CCCC Chair. In addressing his decision on Facebook, Banks specifically wrote that he resigned as CCCC Chair "because of what [he felt] were gross inequities in the search for a new Executive Director, and what [he saw as] a long history of a toxic environment at the Urbana/Champaign headquarters when it comes to the treatment of people of color on the staff."

connected to the political work of the discipline *and* to the discipline's chances for survival in a higher educational environment that is increasingly hostile to work in the humanities. This is, of course, one of the strange and fascinating things about listserv conversations; they evolve in such unexpected ways. New perspectives are introduced, conversations are refocused, defensive postures are taken up, and personal, professional, and intellectual conflicts (re)emerge. And this work is often done with participants we do not see take part in the conversations of our journals and more restricted locations of disciplinary discourse.

As soon as the talk had been posted to YouTube, several people responded to House's initial listserv posting to share the link, and then Katherine Shine Cain replied to the thread with a clear command: "those of you who were not able to attend the opening session: Stop everything you're doing RIGHT NOW and watch this video. It is one of the most profound, exciting, innovative, and thought-provoking addresses I've heard in years (right up there with Malea Powell's a couple of years ago)." Cain's deliberate rhetorical use of an imperative sentence construction and the typographic play with all caps help to establish her belief about the urgency of Banks's discussion, and it is also revealing of the emotional impact that the talk likely had on her as an audience member. Cain's reference to Malea Powell's chairs address is also likely a deliberate allusion to make, one designed to clue listserv readers into the political and social justice message Banks was conveying. It is these issues—the emotional impact of the address, the reception of the disciplinary and political agenda it works to convey, and the ways that the medium of the listserv enables and constrains certain types of conversations about these issues—that this chapter explores.

In this chapter, I provide a close reading of the rhetorical and discursive strategies used in the WPA-L conversation about Banks's address, a conversation which I argue can really be seen as a communal investigation of (and, at times, a heated debate about) the answers to three separate questions: 1) What did Banks mean by his call to move beyond "the essay" as the dominant genre with which the field concerns itself? 2) In what ways is this call symptomatic of an increasing disciplinary disinterest in student writing and pedagogy? and 3) What are the political and material consequences of this sort of disciplinary refocusing, and how might the field work to address those consequences? At the same time, I use this chapter to consider the significance of responding to these questions *on the WPA-L*, how the medium of the listserv shapes who is able to respond, the nature of their responses, and our understandings of the possibilities for disciplinary knowledge-making.

I argue that the listserv participants' reactions to these three questions help draw into sharp focus the various dominant publics and frustrated (and possibly silenced) counterpublics that exist within the field of Composition and Rhetoric. This type of window into the field is important because while the other, more restrictive media might regularly describe and name these same tensions within the field, they are not able to allow us to witness how deeply-*felt* these tensions are, to see representatives of these different perspectives inhabit the same space and respond to one another. Finally, after reviewing this heated discussion, I return to the central themes and arguments of Banks's Chair's address in order to consider how this listserv conversation should, itself, be seen as an embodiment as the type of dynamic, process-oriented "funk" that Banks calls for in his talk.

Finally, in making this argument, I demonstrate how seeing the WPA-L as an important site of disciplinary knowledge-making and scholarly production might help us to address issues of subdisciplinary division and marginalization. I showcase how this sort of reconceptualization of the role and significance of the work of the listserv might be a response to concerns articulated by listserv contributors about the detachment of the discipline's scholarship from the work of practitioners in the classroom, and I explore how the nature of these types of listserv discussions can work to upset, enrich, and respond to the official narratives of the discipline published in the field's journals and monographs. In this way, I argue that more serious investigations of listserv discussions and that treating listserv discussions *as scholarly activity* might help us with the goals of expanding and diversifying the scholarship of the field that Banks articulates and advocates for in his talk at the same time that they might help us to respond to concerns raised in the listserv reception of that talk.

So What Is This Essay We Are Retiring?

If we come back to our annual convention a decade from now and find that the essay is no longer on center stage, it will not mean the end of our discipline. I expect that we will be teaching an increasingly fluid, multimedia literacy.

–Lester Faigley, “Literacy after the Revolution,” the 1996 CCCC Chair’s Address

It is important to note how Banks’s speech was initially characterized on the WPA-L, because that characterization in many ways set the agenda for the rest of the listserv conversation (and, in many ways was essential in providing the fodder for the tense debate that came later in the discussion). Conversation began by focusing rather narrowly on Banks’s comments about the essay as a rhetorical form. This was certainly a key moment in Banks’s speech, but his address also provided extended reflections on the

field's outsider status within the university; the economic challenges of the current historical moment; the field's long history and dedication to literacy work and the education of students maligned by the rest of the university; and the exclusionary publishing practices of the field, which Banks critiqued. Banks's comments about the essay were one part of a wide-ranging speech. In the first response to specifically address the content of Banks's address, rather than just the power and emotional impact of the speech, Nick Carbonne described Banks's address as a "eulogy for the essay" and situated the talk in relation to other texts such as Beth Baldwin's "Evolving Past the Essay-a-saurus: Introducing Nimble Forms in Writing Classes," a text published as a "snapshot" rather than a traditional academic article, on *RhetNet*, an experimental publication platform initially edited and curated by Eric Crump and Mick Doherty (which has now been archived on *WAC Clearinghouse*) that sought to posit and advocate for alternative forms of composing that might be more in line with the pedagogies espoused by practitioners in the field.

In distilling the nearly hour-long public talk in this way, Carbonne focuses on a fairly quick, albeit dramatic and memorable, moment in the address in which Banks makes the following proclamation:

By the power vested in me for the thirty minutes of this chair's address, I hereby promote the essay to dominant genre emeritus. I thank you for your looonnng and committed service over more than a century. We still love you. We want you to keep an office on campus and in our thinking, teaching, and writing lives. We will continue to throw wonderful parties and give meaningful awards in your name. And yet, we also acknowledge the rise and promotion of many other

activities around which writing and communication can be organized. And we realize that if we are going to fly and find new intellectual spaces and futuristic challenges to meet with our students and each other, we have to leave the comfortable ground we have found with you. (272-273)

The tone with which both Carbonne and Banks discuss the essay is mixed. In drawing on the all-too-familiar language of promotion and tenure in his speech, Banks uses the metaphor of emeritus status and the language of love to at once honor the work of the form and to, at the same time, help provide an excuse for pushing it out the door (the latter message effectively conveyed typographically through letter repetition in the published text version of the talk and verbally during his speech through the elongation of the vowel sounds, both cues of sarcasm). Similarly, in using the word “eulogy” in his listserv contribution, Carbonne manages to convey the respect and celebration of the form that Banks’s address does contain (after all, Banks does acknowledge that “the essay is a valuable, even powerful technology that has particular affordances in helping us promote communicative ability, dialogue, and critical thinking” [273]), but at the same time, Carbonne seems clearly happy about the symbolic death of the form, and perhaps the evidence of that happiness comes through most clearly in the metaphors he relies on in his discussion of it. The first one comes in his reference to Baldwin’s text. Referencing Baldwin’s text allows readers of the response to see her essay title, and the reference to the “Essay-a-saurus” simultaneously constructs the form as monstrous and also archaic, a dangerous relic from another time. Carbonne later continues with the metaphorical association with monstrosity in his reference to the enduring power of the form. In his second response to the listserv thread, Carbonne discusses how “the academic essay

(whatever that is) is still the dominant form taught in most first year writing courses” and suggests that “we still see that ‘Research Paper’ being taught in pretty much the same way [Richard] Larson decried [as a “non-form of writing” in his 1982 text],” and then Carbonne draws again on that monster metaphor twice in rapid succession. Carbonne points to how Becky Moore Howard’s *Citation Project* provides further proof that “the mechanical nature of that enterprise [of essay writing] (with strategies for *breathing life into the thing*), [is] ongoing. And yet *the beast* lives” (my emphases). “The thing” and “the beast” are powerful metaphors of monstrosity that work to convey Carbonne’s beliefs about the danger and sinister, insidious nature of the form in our curriculum.

This monster metaphor (and specifically the reference to the essay as “beast”) appears several more times throughout the listserv conversation. It even appears in the language of those respondents to the listserv who specifically work to *reclaim* the essay as a genre and to posit their own interpretations of Banks’s meaning. This happens most clearly in the short response of John Peterson who draws on Harry Potter-esque language to suggest that “rather than teaching the-thing-which-must-not-be-named, writing programs have been teaching the-thing-which-is-wrongly-named.” At the same time that Peterson’s comments work to continue the negatively connoted and even monstrous conceptualization of “the essay,” he also gestures towards a misunderstanding of “the thing.”

Andrea Lunsford’s contribution to the listserv thread builds off of this idea and works to suggest (or, more accurately, to declare) that what we mean when we say “essay” needs to be carefully considered and contextualized. Lunsford argues that “Adam [Banks]’s talk WAS an essay in the very best sense of that word,” her use all caps

emphasis on the verb an indication of the conviction and her argument². This typographic choice is also important to note given the power and currency of Lunsford's name, existing as one of the most well-known figures in the field. In her very brief reply to this thread, she writes two, simple declarative sentences, communicating that Banks's talk was, in fact an essay (though not making a case for why or how) and then continuing by declaring that "the 'essay' that got retired [in Banks's address] is the school-based, pigeon-holed essay!" I would also argue that Lunsford's use of scare quotes in her response functions to encourage listserv respondents to be more conscious of the language that they use when they are talking about Banks's call, and her contribution to the listserv conversation inspired a larger and more elaborated conversation about the intellectual history of "the essay" and its literal definition and historical conceptualizations.

Echoing Lunsford, David Green argued that Banks's talk was "an interesting, exploratory, meditation on a topic through language and symbols" which he sees as the very definition of an essay. Then, much like Lunsford, Green went on to suggest that "what [he] heard being retired was the tightly wound thesis-support driven progeny of the elder 5-paragraph essay of the Introduction, body, conclusion family." Again, I would argue that Green's use of the word "progeny" is deliberate and that though the word is not necessarily accompanied by a negative connotation, "progeny's" frequent use in sci-fi and horror genres connects his comments to the other monstrous metaphors used to describe "the essay" (however we might be defining it) throughout the listserv thread. So,

² The use of capitalization for emphasis in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been well documented. Kalman and Gergle (2014); Lucey (2013). Sutton et al. (2016) and Vandergriff (2013) are all recent examples that discuss semantic and pragmatic functions of capitalization in CMC, including the use of capitalization for communicative emphasis.

for Green, maybe the “essay” is not a monster to escape, just—to continue the monster metaphor once more—its spawn.

Doug Hesse, too, works to provide a more positive spin on the term essay in his first response to the thread, explaining that Banks’s “bravura performance was squarely in the exploratory, celebratory tradition of the essay tradition since Montaigne, a freewheeling genre embracing fits and starts and provocations and personal references, in which the writer’s game is to cast a wide gaze wherever his or her experience and interest lead and try to make something of what he or she sees.” Steve Krause builds on Hesse’s reference to the French Montaignian tradition, even drawing on the etymology of the word essay, its roots in the French *essayer*, meaning “to attempt” or “to try,” which, according to Krause “suggests both a thought and a revision process [he] think[s] we can all endorse.” In this way, Krause positions “the essay” as a useful technology for learning. He furthers this conversation, though, by contrasting the term “essay” with the term “paper,” which is one he would “like to see banned.” Krause argues that the word “paper” “has the connotations of filling out a form or some kind of document required for some sort of certification”; papers, for Krause, are not about learning, but about credentialing and satisfying requirements. Krause seems to be arguing for a genuine usefulness of the skills and intellectual rewards of writing.

This more organic and pragmatic conceptualization of the goals of writing instruction also comes up in John Edlund’s contribution to the thread, which works to understand Banks’s call for changes in forms and genres in relation to recent work in the growing field of transfer theory, an area of theory building and research that has dominated conference programs in recent years. Unlike Krause, though, Edlund actually

uses this reference to work on transfer to provide further justification for a move *away* from the essay, rather than to defend a more complete and historically-nuanced understanding of the form. While Edlund's contribution clearly works from the (somewhat problematic) assumption that listserv readers will be familiar with transfer theory, it is important to note that he writes his post in order to posit a curricular argument that might be made to programs, administration, students, and other stakeholders who might be invested in this conversation (and in doing so, works in a way clearly connected to the mission of the WPA-L to provide resources and ideas which might be used by writing program administrators). Edlund explains that "Part of the reason we are beginning to de-emphasize the essay is that we are beginning to realize that the skills and practices we develop in an essay-writing course do not necessarily transfer into other genres, other courses, other rhetorical situations." In this way, Edlund argues "it is not just technology and new media that push us away from the essay. It is also about thinking beyond the first year course and what our students will be doing in other intellectual venues and workplaces" that has motivated this curricular change. Edlund's post helps listserv followers think about the stakes of this conversation and also helps to equip readers with a rhetorical strategy that might be used within their own institutions to make the case for the vision of writing and literacy instruction for which Banks advocates in his talk. Edlund's contribution, then, gestures towards the programmatic implications of this discussion and in doing so, is able to occupy a sort of middle ground. He suggests a vision for student writing beyond the essay, but it is still a vision of student writing (and of the broader discipline), that is rooted in the classroom.

This segment of the listserv thread is a powerful illustration of the type of collective knowledge-making that happens on the WPA-L. Through the responses, the concept of “essay” is nuanced, (re)defined, and (re)contextualized. It is also a conversation that begins to gesture towards larger issues of our disciplinary missions, of our commitments and responsibilities to stakeholders, of the divisions between perspectives and conceptualizations of our work.

Abandoned Forms, An Evolving Discipline, and Fraught Feelings About a Field’s Future

The beast lives because the institutions that fund our programs believe students still need to learn to write traditional prose for their later academic and professional lives. Sensibly. Because the ability to express a cogent argument in prose remains incredibly important in the world of politics and policy, science, business, and others, despite constant claims that future is multimodal...I just also think that the field has to confront the fact that there is a lot of political exigency necessitating a focus on traditional, prose-based writing. I also think that prose matters, that it has value, and I wish there was more balance in our journals and at our conferences when it came to focus on prose instruction in the classic sense.

–Fredrik DeBoer, WPA-L response

At the same time that this primarily neutral and academic (bordering on esoteric) debate about the nomenclature of genre and form was taking place, a parallel and much more heated conversation was developing which questioned the very premise that the initial conversation was founded upon—that is, the premise that the essay (and print-based prose of students more broadly) continues to be a key form and intellectual concern of the field of Composition and Rhetoric. This suggestion appears relatively early in the listserv discussion in a response from Fredrik DeBoer, the most active contributor (both in terms of number of messages and numbers of words) to this particular thread. DeBoer, who at that time of this discussion was completing his Ph.D. at Purdue University (and

who now works at Purdue as a Limited-Term Lecturer³) actually responded to Carbonne's "eulogy for the listserv" remark. DeBoer writes, "I was surprised to see so many react to the speech on Twitter as a call for the field to abandon the essay as a principal [sic] intellectual concern. That abandonment happened long ago. After all, how many panels at that very conference had anything to do with the essay, or with writing instruction in general?" DeBoer later writes in the thread that he was surprised this claim (and later ones) might be seen as controversial or contestable, but the field's extensive history with the debate about disciplinary identity (and whether it is/should be based around one side of the often-reinscribed binary between student writing instruction or more theoretical and cultural studies-based rhetorical analysis) makes DeBoer's surprise seem naïve to me (or perhaps even questionable in terms of its genuineness). I would also argue that DeBoer's rhetorical choices provide at least indications of an awareness of the heated debate surrounding this issue. DeBoer appears to deliberately use language in a way which delineates sides on this debate (and, thus, reinscribes that teaching/theory divide). His language also functions in a way that baits individuals on various sides of the debate at the same time that it works to convey his emotional and professional interest in this debate.

One of those rhetorical decisions appears in DeBoer's first post, specifically his choice to use the verb "abandon" and its noun form "abandonment," words without the deliberately mixed connotations of "eulogies" and "retirements" that had previously been utilized in this conversation. DeBoer's discussion of the "abandonment" of the form

³ I reference DeBoer's rank and position here because part of my argument is that the listserv often affords individuals who feel marginalized within the field to have a venue to speak. DeBoer specifically references his institutional position at several points throughout the listserv conversation, at times, I would argue, specifically leveraging it to support aspects of his argument.

specifically alludes to a shirking of responsibility on the part of the discipline. But, of course, what is even more interesting about DeBoer's post is that he links the field leaving behind a particular form—the essay—to the field's "abandonment" of writing instruction more broadly, which is a much larger (and certainly more controversial) claim to make. Bringing in some data from the 2015 conference program, in a later post, DeBoer works to assert that this claim about disciplinary disinterest in the essay as a form, and in student prose and writing instruction more broadly, shouldn't be seen as controversial. He explains that "the news is good for those who would do away with the essay: the word "essay" shows up in this past Cs program 16 times. In contrast, terms like community/ies, innovate/ion, and multimodal/ity show up well over 200 times a piece," relying on a sort of numeric proof behind his assertion and attempting to establish his ethos as one who has done the research. Of course, while this data is compelling and intriguing, others on the list acknowledge that there might be many reasons why a term might not appear in program entry titles but might, in fact, be discussed in the context of one of the many public talks. What most interests me about this particular listserv contribution from DeBoer, though, is his next line. Lamentingly, DeBoer asserts that "Clearly, perspectives like mine are not popular. You have already won, at least as far as the research side of this field goes." This is a key moment in this online listserv discussion because it specifically creates an "Us v. Them" dynamic, identifying two opposing groups within the field of Composition and Rhetoric. It establishes a powerful and mainstream segment of the field which is connected to the "research side" of the field, one that is invested in moving beyond writing instruction as the key item on the disciplinary agenda, and, on the other hand, a smaller, more marginalized perspective that

is, at least implicitly in his text, connected to practice (and, thus, writing instruction). He is also reliant on the sports/war metaphors of “winning” and “losing” in this passage, and this sort of competitive language is especially powerful at this historical moment when individuals and departments and institutions are competing for funding, when the job market is incredibly competitive, and when graduate students (like DeBoer) experience a great deal of anxiety about whether they will be employable—and how their disciplinary focuses might help or hinder that employability.

The personal stake that DeBoer (and others) feel in this debate comes up again in some of his later responses to the thread. DeBoer specifically reflects on how his own subject position (and the uncertain future that accompanies that subject position) shapes his understanding, interpretation, and stake in these issues of disciplinary focus and purpose, explaining “I write this simply from my own perspective as a jobless grad student who feels permanently alienated by the field’s biggest conferences and publications.” Simultaneously in this moment, DeBoer shares personal narrative to help others understand his perspective and relies on what I might describe as strategic marginalization for argumentative purposes. He identifies himself in a position of vulnerability, but he does this at least partly so he is able to make more effective his argument about what he sees as an increasing disciplinary disinterest in writing instruction and student writing. This is accomplished by establishing that part of the stakes in this debate is *his livelihood*, his ability to find a job in an increasingly competitive job market. And this is a convincing argument, especially given the rhetoric of the “employment crisis” in higher education.

As David W. Smit explains in *The End of Composition Studies*, new PhDs have less than a 50% chance of getting a full-time job in a tenure-track line at a college or university, which calls into question the size and relevance of current graduate programs to the actual work available” (201). This statistic from Smit is depressing enough, but it becomes even more so when looking at the fact that the percentage of tenure-track jobs has dropped by more than half in the last 50 years. According to the AAUP’s *Annual Report of the Economic Status of the Profession, 2014-15*, “in 1975, full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty composed 45.10 percent of the total instructional faculty. Today, only 20.35 percent of instructional faculty are full time and tenure track,” and the report indicates that “an army of part-time instructional staff and graduate teaching assistants” has filled those posts formerly held by tenured and tenure-track individuals (13).

This ever-tightening job market has made publication and conferencing even more important for graduate students in the field, and DeBoer’s central argument is that what he sees as the current disciplinary move away from print-based composition and writing pedagogy has unfairly disadvantaged graduate students like himself who have focused on such work for their graduate studies. In this moment—when DeBoer has just been, or is just about to go, on the job market—the listserv functions as an outlet for him to express his frustrations with the field and to speak back to the very people that might (or might not) be hiring him, an opportunity graduate students are typically not afforded. At times, DeBoer’s language even suggests that he is speaking on behalf of graduate students in the field more broadly. In the passage below, for instance, he argues that the disciplinary turn he perceives has impacted graduate students so dramatically that it has

reshaped their conceptions of what characterizes an appropriate (and potentially successful) research agenda:

I doubt anyone could seriously look at the panel titles at Cs, or consider the output of the three largest NCTE journals, and conclude that writing pedagogy as it has traditionally been defined is a majority, or even large minority, of what gets presented and published. Maybe that's how it should be! But I think that is a fair reflection of the field. Speaking anecdotally, graduate students in particular seem deeply resistant to defining their research or dissertations in relation to conventional writing. In fact many of them seem to think that the seriousness of a project lies in inverse proportion to its focus on conventional writing pedagogy; they often seem to compete to define their project as far from concrete, in-class pedagogical research or guidance as possible. It's not my place to say if that's good or bad. Their projects are their projects and none of my business. But it's very obvious that they have absorbed the lesson that concern with in-classroom practice of teaching prose is not what the field values.

Here, DeBoer moves from highly qualified statements (with phrases like “*I think,*” “*fair reflection,*” “*speaking anecdotally,*” and “*they often seem to*”) to statements conveying a great deal more certainty (with phrases like “*it's very obvious*” “*they have absorbed the lesson,*” and “*in-classroom practice of teaching prose is not what the field values,*” my emphases). While DeBoer's initial hedging might be specifically designed to convey that this is simply how he sees the field from his particular vantage point and that he is reliant mainly on locally-situated anecdotal evidence, he closes the paragraph by stating these points as simple matters of fact, ones not even debatable.

DeBoer assertions are, of course, rightly challenged by several other listserv contributors, who point to the substantial body of scholarship in the flagship journals of the field that *is* focused on student writing and writing instruction. Kathleen Yancey, who at that time was relatively fresh from her tenure as editor of *College Composition and Communication* and thus had a personal stake in this conversation and DeBoer's controversial charge, provided probably the most direct rebuttal to DeBoer's argument, calling it "a pretty large overstatement" and then, rather than engaging directly, simply choosing to provide a list of articles that had appeared in *CCC* in the previous years as a counter his assertions.

Outside of the listserv, DeBoer's claims have also been refuted by recent empirically-based research projects, perhaps most notably by Benjamin Miller's dissertation *The Making of Knowledge Makers in Composition* (defended in September of 2015), an ambitious project examining 2,711 dissertations in Composition and Rhetoric published between 2001 and 2010. Miller specifically references DeBoer's listserv claims about the lack of dissertations in the field focused on student writing and writing instruction. Miller explains that counter to this assertion, dissertations centered on the teaching of writing actually accounted for the *largest* cluster of texts in his large study (nearly one third). Miller discusses the significance of his findings in relation to the comments from DeBoer:

Needless to say, heated email messages are not often known for their high standards of evidence; they are not refereed articles, and DeBoer and others may have been simply glib in declaring the presence or absence of certain dissertation topics. Even so, claims like this were repeated and repeatedly grounded only in

anecdote. My study, and future distant reading projects like it, provide a means of checking anecdotal impressions against a wider scope, rendering them either falsifiable or defensible. (70)

While it might be tempting to use research from scholars like Miller to simply dismiss and then disregard the arguments of DeBoer in this listserv thread (or even to disregard the value of platforms like the listserv), I would argue that Miller's words help highlight an important function of the listserv as a site of disciplinary knowledge making. It is an archive of those "anecdotal impressions," those felt claims that might not survive the referee process. And those "anecdotal impressions" have impacts. They give a window into the *feelings of the discipline* or at least the *feelings of members of the discipline*. This is important and something worth paying attention to, for it might help us consider and think about how we relate to one another within this field, how and why divisions develop, and how we might better understand the psychological and emotional dimensions of the discursive and professional landscapes we traverse.

Miller's phrase "anecdotal impressions" might also help explain why responses challenging DeBoer on the listserv were surprisingly rare and why those that were sent appeared unconvincing to him. When he did respond to challenges, he simply rearticulated his case. Perhaps part of the reason for this can be linked to DeBoer's rhetorical strategy of grounding his disciplinary frustrations in what he constructs as a disempowered institutional and professional position and also in his personal history with and feelings about the field. I would argue it becomes difficult for others on the listserv to argue with DeBoer's claims because of the challenge (or perhaps even impossibility) of untangling those claims from DeBoer's *felt reality*.

The way this felt reality becomes part of his argument can be seen in a later contribution to the listserv when DeBoer goes on to describe the perceived disciplinary refocusing as almost a (personal) betrayal of the discipline's promise (or at least as a betrayal of the narrative he had internalized about the discipline's mission and that initially motivated his academic study in the discipline):

Speaking personally, I joined a field where I was told that student writing would be taken seriously, and where the creation story was of scholars who took student writing seriously and were willing to fight for recognition of it as a valuable site of research. What I find myself in is a field where, at conferences like Cs, I've heard far more calls for less of a focus on writing than more, and where adjuncts and others constantly complain to me that the field does not produce the kind of work that reflects their real-world pedagogical needs.

At the same time that this passage showcases the way that DeBoer personalizes his argument, it also points to the irony of the listserv's uptake of Banks's address and their (I would argue) somewhat unfortunate choice to focus specifically on the call to move beyond the essay as a form. At the same time Banks makes this call in his talk, he also specifically draws upon and celebrates the attention to students and student writing that DeBoer admires and finds absent (or at least disappearing) from current disciplinary conversations. Banks, I think deliberately, uses the term "Composition" when he speaks of the field in his speech rather than the language "Composition and Rhetoric" or even "Rhetoric and Composition" that are increasingly common (a choice doubly significant given the fact that Banks is probably better known as a scholar of Cultural Rhetorics than of Composition or of Writing Instruction). Additionally, one of the most powerful

moments in Banks's talk is when he argues that "our best work happened when we dedicated ourselves to the students the rest of the academy didn't want" (271), a statement surely meant to remind the audience of the field's long history of working to address real and perceived literacy crises, responding to the challenges of increasing enrollments and open admissions, and developing programs of both first-year writing and basic writing.

Given the amount of time that Banks spends discussing the field's history of writing instruction (and the social justice work that was connected to that instruction), it is clear that he would share DeBoer's concern about the field forgetting or moving away from that focus. Still, it is important to consider the differences in their rationales for why such a move is dangerous. Not only does DeBoer frame this sort of disciplinary refocusing as hazardous to his own success in the discipline, he also suggests that it is a danger to the discipline's longevity and survival in today's higher educational climate. Interestingly, the listserv response to this argument gestures towards the larger historical context of this sort of argument and illuminates the problems with its reoccurrence within the history of the field. I examine this argument, the response, and the implications of this discussion on the listserv further below.

A Familiar Argument: Academic Literacy and Disciplinary Security

DeBoer specifically positions what he sees as a perceived change in disciplinary focus as contributing to the corporatization and de-professionalization of higher education (and writing instruction in higher education specifically). DeBoer argues that "The effect of the utter absence of pedagogy in our most prestigious journals, our conferences, and our dissertations is that we turn that work over to the textbook companies that many of us

lament,” and he continues, explaining that textbook companies “are much more responsive to the demands of immediate institutional need, which are the needs that really motivate the at-risk labor that teach a dominant majority of college writing classes.” Further, DeBoer argues that the danger of a disciplinary disinterest in writing instruction is that there are many administrators in higher education who “are ever ready to say ‘you’re not teaching what we pay you to teach, so we’ll replace you with cheaper at-will labor,” a comment which, again, points to the troubling employment climate of our current moment and concerns of increasing numbers of contingent labor.

Though not directly replying to DeBoer, Charles Bazerman echoes this sentiment about administrative expectations in his response to the thread, urging us to remember “the function of our courses within the university curriculum.” After all, Bazerman writes, “the primary reason most programs are funded and large numbers of students are directed to Writing Program courses is to facilitate student success at the university and in the careers that follow.” Bazerman is rather unromantic in his reminder of the field’s institutional mission, explaining that “Citizenship, personal development, cultural participation, and other admirable motives may contribute to the writing program goals, but our funding and institutional credibility are tied to academic and professional success...whether we are happy with it or not.”

Following the post from Bazerman, whose disciplinary clout perhaps gives DeBoer’s argument greater authority and credibility, DeBoer’s language becomes even stronger, and he specifically describes a refusal to focus on student writing and student success (or a movement beyond those goals as key intellectual pursuits) as, to use his words, “disciplinary suicide”:

In the current political economy of the university, refusing to research or teach the subject that institutions pay you to research and teach is the simplest way to get mass de-professionalization of your discipline. You can lament it if you want, but stakeholders in our institutions and in the policy world believe that being able to express yourself in writing persuasively and with clarity is important and worth funding.

At a cultural moment in which programs, departments, and individual academics are increasingly called upon to defend and justify their existence and cost, when members of the discipline feel a great deal of anxiety about their future, it is understandable that DeBoer and Bazerman would make these sorts of arguments, and they are important ones to consider. However, it is equally important to question where they come from, what felt realities and anecdotal impressions might motivate them, and the consequences—both material and rhetorical—that accompany them. In making these arguments, DeBoer and Bazerman work from the assumption that university administrators and their understandings of the purpose of the discipline are fixed and should continually be (re)affirmed, rather than questioned and responded to in generous, proactive, and, at least at times, antagonistic ways, which, as the analysis above of the listserv's discussion of "the essay" helps show, is often vital for determining best practices.

Other listserv responders chimed in to address problems and limitations of the arguments put forward by DeBoer and Bazerman and to further contextualize them (though it should be noted that these critics only directly addressed the claims of DeBoer and not Bazerman, possibly an indicator of how Bazerman's status, reputation, and disciplinary celebrity shields him from some attacks). In his listserv response directly speaking back

to one of DeBoer's posts, Richard Haswell argues that if our field is "ONLY teaching how to write in academic and professional genres so students can do well in their post-secondary studies and then do well in their careers after college...then our field will always be treated as lesser than other professional fields. The people working in it basically will always be treated as subaltern. Because we will be projecting writing as secondary to more important endeavors. And that fits the way most people outside our field still view writing." Daniel Libertz's listerv response builds off of Haswell's point nicely, arguing that "the more we promote to the public that we 'teach writing,' the more the public views what we do as a banking system of skills that students can use as a means to an end, and thus, something (unlike other fields) that is rather easy to institutionalize in a heavy handed fashion to the detriment of our students." In this way Haswell and Libertz make clear that an over-focus on "traditional" academic writing is just as dangerous to the health of the discipline as the moves away from that focus that DeBoer and Bazerman seem to feel and worry about.

Haswell and Libertz also allude, albeit indirectly, to the history of these competing conceptualizations of the discipline and the consequences they have had. Implicit in their responses is the acknowledgement that the arguments of DeBoer and Bazerman are familiar ones; they are arguments that have continually emerged within the history of our field (and, in fact, in the 22-year history of the listerv, one can see these arguments erupt and rehashed regularly). These are arguments that typically surface in moments like when this one was written, in times of economic insecurity, technological changes, and anxieties about the (possibly insufficient) literacies possessed by students. In such moments, Composition and Rhetoric has, time and time again, articulated its

value in its ability to address these perceived problems. The downside, of course, is that, as Haswell and Libertz point out above in their listserv responses, this posture has regularly positioned Composition and Rhetoric as a discipline in service of the rest of the university. And the problem with this sort of dynamic is that there is always the hope that the very crisis that provides motivation and financial justification for the field—the problem of perceived illiteracy (or, if we are being generous, insufficient situational literacy of the academy), in Composition and Rhetoric’s case—will go away and that universities will be able to go on with their “real” business. Maureen Hourigan also addresses this problem in her book, *Literacy as Social Exchange: Intersections of Class, Gender, and Culture*, pointing out that the field, because of its origins in literacy crisis intervention, has been reliant on selling “the belief that ‘if we can just do x or y, the problem [of illiteracy] will be solved—in five years, ten years, or in a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work’” (20).

While current and historical literacy crises have created the opportunities for the field of Composition and Rhetoric to develop and flourish, Haswell and Libertz show that this is not without consequence. In a bizarre way, it has historically been the case that if the field did its job, it wouldn’t need to exist anymore. This is a precarious and uncomfortable dynamic, the field existing as a sort of Ouroboros perpetually biting off enough of the tail to be seen as doing a good job but having an increasing investment in its own existence. In fact, the question of just when the field might finally go away regularly emerges (even to this day) in debates about abolishing first-year writing, as Donald A. Daiker makes clear in his Introduction to *Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change*:

Ever since 1890, by which time most American universities had followed Harvard's lead in establishing a required freshman course in composition, national efforts to abolish the course have alternated with national efforts to improve it. In times of political, social, and economic calm, cries for the abolition of the requirement are not only heard but taken seriously. But in times of upheaval, especially when new populations of students enter the university or when there is a perceived 'literacy crisis,' abolitionist sentiment is replaced by calls for reform." (2).

Here, Daiker makes clear the cyclical nature of literacy crises and the way that they have shaped Composition and Rhetoric's relation to the first-year writing course and "traditional" writing instruction, and as I have said before, perhaps today's economic climate and the perceived literacy crisis of our current moment, at least partly, help to explain the arguments made by DeBoer and Bazerman. Daiker ends his introduction to the collection prophesizing that composition in the 21st century will continue to be impacted by this swing back and forth between abolition and reform, perhaps because, as Robert J. Connors argues in "The Abolition Debate in Composition: A Short History," "during reformist periods, freshman comp, through problematical, is seen as the thin red line protecting the very life of literacy" (47). Connor's words here point out the always-already overdetermined role of first-year composition in the academy, which originated in addressing student's lack of preparedness but then also quickly takes on the impossible goal of preparing students to write ostensibly for whatever field they might study. Though Libertz explains why most first-year writing programs have worked hard to battle the expectation that they are preparing students for the rest of the writing they will do

during their college career, this expectation is still in wide circulation, and positions first-year writing as the target of a lot of criticism both from within the academy and from the broader culture. In his listserv contribution, DeBoer actually acknowledges the fact that the field receives this criticism from outside departments, explaining that “it’s quite common for powerful departments like Engineering to complain that their students emerge from our [composition] classes unable to write a paper,” but he seems to use this fact as evidence for the need to double-down on the discipline’s historical commitment to preparing students for the remainder of their academic and professional careers, rather than seeing it as a symptom and consequence of that impossible expectation that the field often finds itself working under. Perhaps, as I argue in the preceding section, DeBoer’s reading of this situation emerges out of his own precarious position as graduate student starting out in the field. After all, the narrative of the field’s ability to intervene to address issues of illiteracy is one that helps bolster the case for the work he does.

This re-emergence of an old debate on the listserv is a useful reminder of the ways that different segments of the field benefit from each of these competing conceptualizations of the field and its mission. DeBoer is certainly right that the field (and many practitioners in it) are indebted to these reoccurring and newly erupting crises, for they have helped establish, build, develop, and finance (albeit often meagerly) a discipline and disciplinary careers. On the other hand, as Haswell and Libertz argue, and as the history I have pointed to above make clear, the field, in orienting itself only in relation to fixing these crises, creates additional vulnerabilities (particularly if we work from narrow conceptualizations of the field that position first-year writing as our central commitment). As Haswell and Libertz suggest, this is one of the main arguments for a

vision of the discipline as something with objectives and research interests beyond first-year writing, an argument DeBoer and Bazerman fail to acknowledge in their listserv contributions. Such conceptualizations of the field are, of course, still interested in teaching writing, but they are also interested in examining and interrogating the expectations of writing, the myriad ways literacy might be defined, and the cultural attitudes surrounding different forms of literacy.

In his book *Terms of Work for Composition*, Bruce Horner provides one of the clearest explanations of the problematic nature of the argument put forward by DeBoer and Bazerman and of the dangers that accompany the way that the field has conveyed its mission and institutional value at various times during its history. It is a passage that speaks directly to many of the issues that are circulating in this discussion on the listserv, Horner explains that “Work in composition is recognized for, or defined as, the production of economic capital in the form of the commodified literacy skills to meet ‘society’s’ demands (including the ‘demands’ of other academic disciplines),” and he acknowledges that “Compositionists have sometimes exploited this recognition to make greater claims for material support from society in order to address the constant laments of a ‘literacy crisis’” (16). Unfortunately, Horner argues, “this provides yet another reason for the academy to keep Composition on the margins, and reinforces its subordination to both the academy and ‘society’” (16). Clear in Horner’s words is that the leveraging and exploitation of the literacy crisis has its costs.

However, DeBoer’s assertion on the listserv that “the field focuses far too little on what those administrators and legislators think of as our purview” should be recognized as a useful invitation to the field, a reminder of an important stakeholder that must be

examined, especially at historical moments like our own. This is one of the great benefits of the listserv as a platform of knowledge-making and disciplinary debate; it allows us as a field to return to and re-explore conversations in light of new exigencies, even if those exigencies might be individually-felt ones. While DeBoer uses this moment on the listserv to suggest that “you’ve got to render unto Caesar sometimes,” the listserv response works to complicate this idea, to point out that it constructs a false binary between A) being responsive to (and cognizant of) stakeholder beliefs about our disciplinary value and their sometimes limited and traditional conceptions of the ideal curriculum for a composition class, and B) working to revise and extend for focus and forms of composition classrooms. Many on the list concede that DeBoer is right that “with all of the pressure on the liberal arts and our programs, the case for writing as an essential and valued skill for college students can be made, in a way that protects our disciplinary standing and our funding.” But as the listserv conversation about “the essay” makes clear, it is likely inaccurate to say that “the case can only be made if stakeholders recognize our work as concerned with writing *in the traditional sense*” (DeBoer, my emphasis). As the listserv discussion helps illustrate, it might be more productive (and provide better security) for our discipline to inquire into how we might make more effective arguments about *why* we are working to expand the work of the composition classroom *beyond* “writing in the traditional” sense. And to again reference Edlund, drawing on recent work in transfer studies might be one way we can work to effectively make this case. As Edlund argued, “part of the reason we are beginning to de-emphasize the essay is that we are beginning to realize that the skills and practices we develop in an essay-writing course do not necessarily transfer into other genres, other courses, other

rhetorical situations” and thus, curricular revision is needed to help prepare students for success in their composing lives, both academically and professionally, beyond first-year writing. Such expansion of the curriculum might be needed precisely for the “student success” that Bazerman works to describe as our mandate.

This issue of what might actually be best for students, unfortunately, did not often surface in the conversation of this thread, and this absence is one of the most troubling aspects of the conversation. Perhaps because DeBoer’s arguments are grounded so much in a discussion of his research agenda and employability and then later in reflections on disciplinary security, much of the conversation that took place on the listserv initially centered on the impact of changing conceptualizations of the discipline on professionals in the field. Students as stakeholders were typically neglected in this conversation. While the listserv conversation makes clear that there are incredibly important reasons (and convincing empirical evidence) for moving beyond traditionally-conceived academic literacy as the focus of the composition classroom, it is important to remember the felt realities of many students who populate our classrooms, the fact that they often still very much believe in the importance of traditional academic literacies like the essay “in its traditional sense.” In her listserv post, Holly Hassel, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Marathon County (a two-year college of the UW system) and scholar-activist who works on two year and contingent faculty issues, works to remind us of this population and their perceptions:

From where I sit—where I teach—the ability to write a standard essay, whatever that looks like, in fyw and outside the classroom—is a huge form of academic currency, and a lot of my students just don’t have it. They need to learn it. And of

course that's as much about rhetorical knowledge, rhetorical adaptability, and transfer as anything—but I think we as a field exacerbate the problems that Frederik [DeBoer] has described if we engage in thought exercises or disciplinary conversations that assume the essay is passé without acknowledging that many of the students in postsecondary writing courses need instruction in essay-writing in the traditional sense in order to be not just successful in FYW but retained to higher education all together.

Hassel's contribution locates her perspective differently than DeBoer did. While DeBoer worked to mainly establish himself as marginalized by his position within the institutional hierarchy (as “a jobless graduate student”) and one whose research interests might compromise his likelihood of publication (and, thus, success in the employment and promotion process), Hassel works to locate herself as a teacher working within an institutional context (that of the community college system in which she works, an institutional context she spends a great deal of time advocating for), and she asks readers to remember the needs and felt realities of the students in that institutional context. Her posts encourage us to remember the material realities that face our students and that calls to “move beyond the essay” as a research area and instructional objective might be easier from some institutional vantage points than from others. Hassel's comments encourage us to remember that it is easy to overlook the literacy disparities between students and that we sometimes forget or dismiss the fact that certain types of literacy are associated with a great deal of cultural capital throughout other segments of the post-secondary educational system, even if we might be working to devalue or re-evaluate their valuation within our own field. She asks listserv readers to remember that certain literacies are often directly

ted to certain institutional gatekeeping mechanisms and to important metrics like retention and degree completion. In many ways, this post from Hassel helps us think about the large task that rethinking “what Composition is/should be” might entail. And a big part of that work will surely have to involve convincing both our students and also external stakeholders (who both have preconceived beliefs, beliefs that have, at times explicitly been communicated to them, about our purpose and value) that we might have values beyond their expectations, or that there has been an overvaluation of the knowledge and skills they *thought* our field was supposed to provide them in order that they might be successful in their future academic and professional work.

Chiming in after Hassel, Libertz suggests ways we might work towards this goal, explaining that “if we can articulate that what we do for students is help them attain a greater sensitivity to language (to include symbols beyond the 26 letters of the alphabet) this allows for greater room to think about preparing students as citizens, professionals, parents, etc.” He continues explaining that we need to work to explain to both our students and other relevant stakeholders that “our world is saturated with languages to an extent that it is an *educational necessity* to think deeply about how to live in such a world” and that “this includes thinking about and practicing writing, but in the service of being more sensitive to a world filled with language. And there are numerous ways this can be done and done well for student” (my emphasis). Still, though Libertz’s argument is convincing, the larger question of how we might begin to do this and how we as a field might work to do it in a responsible way, one which resists simply making top-down disciplinary pronouncements from powerful professional organizations, but which works to involve and listen to the perspectives of practitioners working in a range of

institutional contexts and working with a diversity of students whose literacy needs are complex and varied is still left unanswered. Still, listserv conversations like this one help illustrate the nuanced and multi-dimensional understandings of issues that can be developed when they are informed by a fusion of voices coming from a diversity of points of view and institutional contexts. This sort of argument-making—argument making informed by a range of perspectives more representative of the field as a whole—can be hard to accomplish in other sites disciplinary work, and understandably so, because it is harder for some voices to gain access to such sites.

Alienating Practitioners from Research(ers)

You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don't know half of the work being done.

-John Lovas, "All Good Writing Develops at the Edge of Risk,"
the 2002 CCCC Chair's Address

I think [this debate] get[s] at what the larger issue is at work in terms of the field of writing studies, which is a) how knowledge about practice/pedagogy is created, b) how knowledge about practice is disseminated, c) labor conditions in the profession (the academy more largely, of course, but composition and rhetoric more specifically), and d) the disconnect between those who generally have resources, time, and institutional support to produce that knowledge about pedagogy and practice"

-Holly Hassel, WPA-L response

At the same time that Hassel encourages listserv readers and responders to consider institutional context and the literacy needs of students, Hassel also draws attention to these questions of how institutional context dramatically shapes whether (and how) one is able to participate in and respond to disciplinary conversations (and I would argue that she surfaces questions about what we count as "participation"). In many ways, she continues the conversation started by DeBoer about what type of material is

published in the flagship journals of the field (and whether there is currently a lack of scholarship focused on writing pedagogy and student-produced prose), but she complicates this discussion by working to explore how the labor demands and institutional realities of two-year, part-time, and contingent faculty often make it incredibly difficult to participate in these larger disciplinary conversations in traditional sites for the dissemination of scholarship. She shows how this alienates the growing majority of practitioners in the field from the research that, at least in theory, is supposed to support them.

This is, of course, also not a new problem. In “The Long Revolution in Composition,” Anne Ruggles Gere explains that “attempt to define composition as more than a pedagogical enterprise” (124) gets to one of the most emotionally loaded and touchy identity divisions within the enterprise of Composition and Rhetoric. In her response to the listserv conversation, rather than calling for a coordination of our research agendas and disciplinary foci around the demands of powerful external stakeholders and financial backers (as I feel DeBoer does), Hassel calls for greater recognition and involvement of “the *internal* stakeholders involved in the teaching of writing—us!—students and teachers—in the production of knowledge about writing” (her emphasis). Hassel suggests that we need to think carefully about “how that production of knowledge refreshes and supports members of the discipline.” For Hassel, one essential component of accomplishing this goal is by working to diversify our scholarship (channeling a key goal of Banks’s speech, which I discuss further in the following section of this chapter) and to figure out a way to better include the perspectives of teacher-scholars writing from institutional contexts like her own. She “wonders...what we can do to encourage this

kind of research, to empower people to do this research (especially those at non-selective, teaching-intensive, and open-admission institutions and who teach developmental writing and other learning support courses), and to *value* that work and get it into the hands of those instructors who would most benefit from it.” In doing this “wondering,” Hassel adopts an invitational rhetorical framework that encourages others on the list to think about how such work might be done, and one of the first and most thoughtful responses to her query is from Joy Barber, a writing instructor at the City College of the Montana State University-Billings:

As someone who teaches at precisely the type of institution you describe—a two-year institution, where I would argue a great deal of this writing instruction is happening—and as someone who would love to pursue some research, my response is that this research is often not happening because it is literally *not valued* in our contracts. I teach five sections of composition each semester, and while “scholarly activity” is mentioned in my contract and required for tenure/promotion, this is basically covered by my participation in conferences and professional organizations with the tacit understanding that my teaching load does not permit time for “real” research. Additionally, at my institution/under our current contract I do not have the option to request a course release for research. At the risk of putting too much of a point to it, I would literally be trading research time for sleep hours at this point.

Barber nuances the previous listserv discussions about how institutional location impacts abilities to participate in disciplinary knowledge making (or, at least traditionally-authorized forms of disciplinary knowledge making) by specifically pointing out how the

decisions made when positions are written up and contracts are negotiated can incentivize, or, probably more often, de-incentivize research and scholarly activity on the part of large segments of the discipline. Thus, this issue is not just about what research areas are and are not published about in the flagship journals of our field, it is a question of the labor and employment practices and how these practices contribute to or prevent the types of academic work that might help diversify the current body of scholarship. In light of this problem, Barber recommends the following:

What I think the broader field can do is precisely what you [Hassel] allude to: value, support and advocate for the importance of research done by instructors like myself. In short, I think perhaps advocating for a paradigm shift in how two-year and developmental writing instructors' positions are conceptualized and how/what aspects of our labor is valued, as well as a reiteration of the importance (necessity?) of conducting research for writing faculty (at any level) in terms of both their own instruction and the contributions to the wider field would be steps in the right direction.

Barber's recommended paradigm shift is a significant one. While it has been common practice to distinguish "teaching positions" from "research positions," Barber asks us to consider the ways that teaching might *always* be benefitted by conducting research, to imagine the ways that the research of teachers in localized contexts might be essential in improving the teaching and education of those very local contexts, and to consider how the research of teaching-focused academics specifically might help to enrich and diversify the scholarship of the field more broadly. In many ways, Barber here is making

much the same case that is often made by advocates active in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Boyer, Cross, Shulman, among others).

At the same time that Barber's call for greater attention to employment and labor issues might help us address the alienation of teaching practitioners from research(ers) and sites of scholarly activity, I would also argue that we can work on this problem of (felt) marginalization by reconceptualizing just what disciplinary knowledge-making is and where it happens, and part of this project should involve recognizing the dynamic and intellectually-engaging conversations that take place on the WPA-L, conversations like those discussed in this chapter, *as scholarly activity*. I am not alone in making this sort of call or attempting to recognize such work as an important disciplinary contribution. In "Unmeasured Engagement: Two Year College English Faculty and Disciplinary Professional Organizations," Christie Toth reflects on how participation at conferences, membership in professional organizations, and publication are insufficient metrics for assessing disciplinary engagement, and she suggests we need to consider other ways of measuring and acknowledging disciplinary knowledge-making in process. She explains that a big part of this work is recognizing the intellectual work and scholarly activity that takes place in less formal digital spaces. Toth writes that "even when they could not attend conferences in person, many faculty and their colleagues engaged with professional organizations online. They reported using a range of digital technologies to stay involved, including listservs, blogs, and Facebook. These tools served as quick and informal ways to pose questions, share resources, circulate calls for proposes, and stay tuned in to regional and national professional conversations, even it it was just as a 'lurker'" (347). Several of Toth's study participants specifically mentioned the WPA-L as

a valuable site scholarly engagement. As one participant wrote, the WPA-L is “kind of my professional home. When people talk on that listserv, I pay attention...It keeps me up on what people are talking about” (qtd in Toth 347). This response conveys the power and importance of the listserv to huge segments of the profession. It is a key means of staying informed, and people both listen to and value the knowledge and ideas disseminated on that platform. As the cases discussed in this chapter show, there are both exciting possibilities and complex problems associated with the reliance on the listserv for these purposes. Powerfully dialogic knowledge-making happens in this space, and powerfully-composed messages saturated in misinformation can also circulate in this space outside of the world of traditional peer-review. But as I have mentioned above, there is value even in the misinformation, in the way it can help us access some of the emotional pulse of the discipline, the felt realities of discipline members. And, as can be seen in the cases discussed above, this is not a site without peer review and forms of member-checking; there are just more people involved in that process, and we see more drafts in progress along the way than we might normally.

Diversifying Our Scholarship and a Funky Vision for the WPA-L

One major obstacle we have to free ourselves from is the set of handcuffs the same old theory and the same old theorist and the same old scholarship place on us. (276)

–Adam Banks, “Ain’t No Walls behind the Sky, Baby! Funk, Flight, Freedom,” the 2015 CCCC Chair’s Address

Though this listserv conversation emerged as a debate about the essay as a form and the question of whether it is or isn’t taught in our writing classes (and what that might mean), it seems appropriate that it concluded as a thoughtful investigation of the lack of diversity in our scholarship and a reflection about how, individually and as a

discipline, we might work towards the goal of expanding our scholarship and making room for more (and certainly more diverse) voices in the work of disciplinary knowledge making. I say it is appropriate that the conversation concluded in this way because I would argue that this was the central and most important argument that Banks made in his address.

One of the few listserv responses to specifically address this issue was from Iris Ruiz who argued that what she found most impactful from Banks's talk was his argument that "our works cited pages are still very much divided and don't represent the face(s) of our nation's population." And, as the contributions from DeBoer and Hassel and Barber make clear, our works cited lists don't even (or at least don't often enough) represent the face(s) of *our own discipline*. Ruiz explains that she doesn't think she had "ever heard this reference to the Imperial Scholarship tendencies of our discipline" but thinks that "perhaps it's a conversation worth having if it's persisting as the conference noted."

As I explain in the first chapter of this dissertation, one of the reasons I have been so drawn to the listserv as a location of inquiry is precisely its diversity, the ways that it works against (though certainly never escapes) the restrictive and homogenizing forces of other locations of disciplinary knowledge making like the pages of our journals in the field and the monographs published by major university presses. As I said before, I think there is something profound about the fact that a "jobless graduate student" like Fredrik DeBoer and individuals like Holly Hassel and Joy Barber who occupy often precarious positions in their two-year systems, can directly speak back to and alongside prolific emeritus faculty members like Richard Haswell and Charles Bazerman. The listserv is one of the few disciplinary locations where this can happen, where the perspectives and

lifeworlds of a diverse field come into contact with one another, and where the slightly less formal nature of the platform can allow narrative to be shared alongside argument, where we might get to know each other and the many facets of our field in a different way, one which might never be able to be reflected in the traditional published scholarship.

Sitting there in that ballroom in Tampa listening to Banks's speech and his call for an increasingly diverse and inclusive discipline and for greater diversity and inclusion in our scholarship, I thought about the listserv and how it might be one place we might find that. At one point in his explanation of his choice to draw upon the aesthetic and intellectual tradition of "funk," Banks explains "I'm talking about Funk as a guiding idea for who we are in our thinking, teaching, making, and doing because for just a minute, I want us to drop our serious, scholarly personae and just talk together" (270). The listserv might be the closest thing we have to a place where we can "just talk together." I also think that the listserv is one of our best disciplinary representations of the process-oriented nature of scholarly and social justice work that Banks calls for in his talk. As Banks argues, "I want Funk to be our guide because that is the only way we can close the huge gaps that exist between our professed ideals and our practice, the only way we can *own our privilege* within oppressive spaces. Funk means we are willing to sweat. Funk means we are willing to deal with the messiness and complexity" (272, my emphasis). This listserv thread, as messy and heated and tense as it became at different moments, was likely important precisely because it exposes some of those gaps between ideals and practice, for the way that it exposed privileged and marginalized perspectives, and for the way it shows, somewhat depressingly, that there is sooo much work to be done. This isn't

always a comforting message, the knowledge that there is work to be done (and that it will be hard and that it might require major paradigm shifts), but it is likely an important message. To close by quoting Banks, if we work to embrace the funk, “one thing this means is we have to focus less on the rhetorical ‘exemplars,’ focus less on ‘successful’ movements. Freedom work is funky rather than refined. It is becoming rather than overcome. It is in process rather than proclaimed” (276).

CHAPTER 3

“UM, CAN YOU BOYS TAKE IT OUT BACK PLEASE?”:

PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND POLITICAL CONFLICTS ON THE WPA-L

It is essential to come to terms with how best to understand public interactions in the messy places that characterize most online forums. In these places, the rhetorical concepts (and methods) that have served us well for some time are perhaps less able to help us account for rhetorical dynamics expressed and performed in new ways.

–Jeffrey T. Grabill & Stacey Pigg, “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums”

The absence of cues available in face-to-face negotiations encourages the selection and use of competitive strategies in email communications, an approach that may inhibit agreement and undermine the social network of the sender.

–Elaine M. Landry, “Scrolling Around the New Organization: The Potential for Conflict in the On-Line Environment

On the morning of Thursday, December 17th, 2015, I logged on to Facebook to find an intriguing post from my friend Al Harahap, a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona. The post featured an active .gif of comedian Jon Stewart rabidly shoveling popcorn in his mouth as he stares in horror and fascination at some unknown scene. And just above, Al identified the activity that inspired the emotions meant to be conveyed by this .gif—he was watching the WPA listserv. Al didn’t indicate which of the day’s listserv conversations he was reacting to, but I knew immediately that his post was about the shocking explosion of unusually hostile messages that followed in the wake of the announcement that Anne Ruggles Gere, Professor of English and Education at the University of Michigan, had been elected Second Vice President of the Modern Language Association. This might not seem like the type of listserv thread that would generate perhaps the most heated listserv

discussion in recent memory, but it did. It indirectly inspired a thread that led to debates about the political action of the discipline, about “establishment” and “radical” members of the field, and which created unexpected parallels between the election cycle of a disciplinary organization and the national political scene. And while these subjects are not completely unusual on the WPA-L, the level of vitriol in this discussion—with extreme sarcasm, ad hominem attacks, hyperbolic analogies, and profanity—left many on the list shocked, appalled, and frustrated.

Because many of my friends and colleagues know that I study the WPA-L, I received over a dozen messages via text, email, and Facebook making sure I had been alerted to the situation unfolding on the list. Additionally, I was surprised to see commentaries about the thread and its strange evolution on Twitter and Facebook, and these parallel locations of engagement likely indicate the circulation and levels of attention with which members of the field watched. I don’t think this listserv discussion captured the field’s attention solely because of its entertainment value or because of the titillation that can come with seeing prominent members of the field use words like “dickishness,” though (even if that is surely part of it). Rather, I would argue that this listserv conversation was engaging in large part because, like with the thread examined in Chapter 2, this was a discussion that, at its core, was wrestling with questions about whose work is recognized and valued. It was a thread which encouraged those of us in the discipline to contemplate the work and growth of the discipline in relation to cultural issues outside of it.

While the previous chapter focuses primarily on how competing visions of the field are leveraged by members of the discipline in service of particular personal,

political, and institutional goals, this chapter examines how the individual and professional identities of members can themselves become the focus of listserv conversations. Here, I am interested in exploring how the identities of members of the discipline are often interrogated and leveraged as means of evaluating the political actions and objectives of the discipline. This thread's focus on identity highlights the competing interests of various disciplinary constituencies. It allows readers to see individuals who position themselves as representing counterpublic movements working within and against what they perceive as the dominant power structures of the field. As I will showcase in this chapter, the extent to which speakers are actually chosen and appropriate representatives of those constituencies is, at least at times, questionable, but the thread examined in this chapter illustrates how individuals on the list often take it upon themselves to speak as if they *are* designated representatives.

This thread also affords an opportunity to witness extreme emotional responses on this listserv and to see clear evidence of both individual and disciplinary affects. Specifically, the majority of this chapter examines a heated thread featuring a constellation of negative affects—frustration, anger, jealousy—and illustrates how these affects color the work of the field, sometimes to the detriment of productive conversation. This chapter is also interested in reflecting on how a small number of people (or even a single individual) can hijack a public conversation on the WPA-L and the consequences that can follow. For me, the value of examining a listserv conversation like this one is that it provides an opportunity to see how the style of disciplinary communication enacted on the listserv is sometimes at odds with the values the discipline claims to subscribe to (and works to instill in its students). While the discipline of Composition and

Rhetoric has articulated an investment in careful listening, collaboration, engaged writing, and inquiry, in the tenuous moments of this thread, we see very little of that.

The chapter begins by analyzing listserv respondents' celebratory comments on the significance of Gere's election, considering how that conversation inspired the larger, more heated debate. Then, I explore how the criticism of the listserv's celebration of Gere becomes *personalized* and re-scripted as criticisms of Gere and various other listserv members. This happens as arguments are made for recognizing the work of other, less-visible figures in the field and subdisciplinary movements like #MLADemocracy. Following this discussion, I examine the heated nature of the listserv debate and the ways in which the conversation devolves almost to the point of becoming a flame war. Finally, I reflect on the attempts by members to the list to recover or respond to the conversation once it seems clear that the conversation has ceased to be productive. I recognize that I have named an unusually high number of objectives for a single chapter, but this is intentional, as I want to showcase the ways that these listserv conversations evolve in strange ways and often involve multiple layers of conversation. In this chapter, I attempt to provide a play-by-play account of the evolution of the thread and to reflect on micro-rhetorical moves deployed by participants and what those moves reveal about the nature, possibilities, and potential drawbacks of listserv discussion. By following the rhizomatic trajectory of this particular listserv conversation, I argue one is able to witness some of the extreme emotional reactions on the listserv—and, thus, the extremes of disciplinary discourse—and one is also able to see how emotions are responded to, policed, and contextualized. This analysis, then, provides a view of the informal, volatile, and sometimes hostile nature of disciplinary conversations and knowledge-making and how

the WPA-L is one of the few places where we are able to get a look at that dimension of the work (and responses to it) in action.

“A Revolution at the MLA”

Though this listserv conversation winds up, in the end, in a very dark place with tensions exposed, individuals angry, and a community in shock, it is important to note that the conversation began as a celebratory one. And, in fact, the marking of occasions of celebration are a common occurrence on the listserv (as individuals and groups are recognized for new collections published, successful conferences, and exciting new organizational initiatives or successes, among other occasions). Taking the time to mark these occasions is surely part of the reasons that so many listserv members see the WPA-L as a space of community, respite, and professional (and personal) rejuvenation, especially during times of economic, disciplinary, and institutional crises.

And so while much of this chapter will focus on the hostility that followed in their wake, it is important to acknowledge that nearly half of all of the replies to this thread group (32 of the 68 posts) were congratulations to Gere and posts, which voiced excitement at the significance of this election for the field of Composition and Rhetoric. Because the MLA has a rolling executive leadership progression, Gere's election to the position of Second VP means that she will begin the 2017 year as Vice President and will ascend as President of the organization in January of 2018. There have been other Presidents of MLA associated with Rhetorical Theory and Literacy Studies that Composition and Rhetoric sometimes claims (for instance, Fredrick Newton Scott, an early figure in the history of modern writing and rhetorical education, was president in 1907, and then prominent figures heavily cited in the field of Composition and Rhetoric

like Walter Ong and Wayne Booth held the office in 1978 and 1982 respectively), but Gere is the first president-elect in the organization's history that is most clearly a representative of what we think of as the discipline today. She is a noted scholar in the Composition and Rhetoric and English Education, one associated with pedagogy and not just theory.

Norbert Elliot, Professor Emeritus of English at New Jersey Institute of Technology, initiated what Patricia Ericsson, a Professor at Washington State University, would later refer to as “the happy chorus” of listserv congratulations. Elliot invited colleagues to join him “in congratulating Anne who was just elected second vice president of the Modern Language Association” and then added, “How wonderful it will be to have someone from writing studies in that position.” Charles Bazerman replied quickly pointing out that Gere’s expertise is “not only writing studies, but [that she also has] interest and knowledge in K-12 as well as university [writing instruction],” a comment surely meant to point out that the MLA is often seen as over-focused on post-secondary education to the expense of primary and secondary ed. Here, Bazerman is working to explain the multiple ways in which Gere will be a different kind of president for the organization. Bazerman described Gere’s election rather dramatically as “A revolution at the MLA” and urged Gere to “keep on keepin’ on.” Given the debate about the political implications of this election that will follow, Bazerman’s initial reference to “revolution” should be carefully recognized here, for it surely helped inspire both the championing of and resistance to this narrative of the significance of a prominent figure in Composition and Rhetoric holding the office.

Bazerman's reading of the revolutionary nature of this news is echoed in the other responses and specific language choices of many other listserv members. David Schwalm, for instance, simply replied with "Times they are a-changin'. Congratulations, Anne," and Pamela Childers indicated that Gere's election means we should be "Looking forward to great innovations at MLA." But perhaps the message that most clearly communicates the historic disciplinary significance of this comes from Patricia Donahue, Professor and Head of the English Department at Lafayette College: "What a brilliant choice! I never thought I would see the day when the MLA Conference was organized (not next year but soon) by a writing specialist. And what better choice—a remarkable, groundbreaking scholar who has a kind spirit and a generous heart? Anne, this is your wonderful success, but it is also ours." In Donahue's reply, we can see the simultaneously disciplinary and personal significance of this election for listserv members; As Donahue writes, it is something many scholars in the field never could have imagined. These sorts of personally-felt reactions to this news are equally powerful to the comments about the meanings of this news for the discipline. These personal responses help showcase disciplinary affects, the ways that the discipline and its members have often *felt* about their strained relationship to the powerful organization of the MLA with its historical focus on Literary Studies. The feelings associated with the asymmetrical power relationship between Composition and Rhetoric and Literary Studies have, of course, been discussed in many of the histories of the discipline (perhaps especially in Crowley, Miller, and North). And they are also discussed in Jennifer Beech and Julie Lindquist's essay "The Work before Us: Attending to English Departments' Poor Relations." Beech and Lindquist write that "as composition workers, we are often made to feel in our

departmental ‘families’ like the embarrassing poor relations, those relatives whom the more upwardly mobile of the family would keep at a socially safe distance” (172). The significance of Gere’s election has to be read in relation to those disciplinary affects. While the discipline and disciplinary practitioners have often felt marginalized and treated as an embarrassment within our own departments and within the main professional organization of English Studies, Gere’s election signals a move of the field from the margins to the center, signals that discipline might finally be heard, that they might now be welcome.

In their responses, listserv members often seemed to be simultaneously sharing personal narrative in order to comment on the history and future of the field *and* in order to write directly to Gere. Beth Daniell, for instance, adopts a very conversational tone and writes directly to Gere, despite the fact that Gere has not participated in the thread and is not an especially active participant on the WPA-L. Daniell writes, “I do not see how you do all that you do, but I am very glad you do it. When I was an asst professor and you were chair of CCCC, you listened to me and then gave me and my friends a space on the program to introduce our ideas to a wider audience. I have always been grateful, but perhaps I have not said so. I think MLA is very lucky to have you.” This is the type of message that one might imagine Daniell sending directly to Gere because of the way that it includes this private note of thanks. However, Daniell chooses to send this response *publicly* to the entire list, which makes it important to consider the rhetorical work the message is designed to accomplish. Daniell’s sharing of this story seems to suggest that a moment in which she was personally given voice by Gere might be indicative of Gere’s ability to speak for the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric within the large (and, as I

have mentioned, often alienating) organization that is the MLA. It is in these moments that members of this list reflect on how their personal stories and histories intersect with larger disciplinary histories and evolutions. The listserv provides one location in which these narratives can be shared and celebrated, when individuals in the field can speak back to and thank figures who have influenced and supported them, and as I argue above, these public notes of thanks do work for the discipline: they help construct narratives which explain the significance of disciplinary actions and news. The context they provide helps shape meaning and how others read the significance of events

“Gere Isn’t the Winner; The Activist Members Are”

Of course, while these emotionally-inflected public accounts of disciplinary experience can often help to reaffirm or bolster dominant disciplinary narratives, as I have argued in the previous chapters, the WPA-L is also a place where individuals can share counternarratives, challenging the dominant perspective communicated on the list. Not everyone responded so positively to this news and the way the announcement was used to congratulate Gere as an individual. In fact, less than three hours into this conversation, Marc Bousquet, an Associate Professor at Emory University known for his work on the problems of contingent labor in the academy (and also for his intentionally-charged rhetoric both in his published scholarship and on the listserv) began a parallel listserv thread entitled “Congratulation to the Rank and File” specifically designed to challenge the thread focused on the celebration of Gere’s election to the position.

Bousquet’s words were direct:

With all due respect to all three rhet comp candidates for the MLA presidency, the victory here belongs to the hundreds of members, most of them working

compositionists, who forced this accommodation through the #mlademocracy movement. *Any vain careerist tool can be an organization president. Gere isn't the winner; the activist members are*—especially if Gere proves worthy of their courage and sacrifice. Warmest congratulations to everyone who gave, and continues to give, to a more democratic profession and society. (emphasis mine)

Bousquet's basic argument in this thread is that #MLADemocracy should also be recognized for their activist work and the political pressure they placed on the MLA nominating committee. To provide some context on this group, #MLADemocracy describes itself as a "spontaneous" and "radically democratic" movement with a goal "to place activists into MLA governance and to ensure the organization is responsive to the concerns of all members" (MLA Democracy). The movement was inspired in large part by the protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement (MLA Democracy). Similar to the Occupy movement, members of #MLADemocracy claimed that a very small percentage of individuals were controlling leadership positions and policy decisions and that these individuals in control were fundamentally disconnected from the populations they were charged with representing. #MLADemocracy argued that though contingent faculty, graduate students, and research specialists in the field of Rhetoric and Composition make up the largest (and fastest growing) groups of faculty in MLA fields, that these populations are not adequately represented by in MLA leadership positions. Thus, one of the first objectives of #MLA Democracy was to circulate a petition in 2014 to send to the president and nominating committee of the MLA which identified a slate of candidates for nomination which might be more representative of the field. This position received 188 signatures on Change.org.

Bousquet's argument wouldn't necessarily be a controversial claim to make; this sort of nuancing of a situation and additional work to point out the multiple actors involved in any sort of disciplinary change or progress commonly follows these sorts of congratulatory and celebratory messages posted on the listserv (and, in fact, they are often started by the person who has been congratulated). The tone of Bousquet's message (and likely the fact that Bousquet is, himself, the central figure in #MLADemocracy), though, put many individuals on the list in a defensive posture. Beyond simply forwarding an argument that hundreds of members created the political pressure for this action, Bousquet's message to the list works to separate Gere and the other two Composition-and-Rhetoric-affiliated candidates put up by the MLA nominating committee from "working compositionists" (again conjuring the all-to-familiar narrative of the teaching/researching divide existing within the field of Composition and Rhetoric). Bousquet is suggesting that Gere is more of a figurehead than someone actually doing work in the trenches. Additionally, though Bousquet's comment that "Any vain careerist tool can be an organization president" doesn't necessarily suggest that he is calling Gere a "vain careerist tool," it makes that association. It suggests that she is likely interested in the position more for professional prestige than for the political action she might be able to accomplish in that role. This message is communicated again in Bousquet's comment that we won't even really know the significance of this election until we discover "if Gere proves worthy of their [#MLADemocracy activists] courage and sacrifice," which hints at his uncertainty about her ability and qualification for the office at this historical moment. And in the midst of a conversation where dozens of individuals have been

posting about their excitement about the election and their love and respect for Gere, these become fighting words.

Given the sharp edge of Bousquet's initial message to the list, debate began in a surprisingly civil fashion with Fredrik DeBoer pointing out the binary inherent in Bousquet's two independent clause pronouncement that "Gere isn't the winner; the activist members are." DeBoer questions "why not both?" And then, in a post a few minutes later, DeBoer builds on this claim, explaining that "solidarity is not, and has never been, mutually exclusive with graciousness. The victory certainly belongs to the rank and file; it also certainly belongs to Dr. Gere." DeBoer's post, then, can be seen as a type of compromise, a recognition of the truth and importance of Bousquet's reframing of the issue, but one which also validates the celebration of the election by the majority of the listserv responders.

DeBoer does, though, make a slight attack on Bousquet, with the remark on graciousness, and Bousquet picks up on this and uses it as a way to expand his original argument:

You are quite right that solidarity and graciousness go hand in hand. In my long experience ungracious behavior is particularly pronounced among those with a petty authoritarian orientation and those who believe history just happens. There is nothing wrong with congratulating Gere or the other distinguished named chairs that the MLA powers that be, running scared at periodic insurgency, put up for the presidency, guaranteeing a rhet comp win, in an attempt to defuse discontent. There is something wrong with pretending that any of the nominees, however distinguished, made that happen.

Again, much like with the comment about “careerist tools,” Bousquet doesn’t directly indicate that Gere is someone with a “petty authoritarian orientation,” but his rhetoric positions the office she was elected to as one associated with that sort of personality. This post also works to effectively challenge the assertion that Charles Bazerman made that Gere’s election was somehow indicative of any sort of “Revolution.” Instead, Bousquet positions her election as a sort of political concession, an “attempt to diffuse discontent” by the “powers that be.” Implicit in this is the idea that Gere was a non-threatening choice, one which would be palatable to the MLA establishment.

This is the point at the discussion where conversation begins to devolve and the tenor of the conversation dramatically changes, when the civility that had been fraying completely unravels. This happens first in DeBoer’s incredibly sarcastic response, a response which directly fans the flames of the discussion.

I’m sure they all sleep more soundly, knowing that you’re here performing on their [the activists’] behalf. I’m not sure who you imagine on this listserv doesn’t know how elections work -- I assure you, that it is voters and not candidates who cast votes is a generally acknowledged fact about democracy -- but your sage wisdom about the basic operations of an election are noted and appreciated nonetheless.

In *Flattering and Flaming: Interpersonal Relations in Online Message Boards*, Jenny Arendholz argues that in online spaces of discourse, sarcasm is a device “which is supposed to cause social disharmony” (121). Similarly, in “When Sarcasm Stings,” Andrea Bowes and Albert Katz argue that it in interpersonal communication, sarcasm is most frequently “associated with ridicule of a specific person” (216). The passages above

clearly show DeBoer operationalizing the device for such purposes. His sarcasm functions as a type of text-based rolling of the eyes, an evaluation of what he sees as the absurdity of Bousquet's argument.

Bousquet responds very quickly to this message, and he directly calls out DeBoer's sarcasm:

Freddy, now you are just being silly. Your sarcasm would be more effective if it were grounded knowledgeably, but it sounds as if you don't know the relevant history of this particular election, already discussed on the list during the nominations process and earlier. That is when the victory for rhet comp was won—not in the vote—because any of the three candidates was a win for the movement.

Bousquet's evaluation of DeBoer's sarcasm is, of course, inherently biased, for as Bowes and Katz have argued "aggressors perceive their sarcastic, relationally aggressive comments as significantly more humorous than do victims" (323). Given the heated nature of the discussion, Bousquet's intentional adoption of a familiar version of DeBoer's first name is perhaps more important to examine. While DeBoer relied on sarcasm as a means of dismissing the comments on Bousquet, I would argue that Bousquet works to dismiss DeBoer's comments by infantilizing him with that familiar form of address and the use of the word "silly," an adjective certainly applied to children and childlike behavior much more often than it is applied to professional academics. This rhetorical choice is alarming in large part because of the respective levels of power and authority possessed by these individuals within the field. At this point, DeBoer had just recently defended his dissertation and was employed in a contingent position. Bousquet,

on the other hand, is a well-known tenured professor in the field. While both of these figures rely on rhetorical strategies of derision, Bousquet works to pull rank and to specifically position DeBoer as ill-informed, to connect DeBoer's lack of knowledge, at least in directly, to his age and level of maturity. Bousquet's move here seems especially problematic given that Composition and Rhetoric is a field that claims to value students' knowledge.

In his response to the thread, Seth Kahn, a prominent figure in the field who, like Bousquet, is associated with labor activism within the discipline, attempted to re-focus the listserv conversation back on the issues. Kahn sought to better understand the rationale behind Bousquet's claims and to again work to situate those in relation to the celebratory posts about Gere's election:

I'm having a hard time putting together the story that starts with developing a slate of pro-contingent-faculty candidates to run for MLA offices, which led to one victory (David Palumbo-Liu), and then leads to Anne Gere's election to office. I have profound respect for Dr. Gere's work, but I'm not sure how the election of a compositionist accommodates what I thought the goal of #mlademocracy is/was. If I remember correctly, the original #mlademocracy slate of candidates wasn't designed to get comp/rhet a seat at the MLA table; it was designed to get the contingent majority into positions of power in proportion to that majority status.

Kahn's question appears to be born out of a genuine curiosity. He questions why #MLADemocracy would even be invested in claiming responsibility for the outcome of this election, how it would even further their goals. Kahn seems to be pointing out that even if the thread takes as absolute Bousquet's claims that the #MLADemocracy

movement should receive all credit for the success of this election for the field of Composition and Rhetoric, that the significance of the election for #MLADemocracy remains somewhat unclear. In this way, even in the midst of some negativity and hostile rhetorical moves, Kahn's post showcases part of the power of the WPA-L for disciplinary knowledge-making and theory building. He takes a claim offered by one listserv member and complicates it with his understanding of the issue and by raising additional questions.

Bousquet's response to Kahn partially contributes to this work of unpacking significance, but at the same time, he pretty quickly redirects the discussion back onto the less productive conversation about who is and who isn't doing radical work in the field, turning the debate once again into a debate about the politics of personalities and individual practitioners within the field. Bousquet's clarification, then, functions more as a rearticulation of his earlier claim:

Right, Seth. The nomination of three named chairs in composition, guaranteeing that one would become MLA president, was not the goal of #mlademocracy. It was a response by the establishment nominations committee in an attempt to defuse more radical goals. It remains to be seen whether this victory has substance. That will depend on the actions of many parties, including Gere and the movement.

Again, in this response, Bousquet seems to be working to suggest that Gere's election the MLA is representative of some sort of back-room political dealings to put forward milquetoast candidates who wouldn't upset the status quo of the MLA. Bousquet suggests that Gere's nomination and then election is more about the optics of the situation, rather than the substance of the movement he feels inspired that nomination and

election. And Bousquet states this rather directly in addressing a comment from Mike Palmquist who, like DeBoer, wrote to argue that this isn't a binary issue and that Gere and the other nominated candidates have worked for labor and representation issues along with various activist movements that have developed in the field. Bousquet directly challenges this assertion:

The candidates worked for this in the sense that they have all pursued distinguished careers and, not insignificantly, served MLA in some prior capacity. They were not part of the democracy movement that led to their nomination. The democracy movement was comprised largely of the contingent, activists, and working compositionists.

Here, again, Bousquet seems to be constructing a division between academics like Gere with “distinguished careers” from contingent and activist members of the discipline and what he refers to a “working compositionists.”

While Bousquet doesn't seem as interested in engaging with the implications of Kahn's questions directed at him, the medium of the listserv leaves the point of those questions open for others to comment on. John Walter, an adjunct faculty member at Winthrop University, picks up on them in order to offer his interpretation of why the thread didn't initially reference the work of activist movements like #MLADemocracy. Walter does this by echoing Kahn's point that the election doesn't actually do much to serve #MLADemocracy and by working to situate this election within a larger historical context:

Anne Gere's election to MLA office has far much more to do with the long-standing efforts to get Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies the status it

deserves as a top-level forum within the organization than it does with the #mlademocracy movement. The movement to try to get Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies the status it deserves has been active far longer than #mlademocracy, and they are not the same thing, nor should they be. The reliance upon contingent faculty is not isolated to Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies; it's an issue all disciplines covered by the MLA need to address.

In other words, Marc, while I do applaud the work you do on behalf of contingent faculty, you're barking up the wrong tree. Rather than hijack a celebratory thread that doesn't have anything to do with your issue — and please, Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies's final elevation to a top-level category is not the work of #mlademocracy but of years of work by people like Ann Gere — I'd see something like “Hey, we're seeing that MLA is trying to change as an organization, however slowly, which means we should keep working for contingent faculty.”

Once again in this moment, simple position taking and offered complications of perspectives become entangled in rhetorical choices that lead to personal conflict. Walter maintains a civil tone in his first paragraph, primarily offering just a different interpretation of events within a broader historical context, but that second paragraph seems designed to bait Bousquet. The negative connotation of the words “barking” and “hijack” and the absolutist language in Walters assertion that the election “doesn't have anything to do with your issue” accompanied by an aside with a sarcastic “please” once again fan the embers of the initial hostility that surfaced in the debate between Bousquet and DeBoer.

Bousquet chose to reply to Walter by starting a third thread in this larger discussion, which he titled “Alternative Interpretations.” In his first post in this new thread, Bousquet zeroes in on the implications of Walter’s word choice and works again to put forward an argument about the class divisions within the field of Composition and Rhetoric:

You could be right, John. But I suspect that your view will be more convincing to those who see themselves as working “for” the majority faculty, as you say, rather than with them. For me and hundreds of others, I think the response in nominations following directly upon activism targeting nominations makes your theory unlikely. Fwiw, I very much agree that cheerleading for the discipline and faculty democracy are different animals. Those of us agitating for the latter sometimes have the courage to bark at the powerful and comfortable. I bet MLA would be glad to publish your version in Profession.

The way the debate becomes personalized in this moment is fascinating to examine. Despite speaking from a relatively secure institutional location as a tenured professor at a research university, Bousquet aligns himself with the “majority faculty,” or what he, at other moments called contingent, activist, and working compositionists. Bousquet is also rather self-congratulatory in this moment, too, positioning himself as a courageous agitator speaking back to power (though not acknowledging the significant institutional power and social capital he possesses within the field which might facilitate that courage). And he seems to position Walter, without knowing much about him, as disconnected from working faculty and unable speak back to powerful and oppressive institutions. And, he closes the message with a final jab, suggesting that Walter’s account

might be something MLA would publish in *Profession* (perhaps the only time ability to publish in a big-name journal has ever been used as an insult). This comment is surely meant to communicate that Bousquet sees Walter as part of the establishment and not a radical like he sees himself. Of course the great irony in this moment is that Walter occupies a much more precarious institutional position than Bousquet. As Walter himself brings up, he is a contingent faculty teaching under a semester-to-semester contract. He is, in many ways, a member of the “working faculty” that Bousquet claims to be aligning himself with. Both of these individuals, though, selectively draw on aspects of their identities to help provide credibility for their points of view, and this is not an uncommon technique in online forums. Jeffrey T. Grabil and Stacey Pigg explain in “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums that “given the nature of most online interactions, participants often do not build fully formed or coherent portraits of who they are as people, but rather draw on parts of their identity to accomplish other goals within the conversation” (102). Bousquet, DeBoer, Kahn, and Walter each draw on various aspects of their own identities for specific argumentative purposes, to help convey their understanding, credibility, and stake in these conversations. Additionally, they each engage in acts of constructing the other, of making assumptions about the beliefs, perspectives, and life worlds of others for similar argumentative purposes. Identities and how they are leveraged, thus, become a key part of the ways that knowledge is made and debated on the WPA-L. Perhaps this is because, as James P. Zappen explains “Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory,” online communication “is something more than an interaction between speaker and audience in the traditional sense but, rather, a complex negotiation between various versions of our

online and our real selves, between our many representations of our selves and our listeners and readers, and, not least...between our many selves and the computer structure and operations through which we represent these selves’’ (323).

In many ways, the conflict in this listserv thread is about the interactions between representations of selves and constructions of various implicated others. The tensions between those discursively-constructed identities provide the context and foundation for the messy and heated conversation that develops next. As Grabill and Pigg argue, “identity performances move the conversation. They have agency as the interactive moves that literally construct the digital space itself” (109). Responding to the back-and-forth between Bousquet and Walter, Seth Kahn wrote that he had to disagree with Bousquet’s “declaration that John's story is an ‘alternate.’” And then argued that “the record is abundantly clear that many people within Writing Studies have done a lot of work to make (more) space for Writing Studies within MLA.” Then after making this declaration, Kahn speaks personally: “Do I think #mlademocracy catalyzed some of this? Absolutely, but to posit it as the primary or sole cause of this election? I don't see it.” Bousquet’s response shocked everyone:

You are welcome to believe that Sandy Hook didn’t happen either, Seth. But your support of John [Walter]’s speculation would have more credibility if you were actually involved. Cheerleading for the discipline did little for decades. That doesn’t diminish those serving or their distinction as scholars, just raises questions about the effectiveness of polite urging. Electoral activism made change pronto. How much change will depend on whether folks like you think MLA and its giant wad of cash\ unfulfilled mandates are worth your time. You have been pretty clear

that you are on the sidelines vis a vis MLA and I have been equally clear that I think that is a reasonable and rational approach for any rhet comp scholar without a strong stomach for condescension. But I don't need to tell you of all people that if you want to tell this story you have to get involved.

The accusations of careerism and authoritarian orientations were surprising enough to the listserv, but Bousquet's equation of debate participants to Sandy Hook deniers, was so out of sync with the register of the listserv that it left people stunned. Though I think most readers would agree that this reference was inappropriate, it is a powerful one to examine because it points to the emotional conviction of Bousquet in that moment, to the (likely irresponsible) extremes of his argument. For Bousquet, to deny the role of #MLADemocracy in the election was tantamount to denying the killing of children in the deadliest school shooting in US History. This meant that he was, at least indirectly, positioning Kahn, Walter, DeBoer, and the others that challenged #MLADemocracy's central role in the election of Gere as equivalent to right-wing extremist who believe that the Sandy Hook shooting was manufactured as a means of compromising gun rights or to bolster President Obama's approval rating. For Bousquet, such a belief would be the height of denial. In this messy and uncomfortable moment, the listserv provides a window into Bousquet's conviction and frustration, the ways that he resorted to a desperate and surely unfair analogy. The extremes of conversations are not always easy or comfortable to witness, but they do help remind us of the personal stakes and emotional dimensions of our work, even of work we don't think of as inherently loaded with emotional significance.

“You've Just Entered the Realm of Assholery”

Bousquet's language was, as one would certainly expect, immediately critiqued by others participating in the thread. Though the responses appear to chastise the excessive and inappropriate rhetorical decision-making of Bousquet, I would argue that they *actually match his discursive register*, reflecting similar levels of emotional intensity and drawing on similarly aggressive online communication tropes that are relatively uncommon on the WPA-L, though do appear in spaces like web forums and comment sections. Walter provides the first response to Bousquet:

Your suggestion that we “are welcome to believe that Sandy Hook didn't happen either” (which came in as I'm writing this), you've just entered the realm of asshole, directed at a tenured faculty [speaking about Kahn] who has a long history of using his position to advocate for contingent faculty.

Have fun barking, Marc. And thank you for reminding me why I've avoided #mlademocracy. You've confused activism, which does not need to be polite, with being a dick. There's no truth to power in suggesting we're the equivalent of Sandy Hook truthers; there's just over-the-top dickishness.

Walter's response helps provide some context of the speed and intensity of this conversation, the fact that these individuals were overlapping messages, receiving responses from one another as they were crafting new ones. Walter also manages to insult Bousquet basically three times in quick succession with the colorful “assholery” and “dickishness” and the more familiar “dick.” Curiously, though, Walter avoids directly calling Bousquet an asshole or a dick; instead, he adopts a distanced rhetorical approach, suggesting that Bousquet's rhetorical choices have “entered the realm” of those qualities. Walter also constructs a parallel between the characteristics he sees in Bousquet as a

person in this moment and the activist movement Bousquet champions in his “thank you for reminding me why I’ve avoided #mlademocracy” comment. This points to the ways that personalities can shape the effectiveness of various activist causes (and likely individuals’ feelings about professional activism in general).

Seth Kahn’s response was quicker and demonstrated more shock: “Wow. A Sandy Hook cheapshot? Seriously? I can’t even keep writing.” Of course, though, Kahn does continue writing and debating with Bousquet for several more hours. Surprisingly, Bousquet doesn’t ever actually back down from the Sandy Hook comment, despite the fact that all responders to the conversation indicate that it was inappropriate. Bousquet simply replies with “Think I will let history decide who went over the top here!” Bousquet’s exclamation here is fascinating both because it reaffirms his conviction to the analogy, and because it seems conscious of the fact that this conversation will be recorded and considered in the future, that it is a part of the disciplinary history and knowledge-making about this issue. It is an overt reference to the public and archived nature of this listserv fight. And following his assertion that he will let history judge, Bousquet continues the fight, and directly addresses Kahn’s suggestion that the Sandy Hook comment was a “cheap shot”:

Um, no cheaper than trading on your earned rep as an advocate to speak about events of which you know zilch and casting doubt on the achievements of a movement you didn't join. But hey, with name calling and cheap sarcasm and pious loyalty to the careerist party line, you are in good if unfamiliar company. When you un-jump the shark in our previously cordial and respectful relationship, I will too. Fair enough?

Here again, the personal reputations of Bousquet and Kahn become operationalized in the service (and evaluation) of their arguments. A debate about the significance of a professional organization election becomes a debate about who has the authority to speak on that issue, who is most intimately involved, and who is more of an activist.

None of these three figures seem able to let this conversation go. Walter responds again to critique the Sandy Cook comment and adds a sarcastic congratulations to make clear the derision he feels towards Bousquet:

Seeing as how you're the one who responded to people acknowledging your efforts but questioning your narrative with a Sandy Hook cheap shot — a rhetorical device, your Sandy Hook cheap shot serves no purpose other than to shut discussion down through dickishness. So yes, let's let history decide. As for shutting the discussion down, you've won, Marc. Congratulations on your victory.

And then, likely indicating the level of intensity of conversation and how flustered he was, Bousquet replied accidentally from the email address of his partner Heather Julien because he grabbed her tablet by mistake: “Thanks for conceding, John. I will accept on behalf of all those who don't feel safe to speak about their own experiences on their own main disciplinary list—because of exchanges like this one, where imaginary slights to the dignity of powerful and comfortable third parties become an excuse for irrational and yet perfectly intended absurd ranting and abuse.” The meaning behind this post is somewhat difficult to parse out. It is a strange rhetorical move for Bousquet to make. Despite the fact that he intentionally started not one, but two threads that were specifically designed to counter a dominant narrative being put forward by listserv participants, he aligns himself with what he imagines as a silenced segment of the field who feel afraid and

unable to post to the WPA-L and suggests that he is speaking for them (a convenient rhetorical move since it is impossible to prove that he is NOT speaking for them since they are not speaking). He also positions himself as a victim of ranting and abuse, when it could certainly be argued that he was instigating and participating in that rhetoric. In a strange way, Bousquet seems to want to project himself outside of this conversation where he is being attacked and does so by constructing imagined silent allies. He seems to position himself as a victim of the very type of discourse they he helped cultivate on this thread. Kahn points this out, too:

What bugs me about this is—you want acknowledgment for the impact MLA Democracy had. And when John and I both said, “Wait a minute, other people deserve some acknowledgment too,” you accused us of being Sandy Hook deniers. If that’s jumping the shark, so be it. I have never been anything but respectful in public and private to you and your work. The first time I disagree with you in public, I’m a careerist pariah.

What this exchange on the listserv shows so clearly is how the argument and identity of list members can become so closely entangled in these online conversations. I discuss this, too, in Chapter 2 in how Fredrik DeBoer works to ground his argument about what he perceives as a disciplinary transition away from student writing in a discussion of how that transition impacts him personally and professionally. This conversation, though, functions slightly differently because it isn’t just about individual stakes in an issue; it is also about how professional reputations of established scholars are leveraged in order to authorize various accounts of the significance of pieces of disciplinary news and to authorize who has the right to speak for whom. Though Bousquet is, at least indirectly,

suggesting that individuals like Anne Ruggles Gere are safe-bet careerists who will only maintain the status quo for the MLA, it is important to acknowledge that challenging the celebration of Gere serves careerist ends for Bousquet himself and that he uses this example to remind the field of his work with #MLADemocracy and to bolster his reputation as an activist. This thread, after all, started as a way for him to argue for the importance of the very organization for which that he is frequently a spokesperson.

“I Won’t Celebrate if Clinton Wins”

At the same time that this thread group provides insight into the politics of leveraging individual identity and professional reputation within disciplinary debates on the WPA-L, it is also important to examine because of the way that those debates are informed by the emotional atmosphere of the national political scene. In the listserv conversation, the meaning of this MLA election becomes read through the lens of the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential Election. Some of this can be felt through the language of “insiders” and “outsiders” and “establishment” politics that I have already discussed in the personality debates examined in this chapter, but the parallel to the national election also comes into the listserv conversation explicitly, too. The first reference appears as a non-sequitor in message from Bousquet following the condemnation of his Sandy Hook comments:

You and a couple of others seem to have forgotten that we were discussing the fact of a rhet comp exclusive nomination, not rhet comp’s ascent in MLA generally. You want to believe that polite urging for decades is responsible for a nomination response months after activism targeting nominations, go right ahead. *And Hillary Clinton's positions reflect her sweet personal convictions...*All due

respect, I am sticking to my fucking story here. Tell any version you like, but if you keep following the Walter line you will get a nice Pat on the back from MLA insiders. (my emphasis)

In this message, Bousquet is reliant on a commonly-deployed narrative about Hillary Clinton which argues that she is a career politician willing to say anything to get elected, that she lacks all real conviction, and is simply a representative of the Washington D.C. “establishment.” In the context of this discussion about the MLA election, Bousquet slips into scripting Gere as a type of Clinton-esque figure, someone moderate and invested in her career over people, someone he suggests won’t be able to inspire real change or “revolution.” In contrast, he seems to position #MLADemocracy and the candidates they would put up for the office as part of a political revolution in the spirit of Bernie Sanders and Occupy Wall Street. His challenge to celebrating Gere parallels his attitudes about the 2016 Presidential Election:

I won’t celebrate if Clinton wins, and wouldn’t ask others to. And I would expect the movement for Sanders to be properly accounted for. People are entitled to their own views, but lots of folks’ hard work in bringing this about hasn’t been acknowledged, while persons largely tangential to it have been rabidly defended from nonexistent attacks.

I never take credit for what I do, and I certainly haven't been attempting that here! I have been trying to ensure credit to the movement, of whom some are even afraid to be named in congratulation, for fear now of seeming to dim Gere’s glow or rain on the disciplinary cheerleading parade. I think that profound

silencing and non acknowledgement is of much greater concern than imaginary slights to third parties or wet firecrackers.

It is fascinating to read this post now, in the wake of the 2016 presidential campaign and election. In many ways, Bousquet's wish has come true. Despite Clinton's significant margin of victory over Sanders in the Democratic Presidential Primary, much of the media narrative—even today after the election of the Republican candidate Donald Trump—continues to be centered on recognizing the role that Sanders and his movement played in the election (in engaging young voters, and in pushing the Democratic platform further to the left). His movement is being accounted for. And as DeBoer, Kahn, and Walter all point out at different moments, they also want to recognize and account for the movement of #MLADemocracy, but they want to do so while also recognizing the substantial amount of work by individuals like Anne Ruggles Gere, who yes, is an established and long-career professional in the field who has served in numerous professional organization capacities. In much the same way that the discourse surrounding the national political election has centered on personality and identity (whether Clinton is “trustworthy” and “genuine,” who is a “real progressive,” etc.), the discourse in this particular listserv conversation has also centered on personality and identity, on questions about what it means to do radical work, who disciplinary insiders and outsiders are, what being generous and critical looks like. Perhaps this is understandable; the ways personality traits have been discussed on the national political stage cannot help but shape how we talk about them on the esoteric political stages of the Ivory Tower.

National politics certainly shape the work of the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. In recent years, for instance, No Child Left Behind and Common Core and the President Obama's emphasis on community college reform have all had significant impacts of the pedagogical, research, and theory building work of the discipline. Still, while those explicit impacts shape our work, the way the *discourse* and *affects* of national politics become entangled with our disciplinary work is sometimes harder to observe, but is equally important. And I think that the WPA-L, because of the informal nature of the medium, provides one location in which we might be able to observe some of that influence. Partly this is due to the fact that individuals specifically address and debate politics in ways that would be very uncommon in published scholarship, but I think this is also partly because of how in-time and responsive the listserv can be. It can comment on events as they are unfolding in real time.

“This ‘Discussion’ is Disappointing”

At the same time this listserv conversation provides a useful illustration of discursive conflict and the ways that a small number of individuals can completely take over conversation, it also affords the opportunity to see the ways that discourse (especially that which is inflected by heated emotions) is policed and responded to on the listserv. After the conversation between Bousquet, DeBoer, Kahn, and Walter had devolved into name-calling and sarcastic jabs, members of the list begin writing in to attempt to neutralize the conversation. William (Bill) Thelin, a Professor at the University of Akron was the first to write in:

Perhaps it would be a good idea if all of you stepped away from your keyboards for a bit. I like all three of you very, very much, and I do not think we need this

type of division among people fighting for similar, if not precisely the same, goals. Universities across the nation face uncertain futures as the effects of neoliberalism erode higher education. The Humanities, often perceived as irrelevant by detractors, need to defend themselves against true enemies. We have plenty of them out there. Let's not create enemies amongst ourselves—the activists and scholars in Writing Studies who want to make a difference.

Theelin's approach is to validate each of the participants in this debate—he likes them all “very, very much,” a repetition designed to underscore that fact—and then he tries to suggest that they are all working for the same goals. This peace-making gesture is, of course, risky because of the ways that the entire debate has been about the different goals for which various segments of the field are working. But by identifying a larger disciplinary foe (neoliberalism and the defunding of programs in the Humanities)—which he positions as our “true enemies”—he seems to be hoping he might convince the participants in this fight to put aside their differences. Theelin's comments about “stepping away from your keyboards for a bit” also points to his recognition of how the speed of the email conversation and the nature of online conversation might have contributed to the intensity this conversation reached.

Others on the list demonstrated significantly less patience with the tenor of the debate that played out. William J. Macauley Jr., for instance, wrote in obviously exhausted: “This ‘discussion’ is so disappointing; we should be celebrating. Please stop, as others have asked, or take this into your own email accounts where the rest of us don't have to deal with it. I am so disheartened that such a wonderful moment has become . . . this.” Macauley's scare quotes around the word “discussion,” his use of the ellipsis, and

then the undefined demonstrative “this” point to that fact that he doesn’t even know how to describe what the conversation became, only that whatever it was, was disappointing to him. Brenda Jo Brueggemann, a Professor of English at Ohio State University, also pointed out her frustration with the conversation. And Brueggemann specifically pointed out the childish and gendered nature of this sort of debate:

Um, can you boys take it out back please? There is absolutely nothing productive for us, as a field, in this kind/level/tone of conversation. And it isn't doing ANY of your personal/professional reputations any favors either here among us, I'd say.

All best, in civility,

Brenda

The gendered dimension of the conflict that Brueggemann points out is significant because it echoes findings of researchers of online communication and conflict on online platforms. For instance, in “Students’ Linguistic Behaviour in Online Discussion Groups: Does Gender Matter?” Jane Guiller and Alan Durndell explain that while “female postings...display features of attenuation, such as hedging, apologizing, asking questions and a personal orientation...male postings were lengthy and/or frequent, adversarial and featured strong assertions, self-promotion, sarcasm and flaming” (4-5). Such findings are consistent with the work of several other researchers (Herring, Reagle, Soukup, Tannen). These findings certainly provide apt descriptions of the nature of posts by these male participants in the thread.

Some of the more creative attempts to shut down the hostility of the thread are also rhetorical strategies that have been discussed in the published literature on conflict in computer-mediated communication. For instance, Gloria McMillan completely avoids the

discussion in her response to the thread, simply writing “I would like to take this time to wish one and all...happy holidays and hopes for a good new year!” and then she pasted a copy of William Blake’s poem “The Poison Tree,” writing, “Let us consider this little poem that may be appropriate for moments of end-of-semester stress.” This sort of conversational non-sequitur is actually not uncommon in online forums of discussion. In “Behavioral Strategies for Dealing with Flaming in an Online Forum,” an ethnographic study of a Usenet newsgroup, Hangwoo Lee found that “when group members become bored with and intolerant of a highly intensified and prolonged flame war between fellow members, they often express their uneasiness and dissatisfaction by posting, as another form of criticism, poems.” The poetry that Lee found in analyzing the Usenet forum was specifically written to “disparage and satirize flaming,” but I think the theme of Blake’s poem functions similarly as a type of criticism which provides metacommentary on the discussion. McMillan wasn’t the only one to use a textual allusion to provide commentary on the discussion. Cynthia Haynes wrote in with a short message to say “I just reviewed a really good book by Rich and Janis Haswell, *Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession*.” She shared the link to the publisher’s website and closed with “Just sayin’....” These sort of responses to the thread don’t engage with the issues of debate but rather exist as invitational gestures encourage listserv participants to slow down and to contemplate the significance of their actions and their rhetoric. Their sharing of sources functions as a way of reading, evaluating, and contextualizing this conversation. And in sharing these sources, these list participants point out that this conversation is about more than just the issue of debate and hostility; it is about how we communicate with and listen to one another as a field and the consequences of those

approaches.

Dear Friends...

I would be remiss if I concluded this chapter without acknowledging the response to this thread by Anne Ruggles Gere, the figure whose election inspired these multiple layers of discourse. Gere didn't respond to the thread until after the dust settled, after everyone had stepped away from their keyboards. Though Gere could have chosen to reply to the initial thread which included the vast majority of the congratulations messages, she specifically chose to respond to the "Congratulation to the Rank and File" thread which had been specifically initiated by Bousquet to critique the celebration of her election, an act revealing her awareness of this counter-discourse to the celebration and her work.

Dear Friends,

Thanks very much for your kind words about my election. In turn, I would like to thank David Bartholomae, Meta DuEwa Jones, Stephen Nichols, Ann Marie Rasmussen, L. Camille van der Marel, Lisa Vollendorf and Dennis Washburn, members of the MLA nominating committee, along with my friends Keith and Michael and all voters who made the election possible. Making MLA the professional association we would like it to be will take participation by all of us. It is the Delegate Assembly that elects the nominating committee, and I hope that those of you who plan to be in Austin will take part in deciding who the members of next year's nominating committee will be. Between now and December 21 you can also nominate people (or yourself) for one of the many positions in MLA by going to the website.

Meanwhile, I send warm holiday greetings to each of you.

Gere doesn't directly address the argument made by Bousquet that her election is the direct result of movements like #MLADemocracy, but she does specifically address the fact that her election is the result of the work of many individuals. And perhaps most significantly, she uses her message as an opportunity to tell individuals on the list how they might get involved in MLA as an organization, how they might participate in shaping the nominating committees, and thus how their voices might be better heard and considered. She uses her message for the work of literacy sponsorship and to encourage democratic participation. And in doing this, she works in the spirit of the listserv, engaging in information sharing and encouraging members of the field to see ways that they might contribute to the work of the discipline, ways they might network with others who share their value.

Conclusion

At the end of the thread, Rita Malenczyk, who at the time had just recently rotated out of the position of President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, responded to the discussion with an important announcement: "This is perhaps the time to point out, on behalf of CWPA presidents past, present and future, that WPA-L is not and has never been an official organ (sorry for the double entendre) of the Council of Writing Program Administrators." On the one hand, Malenczyk's post was surely designed to lighten the mood, especially with its reference to the double entendre that connected to phallic-heavy ad hominem attacks that peppered the conversation near the end. But at the same time, Malenczyk's post highlights the strangeness of the WPA-L as a platform. While it is not an "official organ" of the CWPA, it is an essential medium

of information dissemination for their organization and a space that regularly informs the organizations work and initiatives. The quasi-official nature of the WPA-L is perhaps another reason why it is hard for many to see the listserv as a valid site of disciplinary knowledge-making.

At the same time, I find myself troubled by the way that Malenczyk's post engages in a rhetorical distancing move that I feel is all too common following crises and horrific events. When bad things happen, we tend to want to say "that thing that just happened? That is NOT us." While it might be tempting say that the field of Composition and Rhetoric is not, to use Macauley's disappointed phrase, "...this," the thread in all its intensity is part of who the discipline is. These heated (and, at times, toxic) emotions, are part of the disciplinary landscape, and we erase the emotional complexity of our work when we erase them, pretend they aren't "us." Though famous "debates" (for instance, the Elbow and Bartholomae debate) do on occasion make it into the journals and edited collections of the field, flame wars like the one that developed in this thread, likely never will. The WPA-L, though, is one place where we can find them, one place where we might face them in all their messiness.

CHAPTER 4:

“THE BEST PART”:

COMPOSING DISCIPLINARY PLEASURE AND DISTRESS ON THE WPA-L

On Friday, December 4th, 2015, E. Shelly Reid wrote to the WPA-L with a problem:

This week the graduate students in my Writing Program Administration course brainstormed ideas for what we wanted to do in our final class meeting next week. A few of them pointed out that we’d spent a lot of time reading really smart articles and chapters that made it clear how Hard and Challenging and Sometimes Depressing and Not Infrequently Overwhelming being a WPA can be—and they asked, a little tongue-in-cheek but a little wistful—if we could talk about Why Someone Would Ever Want To Be A WPA.

The very fact that the question “why would someone want to be a WPA?” was alluded to in Reid’s class *on Writing Program Administration* speaks volumes about these students’ impressions of the emotional toll of WPA work and the dominant image of that work presented in the published literature of the field. Reid’s capitalization of the words “Hard,” “Challenging,” “Sometimes Depressing,” and “Not Infrequently Overwhelming” also establishes the power and familiarity of these felt realities, turning them into the proper-noun key terms of the work. Reid wrote to the WPA-L wondering if the members of the list might share quick “one-sentence explanation[s] of ‘the best part[s] of being a WPA,’” which she could share with her students. She wanted her students to hear stories of the *joy*, on both micro and macro levels, that can also accompany Writing Program Administration. In this way, Reid looks to the listserv as a clearinghouse of knowledge

that might supplement or complicate the image of the field that her students received through the published work they had read over the course of the term. She wants the listserv members to speak back, to offer counternarratives, to the way way Writing Program Administration had been constructed by the texts on her syllabus. And in true listserv fashion, people responded to her question in complex ways, pushing beyond the “one sentence” requirement of her prompt to offer up extended reflections on the best parts of WPA work (and also frequently alluding to the struggles of that enterprise).

Unlike the previous two chapters which examined how affect shapes or emerges in discussions on the WPA-L as they evolve, this chapter centers on a listserv conversation in which affect and emotion were the topics being discussed. The thread’s original purpose is to consider the emotional toll and and rewards of the work of Writing Program Administration. Because affect is the focal topic of this listserv thread and not a dimension of that digital discussion, I approach this chapter differently than the previous two. Rather than following the trajectory of a listserv conversation in a linear fashion, I have followed a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss), tagging each response to Reid’s query with multiple observations about their content and then returning to those tags to identify trends and connections so that I could eventually name the larger themes I saw across multiple thread responses. This, for me, is another exciting affordance of the listserv for researchers. It offers a means of investigating how a large number of individuals write about the same topic or respond to the same question. Thus, I think there is a great deal of potential for researchers interested in grounded approaches. While there is a substantial body of scholarship both inside and outside of Composition and Rhetoric examines the emotional dimensions of teaching and academic administration

from both theoretical and empirical points of view (Boler, Carr; Day and Leitch; Hargreaves; McLeod; Micciche; Nias; Stenberg, among others), this thread affords an opportunity to see dozens of scholars in the field reflect on this question together in a public digital space and to see these individuals respond to and build off of each other's statements about the emotional rewards and challenges of the work. This is a dynamic not replicable in authored accounts and reported studies of these issues, even in those analyses that might be pulling data from a large pool of participants. In this listserv discussion, academics from a diversity of backgrounds, institutional types, and career stages each offer their own perspectives on this question. They think together about the significance of the question being raised, and members offer up individually-felt answers and more general arguments for the advantages and pleasures of being a WPA. In my analysis of this thread, I have identified four main arguments consistently offered by respondents to Reid's query—1) the power and authority WPA work affords, 2) the satisfaction of influencing teachers, programs, and students, 3) the rewards of collaborative work with colleagues, and 4) the pride that accompanies successful social justice and political work within the field.

In this chapter, I provide a close analysis and theorization of individual responses representative of these four larger trends. At the same time, I theorize how the nature of these aspects of WPA work named as fulfilling might actually contribute to the emotional tolls that also accompany the work of Writing Program Administration, that the "best parts" named in the discussion might also afford insights into why the disappointments can be so deeply felt and frustrating for practitioners. In other words, I argue that the listserv conversation helps illustrate how members' deep investments in their work

actually primes them for either joy and satisfaction *or* depression and frustration, leaving little room for middle ground emotional reactions to the work. To help illustrate this claim, I juxtapose this celebratory listserv conversation about the “best part” of WPA work with a listserv conversation from 2002 about Laura Micciche’s essay “More than a Feeling: Disappointment and Writing Program Administration.” I argue it is important to read the response to Reid’s query in relation to this earlier thread in order to have a more complete understanding of the ways that listserv members have dialogued about the positive and negative affective dimensions of Writing Program Administration. Taking the time to reflect back on this 2002 discussion also makes clear the long history of these conversations on the WPA-L and showcases the richness of the WPA-L as an archive for investigating continually-evolving accounts of the nature of work in the fields of Composition and Rhetoric and Writing Program Administration.

“I Like Best the Power It Gave Me”

One of the first themes I observed as I began my analysis of this listserv account of the pleasures of WPA work was the idea of *power*. Writing program administrators have a sometimes uncomfortable relationship with power and authority. As Edward M White wrote 25 years ago in his essay “Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA,” “WPAs in general live schizophrenically, hating power yet wielding it, devoid of official power (for the most part) yet responsible for large and complex programs” (6). The emotion of “hate” that White argues WPAs feel towards power is likely born out of a conflict between the critical political and pedagogical traditions that most WPAs identify with and the typically hierarchical conceptions of power commonly found in powerful institutions like the university. As White puts it, most WPAs “are writers almost by

definition against the establishment, hostile to the powers that be, opposed to that dread monster, ‘the Administration’” (5).

Aware of this resistance—or at least discomfort—that many Composition and Rhetoric specialists feel when they occupy positions of (albeit often meager) institutional power and authority as writing program administrators, I was surprised that so many respondents to this listserv thread specifically mentioned the power they hold as one of the “best parts” of WPA work. This celebration of power named by listserv members challenges the attitudinal relationship to power that is frequently inscribed in published discussions of power and WPA work (Gunner; Miller; Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus; White).

In her response to the thread, Alice Horning, a professor at Oakland University locates her enjoyment of the power of WPA work in relation to a childhood goal: “When I was a kid, growing up in New York, I wanted to be a pitcher for the Yankees. In retrospect, I think it was because I thought the pitcher was kind of ‘in charge’ of the team on the field (probably not really true, but it seemed that way to me). I liked being a WPA because I nurtured the same feeling that I was ‘in charge’ of my program.” Horning’s contribution positions control and power as desirable, a lifelong dream, rather than an aspect of the job one might dread and resent. Interesting in her response is the way that she positions this power as an affectively *felt* one. Horning likes the *feeling* of being “in charge”; she doesn’t actually address the extent to which she actually possesses institutional power in her capacity as a WPA. I would also argue that the way she metaphorically links WPA work with team-based sports seems to allude to her understanding of the enterprise as inherently collaborative.

Others on the list also point to the positive emotions associated with the power one possesses as a WPA. In his response, Bill Condon, writes that he “discovered a long time ago that it is generally a lot more fun to teach in a program that you direct than to teach in one that someone else directs.” Condon’s response provides an example of what the WPA-L can offer that is hard to find in more traditionally-authorized spaces of disciplinary knowledge-making and discussion. While in an article about power and WPA work, one might expect a person like Condon to speak about the benefits of curricular control in terms of pedagogical effectiveness or outcomes or theoretical cohesion, the informal nature of the WPA-L allows Condon to speak frankly about the affective rewards associated with that type of control. He points to how the *fun*, the enjoyment of teaching, is often directly shaped by the degrees of power, control, and autonomy that one possesses. “Fun” might seem acritical, but given that there is a great deal of turnover and burnout described in WPA work, it is a quality likely essential to cultivating sustainability and resilience.

Other references to the positive affects associated with the power of being a WPA are more latent in responses from list members, but they are equally important to consider. For instance, Ryan Skinnell, an Assistant Professor at San Jose State University, who is in his first semester as an Assistant Writing Program Administrator, wrote in to the WPA-L to share the confidence that the position provided him early in his career. Skinnell writes, “one of the best parts of my new job has been discovering how much I actually know about teaching, writing, and writing programs.” He explains that “it is easy to forget how much you learn during the course of your PhD and teaching, but it’s actually really nice to be reminded that you learned important stuff, you know useful

stuff, and people are eager to have you share it with them.” For Skinnell, being in a position where he is *called upon to be an authority*, to be a person in power whose job it is to share knowledge with others, has been reassuring for him. It has worked to help him feel validated in his new career as a faculty member. Thus, his contribution showcases how the power of his administrative position has helped assuage the feelings of being an “imposter” that are often articulated by early-career faculty.

What these responses to Reid’s listserv query seem to reveal is that *feelings* of power and authority are valuable and enjoyable parts of the job for WPAs at a variety of career stages. This type of *felt power* might be especially important given the body of scholarship that addresses the struggles of limited agentive power that many WPAs experience. Though this response was not one I expected to find affirmed over and over again in the list responses, it makes sense given some of the negative affects that often accompany Writing Program Administration. As Hildy Miller acknowledges in her essay “Postmasculinist Directions in Writing Program Administration,” WPAs are often “struggling as it is to establish and wield power and to oversee administrative structures that are often fragile and fragmented.” (49). In many ways, these limited and felt experiences of power might be important for sustaining practitioners in those moments when they feel powerless. After all, Miller explains that “it is generally agreed that many administrators feel a sense of powerlessness, more specifically, a sense of having enormous responsibilities without accompanying power” (51). This mix of continually expanding responsibilities with limited abilities to make change certainly contributes to the high levels of burn out and frustration many individuals feel when they engage in WPA work. Perhaps this explains why so many respondents to the thread treasure and

enjoy the (likely limited and fleeting) moments in which they *do* have power. This appreciation of power might also be a side effect of the position of Composition and Rhetoric as a field and the labor conditions within it. Miller's essay reminds that "the untenured status of many WPAs" and "the underling position of composition in relation to English studies" have complicated the field's orientation to power and have made practitioners protective of any they might possess. (51). Likewise, Talinn Phillips, Paul Shovlin, and Megan Titus's recent article "Thinking Liminality: Exploring the (Com)Promising Positions of the Liminal WPA" points out that many individuals in WPA positions continue to be untenured, contingent, and graduate students, and that these individuals typically only occupy the position for a short time. This can make establishing power and authority difficult and a significant comfort in those few moments when individuals do feel in control.

Still, while the published scholarship on power and WPA work might help us understand these comments, it is important to note that others on the list appeared leery of the ways that power was being celebrated in the discussion. Will Hochman, a Professor at Southern Connecticut University wrote in to complicate the number of listserv messages that were written to speak about the joys of being an authority and having the ability to disseminate wisdom to those in your charge as a WPA:

The best part of being a WPA was learning about how the position gave me too much phony "wisdom power" about teaching writing and that unifying FY Writing courses too much (i.e. common syllabi/text/assignment design) shut off my most valuable learning/leading tool when it came to really understanding a variety of student literacy problems and collaborating on solutions.

Hochman's response, with its scare quotes, points to the dangerous seduction and artifice of WPA power, the ways it can blind one to what he sees as the value of collaborative work. Hochman's discussion of "wisdom power" as "phony," too might point to the ways that power is often only a performative aspect of the job, rather than an indication of actual agentive ability. His comment, then, might function as a recognition of the limited change-making power possessed by WPAs and the importance of collective work in such situations.

"It Is a Legacy Project"

At the same time that individuals discussed their appreciation of the "power" of WPA work, others described that power in terms of their influence on others. Richard Haswell's response to the thread bridges these two related themes that appeared in this discussion. Much like Condon, Haswell shared that he "likes best the power it gave [him] as a teacher of writing," but then went on to say that what he liked about that power is it allowed him to pass on "what [he] knew about getting students to write better... with exponential spread to other teachers." Here, Haswell is making a related, but slightly different, point. It is a comment about power, but more specifically, it is a comment about impact and the ways that his authority as a WPA has allowed him to shape and influence the practices of others.

This same sort of perspective is echoed in a response from Patricia Freitag Ericsson, an Associate Professor and Director of Composition (DOC) at Washington State University. Ericsson writes that, "As DOC, I get to influence TAs and Instructors in how they think about and teach writing; it is a legacy project; at this point in my career, that is satisfying; so my job generally makes me happy." Ericsson's reference to WPA

work as a sort of “legacy project” and the reference she makes to the career point she is writing from are significant to note. I read Ericsson’s reference to the legacy project of WPA work as connected to the discipline’s reoccurring interest in generational evolutions of the field. Composition and Rhetoric has a long history of being interested in the way that particular “schools” of pedagogy or intellectual “turns” have shaped the field, the ways that the discipline has “inherited” ways of thinking about writing, about students, and about its role in the university. Perhaps this is why there are so many projects which seek to map out these sorts of disciplinary family trees. The Writing Studies Tree, which invites users to locate themselves and identify their relationships to both faculty members and institutions so that we are able to visually identify hubs of intellectual influence within the field on a map of the United States, exists as perhaps the most elaborated of these projects.

Connected to this idea of influence and the joys of mentorship, some of the most poignant moments in the conversation thread were when members of the list commented on the excitement and emotion they felt at seeing their own former students participating in the thread, seeing their disciplinary offspring at work in this theorization of affect and WPA work on the list. As Lisa J. McClure, a professor at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale explained, “what a pleasure and how fulfilling to see they will be there to carry on after us.” As a young discipline, with many members still living who pre-date official degree programs in the field, this sort of ongoing project of field-building is perhaps especially important for Composition and Rhetoric specialists, and so it is natural that seeing the impact on young scholars entering the field and classroom would be so important to respondents to the thread.

Listserv contributors also emphasized the potential influence they possess beyond the teacher-scholars of writing they mentor and supervise, with some referencing the enormous watershed impact that one might be able to have over the course of one's career, alluding once again to what Haswell described in his post as the "exponential spread." For instance, Gerald Nelms, assistant professor and Academic Director of Developmental Writing at Wright State University wrote, "passing on what we know about teaching writing to teachers who pass on what we know about writing to students who learn to apply that knowledge about writing and thereby better themselves as students, as employees, as leaders, and as citizens of our nation and of our world—THAT is satisfying!" Nelms, then, seems to root his joy and satisfaction with the work of the profession within a sort of Deweyan conceptualization of the purpose of education. He finds joy in his administrative responsibilities because he sees that work as intricately tied to the public good, to the literacy education and intellectual enrichment of the public.

Others also reflected on the joy that can come with this sort of multifaceted, long-term, and downstream influence, though they did so with slightly less certainty about the public good of which Nelms speaks. William Thelin explained that for him, "The best part about being a WPA is that [his] reading, research, best practices, and theories can reach more than just [his] first-year students. They can influence departmental curriculum, the teaching of instructors in the program, and graduate students." He goes on to explain that such work is "more rewarding than having articles published or presenting on a panel at 4C's." Thelin's juxtaposition of the rewards of WPA work with the rewards of publication and conferencing is important, especially given that publication and presentation are typically the measures used to gauge "impact" and

contribution to the field. It points to both the *felt* and *material* impacts of WPA work and how these impacts might actually be more powerful than that of traditional forms of scholarship and disciplinary contribution. The felt impact of this work is strong for an understandable reason; in doing WPA work, one is often able to *witness* the impacts of one's contributions in ways that aren't always possible to see with scholarly contribution.

Gwen Gorzelsky, Executive Director of the Institute for Learning and Teaching at Colorado State University also references the joy that comes with witnessing the impacts one can have as a WPA. She explains her appreciation of the work by referencing the joys that accompany witnessing learning transfer:

One of the best parts of being a WPA for me was seeing how the work of colleagues and students in writing courses connects in very meaningful (if often unrecognized) ways with the work of colleagues and students in other courses across the university—or, put differently, seeing more concretely the connections between the individual writing classroom and the larger universe of students' academic and personal growth.

These comments from Gorzelsky also seem to point to the ways that she gets joy out of the work of teaching writing more broadly, the ways that she is sustained by what she sees as a value and importance of the discipline of which she is part. And, of course, this phenomenon she is describing here, the ways that students make connections between ideas of the writing classroom and other learning contexts, is one of the most active areas of investigation in the field of Composition and Rhetoric at the moment. David Schwalm, a retired professor from Arizona State University also seems to locate his joy in WPA work as part of a larger pleasure he experiences in working the field of Composition and

Rhetoric more broadly. Schwalm explains “the best part of being a WPA for [him] was that [he] really believed that what [he] was doing was of value to students” and explains that “by comparison, [his] years as a lit guy seemed terribly self-indulgent.” And Michelle Nietsteski in her first six months as a WPA at Lasell College wrote in to add that she’s “been struck by what an amazing opportunity [she has] to talk with students, writing instructors, and administrators and to know that [she has] the opportunity to enact changes that will make a difference for students.”

Of course, these comments that roots link the joy of working in the field to witnessable benefits for students can have risky implications. After all, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, perhaps the biggest battle that Composition and Rhetoric scholars have faced since the emergence of the discipline has been challenging the conception of the field as being in service to the larger university, of only having the task of preparing students for the rest of their “real” work in the university. Perhaps, though, these type of responses to the listserv thread reveal a level of disciplinary ambivalence, conflicted emotions about the value of the work to which the field of Composition and Rhetoric is dedicated. Though the larger discipline has worked to challenge visions of (especially first-year) writing courses as student preparation and service to the rest of the institution, many of the responses to this thread seem to suggest that practitioners in the field find some measure of comfort in that vision, find some satisfaction in seeing how their courses prepared students for future writing situations. And though this listserv conversation was not at all structured around questions of the *purpose* of the discipline, analyzing this theme showcases how comments about the joys of the work end up contributing to that longer, on-going discussion. This is, one of the fascinating aspects of

the conversations on the listserv. Threads on one topic can frequently inadvertently contribute to ongoing conversations on different, sometimes significantly separated, issues. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this debate about disciplinary purpose is often heated, and thus, it is curious that these perspectives were not challenged or problematized by other respondents to the thread, even though many of these individuals in talking about the joy of influence seem to be drawing on a vision of writing as a practical, transferrable, and even marketable skill. Again, I wonder if part of the lack of response emerges from discomfort challenging someone's affective state, challenging the joy one receives from a particular conceptualization of the field, even if that might be a vision that has been harshly criticized. Much as I questioned the lack of responses to DeBoer's reading of the discipline that I discussed in Chapter 2, I wonder if members of the WPA-L are less likely to confront points of view if they are offered up as felt impressions.

“Collective Imagining”

In addition to influence on others, the interpersonal and relational nature of WPA work was also referenced in another way in this WPA-L discussion—through the frequent comments about the joys of collaboration with colleagues. References to the joys of collaborative work were the most common explanations of the “best parts” of the work offered up by the participants in response to Reid's query. In some ways, this should not be surprising. After all, there is now a substantial body of scholarship which specifically theorizes WPA work through various theoretical lenses of collaboration (Bousquet; Gunner; Harrington, Fox, and Hogue; Janangelo; Janangelo and Hansen; Rose and Weiser; Schell, among others). As Jeanne Gunner writes in “Collaborative Administration,” her chapter contribution to *The Writing Program Administrator's*

Resource, “collaborative writing program administration...has become fairly well entrenched in a range of institutions” (254). Gunner explains that this leadership style may be born out of a desire for theoretical cohesion between pedagogical and administrative work, for “although not directly connected to collaborative pedagogical theory, collaborative administration does share in its theoretical foundation some of the values and goals of decentered teaching and learning” (254). Gunner also suggests that the field’s preference for collaborative leadership styles is likely connected to larger social and political commitments Composition and Rhetoric specialists. According to Gunner, whether realized or not, “collaborative administration entails ideological critique” because such a model includes “a restructuring of institutional power in practice, a sharing of authority” and involves “collaborative structures emphasis[ing] community, shared responsibility, and open exchange of information, ideas, and criticism” (254). While there was some reference to the political project associated with collaboration in WPA work, respondents rarely discussed this in relation to their comments about collaboration; instead, they were more likely to talk about how collaboration was frequently a source of *pleasure* and enjoyment or a source of comfort.

In his response to the thread, Steven L. Fox, an Associate Professor and the Director of Writing at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis explained that “the best part of being a WPA for [him] across 20 or so years at IUPUI has been working with a smart, lively, friendly, supportive group of colleagues on our Writing Coordinating Committee. Because of this group, being a WPA has not been a lonely job, for sure, and it is in fact one of the things [he] most appreciate[s] about [his] job as a professor.” In this post, Fox describes the joys of administrative work from a personal perspective; it has

been a source of friendship for him, something he looks forward to. Even though he makes clear that this collaborative work has *prevented* him from feeling lonely, his invocation of loneliness as an affect seems significant. I would argue that it gestures towards the ways that loneliness is frequently an affect of the academy, one only gaining in prominence as anxieties about employment and promotion drive individuals in departments further apart. Also, as I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, because WPAs often find themselves isolated as the only Composition and Rhetoric specialists in their home departments, it is understandable that loneliness might, at times, be part of the job. WPA's work with writing teachers or graduate teaching assistants, then, affords an opportunity for them to feel connected to their discipline and to dialogue about an aspect of the work that feels more like a shared project. It can be a location for conversation in an environment where people often keep to themselves.

Jennifer Marlow, an Assistant Professor at The College of Saint Rose also spoke about this sort of personal enjoyment that she receives from the conversations of WPA work:

As a WPA, I meet bi-weekly with my first year writing instructors (many of whom are adjuncts, but some full-timers attend as well). We sit and dish about writing pedagogy for an hour. Theory and best practices of the field sometimes get tossed out the window in favor of describing what is working or not in our classrooms currently. There is far too little time for these kind of conversations in my life. Being a WPA grants me this.

I am especially drawn to Marlow's language choices in her contribution to the thread. Her use the phrase "sit and dish" seems especially powerful in the way that it evokes a

sort of playful and relaxed conversation with friends, more so than it does a program meeting. She also points to the ways that storytelling is frequently a part of this work, explaining that the theory and best practices “get tossed out the window” as she and her fellow writing teachers use their time to engage in a genuine way about the events of their teaching. Her point that “there is far too little time for these conversations in [her] life” is also significant because it points to the ways that this experience with fellow colleagues enriches her life, not just her work as a WPA. In doing WPA work, she finds something she also values and yearns for in her life outside of work. Again, I would argue that Marlow’s explanation of the emotional dimensions of WPA work is one that would be rare to find in more formal sites of disciplinary discussion. Conversations like this one allow glimpses at multiple registers of engagement with the work of the the field.

Though rarer than the comments about the affectively *felt* nature of collaborative work, respondents did, of course, also address the values and joys of collaboration for more academic and professional purposes. Several, for instance, commented on how collaborative work allowed them to approach complex and difficult issues. Christopher Thais explained that for him, “it’s been the creative challenge that stands out: the opportunities to respond to new situations and learn from and with so many others” and Irvin Peckham spoke about the pleasures of “collectively imagining with teachers in the program better ways of teaching, writing, experimenting, always experimenting, reading what students wrote, and then reimagining.” The contribution from Thomas P. Miller, Professor and Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs at the University of Arizona is perhaps most representative of this type of response:

One of the best parts for me was helping people come together to build on their

shared experience and expertise. An effective writing program is a classroom where people are learning from each other by working on curricular innovations together. It is way cool to see people create something, and then watch it evolve over time as successive groups of people come together to revise and redesign it. The desire to help design collaborative structures and processes was one of the things that brought me to the desk with excitement each morning.

Miller draws on fairly traditional language of “shared experience and expertise” in order to talk about collaboration, and he explains the benefits of this collective knowledge as connected to “curricular innovation.” His response also provides an example of the ways that collaborative administrative practices are conceptually linked to collaborative pedagogical practices, and he specifically draws on the metaphor of the classroom to describe what he sees as effective WPA work. Still, even in this post, there are glimpses at the ways that such work is connected to individually-felt pleasure as Miller’s language switches discursive register slightly to talk about how it is “way cool” to see the work people do. Noting this quick moment helps illustrate the discursive flexibility afforded by WPA-L in the way that it hovers somewhere in the middle ground between formal and informal prose, the way it cycles between feeling like conversation and academic theorizing.

The theme of collaboration also emerged in contributions to the listserv discussion about networking within institutions and with the broader discipline outside those institutions. Michael Day, Professor and Director of First-Year Composition at Northern Illinois University, wrote in to share that this work has “included collaborations with offices and stakeholders across campus and with WPAs at other institutions.” Day

also explains his appreciation that “being a WPA allows [him] to have a co-mentoring conversation with instructors, TAs, and members of this list [the WPA-L].” In making this comment, Day locates the WPA-L as one of the main sites of collaboration in his life. He explains that the listserv is “a conversation that now spans several decades,” a comment which affirms the richness of the WPA-L as an archive and gestures towards the complex relational work that has been facilitated by it. The listserv, after all, regularly exists as a site where members of the field come together to strategize and respond to very difficult problems. It serves both of the main purposes referenced in these comments about the jobs of collaboration: it is a site to come together and “dish,” to chat with friends about work and life, and, at the same time, it is a space to consider brainstorm about complex challenges we face in the field, to draw upon collective wisdom in order to make change.

“Attempting to Be a Positive Force”

This work of addressing complex and challenging problems facing the discipline (and the broader culture) is the last consistent theme that emerged in the responses from listserv participants about the “best part” of WPA work. Though the least frequent of the four themes, several of the contributors specifically pointed out that part of what has made WPA work so rewarding is that it has allowed them to work on issues connected to social justice. Paul Shovlin, Director of the Writing Initiative, First-Year Writing, and the Writing Center at Binghamton University, explained, “I love it for the same reason I’m engaged with critical pedagogy...it offers a different kind of platform...for attempting to be a positive force.” Again, in Shovlin’s response, there is evidence of the ways the politics informing pedagogy are reaffirmed or at least cohesive with the politics that are

informing individuals' practices as WPA. Others, such as Gerald Nelms, made arguments positing that Composition and Rhetoric and Writing Program Administration are inextricably connected to social justice work:

For a different thread on our listserv, Peter Adams argued, "Basic writing is the locus of the most important social justice work we do in higher ed." I think that we can, and should, extend the spirit of his statement to all first-year writing instruction and most notably to the work of a WPA. What we do as writing teachers and writing program administrators, whether in the class, in TA training, in writing centers, wherever, is activist at its very heart, whether we see it as an overtly political act or simply as a way of preparing students for academic success in college and success in their working careers after college—or as both. Doing that work will inevitably be challenging, sometimes be frustrating and sometimes be satisfying, deeply satisfying.

I am, of course, drawn to the way that Nelms cites a contribution to a separate WPA-L thread in his response because it bolsters my central claim in this dissertation that we need to be thinking about the listserv as an impactful site of disciplinary knowledge-making. At the same time, though, I am also struck by the way that Nelms connects the social justice goals of WPA work to *both* frustration and satisfaction. WPAs' deeply-held beliefs in the social and political projects of the discipline perhaps condition them towards extreme joy and excitement *or* tremendous disappointment, depending on the outcome of any particular initiative they might attempt.

Perhaps this is especially true because of the stakes involved. The futures and experiences of individuals that WPAs care about deeply—writing students, graduate

teaching assistants, contingent faculty—are impacted by work undertaken by these administrative members of the discipline. As Linda Adler-Kassner writes early in *The Activist WPA*, these are issues that “deal explicitly with questions of ethics, specifically the treatment of human being” (7). The most commonly referenced question of ethics discussed in the thread was the challenge of addressing the ever-worsening labor problems of the field, and much like Nelms, respondents referenced both the rewards and emotional trials of such work. Susan H. McLeod, a Research Professor at the University of California-Santa Barbara provided one of the most extensive discussions of this sort of work:

My answer no doubt reflects my own experience as a part-time lecturer early in my career, but the best part for me as a WPA was being a voice for those in my department or program who are usually not at the table—pressuring administrators to increase salaries and improve working conditions for non-tenure track faculty, who are often invisible...if you want a high-quality program, you have to treat people like the professionals they are, rather than as disposable parts of the university. I didn't always succeed, of course, but when I managed any improvements, it gave me a lot of satisfaction.

Even while speaking to the incredible rewards and satisfaction that come with such work, McLeod cannot help but simultaneously draw attention to these serious problems. In speaking about how she has worked to address issues of underrepresentation, marginalization, unfair salaries, and inadequate working conditions, she conjures these problems in the minds of her readers, and she acknowledges that this important work has involved failure. At the same time, that McLeod contributes to a listserv discussion of the

“best” parts of being a WPA, she showcases the worst, the most frustrating and disappointing, aspects of that work.

This sort of dual move to simultaneously address the potential for powerful social justice work while also spotlighting institutional and disciplinary problems with labor can also be seen in the listserv response from Matt Dowell, an Assistant Professor at Towson University:

For me, the best part of being a WPA at a small, liberal arts college is listening to feedback from the part-time instructors and demonstrating that their contributions are valued. The relationships I have formed with the “adjuncts” has been very rewarding for me and has reiterated that we place these people in an “adjunct” position at our own peril, or our own loss. I’ve also been reminded that quality of instruction and terminal degree probably aren’t all that correlated.

Like McLeod, Dowell uses the opportunity afforded to him by Reid’s listserv call to celebrate the contributions and expertise of part-time, contingent, and other “adjunct” members of the discipline. At the same time, in doing so, his post acknowledges the ways these individuals’ work is too often ignored or devalued. These contributions from McLeod and Dowell are powerful ones with a level of timeliness. Trends in the discipline show the numbers of these adjunct instructors (and adjunct administrators) rising dramatically; therefore, this mixed bag of rewarding and depressing work on labor issues will continue to gain in prominence for WPAs.

But What About the Negative Affects?

The darker, less explicitly positive contours of WPA work were also inscribed in posts other than those about challenges of WPA activism and social justice work. Megan

O'Neil, an Associate Professor and Writing Program Director at Stetson University explains that she “held off on responding to this query until [she] knew the results of the faculty vote that was taken today at noon,” a comment indicating the dramatic swings of emotions one might feel connected to WPA work. She writes a positive message, sharing that “after four years (of revision, faculty input, consultation with students, alliance-building, research into our peer schools, and blood, sweat, and tears), we put into place a new and much improved writing requirement that has triggered discussion on campus about issues ranging from hiring and growth to curriculum and core values.” Her delay in responding to the thread, though, underscores the incredible amount of uncertainty in the work, and her reference to the “blood, sweat, and tears” clearly acknowledge the stress and mental and physical exhaustion that also come with the work

Often posts that shared excitement about WPA work also acknowledged the negative affects that continue to shape or exist alongside moments of joy. Timothy Oleksiak, writing in his second year as an Assistant Professor and the Writing in the Disciplines Coordinator at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, explains that he has “a lot of feelings” about his administrative work, but that that he finds himself “wanting to state very clearly that WPA work is still so anxiety producing.” Oleksiak’s honest response about the ways the mix of emotions he feels about WPA work are all colored by an overarching affect of anxiety provides a powerful disruption in this listserv thread that, for the most part, stays pretty focused on charting joys of the work. Anxiety is a fascinating affect for Oleksiak to name because it exists outside of the good/bad binary that much of the previous listserv conversation seemed to be working under. Anxiety is, after all, often an index of *care* and *investment*, a recognition of the importance of our

relations to one another.

The anxieties born out of care and investment in WPA work are also often felt partly in terms of fears of disappointing others, of being unworthy of the position or unable to fill the shoes of previous scholar-administrators one has admired. In his response to the thread, Doug Hesse writes that the best part of WPA work for him was when his mentor Charlie Harris encouraged him to become a WPA. Hesse explains that this was a role he had never imagined for himself. Though Hesse is one of the most recognized figures in the field today (especially for his WPA work), he closes his email acknowledging his own continued anxiety and uncertainty, writing, “most days still years later I feel unfit.” There is something profoundly revealing about seeing Oleksiak’s response to the thread juxtaposed to Hesse’s. Oleksiak writes only months into his career, and Hesse writes in after decades of service in the position, but both of these figures are united by a shared affect of insecurity and anxiety. Listserv threads can help showcase these connections of experience across geography, across disciplinary rank and position, and across time

Ghosts of Postings Past and Future: A Conclusion

I want to close this chapter by thinking more about the ways that the listserv allows us to consider issues of the field across context and time. Reid’s query on the WPA-L is, of course, not the first time the issues of disciplinary affect have surfaced on the list. It is a reoccurring subject (and frequently one that inspires significant response from subscribers of the list). Because Reid’s “best part” is designed specifically to inquire into the positive affects of the discipline, in this last section, I want to quickly turn to a conversation examining the discipline’s negative affects, and the 2002 discussion of

Laura Micciche's article on "Disappointment and WPA Work" provides perhaps the most active and dynamic example of this other side of the conversation. As I explain in my introduction to this chapter, part of my rationale in returning to this conversation is to help illustrate the richness of the WPA-L as an archive of disciplinary conversation; it is, I argue, a catalog of both *disciplinary affect* and *conversations explicitly about disciplinary affect*. I am also interested in how this earlier thread seems to indicate that negative affects are responded to differently by members of the list, that there is a greater unease about confronting those affects. While Reid's post was met with enthusiasm and excitement from members of the list, the discussion of Micciche's article started in a place of resistance and at times became rather heated. This thread eventually inspired responses from both Micciche and from Jeanne Gunner, who responded in her position of editor of *College English* about the decision to accept Micciche's essay for publication.

Richard Haswell began the 2002 discussion of Micciche's "Disappointment" article by questioning when the disappointment, disconnection, and loneliness that Micciche speaks about in her essay set in as the dominant mood of the discipline. Haswell explains that when he was a WPA in the 1970s, he didn't feel this mood. He acknowledges that "there were frustrations, some anger and good cause for it, a sense of being isolated, and so on," but he argues that "the inside group (WPA, TAs, writing-lab tutors, researchers, etc) seemed, emotionally, to absorb this 'dissonance' with an overriding sense of energy and excitement that was connected with a new and exciting field and partial successes toward credible goals." In closing his initial query to the list, Haswell asks "Have things really changed this much? Or am I constructing some fictive Golden Age of WPA work?" Haswell, then, opens the thread in what appears to be a spirit

of openness, but it is also a resistant one in the way he makes clear that he is unconvinced and that Micciche's claims about the nature of WPA work run counter to his own felt (or at least remembered) experience.

Greg Glau of Northern Arizona University questioned the fundamental assumption of Micciche's piece, too, explaining that he "found the essay kind of disappointing—only looking for and at the negative aspects of the WPA position, of which there are many, to be sure, but there are also many, many positive aspects (WPA is one) that could have balanced the essay and presented a more accurate picture." Both of these posts seem uneasy with Micciche's work to uncover the emotional toll that WPA work takes, but curiously, both Glau and Haswell acknowledge the very types of disappointment, frustration, and alienation that Micciche is writing about. Why they think that the positives of the work need to be emphasized in her essay is also not completely clear. After all, it is certainly not unusual for academic work to focus in on a single aspect of an issue in order to engage in theory building. The call for "balance" seems to emerge more out of their discomfort with the attention Micciche dedicated to the darker emotional terrain of the work.

Because this 2002 thread originated in a resistance to Micciche's articulation of negative affect, respondents to the thread are put in a significantly different rhetorical position than they are in the 2015 conversation about the "best part" of the work. Surprisingly, though, the nature of the conversations in both is remarkably similar. In both of these threads, one can see how WPA work is almost always characterized by a confluence of conflicting positive and negative affects. Even when participants attempt to talk about only the positives or only the negatives of that work, they cannot seem to help

but also conjure the inverse emotional responses. In his response to the 2002 discussion, Doug Hesse draws on personal narrative in order to illustrate how feelings of “affective dissonance” might emerge from a disconnect between one’s initial motivations for joining the field and the realities one faces in WPA work:

When I started WPA work in 1987, I thought it was the best job I could ever want, and when I discovered there was an organization of WPAs (and that they were great folks), well, it couldn’t get any better. My enthusiasm came largely from perceiving that the whole field of teaching writing was open, that teachers could do interesting and important things, that, what the heck, those of us really invested in teaching writing were on the fringes anyway so we might as well do what interested us and seemed to make sense.

Something has changed that I’m sure makes work harder for newer WPAs. First, the whole of the academy has become more administriviated over the past twenty years. The kinds of reporting and accountability to legions of institutionalized bureaucrats seems much more extensive then when I began. Second, work in writing has become administriviated along with everything else...But it seems to me that in ratcheting up “professionalization” for ourselves as WPAs we join a nexus of activities that might be inherently alienating. I have mixed emotions, then, about teaching graduate courses in Writing Program Administration (which I am doing this semester), for I see this kind of professionalization as simultaneously empowering and alienating.

Hesse’s comments point to the ways that Composition and Rhetoric’s movement towards disciplinarity has been a double-edged sword for practitioners in the field and that the

institutionalization and professionalization of the discipline have had affective consequences. Further, Hesse alludes to how one of the affects that had sustained him earlier in his career, his excitement at the edginess of being “on the fringes” of the the discipline, has disappeared as the field has become more institutionalized.

Hesse explains that what drew him to this field was a love of writing and the teaching of writing. He explains that “To the extent that administration allows me to draw [these] joys (and there I've gone flakey again), WPA work remains wonderful,” but he continues reluctantly acknowledging that “there is so much these days in administration that interposes itself between my work and what brought me to the field.” For Hesse, it isn't that WPA work is without joy, it is the way that other aspects of the work are affectively loaded in such a way that at times, they can blind him to or overshadow the experiences of joy associated with the aspects of the work that drew him to the field in the beginning.

Brian Huot, Professor at Kent State University, also reflected on the mixed bag nature of WPA work in his response to the 2002 thread, explaining that he found himself “drawn to the article because [he] think[s] being a WPA can be a bit of an emotional roller coaster.” Huot goes on to give a clear explanation of why WPA work primes individuals for either incredible happiness or devastating disappointment. He explains that “most of us who do this work on a regular basis love what we do and are committed to the people who work for us and make our programs possible, even though many of them are compensated far below what is fair and ethical.” Much like many of the respondents in the 2015 discussion, Huot locates both the rewards and trials of the work in our commitment to others and to the personal and political implications of our work.

As Huot argues. “coupled with this love and dedication is a huge responsibility we all feel and shoulder. And yet, we have to fight for even the basic necessities we need to do our jobs well. Maybe this is where some of the disappointment or other emotions attached to WPA work come from.”

At the same time that many on the list were actively resistant to Micciche’s article, these contributions from Hesse and Huot work to validate it, and others on the list worked to defend its political project. Bonnie Kyburz, an Assistant Professor at Lewis University explained that sees Micciche’s essay as a kind of activism, arguing that “to generate language that articulates these problems is in part a kind of theorizing that can promote collective action.” In a sense, both of these threads perform a similar type of activist work as they engage in consciousness raising, as they share often hidden or marginalized perspectives, and as they draw readers’ attention to ongoing social justice problem in the field. The WPA-L can be one location through which we can examine the evolution of these conversations (and the ways they have stayed the same). They help us see the difficulty of such work and its importance.

Because academic disciplines tend to dialogue on issues asynchronously through text, “responses” to arguments can take years to appear in most sites of disciplinary conversation. Listservs, though, exist as one of the few spaces where ideas can be confronted *both* synchronously and asynchronously. On the one hand, ideas can be responded to more in time, and perhaps even importantly, in a space where the individuals one is responding to might quickly write back. The two threads examined in this chapter help showcase that sort of in-time discussion of an issue. At the same time, because the listserv is archived, it can be examined for the ways that conversations speak

to one another *across* time. Both of these possibilities can allow for powerful complications and nuancing of ideas. Near the end of the 2002 discussion, Laura Micciche replied, and her comments directly address the excitement she feels at how the listserv allows for a witnessing of the uptake of her text and the issues it raises. Micciche writes, “I’ve been lurking during the discussion of my recent article in CE. How often do we actually find out that people **read** our work and then that they **connect** or **disconnect** with our ideas?!” It’s extremely gratifying to know that the piece is being looked at so thoughtfully by y’all—thanks, everyone, for writing.”

Similarly, the respondents in the 2015 discussion also reference the ways that these listserv threads allow for different types of conversations about the work of the profession. Lauren Marquez wrote in to thank E. Shelley Reid for this “opportunity to share the moments that we often don’t write about in journals about the encouraging emotional work we do as WPAs,” and several people commented that they plan to use the thread responses in their own courses on Writing Program Administration, which again helps emphasize the potential value of these conversations for the field, the ways that these discussions might add to and speak back to the more traditional forms of scholarship we read and assign our students.

Reid closed the thread with her own contribution to the query about the “best part of being a WPA”: “For me, from the very start, YOU ALL have been right at the top of my Best Part of Being A WPA list -- and your responses here have only strengthened that conviction. This field has the most amazing, generous, brilliant colleagues, locally and nationally, senior and junior, posting and lurking, asking and answering.” While Reid’s comment is certainly one designed to serve certain politeness functions, it also speaks

clearly to the incredible value of the listserv as a platform, the ways the list is both a site of community and conversation—a location to “sit and dish”—and the ways that the list is a powerfully diverse network of individuals to draw upon, a site of complex theorization and knowledge-making.

CHAPTER 5

MESSAGE FORTHCOMING:

A CONCLUSION AND CALL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE WPA-L

Sitting here in the Starbucks on 33rd and O as I write this last chapter, I find myself distracted by the email alerts that pop up on my phone. I have silenced it, but every few minutes I catch the flash of a message popping up on my lock screen out of the corner of my eye. I should turn the phone over and ignore it, but I am always afraid I will miss something important, an email from a student or the department or some new discussion on the WPA-L. It is September now and so the listserv is peppered with job announcements and inquiries. Acceptances and notices of regret were just sent out about the 2017 4Cs conference in Portland, OR, and so listserv conversations are slowly turning towards the conference. Several of the notifications that flash across my phone are emails contributing to the two main listserv threads of this month, each of which have racked up about 40 responses (making them two of the most active of the entire year). One of these threads is focused on the faculty lockout at Long Island University. Members of the list are helping each other come to terms with the situation there. Locals are writing into the list to share stories about what is happening on the ground. Conversations drift towards the best way to help and show support. Ideas about who to write letters to are put forward. Petition links are shared. And while this is happening, others begin theorizing what this individual case might mean for the field and for faculty labor across the country, questioning what the events at this one school foretell about what is to come.

The other main thread of the month is a resurgence of a frequent listserv debate about names for the discipline. It started with an inquiry about whether people identify

with “Rhetoric and Composition” or “Composition and Rhetoric” and what those identifications might mean. Arguments for how these terms shape individuals’ orientations to their work, their teaching, and the broader field are put forward. Contributors to the thread share their own personal histories with the terms and acknowledge the names and emphases of their degree programs and how those histories might shape their attitudes. Historical contexts are offered up and challenged. Individuals discuss the limitations of “writing” in the age of multimodal composing. Eventually, the conversation evolves into a debate about the future of the field and the ways our terminology might need to evolve in order to capture new forms and new sites of rhetorical action.

For me, these two threads are representative of the very different but complementary roles that WPA-L plays as a site of disciplinary knowledge-making. These two threads reveal the exciting possibilities of this space. As I argue in the introduction to this dissertation, the WPA-L is one of the few places members of the discipline can always go to debate issues as they are unfolding in the world. One can see this in the conversation about the faculty lock out at Long Island University. Similar listserv posts exist at the moment about the upcoming presidential election, about newly announced issues of journals, and about questions connected to recently-posted jobs. The listserv, then, exists as a sort of live feed, allowing individuals to react and respond to issues in-time. The listserv is thus able to attend to kairos in ways that are just not possible in most of the more slowly-moving spaces of traditional disciplinary knowledge making. On the list, individuals are able to focus on issues as they emerge, and at the same time, the listserv affords a space to dialogue about the ephemeral, those concerns

that might be so fleeting that they will never be explored in more extended scholarly pieces but might, nonetheless, still offer important insights of the nature of the field's work and the challenges it faces.

On the other hand, the re-emergence of the discussion about how the field is named showcases the ways that the listserv exists as a site for ongoing inquiry, for the repetition of questions and the offering of new perspectives on what might seem to be old or already-settled issues. The listserv, then, is a platform of continual revision and re-investigation, a location in which new people can join in on conversations that have long histories within both the official and unofficial scholarship of the discipline. In this way, the listserv is an illustration of the ways that academic inquiry is always in-process, is continually developing and evolving. The listserv is perhaps the best enactment of the metaphor many of us use to explain academic writing to our students—the “Burkean Parlor Conversation.” The listserv is a literal ongoing conversation in which participants enter and listen, contribute and speak back, and then eventually slip away only to be replaced by new voices. If we find value in the metaphor of academic scholarship as “a conversation,” then the listserv, as perhaps the most conversational space of the field, must be recognized as an important location in which to observe how those conversations unfold, how people directly and indirectly interact with one another as they explore both the mundane and the intensely pressing concerns of the field.

The WPA-L as an Embodiment of the Field's Pedagogy

I make these points because I believe that the WPA-L is, in many ways, a representation of the type of writing and sustained academic inquiry that Composition and Rhetoric Specialists claim to value as discipline. It embodies a conceptualization of

knowledge, thinking, and learning as ongoing, as always partial, and as responsive to others. These are conceptualizations that I believe many of in the profession try to convey in their classrooms and to instill in their students. In the same way that many of Composition and Rhetoric Specialists spend a substantial amount of time in their classrooms working to encourage students to consider the process-based work of composing, the WPA-L can help draw the field's attention to the process work of academic knowledge-making and theory-building. If the field want its students to move from a product-focused to process-focused mindset, the field should embody this in its own practice and in its own conceptualizations of scholarship.

Process work is, of course, messy, and that messiness can easily be seen in my analyses of the three threads I have focused on in this dissertation. That messiness is revealed in my analysis of the listserv's response to Adam Banks's Chair's Address in Chapter 2 in the ways a graduate student's extensively shared felt impressions about what he sees as a disciplinary abandonment of student writing actually run counter to findings from empirical studies investigating the output of scholarship in the field. And perhaps most dramatically, that messiness is evidenced in the intensely-heated conversation about disciplinary leadership in Chapter 3 in the ways it reveals how a singular voice can sometimes overtake and cast a dark shadow over an entire conversation and the ways that debates over important issues like labor and representation can devolve into a series of personal attacks. Even in discussions that remain productively focused on the original questions posed, like the conversation about the "Best Part" of WPA work examined in Chapter 4, hint at the messy and sometimes unstable terrain of in-process reflection. It is present in the ambivalence and tentativeness of respondents to the thread, and it can be

seen in the different levels of enthusiasm between the 2015 conversation and the more resistant 2002 conversation about disciplinary affect. Still, as I have shown in my analysis of those moments, in that messiness are opportunities to ask questions, to gain insights into the field, to witness the affects that contextualize participants' perspectives, and to better understand tensions in the group dynamics of the discipline's membership. Process is messy, but that is part of its charm, part of what allows insights to be discovered.

As I set up the theoretical foundation for this dissertation in Chapter 1, I quoted from Bruce Horner's *Terms of Work for Composition*, specifically his argument that the discipline has a tendency to work from a "commodified view of scholarship" (225). I explain how this view is connected to our discipline's tendency to approach scholarship from a product-based mindset. Contributing to the discipline's scholarship, thus, is typically conceived of as about publishing books and articles. It is about countable items and CV lines. The in-process work of members of the discipline—the work of communal invention and discussion with colleagues, the question posing, and the experience sharing—isn't typically seen as "scholarship," especially if that work doesn't eventually result in said specific products. As Horner explains, "the work of theory is seen not as theorizing—that is, as involving specific material social relations of production, distribution, and consumption of writing—but as commodity: a theory, opposed or accepted, current (and those possessing 'currency') or past (and therefore lacking value)" (225-226). This conceptualization of scholarship, though, runs counter to many of the pedagogical values of members of the discipline. And if Composition and Rhetoric specialists want to attend to this disconnect between the field's beliefs about what

scholarship is and its beliefs about composing and knowledge-making, the WPA-L provides one site in which they might begin to do this work, one location where one can see the work of theorizing, one place there is a record of this work, in all its messiness.

I am certainly not the first person to encourage the field of Composition and Rhetoric to attend to its disciplinary hypocrisy when it comes to its espoused commitments to process and to embracing the mess of composing. In his dynamic and wonderfully entertaining piece “Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where’s the Sex Pistols?” published almost 20 years ago, Geoffrey Sirc provides a rather biting critique of the “field’s general preference for ‘the tempered as against the raw’” (13) at the same time that he imagines an alternative history of the discipline in which it embraced the aesthetics and politics of punk. Central to Sirc’s argument is that punk embraced process in radically generative ways. He writes “punk didn’t discard pre-writes, jotted notes, general ideas—it lived off them” and laments the fact that as the field of Composition and Rhetoric has professionalized, it has “cleared out all the kooky trash” (13) from its journals and its writing. In doing so, Sirc argues, the field has lost interest in “the possibility of [the] becoming-writer, the process, the play” (14). The WPA-L is one of the few places we get a glimpse at some of the raw; the listserv is something that might, in fact, be an archive of those “pre-writes, jotted notes, and general ideas.”

Towards the end of his essay, Sirc voices concern that in Composition and Rhetoric’s quest for respectability in its publication practices that he and other members of the discipline have become “victims of our own drive to coherence, in bondage to our own fantasy of absolutes” and asks “what do we do when we realize it’s our own pedagogy we’ve been critiquing, it’s our own body we’ve been mutilating. Worse, and

infinitely more worrisome, what if we never realize it?” (24-25). This dissertation is, in a sense, a return to Sirc’s question about the violence we do to our pedagogy with the way we conceive of scholarship. By focusing in on the WPA-L, one of the “kookiest” spaces of the discipline, I question what might be found there, what we might learn, and, perhaps more importantly, I consider what and who we erase when we ignore this and similar spaces. Identifying the listserv as a site of the in-process and active work of theory and knowledge-building might allow for a broader reconceptualization of scholarship as process-based, rather than product based. Moreover, I suggest that the digital nature of the listserv as a platform might allow for greater diversity of (sometimes conflicting) voices, for more dynamic projects showcasing continuing evolutions of thinking, and that it might even encourage more ethical modes of being, modes which acknowledge the always-existing failures and limitations of our attempts, which encourage risk, vulnerability, and collaboration, and which resist the aggressive and competition-driven ethos that shapes too much of academic work.

In addition to seeing their punk possibilities, as I think about the affordances of the listserv as a digital platform of knowledge-making, I am struck by how much they facilitate what Donna Qualley refers to in her book *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry* as an “essayistic stance” necessary for “reflexive inquiry.” Qualley explains that reflexive inquiry is about “composing in its largest sense: a way of making sense of, connecting, and responding to situations, texts, and ideas that is open, provisional, and dialogic” (5). Such a conceptualization of essayism also appeared in the listserv’s discussion of the significance of “the essay” as a genre of the field that I review in Chapter 2 of this dissertation in my investigation of the listserv’s

response to Banks's Chair's Address. In a way that aligns closely with my own thinking about the purpose and nature of academic writing, Steve Krause reminds members of the list of the literal meaning of the word. As I explain in that chapter, Krause provides some historical contextualization, explaining that the generic form developed as part of the French Montaignian tradition, and he reminds listserv readers that the term comes to us from the French verb *essayer* meaning "to attempt" or "to try." This is the same type of conceptualization that Qualley is working from, and she explains that the essay, in its very name, acknowledges its provisional status. I see most listserv queries and responses as embodying that spirit of provisionality and tentativeness. Often it even comes across in the language choices of those writing in. People share articles and close simply by asking "Any thoughts?" Respondents, too, often write in announcing their willingness to "take a stab" at a question. Singular answers and solutions are rarely solicited or offered up on the listserv. Even when members of the list write with seemingly specific questions (e.g., "is there a rhetorical terms to describe X?"), multiple answers are usually put forward, and participants reflect on the different affordances and constraints of the potential answers they have offered.

Overly simplistic models of collective intelligence that are facilitated by digital platforms sometimes position the rewards of that collective intelligence as the ability to draw upon a diverse network to get an answer. These are models about efficiency, the ability to quickly draw upon a network and get a result. The form of collective intelligence represented by the listserv, though, is more complex. It is a site of shared theorizing, with answers that are offered, but rarely in an absolute or settled fashion. And though sometimes people write in to the list with a quick question, the multiplicity of

answers tends to slow that inquiry, to complicate the issue rather than simplifying it. It is a space of discussion, not answers. It is a space of reflexive inquiry. As Qualley explains in her text, reflexive inquiry is “not a finite dialogue designed to produce consensus and agreement, but rather in an ongoing, reflexive, and ethical dialogue of inquiry that serves to continually illuminate and enlarge [one’s] understanding of others and [oneself]” (5).

As the quote above demonstrates, Qualley’s text also showcases the ways that this sort of essayistic stance involves dialoguing *in response to* and *in concert with* various Others, and I think this same sort of dynamic can be witnessed on the WPA-L. For Qualley, the essayistic stance is an *ethical means of relating* in an encounter between the self and the Other, and she writes that “in a culture increasingly fractured and polarized by competing discourses, we need a method that will allow us to continually reflect on our own positions in light of our ongoing transactions with others” (5). I argue that the listserv is one place we have the opportunity to do this work, and the examples explored in this dissertation show individuals in the field offering and reflecting on their positions in light of others. In the listserv discussions examined in Chapter 2, we can see graduate students and two-year colleagues sharing both their felt impressions and the evidenced reality of isolation and marginalization they face as they speak back to other individuals in the field. The discussion explored in Chapter 3 shows constituencies in the discipline speaking back to one another about competing accounts of disciplinary activism and the politics of representation in large professional organizations. And Chapter 4 investigates a moment in which the listserv provided an opportunity to see individuals speaking together about the affective experiences of the work of Writing Program Administration, and within that conversation, one can see individual responses complicating and nuancing

the sometimes overly positive account of the world. These conversations are all examples which showcase the complexities, challenges, and possibilities of collaborative inquiry. Qualley writes that “collaborative inquiry increases the number of transactions, as students attempt to negotiate several multiple (and often conflicting) perspectives at once,” and she explains that “collaborative inquiry entails genuine dialogic encounters with flesh-and-blood beings who are capable of talking back” (94-95). Qualley’s reference to the “genuine encounter with flesh-and-blood beings” seems especially relevant to thinking about the nature of dialogue on the WPA-L. While academics certainly respond (sometimes very harshly) to one another in traditional forms of published scholarship, the capability of those individuals to quickly speak back on the listserv makes this possibility more real and more felt. As the moments I have examined in this dissertation show, these moments are not always successful. Chapter 3 provides a pretty clear example of the ways that listserv members occasionally devolved into *speaking at* one another rather than *speaking to* or *speaking with* one another. Perhaps this is why Qualley takes so much time in her book to discuss the difficulties of an essayistic stance needed for reflexive inquiry. She writes, “we need an approach, a method for engaging the other that is captive, deferent, explorative, tentative. Learning to adopt this stance takes conscious effort” (141). The listserv, I would argue is one of the places we can *practice* this work. It is not always successful, but it is a space that challenges us to do the work.

Though listserv moments I have reviewed in this dissertation showcase significant failures of genuine engagement and openness, moments when combative stances were taken instead of essayistic stances, I would argue that the nature of the platform, the way

it facilitates collaboration and continued (re)development of ideas across time embodies an essayistic spirit. It is also a space that allows individuals to return to and revise their earlier comments, to showcase the evolutions of their own thinking. This spirit of always-possible revision is another aspect that I argue links the format of our listserv to the pedagogies of the field of Composition and Rhetoric. As Ann E. Berthoff argues in “Recognition, Representation, and Revision,” revision should be thought of as a “dimension of composing. Revision is, indeed, re-seeing and it goes on continually in the composing process” (21). What I love about Berthoff’s text is the way that she acknowledges the chaos and the mess of revision at the same time that she acknowledges the difficulty of the work and its beauty and potential:

Unless students prove to themselves the usefulness of tentativeness, no amount of exhortation will persuade them to forego ‘closure,’ in the current jargon. The willingness to generate chaos, patience in testing a formulation against the record, careful comparing of proto-statement and half statements, completed statements and re-statements: these are all expressions of what Keats famously called ‘negative capability,’ the capability to remain in doubt. (24)

Berthoff is, of course, discussing the idea of revision in terms of teaching writing to students, but her words here are also relevant and instructive for those of us scholars and teachers of writing. Her encouragement to think about the “usefulness of tentativeness” and the value of foregoing closure is something we might all benefit from. While this sort of composing ethic is often overshadowed by desires for authoritiveness and completeness and finality in the published scholarship of the field, the WPA-L is one of

the places members of the discipline might get close to embodying that commitment, to living the pedagogy we espouse and encourage.

Imagining Future Research on the WPA-L

Berthoff's commitment to "forego[ing] 'closure'" is an important part of my pedagogy as a teacher of writing, and I try to also model it in the scholarship I produce. This dissertation is, by no means, a comprehensive study. As a teacher, writer, and researcher, I am honestly not that interested in producing projects meant to be all-encompassing and authoritative in that that way. Instead, I see this project as a look at the richness of three local moments, three conversations in an archive of hundreds of conversations spanning over two decades. It is my hope that this dissertation is invitational in nature, that it encourages others to explore the WPA-L as a dynamically important archive of the discipline. I think that there are many possible directions that this future work might take, but below, I have chosen to close this final chapter by identifying four broad areas of inquiry where I would encourage future research.

Large-Scale Quantitative Work.

The hugeness of the WPA-L as an archive simultaneously presents challenges and exciting possibilities for researchers. At the same time that I see incredible value in locally-focused investigations of moments on the listserv like my own, I also believe that the field would benefit from large-scale quantitative work to investigate the WPA-L archive. Methodologies of algorithmic analysis developed in the cross-disciplinary field of the Digital Humanities seem especially well suited to this sort of study. This sort of quantitative work could likely shed light on important questions about what topics are most commonly examined and discussed on the WPA-L, whose voices contribute the

most (and whose contributions receive the most response), and various other questions connected to patterns of communication on the WPA-L. Thinking about these sorts of quantitative inquiries in relation to my own project, I see exciting possibilities for tracing the institutional locations and positions of contributors to the list across time to gauge the representation of different segments of the field. As a specific example, it would be especially important to consider the extent to which two-year specialists contribute to the list and the extent to which issues facing two-year institutions are covered in conversations of the list. In connection to my interest in disciplinary affect on the WPA-L, there are possibilities for conducting sentiment analyses to gain quantitative insights into the nature of disciplinary affect on the WPA-L. Such work could potential offer findings about the ways that positive and negative sentiments wax and wane over time on the listserv, and insights into the topics and subject matter that tend to be associated with positively or negatively-associated sentiments.

Tracing Single Themes Over Time

As I have attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 4, one of the incredible values of the WPA-L is the ability to examine threads from different historical moments which are commenting on the same issues or contributing to similar discussions. I see great potential for tracing conversations across the history of the listserv, and the broad-scale quantitative inquiries I discuss above might offer initial ideas for where to begin with these types of more sustained analyses. These types of cross-time and cross-context analyses could offer exciting insights into how the field constructs certain issues. For instance, it would be fascinating to consider the ways that “students” or “part-time instructors” are constructed and represented on this space. Methodologies of Critical

Discourse Analysis, especially Critical Metaphor Analysis and Critical Metonymy Analysis might be especially well-suited for such work. Additionally, in line with my investigation of the listserv's discussion of "the essay," as a genre, it might be valuable to consider the genres of student texts that are discussed on the list and how they are represented. Investigations about the representation and role of new and emerging digital technologies could also be conducted. Projects tracing themes across the history of the listserv could then be mapped onto similar projects that trace themes across the published scholarship to consider whether qualitative differences exist between the history of these themes on these two very different platforms of digital knowledge-making.

Qualitative Work on the Social Function of the WPA-L in the Lives of Subscribers

At the same time that the field would benefit from extended analyses of the content of the WPA-L archive, qualitative investigations into subscribers' relationships with the with the listserv would also be valuable. Survey and interview methodologies could be employed to invite subscribers to comment on the ways that they use and conceive of the listserv and the various functions it serves in their lives. Of particular interest might be investigating the perceptions of subscribers to the list who contribute at different levels—frequent contributors, occasional contributors, the "lurkers" who read but never contribute—to inquire into whether different levels of participation on the listserv are indicative of different uses of the listserv as a space of disciplinary knowledge-making. There would also be value in examining the role of the listserv to specific segments of the profession—emeritus faculty, non-WPAs, two-year specialists, among others. Such work to understand subscribers' perceptions of the social functions

of the listserv might give greater insight into why conversations evolve in the ways that they do.

Modeling the Pedagogical Possibilities of the WPA-L

As I have tried to state multiple times throughout this project, one of my goals is for the field of Composition and Rhetoric to look at the WPA-L conversations as knowledge-making and theory-building, to recognize the work of the platform as a form of scholarship. Certainly one means of working towards that goal is what I have attempted to do in this dissertation—to put listserv threads in conversation with the field’s scholarship. I think another way of honoring the scholarly work of listserv participants, though, is by thinking about how those of us in the field might utilize listserv conversation in our classrooms, how we might invite our students to read threads alongside articles and how we might invite our students to engage in dialogue with other scholars across this platform. As I think about undergraduate and graduate courses I would like to develop, I have been making a conscious effort to consider how I might pair more typical readings with discussions from the listserv, and I would love to see other teacher-scholars produce work providing examples of how this platform might be used.



These are, of course, just initial starting points for what future inquiries into the platform might explore, directions that might allow us to take the listserv more seriously. There is, as always, more work to be done. And I want to close by stating one more time why I see such work as so important. Much of my dissertation has focused on thinking through the (albeit often messy, uncomfortable, and even infuriating) affordances of the listserv, but it might be more important for me to end this chapter by thinking about the

costs associated with failing to seriously contend with the conversations of the platform, of dismissing it as idle disciplinary chatter. If we diminish the significance of the WPA-L, if we refuse to see its threads as knowledge-making and theory-building work for the discipline, there are profound consequences. If we only look to the journals and monographs and edited collections of the field, we end up erasing perspectives and voices that do not make it into those venues, we miss the opportunity to see conflict play out live and in-time, and we flatten the emotional topography of the work of the discipline.

I remain drawn to the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric because of its investment in access, in democratizing knowledge, and in recognizing meaning-making as always in process. Despite these espoused commitments, the ways we write and publish in the field often fail to embody these principles. I think the conversations of the listserv are, at least at times, an exception. It is certainly not a perfect platform, but as I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis of the three threads explored in this dissertation, and as I have tried to explicitly argue in this concluding chapter, the WPA-L is a site that seems to better connect our theories of composition to acts of composing. I believe seriously attending to the listserv can help us better understand what the field's theoretical commitments mean in practice.

I also think such work is important because of the changing nature of media. The WPA-L is reliant on an old technology. Twenty-two years is a long time in the digital age. Email and the technology of listservs are almost quaintly old fashioned. But as one of the oldest digital presences of the discipline (and as one of the most extensive archives of the field) the WPA-L deserves attention. And as new social and participatory media continue to emerge, we would be wise to think about how the public disciplinary

conversations of the listserv differ from those that take place in the online comment sections on trade publications and newspaper articles or in the semi-public tweets and Facebook posts of the discipline's membership. The WPA-L is not the only digital site of disciplinary conversation, but it was certainly an early one.

These are just my thoughts, though. It would, of course, be wise to also ask the list, to invite the subscribers themselves to comment on the disciplinary significance of the listserv and to invite them to help direct these future studies. I have no doubt that WPA-L members would respond with enthusiasm and many suggestions. And such projects would be richer from that feedback.

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