ASSUMING AMBIGUITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation considers ambiguity throughout the history of Rhetoric and Composition, a discipline generally concerned with clarity, concision, and correctness as key attributes of "good" writing. In the first part of this dissertation, I draw from the theoretical contributions made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and show how the central tensions she wrestled with in that text mirror the tensions experienced at the dawn of this discipline, tensions that have (re)emerged throughout subsequent decades. I trace the disciplinary conversations in the decades following World War II, as Rhetoric and Composition sought to define itself and its space in increasingly neoliberal, corporate college and university structures. Summarizing field conversations around the problems of relevance, content/standards, teachers and students, and assessment, I show how the gap between disciplinary knowledge/best practices bumps up against the demands of a profit-driven university. This project offers another way of thinking and doing through a praxis of ambiguity, explored and articulated through five guiding verbs: imagine, emerge, expand, intuit, and situate. Through these guiding verbs, I explore how these verbs and the scholarship that supports them may offer ways to intentionally disrupt the presence of white supremacy culture in teaching, research, and administration in the discipline by making visible the characteristics of this culture and sketching the outlines of an interventional framework based on a praxis of ambiguity, offering avenues for future research.

For my parents, whose belief in me has never been ambiguous.

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Quite literally this dissertation could not have been completed without the solidarity of Michigan State University's Graduate Employees Union. I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in October of 2020, just about six months after I defended my prospectus and during a still ongoing global pandemic. Without the quality health insurance guaranteed to me by their bargaining, it would have been impossible for me to continue writing or complete my Ph.D.

Similarly, it would have been impossible for me to complete this dissertation without my committee chair, Dr. Danielle Nicole DeVoss. Whether or not she knows it, she used a mentoring approach that embraced ambiguity and shifting situations. As my health worsened and improved, improved and worsened, she remained steadfast and unpressuring. We both had to rework definitions of who I was as a thinker and a writer; she remained confident that I'd find a way through. I am beyond grateful for her presence during these years.

I also want to thank the rest of my committee for their support and patience. I presented them with clear timelines and deliverables at my prospectus defense in February 2020 and I didn't follow a single one. They gave me space and grace as I had to learn new ways of working and relating to my work. Dr. Jacqueline Rhodes encouraged my exploration of Simone de Beauvoir in the context of Rhetoric and Composition during my first semester of coursework, and it was her continued interest that gave me the confidence to pursue this topic. She was both committee member and professional mentor, as we worked together on *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* throughout much of my writing this. During our weekly editorial meetings, we'd talk about life, which was an anchoring routine when everything else felt unmoored. Dr. Michael Ristich sent regular check-ins, offered helpful advice particularly on the theoretical portions, and graciously weathered what I imagine was an uncharacteristic committee experience. Dr. Julie

Lindquist was supportive and encouraging when I reached out seeking feedback about how I was treating the role of the writing program administrator in various sections. She told me in that meeting that she missed spending time with my mind, which I've kept with me as a salve to the fear that mind has changed since diagnosis.

There are so many other people I must thank but I promised myself I'd keep this to two pages. Of course, my parents have been supportive, even when that expression of support was to abide by the plea to never, ever, under any circumstances ask me how the dissertation was going. Shannon Kelly, who gifted me Lola Olufemi's (2021) *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* at the time I most needed to read it and ensured me I would finish my own work in the otherwise, even when it seemed utterly impossible. Travis Freeman, who has weathered significant ambiguity with me as I moved, wrote and didn't write, processed grief over my illness, and wrestled with existential dread navigating the job market. I can't imagine finding my way through this past year without having found you.

Finally, two groups. First, the International Simone de Beauvoir Society was supportive of my work on Beauvoirian ambiguity and pedagogy, and I was able to attend conferences in Paris and Washington, D.C. where I connected with others who cared about Beauvoir. These experiences energized me as I sought to carve out a space for her in my own discipline.

And second, Quakers know a thing or two sitting with ambiguity, which is why it is of both little and great surprise (as a lifelong atheist) that I have become a Friend while writing this. Quakers have been listening into silence, practicing pause, and assuming ambiguity for hundreds of years. I am so thankful to the Syracuse Friends Meeting for continuing this tradition and holding space for all.

PREFACE

"The otherwise requires a commitment to not knowing. Are you ready for that?"
(Olufemi, 2021, p. 17)

"To be human is to be rhetorical. That is, to affirm that the essence of the human condition is to be bound to uncertainty." (Kneupper, 1980, p. 160)

In Mandarin, a 'problem' and a 'question' are linguistically identical. You have a 问题 (wèntí) either way. I've been consciously working with the problemquestion/questionproblem of ambiguity since the first semester of my doctoral program but, as I look back, I realize that my interest in ambiguity first arose as an affective reflection of my years living in Shanghai and learning a notoriously difficult language rife with double meanings, meanings based on social context, on linguistic context, on poetic interpretation. Perhaps it is also easier to see cultural and social ambiguity when removed from one's country or culture of origin; to find oneself strange in a place reorients to the strangeness of all places, even those that were once familiar. Jostling an assumed sense of stability and normality is at the heart of this dissertation, where question is answered with question and problem does not seek solution. And yet things move, take shape, call forth an otherwise, a way of being in discipline that upends the very notion of discipline.

This project is organized in two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-3) sets the context, defines important terms, outlines a methodology, and situates the use of theory for ambiguity and the implications of ambiguity for theory. It also reviews a slice of disciplinary history that grasps at a simple and complex question: Why do we do things the way we do? This question sets the exigence for the second part (Chapters 5-9), which proposes how we might do things differently, building from a framework of rhetorical and pedagogical ambiguity. I've organized the second

part around five guiding verbs (imagine, emerge, expand, intuit, and situate) that I hope sketch a vision for ambiguity in our discipline that sparks other traipsings, flights, avenues of thought in future scholarship and practice.

As I've worked on this over the past few years, I've often questioned whether it is defensible or ethical to forward ambiguity at a time where the society from which I write is desperately struggling to grapple with a sense of shared, concrete reality about both our history and our present moment. Without some shared understanding of problems and questions, we've seen that there is little hope that we might ever emerge from this deeply entrenched political and ideological stalemate between the "two sides." As we will see, the conceptualization of ambiguity that I work with, drawn and adapted from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), takes as a founding premise that ambiguity isn't created or resolved - it simply exists as the fundamental condition of being. In these moments of concern and confusion about forwarding ambiguity in our current context, I kept coming back to this. To look at ambiguity is not to bring it into being. It is there whether we choose to look or not; I've continued with this project under the premise that we risk far too much in choosing not to.

Similarly, as much scholarship before this has argued, to think that the composition classroom or our scholarship on rhetoric and writing can be apolitical is misguided. Like ambiguity, even if one thinks they are achieving an apolitical stance in the classroom - politics will seep through the cracks of this poorly constructed foundation. As scholars and teachers of rhetoric, we deal in the varied and complex ways that arguments take shape and spread. If we are to help our students, our colleagues, our neighbors, ourselves out of the mess we currently find ourselves in, we will need new and more sophisticated tools to deconstruct deeply entrenched

cultural beliefs about supremacy, exceptionalism, competition, and definitions of truth and freedom. This dissertation explores how ambiguity as praxis can be one of those tools.

I carry through this project the call to action from Julie Lindquist in her 2021 Chair's Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication:

> I always say that I've never met a paradox I didn't trust. I believe that it's time to double down on our missions even as we let go of the idea that all is under our control. It's time to speak to our impacts even as we acknowledge that what we do with students isn't the whole story. It's time to aim for a more integrated, holistic way of being teachers, scholars, and humans with other humans, even as we show up in our specialized professional roles. (p. 202)

In these remarks, Lindquist is responding to the, still, ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which has spanned the entirety of my writing this project. Strangely, the pandemic doesn't show up much in these pages directly; perhaps the connections between assuming ambiguity and living in global crisis was just too obvious. And yet the affective cloud of those years bleeds into my thinking, my writing, and has forever shifted how I think about the responsibilities of our discipline.

Finally, I follow the excellent model of one of my favorite contemporary thinkers, adrienne maree brown (2019), regarding shifting terminology as it bumps up against the calcifying nature of publication. She writes, "If this is being read in a future in which…language has evolved, then please know I would be evolving right along with you" (p. 18). I have sought to use inclusive terms and concepts. I am sure, somewhere in these pages, I have made mistakes. I am sure in three, six, twelve months, ten years, there will be things small and large that I will want to change about this project as the world changes and my own understanding changes with

it. This is not to avoid my responsibilities as a writer, but to forward a sense of humility regarding any attempt to make solid the shifting nature of political, social, and emotional life.

Thank you for being here, however you have come.

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CHAPTER 1: AT THE DAWN OF DICIPLINE

An Interesting Subject

At its core, this dissertation is an act of gratitude to my life's thought partner. Although Simone de Beauvoir and I never lived in the same world, I have lived much of my life in the light of hers. She died on April 14th, 1986 in Paris, at the age of 78. I was born just a few weeks later, only eight and a half hours away in Eschenbach en der Oberpfalz, Germany. The capaciousness of the writer/reader relationship makes our connection possible, expanding beyond the confines of the short lives we live, with rebellious disregard for the temporal limits of individual existence. When a writer gives as much of themselves to their readers as Beauvoir did, the relationship can take on texture and depth that echoes partnership, a collaboration of thought. And although it may seem unidirectional (how, now, might Beauvoir be influenced by her readers, entombed as she is at Montparnasse?), those who re-read Beauvoir in the present, into the future she would never reach, inevitably shift those ideas and give her new life.

In the summer of 2008, after I graduated college, I read all of Beauvoir's autobiographies, totaling nearly 2,000 pages (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* 1958; *Force of Circumstance 1963; The Prime of Life,* 1968; *All Said and Done,* 1974). I'd previously read some of her work in gender theory and philosophy classes, but mostly just from *The Second Sex.* While in many sections of that text Beauvoir uses her own experience as a case study for gender dynamics, the voice she takes in the autobiographies is more intimate, confessional, vulnerable, all while highlighting many of the same issues explored in *The Second Sex.* Through the autobiographies, I entered Beauvoir's life, not just her thought; I wondered how someone could

write so well about themselves (my journals of the time betray me) while I interrogated her purpose in this expansive, life-long project.

Those autobiographies changed how I thought of myself and what I imagined possible for my life. bell hooks (2012) writes that Beauvoir's "life, her work, was vital to my survival and personal growth, for she was the one female intellectual, thinker-writer who had lived fully the life of the mind as I had wanted to live" (hooks in Mussett and Wilkerson, 2013, p. 231)[1]. I share this profound gratitude for the gift of a life laid open to the world. It is significant too that in writing about her life at that time, she was reinvigorating the genre of the personal essay, which Beauvoir scholar Ursula Tidd (2017) has termed a "multidirectional form of ethical witnessing" (414). While personal essay or autobiographical writing in itself was not new, and is traditionally traced back to Montaigne in the Western tradition, Beauvoir's revitalization of the genre revolutionized feminist writing, theorizing, and consciousness-raising with lasting effect into the present.

Simone de Beauvoir is an interesting subject for Rhetoric and Composition[2] because, while she was classically trained in philosophy, the archive of her life's work is a praxis of rhetoric and writing. In her works intended for publication, Beauvoir wrote in many genres including novels, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, and literary/philosophical/cultural critique. Writing published posthumously by Sylvie LeBon de Beauvoir, Beauvoir's adopted daughter and

[1] And true to bell hooks as a reader, thinker, and critic, she goes on to say that yes, Beauvoir was limited in her understanding of race, and that other - particularly Black - women were also publishing important, influential projects of intellectual life. And still, Beauvoir's model of a life of the mind was formative for hooks.

[2] Throughout this work, I refer to the discipline I write from as "Rhetoric and Composition." I capitalize it to designate when I am speaking about the discipline as a whole, and do not capitalize the terms "rhetoric" or "composition" when I am speaking of them as general concepts. The fact that our discipline cannot settle on a name for itself is not lost on me, given the amount of time I've spent mapping that very discipline into frameworks of ambiguity. At the present moment, Rhetoric and Composition is sometimes also called Rhetoric and Writing, Language and Literacy, or Rhetorics and Communication, Communication Studies, among others. I mean all of these things, but for consistency I refer to it throughout as "Rhetoric and Composition" when I am speaking about the discipline specifically.

executor, include her journals as a philosophy student, letters held for publication after death, and other pieces of ephemera that together form an increasingly complex, and at times incoherent, interpretation of who she was and what she believed[3]. While Beauvoir was human and no doubt wanted to present something of a coherent, intentional self to the world, she was also - intellectually at least - comfortable with the messiness of life and its fundamental inability to be lived coherently if it is to be lived fully or honestly.

New Becomings

By the mid 1940s, Beauvoir was well known in French intellectual circles as a novelist, her published works including *She Came to Stay* (*L'Invitée*, 1943), *The Blood of Others* (*Le Sang des autres*, 1945), and *All Men are Mortal* (*Tous les hommes sont mortels*, 1946). In January 1947, at the age of 39, she departed for a six-month speaking tour throughout the US, her first transatlantic trip, on which she expected to "have the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me" (Beauvoir *America Day by Day* 3*).* She had just finished the manuscript of what would become the *Ethics of Ambiguity,* which was initially published in six monthly installments in *Les temps modernes* in 1946 and then as a monograph in 1947. The English translation became available in 1948, the quickest translation for any of her works, perhaps due to the public and media excitement surrounding her U.S. trip. She was met with some fanfare in the U.S., which was surprising since she was an intellectual (not a celebrity) and a French *woman.* But her trip was cataloged in multiple major media sources, including her own reflection "An Existentialist Looks at Americans" published May 25, 1947 in the *New York Times.*

[3] Kate Kirkpatrick's 2019 biography of Simone de Beauvoir, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life,* highlights the ways in which new writing from and about Beauvoir has complicated understandings of her life.

While Beauvoir was on her adventure to become a different self, there were also growing pains for the discipline of English. Decades before, Communication established itself as its own discipline apart from English. In the late 1940s what would soon become Rhetoric and Composition seemed to be outgrowing its home as well, as the job of teaching introductory writing took on more importance to the university and pedagogical expertise beyond literature was needed to support increasing demands and stronger programs. So, in February 1947[4] The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Speech Association of America sponsored a conference in Chicago to discuss the interests of those teaching "reading, writing, and speech to college freshmen" (Gerber, 1952, p. 17). At that very same time, Beauvoir spent a short, but significant, thirty-six hours in Chicago. For that leg of the trip, her host was the novelist Nelson Algren, with whom she would have a decades-long, tumultuous transatlantic relationship.

It's hard for me not to find a deeper significance in the fact that both the beginnings of the discipline as we know it today and Beauvoir's journey to a new self shared the same physical space to work out the details of their growth and identity. Perhaps Beauvoir, on her way to the Art Institute of Chicago (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 95), passed some academics on their way to discuss the future of this new discipline. Even if not, their coexistence in space and time is significant as all were shifted and swayed by being in these particular moments, past the active horrors of the Second World War but carrying the scars of acute existential precarity. Beauvoir, a teacher herself for a brief period after she completed her degrees, would no doubt have taken much

[4] Two years later, on April 1st and 2nd 1949, NCTE hosted a conference focused on the issue of freshman English at the university level. Over 500 people attended this first meeting, justifying the NCTE's decision to make this a permanent organization within its larger structure, the seeds of this meeting were planted at the unofficial Chicago meeting in 1947 (NCTE Archives)

interest in the discussions of those meetings, of the question of what teachers owe to students of writing - the craft from which she formed a life.

One of the emergence points of Rhetoric and Composition, when viewed from its institutional history, is from English Literature. This connection shaped and continues to shape the discipline today, particularly regarding our own sense of agency in our expertise. Some of the first pieces that take composition as a subject matter in *College English* are written by English Literature professors, largely bemoaning the work of composition instruction. In "An Open Letter to the Educational Experts on Teaching Composition" George Wykoff (1939) shares skepticism regarding the advice given from scholars of education on how to best approach composition teaching:

> You tell us there is no relation between knowledge of grammar and writing. Naturally, we are puzzled, and as teachers of composition (who, to be frank, have very little real interest in composition except as it earns us a livelihood, while we do graduate work, get Ph.D.'s, write scholarly articles on abstruse literary subjects, and this use composition-teaching as a stepping stone to something better, more interesting, and more profitable in the field of literature).... (p. 144)

Wykoff's general sentiment was not an aberration at the time; many of the instructors of composition were literary scholars who would have much preferred to teach in their area of expertise but understood composition was a means toward that end. For Wykoff, and many other English scholars at the time, the perception was that "teachers of composition are, and can expect to be, only pedagogic pretenders, academic proletarians, section hands, doers of drudgery, and

unhappy, disillusioned men and women, without hope of professional or financial reward" (p. 146)[5]. This is a difficult morale from which to shape a new discipline.

Of course, not everyone was as disillusioned by the prospect of teaching composition as Wykoff was, and those who felt drawn to the challenges and problems of teaching composition recognized early on that the relationships between English and Composition would need to be addressed for composition instruction to be taken seriously. Haber (1941) writes an impassioned plea in *College English* entitled "Vive Freshman Composition!" Haber saw unique strength in composition as a subject since

> the opportunities that lie open to the teacher of freshman composition are tremendous. He fills a place so strategic that it may well be called decisive. No matter how many kinds of classes he may teach later, he will never have more promising material than that which his freshman classes offer him. (p. 292)

But there was a looming obstacle: composition was housed in a discipline that largely resented it, since it took time and attention away from literary teaching and theory. He explains:

> If a satisfactory understanding could be reached concerning the relationship of the teacher of freshman composition to the whole program of the English department, one of the most important steps in modern education would be accomplished….it is always time to begin working at it: not merely for the sake of solving a vexed administrative problem, not even for the sake of improving the situation of the teacher of freshman composition, but for the sake of serving more efficiently the most important person on our college campus - the one-day-old college freshman. (p. 293)

[5] Unfortunately, these complaints echo today, even among composition instructors whose professional aim it was to teach composition: the rise of adjunct labor on the one hand and increasing demands for tenure promotion on the other have made composition teaching low-level work that tenure track faculty may wish to avoid in favor of building teaching and research resumes more appropriate for promotion.

Wykoff and Haber represent polar perspectives[6] on the status and value of freshman composition at the cusp of Rhetoric and Composition: for some, it was a means to an end; for others it was an area of scholarly and pedagogical expertise worthy in its own merit.

English in Wartime

The emergence of this new discipline came at a particularly tense and chaotic time in US higher education. In response to the Second World War, universities urgently adjusted to accommodate both the United States' involvements in the war and then the return of soldiers seeking to use their GI benefits toward education. In a symposium published in *College English* Louise M. Rosenblatt (1942) of Brooklyn College captures the existential weight of teaching and learning during these times: "Neither we nor our students should function in the classroom other than as complete human beings. Hence it should be inevitable that the teaching of English, like the rest of our life, should be profoundly affected by our entrance into the war" (p. 499). The tensions between serving the complete human being while mitigating the national security interests of a country at war put tremendous pressure on humanities disciplines, feeling the need to pivot their abilities toward training and preparing for war efforts while simultaneously questioning the validity of war, seeing violence of all kinds as a humanistic threat. In *College English* Warner G. Rice (1943) of the University of Michigan and Howard Mumford Jones of Harvard write:

> How far can colleges of liberal arts (whether separately established, or parts of universities) become in fact technical schools for training the operatives of highly

[6] These perspectives and tensions were not limited to the beginning of the discipline but have continued throughout. For example, in 1976 David R. Pichaske published an article in College English bemoaning the dredges of freshman composition, titling it: "Freshman Comp: What Is This Shit?"

> complex and delicate machines of destruction for the duration of a long and costly struggle, without endangering or obliterating those arts of peace out of which must come a renewed life for the nation and for the world? (p. 313)

This tension, between the perceived patriotic duty to maintain global peace *through war*, dug deep into the foundations of what a liberal education should be and do, and with it the scholar's place in maintaining or revolutionizing those aims.

Henry V.S. Ogden (1944) in "Liberal Education and the War Crisis" outlines what he sees as the six central aims of a liberal education at that juncture:

1. The student should have a mind capable of concentrated and sustained mental effort
2. The student should have a critical mind, one which demands evidence before granting belief and one which is competent to evaluate evidence
3. The student should have a knowledge of the basic field of knowledge
4. The student should have a knowledge of the ruling values of Western culture and, more specifically, of American culture
5. Knowledge of the possibilities of human life
6. The student should have a perception of the relationships of the different kinds of knowledge (p. 266)

To the modern reader, perhaps this may seem a rather progressive articulation of liberal educational goals for the mid-1940s. The aims, worded as they are with "have" rather than something more iterative such as "develop" point potentially to gatekeeping, but assuming Ogden intends that students would develop these abilities over the course of their education, these aims point to critical thinking based on evidence but open to multiple ways of knowing,

multiple lived experiences, and an interpretation of culture as a reflection not of human nature but of the products of epistemology and belief. Missing are any aims that suggest that the student is being developed for work and not for life, or that work and life are poised to become inseparable categories in the burgeoning post-war capitalist America.

War efforts catapulted efficiency models already introduced to the United States labor economy through mass manufacturing. As a result, at the end of the war, in order to continue production and economic growth/recovery, consumer and infrastructural development continued as the United States' patriotic focus. Higher education was co-opted for the corporate and manufacturing machine, and subtly, slowly the goals of education shifted to development and training - not of the mind or the holistic person - but of the worker. Just ten years after the end of World War II, George Kelly (1955), writing in *College English*, anticipates the co-optation of higher education for the purposes of the market. The history of composition as a discipline is crucially tied to this: we began departing English at the very time that the corporate university needed a stronger "general education" approach to training new workers. Kelly observes:

> The recent shift by the universities toward general education is the educational response to one of the most important shifts in the new society – the bureaucratic rationalization of occupations and professions...Since the rise of the personality market, the well-rounded, generally informed, smooth, articulate, and communicative graduate is now the product demanded by the corporate monopsonists who determine our production. (p. 212)

This becomes an issue for department chairs/program directors as they navigate the split from English along with new and growing demands catalyzed by the end of the war. In this context, Kelly explains that the "administrator" role is "the most complex and ambiguous...Since the communication course is frequently interdepartmental and since it is more often than not the

biggest course in the institution, institutional power and prestige accrue to its director" (p. 213). It seems that what many scholars and department heads viewed as their patriotic duties during wartime metamorphosed to education in service of a complex and demanding capitalist labor machine.

Although these changes occurred quickly, they did not go without reflection and critique, sparking debate and concern about the shifting aims of higher education, and a liberal education in particular. Harold Taylor (1957) captures the cacophony of competing aims and goals, which still feel relevant today:

> Education for citizenship, education for responsible living, for effective living, for democratic living, for clean living, for clear thinking, for the American Century, for Americanism, for the Kingdom of Heaven, for moral character, for ethical conduct, for a better world, for success in love, marriage, motherhood, wifehood, womanhood, and a career, education for the future, for a world of international tension, for a Western civilization, for the atomic age, for an age of neuroses, an Age of Anxiety, and education for God, for country, and for Yale. (p. 245)

Pinballing between these purposes has caused a sense of directionless, chaos, overwhelm, and sometimes accepted failure within Rhetoric and Composition. Without a clear sense of what it is we are trying to do, and the extent to which we can realize our own disciplinary agency against the backdrop of the ever-expanding corporate university, how can we assess ourselves? What even is it that we seek to assess? Taylor pushes back against this tension: "I do not see how there can be a single aim for education, because I do not see how there can be a single aim for human

life" (p. 245)[7]. There are echoes of existentialism in Taylor's articulation of the way out and the way forward from the grip of the corporate university:

> What kind of teaching, then, can help us to achieve the level of technical competence we must have, and yet develop young men and women who are free and independent, who want to think and act for themselves? It seems to me that this is a question of teaching people to find themselves, to establish their own identity, an identity which is theirs and no one else's; it is a question of teaching people to know what they believe, about themselves in their world, about other people, and to know who they are, to know what there is in life, what they want from life, and what they want to give to it. All this is involved in the struggle for personal independence. (p. 246)

However, even if the discipline were to agree on this multifaceted conceptualization of the aims for education, how would we package it in a way that is attractive to administrators concerned with the bottom line? How would we assess the relative strength of our programs against these lofty, longitudinal, and ambiguous aims?

Taylor's concern with personal independence speaks to the way we think about personal growth as an aim of education. On this point, I distinguish between personal growth and existential growth. Existential growth differs from the models of personal growth that the neoliberal university, via neoliberal culture, promotes. Personal growth reflects a process of learning from mistakes to develop better strategies and achieve better outcomes. Under this model, personal growth sees linear progress as an inherent good. Generally speaking, progress

[7] Hauntingly, Taylor anticipates how we managed to continue teaching during a global pandemic: "If higher education merely consists in feeding information to students and grading them on how they managed to hand it back, it would be much better to save the money now spent to build campuses and just pipe in the information to every happy student listener in his own living room or bar....As General Grant once said about Venice, it would be a great town if they would just drain it" (246).

under neoliberal logic aims to create better adapted individuals able to sustain inhumane working conditions, and to see their inability to do so not as a failure of the system but rather a personal failure. For example, we see this dynamic exposed in emails sent to students and professionals alike suggesting that practicing mindfulness is an effective way to manage increasingly unsustainable study and work conditions. These measures fall under the guide of a model of personal growth and overall well-being; however they (mis)place the cause of this overwhelm - individual responsibility is not a comprehensive answer for systemic imbalance. Neoliberal logic seeps into these dynamics often unnoticed, and for these reasons, it is helpful to distinguish between personal growth from what I'm terming existential growth.

Set against personal growth, existential growth is more holistic and brings with it a suspicion of personal development in the name of anything outside of a deeper sense of connection to oneself and one's community (broadly defined) and carries a concern with how systems/institutions either support or diminish these connections. This type of growth is difficult to capture and since it includes an eye for situated institutional critique, it potentially poses a threat to the neoliberal/corporate university model. It is not just that it is difficult to articulate or categorize this type of growth, thus making it difficult to monetize, the ends of this type of growth would be critical of that very push for monetization or optimization. So, in this distinction between personal growth and existential growth we see that while there were voices pushing back against the pressures to market this new discipline to profit motivated university administrators, the possibilities for working against those constraints dwindled under the pressures to articulate the value of our disciplinary knowledge and existence.

While World War II and its shadow significantly shaped the outlines of this new discipline, it also had a profound impact on Beauvoir's thinking, radically shifting her moral

compass and intellectual commitments. Beauvoir wrote extensively throughout the war, both as a way to record it and as a way to escape it. The pieces she published during this time, including "Pyrrhus and Cineas" (1944), "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" (1945), and "An Eye for an Eye" (1946) contribute to the ideas she presents in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and reflect a more complex rendering of ethical action and moral foundation. In addition to her published essays, she kept regular and detailed accounts in her personal journals, published posthumously as *Wartime Diaries* and used these as a skeleton for her extensive autobiographical project[8] along with letters between her and her life partner, Jean Paul Sartre[9], during his military service, including time spent as a prisoner of war. These artifacts show how Beauvoir's thinking changed as a result of the war, both as obvious reactions to injustices she saw and as well as ambiguous shifts from the sociocultural gestalt. Through these years, the purpose of philosophy became clearer to Beauvoir: a philosophy is valuable to the extent that it not only helps us to live in the worlds we are born into, but also shows us what in that world needs to be changed so that it might be more free, more equal, and more peaceful for all.

In *The Prime of Life,* Beauvoir explains that 1943 marked the beginning of the "moral period" of her writing career in which her expectation for what a philosophy should *do* changed dramatically (Bergoffen, 2004, p. 79). Into the 1930s, Beauvoir saw herself as an "apolitical, idealistic Kantian, a solitary individual content to exercise her own petty bourgeois freedom as a teacher and writer" (Holveck, 2004, p. 11). Kate Kirkpatrick (2019), in her biography of Beauvoir, notes that "before the war she had been, by her own admissions, solipsistic" but throughout the ongoing conflict and the eventual occupation of Paris by German forces, she

[8] Particularly in *The Prime of Life* (covering 1929-1944) and *After the War* (covering 1944-1952).
[9] *Quiet Moments in a War: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir 1940-1963* (ed. Simone de Beauvoir) and *Letters to Sartre* (ed. Quintin Hoare).

began asking "who is useful or useless to society? Who has the power to decide?" (p. 187). It was in these years that she wrestled with a critical distinction regarding the conceptualization of existential freedom, a shift that would influence the rest of her intellectual work.

Existentialism as a philosophical movement is difficult to concisely or singularly define since resistance to overarching systems was one of its notable tenants. Existentialism is a term applied *to* this body of thought rather than used by its thinkers to describe their own work, with philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre even pretending not to know what existentialism was (Burnham & Papandreopoulos, n.d). It developed as a recognizable body of thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mostly throughout Europe, connected by concerns with freedom, authenticity, anxiety, and absurdity. Notable thinkers include Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus. Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus broadly represent perspectives of French existentialism, and speak to the attempts of the philosophy to work through the precarity of France after occupation in the Second World War and navigate ongoing state-sanctioned oppressive policies, such as French colonial rule of Algeria. Each was seeking to articulate a philosophy and meaning of life not dependent on organized religion, faith, or modern societal institutions. In this way, French existentialism was both a philosophical and political project. As life partners, Sartre and Beauvoir are often viewed as being in broad agreement on the aims and articulations of existentialist philosophy, but as many posthumous publications of personal writing in the form of letters and journals show, they had both points of convergence and division on central issues in the existentialist project.

A main point of divergence between Sartre and Beauvoir was on this issue of existential freedom, which is captured in her critiques of Sartrean thought in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Sartrean existentialism argues that limitations on freedom are self-imposed by one's

internalization of their socialization as fact; the path to freedom is to reject these limitations and accept/assume one's inherent freedom. But as her thinking shifted during the war, Beauvoir could no longer support this conceptualization of freedom after seeing the "concrete experience of actual human beings struggling to act freely in situations of oppression" (Holveck, 2004, p. 11). Given what she saw in France and abroad during and immediately after the war, she realized that locating freedom within the agency of the individual irresponsibly glossed over how power and oppression materially function. As Kirkpatrick (2019) explains, for Beauvoir "there is a difference between having freedom (in the sense of being theoretically able to make the choice) and having the *power* to choose in the actual situation where your choice has to be made" (p. 193). This matrix of freedom, agency, and oppression is both more nuanced and more demanding of an ethics needed to address it.

In these ways, the war had a profound impact both on the early trajectory of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline, and on Beauvoir as a writer, citizen, and philosopher. It pushed both to ask foundational questions about meaning, purpose, morality, and agency. And central to both is the notion that writing should aim to *do* something and that writer-teachers/teacher-writers have an ethical obligation to engage the moral implications of their work. For Beauvoir, her writing from the 1940s on demonstrates this growing commitment, and we can see this most clearly in her first and only[10] philosophical monograph, *The Ethics of Ambiguity.*

[10] This is a debatable claim, since critical interpretations of Beauvoir's first person, autobiographical writing read it as lived philosophy, philosophy for the masses, or applied phenomenology. Additionally, many read her novels, such as *The Mandarins* or *She Came to Stay* as literary philosophy. It is difficult, too, to define or label Beauvoir as a philosopher - she insisted in interviews later in her life that she was a "writer" not a philosopher.

Articulating an Ethics

"The Future is not in front of us, it is everywhere simultaneously: multidirectional, variant, spontaneous" (Olufemi, 2021, p. 35)

The Ethics of Ambiguity was published in French in 1947 and translated into English in 1948, five years before the first English publication of her most well-known nonfiction text, *The Second Sex*[11]. It seeks to define an ethics that can address the ambiguous situation of human subjectivity as both a transcendent being attending to its own projects and simultaneously "a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 7). Reflecting on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir said that she didn't like it because it was too abstract (Marso, 2017, p. 17). For her, its major flaw was trying to define an ethics without a clear social context. In this way, *The Second Sex* attempts to clarify the claims made in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by providing a contextualized case for analysis: gender. However, in its philosophical abstractness, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* presents potentials for broad and expansive analyses of subject/object orientations, embodiment, oppression, power, and the role of language and ideology in the maintenance of oppressive conditions.

The central argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* holds that ambiguity is a fundamental, inescapable, and irresolvable condition of human existence. According to Beauvoir, there are three primary ambiguities that form our experience of ourselves as both subject and object in and for the world, and we must begin from this assumption if we are to develop any useful philosophy or ethics. The first layer of ambiguity is that of transcendence and immanence. I am both the center of the world in which I live and the projects I undertake (transcendence) and but a

[11] Originally published in French in 1949

thing in the lives of others (immanence) who also see themselves as the center of the world in which they live and the projects they undertake (transcendence). Decades later, rhetoric scholar Charles W. Kneupper (1980) expresses a similar sentiment, attempting to square the balance between our material lived experiences and our immaterial subjectivity: "Human beings live both a material and symbolic existence. We are beings of flesh and blood as well as of words and images. We live in an objective, independent, material world which impinges upon us in real material ways" (p. 161). Our existences float between these realizations of the self and its positionality in relation to others in the world; we are never wholly one or the other but a continual, recursive becoming through these competing forces.

Second is temporal ambiguity. We are aware of past, present, future but in a moment in which the past is no longer, the future isn't yet, and the present is nothing (Weiss in Simons *Philosophical Writings* p. 284). From the present moment, I see a future in which I exist, a past that once existed and implies development toward both present and future, but the actual movement of time unfolds in a series of moments that "die one by one" (Beauvoir, 2004, p. 311). There is no mechanism by which we might hold time steady; thus, we exist in continual temporal ambiguity.

Finally, we see the aggregate of our lived experiences as belonging to ourselves alone, but also as unfolding as experience shared with others; we are both historically unique and part of the general collective of our milieu. These three experiences of ambiguity exist simultaneously, impacting how we understand the purpose and value of our embodied existence in the world. Weiss explains that Beauvoir's articulation of the situation points to how "intertwined all three experiences of ambiguity are [and] also how fruitless it would be to seek to move beyond them to achieve a non ambiguous understanding of human existence" (Weiss,

2004, p. 284). And yet, this is exactly where Beauvoir finds her exigence, seeing nearly all philosophical systems as falling to these fruitless aims of understanding human existence sans ambiguity. She writes:

> As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. Those who have accepted the dualisms have established a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot be saved…. And the ethics which they have proposed to their disciples has always pursued the same goal. It has been a matter of eliminating ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or encompassing oneself in the pure moment. (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 6)

She critiques philosophical systems that attempt to reconcile or resolve existential ambiguity rather than accepting this ambiguity as a given and establishing ethical ways to exist within it. The canons of feminist thought proclaim Beauvoir's "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" from *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe* 1949/Borde and Malovany-Chevallier translation 2011, p. 273) one of the most significant sentences in feminist history for reframing gender not as a reflection of nature or biology, but as a reflection of the processes of social construction. However, I'd argue that it is Beauvoir's swift revisioning of philosophical thought in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that foreshadows the movements of feminist and queer theory in the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st. For Beauvoir, the value of a philosophy is not as an explanation of the world through some coherent "system" but through a flexible, emergent

articulation of the ethical principles that can guide thought and action, that increase freedom for self and other without erasing the fundamental ambiguity of embodied existence. As a case in point, Beauvoir's critique of Hegel:

> According to his system, the moment is preserved in the development of time; Nature asserts itself in the face of Spirit which denies it while assuming it; the individual is again found in the collectivity within which he is lost; and each man's death is fulfilled by being canceled out into the Life of Mankind. One can thus repose in a marvelous optimism where even the bloody wars simply express the fertile restlessness of the Spirit. (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 7)

By this account, philosophical systems such as Hegel's justify even the bloodiest wars, because a human is nothing outside of the collective project. Sacrifices to this project, then, are not only necessary, but honorable uses of the self that can maintain a sense of optimism in the current order of things despite violence and oppression. Beauvoir's aim to find ethical ways to exist in, rather than resolve, the fundamental ambiguities of our situation requires that I see my freedom as bound to the freedom of all others, since we are all transcendent and immanent, unique and part of a collective, tied to past and future by a present moment that is nothing. The optimism of genuine freedom does not come from explaining away this situation or finding arguments that enable one to subsume themselves into the project of the collective. It comes from first assuming the ambiguous conditions of our existence, and then finding ways to exist ethically and purposefully within it.

Beauvoir wasn't even satisfied with her partner Jean Paul Sartre's articulation of existentialism[12] because while it accepted the ambiguity of our situation, it did not provide a

[12] The reader interested in an introductory account of the development of existentialist thought in post-war France should read *At the Existentialist Cafe: Freedom, Being an Apricot Cocktails* by Sarah Bakewell (2016)

framework for an ethics in response to existential ambiguity. Sartre's answer was *freedom* but, for Beauvoir, the conceptualization of freedom articulated by Sartre and other existentialists was not a tenable foundation for ethical choice or action:

> Sartre declares that every man is free, that there is no way of his not being free. When he wants to escape his destiny, he is still freely fleeing it. Does not this presence of a so to speak natural freedom contradict the notion of an ethical freedom? What meaning can there be in the words *to will oneself* free, since at the beginning we *are* free? It is contradictory to set freedom up as something conquered if at first it is something given. (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 24)

This rejection of Sartre's figurations of inherent freedom makes Beauvoir's thought both unique and radical among the existentialists, who were often read as narcissistic or nihilistic, proposing nothing but one's own freedom as the fundamental meaning in life. In order to make existential freedom a workable concept for an ethics, and more carefully attuned to ambiguity, Beauvoir rearticulates inherent freedom as constrained by facticity. Facticity is the set of conditions to which we are born and live our lives: where and when we are born, the family we are born into, our religion, and other demographics that come to form our identity before we are even conscious of ourselves as beings. In this connection between freedom and facticity, Beauvoir highlights that it is inaccurate, and harmful, to assume that we are all free to the same extent or in the same ways. To build a philosophy on the notion that we are, as the majority of the existentialists of the time tried to, is not only unethical but unreflective of the world as it is.

Beauvoir's understanding of freedom, genuine freedom, as it is presented in *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* holds that my freedom is tied up in the project of freedom for all others. This freedom is not something that can be achieved all at once, or outside the circumstances of others'

conditions, rather: "Freedom can only be achieved through the freedom of others" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 169). This understanding of freedom as both fundamental to the human experience and also deeply entangled with others' is foundational to intersectional feminism today. Three decades after Beauvoir articulated this concept of freedom, Audre Lorde (1981) in "The Uses of Anger" writes "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own," a concise representation of intersectional feminist thought and action (p. 10). Of course, intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1990) and tied specifically to the condition of Black women (later expanded to a framework for understanding marginalization, oppression, and power as compounding across identities) came decades after Beauvoir wrote about this conceptualization of freedom. Beauvoir did not holistically think through the lens of what we would call intersectional feminism today - she often took her own perspective as an educated, white, Western, cis-gendered woman as a universal experience for all women, as was common for white feminists writing at the time. Still, it is significant that in the late 1940s, Beauvoir was concerned with the ways in which an ethics for existentialism must have more complicated, more entangled, notions of freedom and oppression. It is this groundwork that makes it a text worth re-reading in the present and relevant to the Rhetoric and Composition.

While existentialism doesn't play prominently in the theoretical development of Rhetoric and Composition, it wasn't absent entirely, finding space in our scholarship not just at the time of the boom of existentialism in the post-war years[13]. Glenn Matott (1976) published "In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition" in *College Composition and Communication*. In it, he argues against using Sartrean existentialism as a basis for teaching

[13] See, for example, Gordon E. Bigelow's "A Primer in Existentialism" in *College English* 1961 21.3

composition and offers instead Martin Buber as a contrast because Sartre is looking for the "essence of the human in the radically isolated individual" whereas "Buber insists that this essence is emerging in 'dialogue'"- that is, in the *relationship* between the individual and the world (p. 30). Matott writes during the shift from a focus on product to process, and from individualism to social constructivism. For Matott, the tendency for expressive approaches to composition to ask the student to account only for themselves was a weakness since it did not "require the individual to be measured against any norm, nor to be placed in relationship to any other human being. It is, apparently, a view of the human experience which values the individual in all his uniqueness - or, one might say, his isolation" (p. 27). He argues that this is a legacy of Sartrean existentialism. Beauvoir's critique of Sartre's approach is similar since, viewing it as uncritically focused on individual freedom (the "radically isolated individual") and therefore lacking in both social context and an actionable ethics. Matott explains that the popularity of this approach to a philosophy of existence is that it has led to isolation in a culture already primed for pathological individuation (p. 28). I continue to see some insight in Matott's configuration of the 'radically isolated individual' - whether or not it is a legacy of Sartrean existentialism - in the profound difficulties many U.S. residents have had and continue having in seeing freedom as a collective responsibility rather than an individual right in several pressing social issues. From mask and vaccine resistance in the pandemic, to defending the right to bear arms amidst a gun violence crisis, to the most recent overturn of Roe v. Wade, U.S. many residents have shown that their individual freedoms are more valuable to them than a vision of freedom as collective responsibility.

In relation to education specifically, Matott argues that Buber's approach to existential philosophy "transcends the reductive tendencies which characterize so much of what is

specifically 'modern' in education: the vocational reduction, the behavioral reduction, the technological reduction: not unuseful, but in themselves mere *petits culs-de-sac* of the human spirit" (p. 31). I don't disagree that Buber could be a useful progenitor of existentialism for Rhetoric and Composition, and to that intervention that I offer Beauvoir. Both Buber and Beauvoir speak to the complex entanglement of subjectivity, and both provide relevant heuristics for thought and action today.

Ambiguity in Rhetoric

Beauvoir's written works span thousands of published pages, across multiple genres. Because of this, Sandrine Sanos (2017) observes that "Beauvoir is an icon read in fragments" (p. 4). This project will not overcome the fragmentary way in which scholars engage her texts. However, it will focus on a fragment not often considered - her slimmest book[14], the one she liked the least, and the one most often overlooked by scholars[15] in favor of her novels, her autobiographies or - of course - for *The Second Sex. The Ethics of Ambiguity* deserves modern attention because it is both a reflection of her epoch and a foreshadowing of the world to come. A new reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* one that considers trajectories of thought and geopolitical realities into the 21st century, finds that it was well ahead of its time. Its ability to remain abstract is a strength of the text rather than a weakness: there is space for translation, interpretation, and negotiation. It is this ability to flirt with ambiguity, to think with it rather than

[14] The only shorter book was her account of her mother's death, *A Very Easy Death* (1964)

[15] There are a few works that have engaged *The Ethics of Ambiguity* critically as an intervention for the modern era and a re-visioning of Beauvoir's legacy. Sonia Kruks' monograph in Studies in Feminist Philosophy, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (2012), extends Beauvoir's theories of existential ambiguity to topics like oppression, privilege, and political judgement. Laura Hengehold's *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Individuation: The Problem of the Second Sex* (2017) focuses on *The Second Sex,* but critically enriches her reading of *The Second Sex* by contextualizing its argument in the broader implications of Beauvoir's philosophical system by including other texts such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the philosophical essay "Pyrrhus and Cineas."

resolve it, to use it to open more potentialities that makes it particularly poignant in approaches to theory today.

There exists now a clear exigence for ways of thinking, writing, teaching, and doing that open more possibilities, engage ethics realistically, and seek to build worlds where difference need not be subsumed in the name of inclusion. The problems we face today -- including oppression and marginalization based on identity, rampant environmental destruction and decay, and worsening international and domestic political tensions -- necessitate such careful considerations of ethics. More precisely, these problems require an approach to ethics that begin realistically from the complexity, contingency, and complicity of trying to make "right" choices and actions in the modern world. As Alexis Shotwell (2016) argues in *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, the moral landscape on which we make our "right" choices is impossibly complex, and the only way to begin to consider an ethics is to realize that our obligation "is to do our work as individuals understanding that the meaning of ethical actions is also political, and this is something that can only be understood in partial and incomplete ways" (p. 130). The acceptance of partiality, incompleteness, and contingencies requires a more robust ability to think, choose, and act through an inherently ambiguous context.

Ambiguity, complexity, and entanglement are also revolutionary concepts at the boundaries of scientific discovery. For example, neuroscience has shown that the brain is flexible, that it develops and functions in unpredictable ways, and that it is able to heal itself and form new pathways through neuroplasticity. The input-output, computational metaphor that was popular for describing the functions of the brain since the 1950s (uncoincidentally, while modern computers were first being developed) has been partially traded for an emergent, rhizomatic, flexible model of brain structure and function. Similarly, in physics, quantum mechanics and

string theory have suggested that the observable world is far more complex and far less predictable than we may have assumed. In fact, as I write this, the CERN laboratory announced that they've observed matter switch from matter to antimatter, suggesting that even the smallest observable components that construct our perceived reality are non-binary and ambiguous (Irving, 2021). In *College English,* S.M. Halloran (1975) anticipated the impact of this type of scientific discovery on our own discipline:

> The assumption about knowledge and the world that informed classical rhetoric are no longer tenable. External reality is paradoxical; our very effort to know something of the physical environment alters that which we seek to know so that the object-as-known is not the same as the object we set out to know. (p. 624)

The last century of scientific discovery is rooted in complexity: the more we learn, the more questions arise, the more we try to develop fixed models, the more those models reveal underlying complexity that turn back on the very theories that attempt to drive closure and clarity. Not only are we a discipline trying to research, write, and teach in the epistemic context just described, but Rhetoric and Composition has reasons to think about ambiguity, although - to my knowledge - no one has identified or explored this as a singular topic of study. The very concept of the discipline is ambiguous; the boundaries between the two terms that define us cannot be settled. Rhetoric seeps into composition, composition back into rhetoric. Like matter and antimatter, they are at times distinct entities that can become each other and themselves again. Even one half of the whole resists its boundaries, as Bruce Horner (2015) articulates of composition:

> Hence, composition may be used to refer not only to a kind of text and the means by which such texts are produced, but also and at the same time to the authors of such texts,

> the courses in which they deploy particular means to produce such texts, the programs responsible for such courses….and the professional academic disciplinary participation in and study of the programs, courses, students, texts, and activities by which those texts are produced in relation to one another -- Composition writ large. (pp. 450-451)

And similarly, Robert M. Gorrell (1977) shows how the other half of the whole - rhetoric - also resists its own boundaries since "Rhetoric can be an academic discipline or art, a theory of discourse, a description or grammar of discourse, a body of precepts, or whatever all these deal with -- the writing or speech itself. Thus, when we talk about rhetoric, we often are talking about a kind of multiple-exposure photograph, with none of the faces distinguishable" (p. 20). Additionally, *what* we study also seems ever expanding - if we study writing and persuasion, isn't that everywhere all time, in our own discipline and outside it? In the academy and in the community? In the individual and the collective? While we have long understood ourselves to be relevant everywhere all at once, articulating this relevance outward has proven a challenge for all generations of scholars who inherit our particular problems of disciplinarity.

There are also pressing sociopolitical reasons for re-considering *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* Ambiguity, complexity, entanglement have become defining concepts for our current milieu, as technology and mass communication have sent globalization into warp speed while simultaneously contributing to large-scale environmental destruction. The nature of "truth" and of "fact" have become so controversial and disputed in our mediascape that the very fabric of civic life, particularly in the United States, where I write from, is crumbling[16]. This complex and

[16] The civic fabric of the United States was never intact, with the colonial legacies of slavery and forced removal and genocide of Indigenous people. Holding steady the violent history of the United States, there still has been notable change in political debate, discourse, and civic participation which have been exacerbated by the Trump presidency and administration and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which since 2016 have uncovered a particular chaos in "truth" and "fact" in sociocultural discourse.

chaotic environment has enabled a rise in demagoguery and (neo)fascism, similar to the political dynamics Beauvoir witnessed while working on the outline for *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* In order to understand complexity, rather than merely seek to resolve it, we need frameworks that enable us to think through and with it. I argue throughout this project that ambiguity, as articulated by Beauvoir and explored by others, is one such framework.

I have been working with the notion of ambiguity in Rhetoric and Composition via Beauvoir since my first doctoral semester in the fall of 2017. Throughout my program I learned an incredible amount about the racism inherent in our predominantly white discipline (PWD) embedded in a predominantly white institution (PWI) from both faculty and classmates. I also learned as I navigated my own commitments to social justice in the unfolding of the 45th presidency. In my last two years of the program, I served as the editorial assistant for *Rhetoric Society Quarterly and* worked with authors and reviewers as they too tried to grapple with and address racism in our scholarship, teaching, and professional/interpersonal relationships. All these experiences have shown me that race is always a relevant topic in the work we do, and that scholarship has not only the potential but the responsibility to speak to these ongoing dynamics and pose interventions and solutions. A connection to this project comes through commitments to anti-racist pedagogy, and a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity has the potential to offer some new avenues anti-racist pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition.

As I learned about white supremacy and anti-racism,[17] I was introduced to the tenets of white supremacy culture. These fifteen tenets include: perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness and/or denial, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, the belief in one "right" way, paternalism, either/or binary thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict,

[17] Learning about this, rather than experiencing it, is a privilege and a testament to how white supremacy functions

individualism, progress defined as more, the right to profit, objectivity, and the right to comfort ("Characteristics" n.d.). It was helpful for me to come to understand white supremacy culture as a set of characteristics, orientations, and behaviors, since I was enculturated to see white supremacy and racism as an overt, hateful way of thinking and being, rather than as the very fabric of white hegemonic culture. This ignorance demonstrates white supremacy functioning as it was designed, and it is by naming it and coming to understand how it manifests in our own thoughts and practices that we can meaningfully deconstruct it, even if in only one classroom or publication at a time.

As I worked with these ideas, I was also reminded of a piece I read early in my research on ambiguity. In "Gloria Anzaldua's Rhetoric of Ambiguity and Antiracist Teaching" Klotz and Whithaus (2015) actually name the "rhetoric of ambiguity," and connect it to Gloria Anzaldua's rhetorical modes and practices in *Borderlands/La Frontera.* They define a rhetoric of ambiguity as "a discourse practice that privileges overlapping, intersecting, and constantly reshaping identity categories as a productive way to address racism in America today" (p. 72). In developing this approach to discussing and analyzing rhetoric in the classroom, they also draw from feminist, anti-racist, and critical pedagogy approaches to teaching and learning. They point to others in Rhetoric and Composition who have upheld Anzaldua's work as a model to use in the classroom, including Ede, Glenn, Lunsford, Licona, Rosinski, and Peeples. Klotz and Whithaus are interested in ambiguity because it, as an orientation, "demands a return to the process whereby we came to name ourselves within predetermined categories. Ambiguity generates coalition by bringing students and teachers to a common ground of doubt…" (p. 73). Anzaldua explains this ability as a "tolerance for contradictions" (p. 101). The authors point to "traditional" rhetorical theorists such as Aristotle, Bakhtin, and Burke as providing useful vocabulary and frameworks for analyzing rhetoric but point to their limitations in classrooms where identity and power are central concepts. They write,

> While Aristotle, Bakhtin, and Burke provide robust frameworks for analyzing rhetorical situations, Anzaldua's rhetoric of ambiguity allowed the students to account for potential contradictions within speaking subjects...Our students use Anzaldua's perspective to hold account for difference stances within the same speaking subject. (p. 80)

They argue that critical pedagogy and participatory learning are needed to teach a rhetoric of ambiguity. The authors conclude that their "experience speaks to the necessity of problems, trouble, and discomfort in our teaching, and the openness of a rhetoric of ambiguity to address power and identity within our classroom contexts" (p. 89). This makes me think of Karma Chavez's (2013) notion that a coalition is not a home, that we cannot look for consensus if we are seeking to address the deep structural inequalities that form the fabric of classroom dynamics.

In the second half of this dissertation, Chapters 5-9, I highlight how each of the approaches to ambiguity (imagine, emerge, expand, intuit, and situate) have the potential to push against these tenets of white supremacy culture. Together, this provides an additional avenue for thinking about anti-racist pedagogy and scholarship, since it seeks to address these tenets through practices we often view or assume are neutral or even beneficial. Many scholars in the discipline have made anti-racism and social justice central in their research, and my thinking here is indebted to them. April Baker-Bell (2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2017; 2013) researches how language policies and practices in composition and language arts classrooms are inherently racist. Asao B. Inoue (2019a; 2019b; 2015; 2012; 2004) researches anti-racist assessment practices and labor-based grading contracts in composition classrooms. Aja Martinez (2020; 2019; 2018; 2014a; 2014b) researches integrating critical race theory in Rhetoric and Composition classrooms and departments. Natasha Jones (2020; 2017a; 2017b; 2016a; 2016b) researches social and racial justice in technical communication teaching and practice. Carmen Kynard (2018; 2015; 2013a; 2013b; 2008) researches Black histories of the discipline and connects those histories to her own racialized experiences of teaching and researching within the discipline. Together, these scholars,

among others, build a body of knowledge that shows persistent racism in our discipline and enables continuing research into how to address this in our classrooms and departments.

As they are filtered into pedagogy, many approaches to anti-racist teaching center race and social justice as the content of the classroom. These approaches are great because they make visible the systems and power structures in our country that benefit from remaining invisible. However, content-based approaches to anti-racism and social justice are not always possible in all programs and/or faculty may not feel prepared to address these topics in their classrooms. Additionally, harm can be perpetuated in situations where faculty are not trained or prepared to engage classes in discussion on race or social justice. I don't offer ambiguity as a counter to the tenets of white supremacy as a *replacement* to content-based anti-racist teaching and I do not intend to suggest any hierarchy between them. What I do see is a potential to target white supremacy culture in our discipline from another angle, and to make both white students and white scholars more aware of the ways in which white supremacy culture functions not only around us but also through us, particularly without our knowledge of it.

Rhetoric has historically considered itself an art, as opposed to a science. Yet overall, both historically and in the current iteration of the discipline, we tend to ask questions and seek answers in order to resolve ambiguities, to define our boundaries, to establish pedagogies that are airtight, replicable, scalable, efficient. Yet, we have known all along, as the much of scholarship throughout our discipline has shown, that both rhetoric and writing are steeped in, entangled with ambiguity. But rather than assuming it and establishing a framework that radically engages this ambiguity, we try - repeatedly - to resolve it. And in finding it difficult, perhaps impossible, to resolve, we declare that we have failed, that the subject is not knowable/teachable. Each generation of emerging scholars seems to inherit the same shape, if slightly different flavor, of our existential crisis.

The question I pose as a coordinate of ambiguous thinking is: What if we resisted the rational tendency to resolve or foreclose? What if we developed frameworks that helped us to better understand these ambiguities while also providing theory and practice to allow us to work within the material, often inflexible contexts and conditions of the modern university? There are several scholars at different points in the history of the discipline who have attempted this; a recovery and revival of their voices uncover ways to engage the project of our intellectual and pedagogical work differently. Can we get comfortable with accepting that writing and rhetoric, as both intellectual and pedagogical pursuits, do not yield entirely to objective inquiry? At least not without compromising the core of what we do? Yes, we can define phenomena, hold them steady, hierarchize, dichotomize, quantify, replicate - but in this work we risk having shaped the thing into what we can observe given our current tools, rather than honoring it for what it is in gestalt. In short, we risk having shaped the thing into a version that negates and betrays the very work we set out to do.

CHAPTER 2: A WILL AND A WAY

"I want knowledge you can sit a while in, knowledge that won't expel you for pontificating, knowledge that knows there is no certitude." (Olufemi, 2021, p. 124)

Emergent Methodology

A significant portion of this project considers how Rhetoric and Composition has considered, engaged, and at times obfuscated ambiguity throughout its modern history. I'm specifically interested in the ways this has been captured and preserved in the published scholarship. This is of course only one way to approach this topic. An entirely different dissertation might take the form of qualitative educational research observing composition teachers in the classroom and analyzing their approaches through a lens of ambiguity. Or an experimental design aimed at capturing intentional uses of ambiguity in the writing classroom and their effects. Or a cultural-rhetorical study looking at how ambiguity pervades modern discourse and the implications for teaching and research. All of these would be interesting ways to study ambiguity in Rhetoric and Composition. Each would likely lead to different answers and understandings; such is the nature of the topic at hand and the nature of epistemology more broadly.

Another approach would be a comprehensive history starting with the beginnings of Western rhetoric in Ancient Greece and tracing those concepts to the modern version of the discipline we find ourselves in today[18]. Aside from scope of that project quickly exploding beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of a dissertation, there is already recent work that takes on this task. In *A History of Ambiguity,* the Western classicist Anthony Ossa-Richardson

[18] A concern with ambiguity obstructing clarity is not unique to the modern history of Rhetoric and Composition but has been a concern since the origins of Western rhetorical thought. Overall, the Ancient Greeks sought to remove linguistic or interpretive ambiguity from communication, and many believed that with time this would be possible. Ossa-Richardson's (2019) study considers these examples in depth.

(2019) collects the fragmentary and often hidden moments critical to understanding ambiguity conceptually across key disciplines - rhetoric, law, divinity, and literary criticism. He works without internalizing Aristotle's judgment of the matter, that ambiguity is "the hallmark of sophists, bogus diviners, and poets with nothing to say" finding that, in fact, there is much to say (p. 34). His careful, detailed method establishes a comprehensive history of a concept obscured by its very indeterminacy.

Ossa-Richardson uses William Empson's (1930) text, *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* as a conceptual frame, but this is where Ossa-Richardson ends his study. Whereas Ossa-Richardson stops with Empson, and then traces back, I begin with Empson and Beauvoir, and move forward. Empson passes this torch between linguistic/rhetorical understandings of ambiguity and Beauvoir's more philosophical concerns, but both point to ambiguity being not only an important feature of a text but also of a lived, embodied experience. Empson was a student of I.A. Richards, whose theorizing on the old and new Rhetorics influenced how Empson understood ambiguity both historically and in his milieu. In this way, "Empson was the heir to a conversation, or a profusion of them, even as he gave rise to new ones - worlds as vast as the whole emergence of humanity, as intimate as quiet legions of readers at their desks" (Ossa-Richardson, 2019, p. 401). It is this conversation I join, picking up where Empson (and Ossa-Richardson) left off. This demarcation makes sense, as there was a conceptual shift regarding ambiguity in the late 1930s, when thinkers such as Beauvoir begin to explore the existential components of ambiguity as experienced in subjectivity (Ossa-Richardson, 2021, p. 18).

Ossa-Richardson makes a critical argument that I continue here regarding how to read for ambiguity in a corpus or an archive. He calls into question I.A. Richards' claim that "where the old Rhetoric treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hopes to confine or eliminate it, the

new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of our most important utterances - especially in Poetry and Religion" (Richards *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* qtd in Ossa-Richardson, 2021, p. 5). Of concern is Richards' assumption that 'tolerance' of ambiguity is a newer critical and theoretical approach when, in fact, there are isolated but significant traditions that have "acknowledged the deliberate and beautiful ambiguity of certain privileged, exceptional texts…" particularly poetry and the Hebrew bible (p. 21). Ossa-Richardson argues then that, given the examples this history presents, the "temporal distinction between Old and New Rhetoric should be replaced by a *generic* one" (p. 21). I follow this in my own approaches to seeking out and understanding how ambiguity has existed in the modern history of our discipline. As I discuss shortly, this historiographical project questions the metanarratives of our discipline, both trying to understand how those narratives formed while identifying moments in which scholars worked actively against narrative calcification; an honest attempt to write about ambiguity cannot quickly fall to dichotomy, temporal or otherwise.

Ossa-Richardson's purpose in writing *A History of Ambiguity was* "to trace the possibilities of...questions, not to foreclose them in advance" (p. 402) because "not knowing is, in the end, a kind of knowing" (p. 403). This way of thinking about epistemology is central to this dissertation. Resting for a moment in the idea that "not knowing is, in the end, a kind of knowing" and holding the space not to foreclose possibility helps orient to the thoughtspace I've cultivated in order to approach the indeterminate nature of ambiguity while still having to capture something of it in the words set finally on this page. I am inspired by an articulation of this dance from Black feminist and activist, Lola Olufemi (2021) in *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*:

> My aim is to produce a map that is nothing like a map at all, but rather a record of traces that make connections between the past (present/future) - the present (future/past) - and the future (past/present). I want to demonstrate how these temporal regimes encroach one another, so to tell the story of the past means telling the story of the present, which is already where the future resides. (p. 32)

A fresh articulation of Beauvoir's temporal ambiguity, Olufemi offers a reorientation of historiographic work, one determined to break open "temporal regimes" to show the past and future as being tied to the present, recursive and unfolding. This suggests the etymology of evolve from *evolutionem*, meaning "an opening of what was rolled up" (Etymology Dictionary). Perhaps there is a way to think of an ambiguous evolution, beyond time and space, interconnected and ongoing, impossible to meaningfully know from the limits of our own brief embodied experiences. As in a test of limits, taking on ambiguity as a topic of study is like coming ever closer and yet never fully arriving. It requires understanding from the outset that arrival was never possible - and continuing anyway. Since I am interested in how ambiguity has shown up in both major and minor moments in the discipline, I've drawn from a number of methodological approaches to triangulate something that might allow me to generously approach the subject matter. In the following paragraphs, I explain methodological benefits of (pan)historiography, recontextualization, and feminist rhetorical practices for this project.

Historiography is an interesting match for the topic, since historiographical methods require unambiguous, comprehensive, and meticulous engagement with the history in question, the archive under investigation, and the researcher's own orientation to the history. Ambiguity is a tricky subject for historiography, because it is everywhere at once and yet rarely named. An attempt at definitions comes later, but in the following I outline the frameworks of

historiography I have used in the research and writing of this project. Historiography is, in essence, an engagement with the fundamental ambiguity of the stories that have taken hold and what is left behind. James Berlin (1994) argues that in any project of revisionist history, "we must search for interpretations that cast the past and the present in new conceptual formulations...a dialectical process that is never fully ended, since the relation of past and present will continually change through time, each generation needing to reformulate its historical understanding" (p. 123). The past, although large and looming, is still a finite series of events. In connecting Berlin's conceptualization of revisionist history to Beauvoirian ambiguity, we see that the events themselves do not shift or change, but the *meanings* of those events do as we move further into a present (that was once a future and is also already a past) and come to understand and/or reinterpret the significance of formerly insignificant events and the waning significance of others.

Berlin argues that "revisionary" histories of rhetoric are needed to complicate and push back against the grand, metanarratives that stand today. He holds that the histories written by Howell (1971), Kennedy (1980), Corbett (1990), and Vickers (1990) present rhetoric as a "march of ideas, ideas characterized as unified, coherent, and rational" (p. 112). Anything that does not fit this "coherent" whole is seen as an aberration to be ignored, rather than as something that might, in the very least, complicate interpretations of history. Berlin raises two major problems with this approach to the history of rhetoric. First, are the erasures that occur, particularly of historically marginalized or silenced groups, when we continue to tell, unproblematically and uncritically, the stories that have solidified over time. Second, is the idea that not only is history itself ideological but the (re)construction of history is also ideological: "The historian is never simply writing an account of the past. He is also writing an account of the present and, of equal

importance, a hope and vision for the future. In telling us what happened, the historian is telling us what ought to happen now and tomorrow" (p. 127). A revisionary approach to histories of rhetoric would not only work to fully reconstruct the social, political, and economic ideologies of the period under study (rather than just considering the pieces that seem to speak directly to the present), but it would also work to make transparent and tangible the ideology guiding the researcher in their work. It's not that the metanarratives are always incorrect; they may in fact be correct within the ideological focus of their study. But, like any history, they are inherently incomplete. The trouble arises in histories that do not transparently reflect upon their own fragmentation.

This history will also be incomplete and will make transparent my ideological leanings in Rhetoric and Composition: that seeking clarity, coherence, and quantification is a limited way to understand the potentials of communication and subjectivity as reflections of existence. While Berlin doesn't speak to "ambiguity" in the study of rhetoric directly, his call for more complex and nuanced approaches to the study of rhetoric's history points to ambiguity as a *productive* feature of historiographic methodology. The point of this methodology is to continually refine interpretations, but not with the goal that these nuances eventually lead to a 'complete' picture of the history of rhetoric, since the 'history' of rhetoric and our interpretations will also change in accordance to our position in the present, which is also ever-changing. And here are echoes to a Beauvoirian trifecta of ambiguity: subjectivity, agency, temporality. This also shows up in her thinking on the movement/telling of history: "One does not love the past in its living truth if he insists on preserving its hardened and mummified forms. The past is an appeal, it is an appeal toward the future which sometimes can save it only by destroying it" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 102).

This project is revisionist in nature, while also tracking a history that spans generations of scholars. There is something happening with the concept of ambiguity in the modern history of our discipline that moves beyond the individual thinkers who engage it. To capture this type of longitudinal and multivocal movement, a panhistoriographical framework is helpful. As conceptualized by Hawhee and Olson (2014), panhistoriography refers to "writing histories whose temporal scope extended well beyond the span of individual generations" and can also refer to studies that "leap across geographic space, tacking important activities, terms, movements, or practices as they travel with trade, global expansion, or with religious zealotry" (p. 90). Hawhee and Olson here, spurred by the expansiveness of their own research agendas, look at the discipline's tendency to strictly limit the scope of research and question what is lost if we abandon panhistoriographic projects in rhetoric. This project too has wrestled with scope and focus, setting limits on time (1939-the present), but leaving conceptual frames and definitions open to allow for a more generous and generative relationship with the texts under study. Like Berlin, Hawhee and Olson are concerned with the tendency for even the more reflective historiographical projects to bump up against hegemony, just by the pressure to say something complete enough for a reader to meaningfully comprehend. They explain that "expansive histories always run the risk of slipping from wide-angle views of indeterminacy to totalizing narratives" (p. 96). Panhistoriographical methods help to keep the researcher attuned to "the parallels that cannot be drawn and the changing details that bring texture even to apparent continuities in argument and identification" (p. 101) and for these reasons seem particularly well suited to think with and through ambiguity as it appears (and/or doesn't) throughout the modern history of our discipline.

Historiography of a discipline is a particularly layered and meta-reflexive approach to research. It is critiquing and building in the same stroke, a look at the past while intuiting a yet unrealized version of the future. In this work, as Jacqueline Jones Royster (2003) sees it:

> The challenge is to be adventurous enough in our thinking to take a different path, to find a different viewpoint, to critique the terms of engagement so that a different sense of the landscape can be made visible, can be deemed valuable, and can become instructive in the re-envisioning of what constitutes knowledge. (p. 161)

Royster positions the theory and history of rhetoric, and knowledge production more generally, as *situated interpretation* (p. 148). It is in coming to understand the situatedness of our perspectives and interpretations that allows (and/or doesn't) work toward calls for recovery projects that re-order, re-situate, re-vision, and re-create not only what counts as the history of rhetoric but also the emergence of possibilities for the future. Royster sees epistemology as rhetorical to the extent that it persuades a particular understanding of truth and stability; because of this rhetorical epistemology must, as often and as transparently as possible, turn back on itself to interrogate what it makes possible and what it closes off. She writes: "We are questioning not just the rhetoric as measured by our traditional values and interests, but also the measures, the values, and the interests themselves and how such decisions emerge and gain primacy" (p. 161). Following critical approaches to historiography and disciplinary landscaping, this project reframes the past so that we might more easily move the needle toward a different future, or a larger set of imaginable possibilities in the future.

The way we understand where we have been directly influences how we can conceive of where we want to go, and in positing here that there has been something missed in not engaging, in a sustained way, notions of ambiguity in Rhetoric and Composition, I offer that there may be

new/different ways to move, in new/different directions. New and different cannot be easily separated; things that appear new in fact often are not, and things that are different are not always new, but a revival and revisioning of something once already seen, perhaps forgotten. Royster questions "whether we can actually build a higher tolerance for dramatic change, kaleidoscopic vision, and philharmonic interactions" (p. 165). Ambiguity can provide guidance for both theory and practice in Rhetoric and Composition, for things being both here and elsewhere, this way and otherwise, without either determining or foreclosing possibilities.

I also draw from LuMing Mao's (2013) art of recontextualization and use it as a tool within my approaches to historiography, which "works to develop terms of interdependence and interconnectivity, aiming not merely to reverse our evaluation of the self/other binary or any other binary for that matter, but to recalibrate it and to replace it" (p. 47). Originally developed for comparative rhetoric, as a corrective to the Western-centering projects that problematically defined the outset of that field, the art of recontextualization offers much to theory more broadly, to move beyond binaries, dichotomies, and hierarchization. For Mao, problems arise when the research "fails to examine, among other issues, the constructed nature of one's starting point and the inherent power dynamics attending each and every form of representation" (p. 43). The art of recontextualization is an important tool for developing ambiguity as a concept within Rhetoric and Composition, both in terms of rhetorical scholarship and pedagogical applications. It speaks to and with *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* providing a way to think about the position of the self as both subject and object, and to complicate an understanding of context as one that is ever shifting and always unfinished. Echoing Beauvoir, Mao's art of recontextualization "rejects any external principle or overarching context to determine the context of the other and relies on terms of interdependence and interconnectivity to constitute and regulate representations of all discursive

practices" (p. 46). Both seek a more complex, less complete, more contingent, and inherently dialogic understanding of the self in context.

Finally, I engage feminist rhetorical practices, particularly those outlined by Royster and Kirsch (2012). Their methods focus on rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription and take shape through critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization. Similar to the other methods I use in this dissertation, feminist rhetorical practices seek to identify and operationalize ways to maintain the complexity of topics under study: "we deliberately recognize rhetoric as a social practice that is multivariant and polylogical...Such positioning helps us to remember how complex rhetorical processes are, to resist coming to firmly set conclusions too quickly…" (Royster and Kirsch, 2012, p. 90). For them, intersectional approaches to rhetorical scholarship have shown how our social positions, and by extension our subjectivities, cannot be reduced to an equation or a predictable set of characteristics or outcomes. Because of this, we need a more refined set of theoretical concepts and methodologies to support the nuances that an intersectional lens brings into focus. They write that intersectional frameworks have pushed the

> conceptual frameworks for rhetorical action well beyond establishing the existence of basic issues of identity and representation toward ever more complex analyses of the social, geopolitical, and cultural dimensions of analytical paradigms as they are infused with complicated relationships and interrelationships in light of various contexts, conditions, and processes. (p. 48)

A feminist rhetorical methodological approach requires "dialogic, dialectical, reflective, reflexive, embodied" orientations that are "anchored in an ethos of care, respect, and humility" (Royster and Kirsch, 2012, p. 67). Seeking to maintain complexity and not foreclose

interpretation, especially in my engagements in the archive of a discipline I have been taught a particular history of feminist rhetorical practices help me to tell a more nuanced story, one that is able to articulate the how and why of our current metanarratives, while not succumbing to a chronological argument about progress and innovation as things that belong only to a recent past. Feminist rhetorical practices enable me to stay present to the past, to imagine what it might have looked like for a different matrix of history to take hold.

Together these frameworks and methods offer a generative and generous foundation from which to explore, name, and theorize ambiguity and its potentials in our discipline. They are interrelated and intermingling, with overlays and overlaps that put them in conversation with one another. This allows me to draw simultaneously from each, establishing an orientation toward my work I term *emergent*. I'm influenced here by the idea of emergent strategy drawn from the work of writer and activist adrienne maree brown (2017). brown works with a definition of emergency from Nick Obolensky's book *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty:* "Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions" (Obolensky qtd in Brown 3). This is an apt description of how I have found and engaged my methods, and how I interacted with the data. To think and write about ambiguity requires an emergent orientation, the ability to see how the networks between ideas proliferate, becoming something larger and more expansive together than they were on their own, but without negating their individual importance. Perhaps this methods section feels more nebulous than is usual for a project as large and as formal as a dissertation, but the topic requires a different way of thinking about how we come to know, what purposes boundaries and definitions serve epistemology, and perhaps even what we might be trying to avoid through

standardization of knowledge production. Emergence is an epistemic vessel that can breathe, expanding and contracting without collapse or explosion.

Scoping History, Narrowing Archive

> "I want to fall into the gaps and tear the gaps, smudge them, stretch them, rip them into tiny pieces and submerge my body in the material scheduled to be discarded, so that History will never find me" (Olufemi, 2021, p. 38)

I am interested in modern scholarship that speaks to the potential for ambiguity as a metatheory and pedagogical heuristic in Rhetoric and Composition. As such, the bulk of my textual data comes from the published scholarship in four of the top and longest standing journals in the discipline: *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and *Writing Program Administration*. I sought to narrow my data collection to a manageable scope for this dissertation while prioritizing representation across subject areas and years of publication. *College English,* which first began publishing in 1939, is the longest standing journal that has published pieces dedicated to Rhetoric and Composition and is the site from which *College Composition and Communication* grew. *College Composition and Communication* was the first journal dedicated to the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, publishing its first issue in 1950. It is sponsored by The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) which remains a significant organization for Rhetoric and Composition today. While both C*ollege English* and *College Composition and Communication* also publish research on rhetoric and the intersections between rhetoric and composition or rhetoric and English literature, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* was the first journal dedicated to the study of rhetoric from a Rhetoric and Composition perspective, and it is also the flagship journal of the Rhetoric Society of America. It began publishing in 1968 as the *Rhetoric Society Newsletter*, and then formalized to its present form in 1976. Finally, I use *Writing Program Administration*, established in 1977,

to consider the development of the discipline from the administrative perspective. The administration of composition courses is tied to the development of the discipline as a whole, and the tensions between disciplinary knowledge and administrative pressures/constraints comes through clearly in the scholarly conversations within.

As a first step, I used keyword searches for ambiguity within each of the journals, and while I found many articles that used the term in several ways, I realized that ambiguity as a concept, as I seek to understand it, exists far more often than it is actually named. And when it is named, it is often referenced without deep consideration, a stand-in for things (words, ideas, arguments, concepts, phenomena, etc.) that are unformed, unclear, or open to interpretation. As such, I realized that I would need to conduct more thorough and intentional archival research, both with initially formed ideas for what I was looking for, drawing from the concept of ambiguity as articulated by Beauvoir, and an openness to what the corpus would reveal.

It is interesting that studying ambiguity as a historical concept requires such an unambiguous approach to tracing that concept. For a project like this, well-worn paths and traipsings on the margins are equally significant. I read the table of contents for every issue of each journal chronologically, considering the titles and the authors, then reading the beginnings or abstracts of pieces that seemed relevant to my research. I also took note of pieces to add to my reading list that were outside these journals, whether from other journals or from monographs and edited collections. In total, I collected 326 articles of general relevance to this project across the four target journals. Some I chose as representative of the metanarratives we have of the discipline, while the rest engage ambiguity whether directly or by implication. While I read through the tables of content, I held titles up against the sweeping metanarratives of disciplinary development across the decades. If a title seemed to point to a different way of thinking,

teaching, or writing I'd skim the article to see if it tracked with my running concept of ambiguity, of things being otherwise.

In addition to the process of gathering sources, there was also a more nebulous process throughout my research; I tracked the development of conversations in the discipline as they unfolded across the decades. It was particularly interesting how they traced onto the sociopolitical milieu. This wasn't something I could account for while I was reading; but as I look back on this extensive reading phase, I realize that I tacked onto versions of the history of the discipline most commonly taught, while seeing the moments where there was some momentum for a different way of knowing and doing. For example, I was able to see in retrospect how the post war world that Rhetoric and Composition was formalizing under dramatically shaped how the energy and ideas forming the discipline almost immediately clashed with the administrative needs of a radically changed higher educational system. In thinking about the conceptualization of the discipline, it seemed to me that the co-incidence of the start of the discipline and the end of the Second World War is often glossed or overlooked.

The discipline also wrestles over time with mapping its own knowledge onto the more recognizable knowledges of the sciences and of management, particularly theories of cognition, problem-solving, and technical/professional writing, but at the same time there was also a call to come back to the foundations of the discipline as an art, not a science, and to consider the value of theory and philosophy to the problems of composition. Additionally, while I thought that program administration would be a passing consideration for the more theoretical implications of ambiguity in Rhetoric and Composition, it became clear that administration really is the water we swim in, and that it would be important to trace ways our histories have solidified a deep engagement with the role of the writing program administrator as it changed over the course of

the discipline. These are a few of the ways in which the data collection portion of this research shaped the project itself, both in the tracing and tracking of conversations over time and also in the less direct influences of reading the history of the discipline over the span of a couple of months, which shifted my conceptualization of the discipline.

On the Uses of Theory in Rhetoric and Composition

"Theory does not deny practice. Theory is practice." **(**Welch, 1987, p. 280)

> In his *College English* piece "To Write the Truth" Richard Weaver (1948) observes that, It is very hard after a century of liberalism, with its necessity of avoiding commitment, to get people to admit the possibility of objective truth, but there again we are face to face with our dilemma: if it does not exist there is nothing to teach; if it does exist, how can we conceive of allowing anyone to teach anything else? (p. 29)

This dilemma has continued to shape the function and uses of theory in Rhetoric and Composition; to form theories about writing and the teaching of writing there must be some sense that there can be something to know and therefore something to teach. It seems obvious that one of the uses of theory in Rhetoric and Composition, then, is to come closer in some ways to stable, concrete, reliable knowledge (which some might call truth), but it also seems that theory leads to proliferation rather than closure, or a recognition of *knowledges* as a first step toward any knowledge at all. This tendency to make things more complex, varied, multivocal has long been at odds with pragmatic ideological foundations of the discipline.

Since the split from English, Rhetoric and Composition moved from the abstractions of literary theory to a practical, pragmatic approach to teaching and research with the first-year writing course at the helm. This has resulted in a tendency to privilege scholarly work and

inquiry that lends itself to immediate application, usually in the classroom. Additionally, Rhetoric and Composition imagines itself to be, aims to be, inherently democratic, a discipline in service of the university and the student. As such, capital "T" theory has struggled at times to situate itself in Rhetoric and Composition. Barnard (2010) notes that:

> With the ascendancy of critical theory in the second half of the twentieth century, charges of willful obscurantism were hurled at theory from anti-intellectuals, from readers who found theory difficult and frustrating, from critics on the Right who felt threatened by the ideologies of postmodernism and poststructuralism, from critics on the Left who believe that theory's density diminished its political efficacy, and form those inhabiting any combination of these positions. (p. 437)

The specialized vocabulary and lofty style of much theory appears intentionally gatekeeping, and a lack of clear and immediate applications to either research or teaching makes it seem less useful (and, therefore, less valuable) to teachers/scholars of Rhetoric and Composition. Robert M. Gorrell (1965) explains the self-defeating, cyclical nature of theory in the discipline: "theory develops, is taken seriously, is confused with precept, is translated into dogma, and develops into absurdity" (p. 140). This sense of theory as vacillating between dogma and absurdity has influenced the perception of theory throughout the development of the discipline over time, garnering general disinterest and sometimes even critical hostility from scholars in the discipline.

These reactions in the name of utility and accessibility are only part of the reluctance to view theory as a valuable episteme. As a central idea, this dissertation holds that the pressures to scale and standardize in an organizational structure that was rapidly corporatizing tied the survival of Rhetoric and Composition to its ability to produce research and programmatic evaluations that justified its existence against an inflexible bottom line. At least implicitly this

results in what Susan Wells (1994) has described as a disciplinary discomfort with doubleness and complexity, or what I classify as a disciplinary discomfort with ambiguity (p. 118). As the department/program/major that provides a general education service course to nearly all students entering the university, scholarship that points to the complexity of the writing situation, writers themselves, and the inherent unpredictability of writing outcomes does not make for a strong sales pitch. Of course, we know this because we are, after all, scholars of rhetoric. But somewhere along the way we've mistaken the rhetorical situation of the classroom itself and the rhetorical situation of translating the classroom to university-level administrators, forgetting that they are different worlds. Overall, we've accepted the demands of the corporate university as the guiding principles of our research and practice[19]. Wells writes,

> We need to save ourselves from the requirement that...writing becomes single, unitary, coherent...When we wish to understand doubleness, we need the most sophisticated critical tools of both rhetorical theory and literary theory. Perhaps in performing many such *progymnasmata...*we may train our ears to hear the doubleness of our discipline, and we may work up the courage to ask one another whether, finally, after all this trouble, we might experience some pleasure for our pains. (122-123)

Theorizing in our discipline is vexed, largely because we have accepted somewhat unquestioningly that the telos of such work should be to render the rhetorical and writing situation coherently through recursive processes of demystification. But to expect from the outset that simplification is not only the goal of theory but should also be a *de facto* requirement of any theoretical project ignores the possibilities and potentials of thinking with/through complexity and multiplicity.

[19] For more on the relationship between Rhetoric and Composition and the neoliberal university, see Nancy Welch and Tony Scott (2016) *Composition in the Age of Austerity.*

Even in spaces where theory is not seen as a threat to the democratic ideals of the discipline, debates about the function and use of theory in Rhetoric and Composition are complex. On the one hand is the relationship between rhetorical theory and composition theory and on the other is the relationship between theory and practice. The boundaries and demarcations between these considerations are not stable or easily defined. Are rhetorical theory and composition theory meaningfully different enough to be addressed separately, as much of our scholarship has done and continues to do? Does theory work in the service of practice? Is the purpose of practice to extrapolate theory? Raúl Sanchez (2012) argues that composition studies needs an "agenda for inquiry comprised of theory and empirical research in a mutually informing relationship" (p. 1), but for most of the history of the discipline there has been effort to separate, categorize, and hierarchize. For example, Douglas Park (1979) questions the pressure on theory to "serve pedagogy in direct and immediate ways" which "risks misunderstanding the basic value of theory and research" (p. 48). He argues that this conceptualization of theory as a service to practice stems from our discipline seeing writing as a problem to be solved, which has made "the enterprise susceptible to fads and dreams of panaceas – the newer the better because the old has never worked well" (p. 49). However, even with this critical read on the relationship between the two, ultimately Park urges that we see theory and pedagogy as two separate things so that each might improve its own arena (p. 51). Perhaps, however, this separation only limits the impact either can have.

Other scholars have critiqued this desire to demarcate and categorize, finding that it limits insights and impacts. Nancy Sommers (1979), in her work on process theory, critiques that process approaches have uncovered two problems with the development of theory. First, is an imbalance between the concerns of application (pedagogy) with the concerns of theory, the

weight tilting toward application as more important and more valuable. The second, within theorizing in process theory itself, was the desire to compartmentalize the writing process into discrete stages in order to make the theory more conducive to being taught. From her perspective,

> Too much of the research on the composing process has been aimed at developing new methods of teaching or trying to find out which method is most effective, and too many composition teachers and researchers have remained defiantly anti-theory and consequently remain dependent on whatever partial or invalid ideas the marketplace supplies. (p. 46)

The two issues mirror each other, as the drive to make clear demarcation of 'the' writing process is the same drive to compartmentalize theory and practice from each other, preventing a more generous interflow of influence; instead, we have "created perceptual boundaries" between the two (p. 46). While I don't immediately see "partial" or "invalid" ideas as inherently less worthy of consideration and engagement, I agree with Sommers that the goal of finding the "most effective" method is troubling. When we use theory, and accompanying methods, to enact a competitive rather than collaborative approach to knowledge-making, we lose the radical potential for theory to bring about several complementary *and* contradictory ideas and practices.

In a piece considering the theoretical distinctions between the social and cognitive theories on composition, Linda Flower (1989) further articulates the problem with seeing theories as competing rather than expounding. When we accept that theory is an either/or project, that *either* social theories about writing *or* cognitive theories about writing are more reflective of what happens in practice, we inevitably "try to polarize (or moralize)" and "in the end, these attempts to dichotomize leave us with an impoverished account of the writing process as people

experience it and a reductive vision of what we might teach" (p. 282). To address this, Flower proposes that we use "interactive theory," that can account for insights from multiple perspectives and approaches (p. 284). Although there have been calls to engage complexity in our research, the general push for coherence and a rejection of ambiguity has limited, I believe, scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition since its founding. Beth Daniell (1994), reflecting on her expectations of what theory should do for the discipline, echoes this sentiment: "I used to think that a coherent theory would help composition become a coherent field, orderly and organized. Now I doubt that this sort of theory is possible or even desirable. I have let go of theory hope" (p. 139). Letting go of hope may sound pessimistic, but in a Beauvoirian sense it is a recognition of the fundamental limits of knowledge and the complex messiness, the ambiguity, that knowledge construction entails.

In *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies,* Raúl Sanchez (2012) points to the theoretical lineages Rhetoric and Composition has drawn from as an explanation for our limitation in working with theories that engage complexity. He argues against an approach to theory that relies, either explicitly or implicitly, on hermeneutics, since writing is far more complex than a "technology of representation" (p. 3). He explains that "a dependence on hermeneutics and its corollary, representation...limits composition theory's ability to describe the function and nature of writing in an increasingly networked world. In this world, the most striking features of writing are its sheer proliferation and its constant, rapid circulation" (p. 3). He argues that drawing on hermeneutics, since it relies on the "persistent belief in a consequential difference between words and things," reinforces binary perspectives (i.e. Platonic, Cartesian) which undercut composition theory's ability to effectively describe the increasingly networked and entangled conditions of writing. And still, in trying to move away from binary

perspectives in theory and an oversimplification of the object being theorized, Sanchez works from a competitive framing, ruling out potentials and possibilities of hermeneutics toward theory in Rhetoric and Composition, and proposing another framework *in its place.* There are many other examples where scholars identify the limitations of binary thinking, of resisting complexity, but in the next breath continue an either/or, competitive model of theorization. In many ways this is the reflection or the shadow of the discourse practices in academe, the generic expectations readers have when they come to scholarship, and the *de facto* requirement to carve out a niche in order to form a body of work. It is in taking time to imagine alternative discourse practices and epistemology that we might shift audience expectation while also pushing for more engaged critical reflection.

Some might argue, as Sanchez does above, that the increasing complexity of the world requires theories (and, thus an approach to theory) that is more capacious, more sophisticated in its attunement to complexity. While many of the communicative circumstances of our current milieu are unique, particularly circulation and velocity, my orientation to Olufemi's (2021) "temporal regimes" (p. 32) asks for pause before forwarding a view of history that imagines the current moment to be so radically different from the past. While I agree with Beth Daniell (1994) that "theories...are never pure. They are always embedded in a situation that is at once historical, economic, social, cultural, and therefore political" (p. 128), I resist assuming that newer theories are inherently better situated to the present moment. As the archival work in this project shows, there have been thinkers within and outside the discipline wrestling with ideas that sound contemporary, but that came from a unique set of historical, economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances at that time. There is great potential to revive these perspectives, re-reading them through a doubled lens; one that seeks to understand the theory in its original

context as much as is possible and another that seeks to read it fresh, anew. This is how I engage *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* along with a number of other "dated" texts from the archives of our own discipline.

In these ways, theories are both rhetorical and political and in this project, I offer that we might additionally approach them as imaginative. This is not suggesting that they are *more* imaginative than they are rhetorical or political, nor is it suggesting that imaginative, rhetorical, and political are boundaried concepts distinct from each other. Because theories are developed in a particular historical, social, cultural moment they are rhetorical and because they are rhetorical, they are political:

> they not only derive power from relations within a field of study but in fact shape these very relations. Theories are thus immersed in politics, serving the interests of a discipline, or of groups within that discipline, while protecting the discipline's most deeply held view of itself, its hard core of assumptions and beliefs. (Daniell, 1994, p. 131)

The stakes of theory, then, are high since theory has the potential to shift the trajectory of the discipline. As a form of persuasion, theory impacts the values and direction of the discipline; I'm interested in considering two orientations to persuasion that directly influence what I want to articulate about my particular theoretical orientation throughout this work. I posit that there is a difference between persuasion that seeks to narrow conclusion - for example getting someone to agree to this thing *over* that thing - and persuasion that seeks to proliferate conclusion - for example, getting someone to see the possibility of more than one thing. I refer to this second type as imaginative persuasion. An underlying argument of this project is that we would have been better served as a discipline, and would be better served in the future, if we realigned our persuasive techniques in scholarship to be imaginative in nature, seeking to offer more

possibilities and converse with existing ones, rather than to rule out, undermine, or replace. This isn't a new idea: in "Speaking of Knowing," Walter R. Carleton (1978) explains that,

> Communication with others is what makes it possible for thought to dislodge itself, to move down the level of a point of view to the level of a point of view about points of view. And it is this movement, in turn, which promotes reflection productive of transformed problems, novel solutions, and perspectives on criteria for truth and knowledge. (p. 68)

I'm struck by this simple reformulation: "to move down from the level of a point of view to the level of a point of view about points of view" (p. 68). It captures the subtle shift between narrowing persuasion and imaginative persuasion - we are no better for reducing the options of thought, and in fact increase critical reflection when we can see ourselves as observers of a plethora of ideas rather than a proponent of one or even a few. Olufemi (2021) says that imagination is in the "teleological pool" because it "undoes entire epistemes and clears space for us to create something new" (34). This is the kind of imagination I hope to bring to theory in this project.

As I explore in more depth in Chapter 3, the disciplinary reactivity of needing to establish an identity distinct from English after the split complicated what Rhetoric and Composition might want from theory. Daniell (1994) identifies this as the difference between a scientific theory and an interpretive one. Scientific theories are predictive, and their value is connected to the strength and reliability of their predictions. The 'hard' sciences are more successful with scientific theories because their subjects are more likely to repeat the same behavior. Humans are complex, however, and so the social sciences or the humanities have less success with scientific theory. Rather, they engage with interpretive theory and "since interpretive theories are not

comprehensive or cumulative, no clear 'objective' criteria exist for judging which theory is best; those of us in the human sciences *choose* which phenomenon we want to explain" (Daniell, 1994, p. 129). Rhetoric and Composition has straddled between scientific theory and interpretive theory, finding that scientific theory is helpful for speaking to administrators who want a clear picture of objectives and outcomes in our writing programs. However, problems occur when we imagine we create scientific theory without translating for the inherent unpredictability of our subject matter, or when we aim to create a theory that "unifies all the knowledge we have created using different theoretical models" (Daniell, 1994, p. 129). Of course, it would be hypocritical for me to propose that we swap scientific theory for interpretive theory, since they are not functionally entirely distinct. I do think, however, that this hypothetical distinction offers pause in the project of theorizing in Rhetoric and Composition, asking us to ask ourselves what it is we want our theory to do, how much we are asking of it, and - more deeply, more personally - what insecurities and anxieties we attempt to write away in creating theory that strives for coherence, replicability, standardization, and applicability.

Another trend regarding theory and its uses in Rhetoric and Composition is that as a discipline, we pull theory from other disciplines - psychology, education, literature, economics, physics. Sanchez (2012) argues that Rhetoric and Composition should be able to build its own theories rather than "retrofit existing ones" (p. 14). If we reframe Sanchez's point here through a lens of imaginative persuasion, we can both question the ways in which Rhetoric and Composition engages with thought from other disciplines *and* rethink the ways that we do, in fact, create our own theories even if they do not always announce themselves loudly and clearly. It makes sense for Rhetoric and Composition to draw inspiration from and learn with other disciplines since the subject of our study is ever-expansive and relates to foundational aspects of

human experience - communication in its varied forms. The quality of the outcomes of this interdisciplinarity ranges, of course, but the potential for insight is great. That is to say, I'm not particularly bothered by our interest in other disciplines, but I am concerned with how we understand the ways that theory develops within our own.

To answer this concern, I draw from la paperson (in *A Third University is Possible* two ideas about theorizing in vexed times. The first is "theorizing contingently" (p. xxiii) which comes from the recognition of impossibility (for la paperson) and ambiguity (for me). To theorize contingency means committing to making space, and it is my hope that the rest of this work places a small crack in the modes and methods for which we currently do things. La paperson, drawing on Fred Moten's work on the Black radical tradition, also discusses theorizing in the break, which is to "theorize an elsewhere that is already beyond the dispossession of that oppressive theory" (p. 19). This is to theorize in the "rupture" of tradition, specifically for Moten, the tradition of the European founding fathers, and embody theory "in the elsewhere, in the sovereign, in the Black" (p. 19). His point is to say that to theorize does not require a particular lineage or modality, and that an expectation that it should denies the very liberatory and radical potential we might hope to see in theory.

In my research, I found that an outcome of a historiographical approach to our scholarly archives is uncovering a longstanding metatheory that spans decades and disparate thinkers, but never came to announce itself as a theory. How many theories have been missed because the theorist had no need for pronouncement? Perhaps this is an ambiguous attunement to disclosure; can a theory exist without its theorist(s) recognizing or announcing it on their own, but creating it nonetheless? In the second half of this dissertation, Chapters 5-9, I show how we miss the ways in which we have developed our own theories working themselves quietly over time. Part of my

theoretical work in this dissertation is to weave together a theory of ambiguity through our published scholarship, pointing to a body of literature robust enough to form a praxis.

Finally, I'd like to say that while theory is political, rhetorical, and persuasive, it is also inherently personal. Daniell (1994) makes this point beautifully:

> This personal need for theory pushes us to pick up the separate pieces, our fragmented experiences, and put them into one basket...Theory is then a way to make sense of how our private lives, our histories, our reading, and our experiences with language, writing, and teaching shape beliefs and values on which rest our practice and our public identities" (p. 138).

bell hooks (1991) has also written throughout her career, and most famously in "Theory as Liberatory Practice" that she came to theory from a space of deep personal pain, and it is the possibility of liberation that gives theory power as praxis: "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (p. 2). I connect deeply with these perspectives on theory and see much of my movement toward ambiguity as a reflection of a struggle to experience growth in some limiting aspects of both my personality and my professional/academic tendencies.

I don't think I am alone in running from ambiguity, hiding in the salve of organization, routine, and regimentation. When I don't know where to start on a new project, I often fall into a pit of endless reading, insecure about my ability to know enough to have anything to say. When I feel nervous about how a class might go, I plan it to the minute. One semester, in my course evaluations, I received perfect scores on every measure from every student in the class. I was elated, having navigated my way through an entire semester and kept every student 'on my side.'

The clarity, organization, and intense planning gave students a sense of stability and confidence, but as I continued to develop as both a scholar and teacher in the years since, I see that semester quite differently. I am left wondering what I actually taught them. It certainly wasn't how to write within the shifting, uncertain, and unclear conditions that we most commonly find in writing we do outside the classroom.

An over correction to clarity and certainty might feel good because it feels like safety, but it is unrealistic; the writing event almost never occurs this way, life is never entirely clear to us even in our best attempts. In "The Ruse of Clarity" Ian Barnard (2010) writes: "Clarity's comfort can be symptomatic of a parallel anxiety or desire to fix and control meaning in the face of challenges to such fixity and control" (p. 440). I taught them how to write the papers for my class, but had I taught them how to write? Isn't there value in a bit of discomfort, and is there anything more uncomfortable in our learning and writing practices than having to traverse a path at the same time we are creating it? I recently attended an author talk by Yaa Gyasi (*Homegoing; Transcendent Kingdom)* and she said that the process of starting a novel is like walking toward a mirage. I've been walking toward the mirage of this dissertation for years now, so I immediately resonated with this image. I also thought about how the theoretical interventions we've developed in Rhetoric and Composition want to resolve the mirage, want to build a comfortable and nourishing oasis so that our students might not have to face the discomfort of a slow and uncertain arrival. For me, Beauvoir's articulation of an ethics of ambiguity has always been aspirational. It counters my anxious tendencies and highlights the ways in which I hide behind poorly constructed facades of certainty to avoid the inherent existential difficulties of being human and alive.

Indefinite Definitions, or Experiments in Paradox[20]

"Otherwise as in, a firm embrace of the unknowable; the unknowable as in, a well of infinity I want us all to fall down together" (Olufemi , 2021, p.7).

In "The Meaning of Language If Any" T.Y. Booth observes: "words are not meaning-objects or meaning-counters with fixed values, but meaning-chameleons that change hues subtly or radically as their relations with situations and with other words are altered" (p. 218). In working with these "meaning-chameleons," a challenge in writing about ambiguity is definition: how to bring clarity and insight without falsely closing the inherent openness of the concept? William Empson's (1996/1947) *Seven Types of Ambiguity* faces this challenge by defining ambiguity confidently in the beginning as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (p. 1) - but quickly qualifying in footnotes and in later definitions that ambiguity cannot have a decisive definition, that it necessitates constant shifting. Empson classifies his seven types from a perspective of literary criticism, but also notes that the list is incomplete. In *A History of Ambiguity* Ossa-Richardson (2019) offers multiple definitions of ambiguity from his research, but he doesn't provide his own working definition.

In these ways, definitional inconsistency is a problem for scholars of ambiguity. But how else could it be? How could one approach a thought project on ambiguity expecting only clarifying moves and motives? Ossa-Richardson concludes: "If [*Seven Types of Ambiguity*] is a confused book, [Empson] might rejoin that it reflects a confused subject, and that, like Socrates, he has preferred aporia to false certainties" (p. 5). Ossa-Richardson, following Empson's lead,

[20] I draw inspiration for this title from Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner's "A single good mind: Collaboration, cooperation, and the writing self." *College Composition and Communication* 49.1 (1998): 45-62.

questions whether "definition is possible" since "all definitions only raise further questions" (p. 402). In this sense, working with the definitions provided by others in distant and recent pasts gives Ossa-Richardson a way to engage these "further questions" without attempting closure. In the end, definitions exist but no single definition is essential to engaging with ambiguity either historically or theoretically. To this, Ossa-Richardson poses a critical definitional question: does ambiguity enhance plenty or does it proliferate doubt? And, more importantly, are these categories mutually exclusive? Thinking through a lens of ambiguity, almost nothing is mutually exclusive; even entrenched paradoxes together shape a new understanding that resists resolve.

I too resist definitive definition(s) of ambiguity but conclude this section with what I call a textural working definition of ambiguity as I envision it throughout this project. I also have some analysis of the use of the actual word in our scholarship, a moment of respite in something concrete. To follow the usage of the word, I used search engines within the four journals that I've identified as my "archive" of scholarship (CE, CCC, RSQ, WPA). While this produced some interesting trends about how ambiguity[21] has been discussed, it only captures the times that the term itself is used and does not often capture the moments when scholars are *engaged* in the work of ambiguity. By this I mean that, as I offered in the theory section, it does not capture the expansive and long running conversation we've had as a discipline about ambiguity because those conversations do not always, or even often, identify themselves as engaging the subject.

From the keyword searches across the journals, I found three major themes. I classify these as negative, neutral, and positive interpretations. First, many pieces have considered ambiguity in writing and other forms of communication as an error to be addressed and ultimately resolved, what I call the negative interpretation. These engagements with ambiguity

[21] Variations of search terms included ambiguity, ambiguous, and ambiguously

are concerned with errors in student writing, such as pronoun or referent ambiguity (see Ruth and Murphy; Sloan; Kroll and Schafer; Hull). For example, in Ruth and Murphy (1984) they lament the inability of assessment methods to "reveal the *causes* of ambiguity or other difficulty" present in student writing (p. 411). For these scholars, the role of writing instruction and assessment is to teach the skills needed to prevent and resolve ambiguities in writing and other forms of communication.

Second, many pieces displayed what I call a neutral interpretation (see Daly, 1978; Faigley, 1986; Harris, 1989; Marback, 2009). Essentially, these pieces discussed ambiguity as an undesirable, although ultimately unavoidable, feature in writing and other forms of communication. For these scholars, although ambiguity in communication can never be fully resolved, there are skills that can be taught to identify and address it, and these skills are important to prioritize in the composition classroom.

Third, although they were less common, a few pieces presented a positive interpretation of ambiguity, recognizing the potential benefits of ambiguity in writing and other forms of communication (see for example Zeiger, 1985; Bean, 1986; Lazere, 1994; Duffelmeyer, 2000). In these positive interpretations ambiguity is seen as both unavoidable *and* as an opportunity to engage critical thinking that helps to understand inevitable ambiguous communication and situations. Some of these sources described strong writers/thinkers as ones who have a "high tolerance" for ambiguity in communication. For example, Duffelmeyer (2000) writes, "The cornerstones of critical thinking at the college level are the related abilities to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions and the willingness to consider an issue from many sides" (p. 290). Tolerance is a limited approach in some ways, a larger discussion that will be worked out through this dissertation, since even "tolerance" suggests a wish, perhaps, that it wasn't there at all.

Identifying, engaging, thinking through - these are all preferable verbs given the orientation to ambiguity this dissertation aims to cultivate.

Some other works attempted to classify different types of ambiguity. Take for example, David Kaufer's (1983) article in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* titled "Metaphor and Its Ties to Ambiguity and Vagueness." He defines four separate types of ambiguity on an axis of planned/unplanned and covert/overt: unplanned covert ambiguity, planned covert ambiguity, unplanned overt ambiguity, planned overt ambiguity (p. 210). Additionally, he classifies four sources: syntactical lexical, illocution, perlocution, and use/mention (pp. 210-211). Ultimately, he felt the value in trying to classify concepts such as ambiguity and vagueness was tied to establishing some guidelines for their proper usage. He writes:

> To understand why one selects metaphor, one needs to understand how vagueness can become an overriding interest, even a value, of communication. Work in the pragmatics of metaphor will blossom once theorists come to see in theories of vagueness not only the roots of why we use metaphor, but also the roots of why we sometimes perceive we *must,* sometimes perceive we *cannot,* and sometimes perceive we *should not* use it. (p. 220)

This work resists this classifying and standardizing approach, but there is value to any work that seeks to better understand these concepts and their usage in Rhetoric and Composition.

So, while ambiguity is not often directly named as the subject of consideration in the scholarship, it does appear as a regular feature in the processes of writing and other forms of communication. It also appears in the ideas being worked out through the scholarship, and recovering, re-reading, and reviving those moments is the work of this dissertation.

Beauvoirian ambiguity deals primarily with subjectivity and the pre-existing conditions of our existence. For her, the ambiguity of our condition comes from being the center of our own

worlds and projects, but a mostly anonymous object in the lives of others, even those in our direct communities. Philosophy, claims Beauvoir, has largely tried to resolve this ambiguity, and thus their philosophies produce ethics that "eliminate ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 8). Philosophies can propose interpretations of the world that aim to resolve these ambiguities, but that does not actually change the conditions of the lives we face each day. Beauvoir urges that we must first assume this ambiguity, accept it as a paradoxically shifting and yet immutable condition of our existence, for "it is in the knowledge of the genuine condition of our life that we must draw strength to live and our reason for acting" (p. 9).

I see a few connections between Beauvoir's articulation of the need to "assume our fundamental ambiguity" and the unique circumstances of the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. The first is that we, as scholars and as humans, exist in the very world Beauvoir describes, and this ambiguity of our condition shapes how we show up as scholars, teachers, colleagues, community members, and so on. We come up against our own subject/object relations in mundane daily encounters and in the ways, we are made objects in the projects of large institutions - for example, the university. But we also often experience and attempt to resolve the ambiguities inherent in our discipline, as I have discussed throughout this section, by creating either/or scenarios, hierarchies, competing theories, and dichotomies - even of our founding concepts (rhetoric/composition).

In the spirit of doing the work of ambiguity-embodied scholarship, in lieu of a tight, concise definition, what I offer is textural. A textural definition is intentionally less precise because it is more encompassing. It seeks to provide the feeling, the texture, of a concept,

without constraints for particular ways that it might be used. Without foreclosing, like Booth's (1980) "meaning-chameleons" it might shift beyond our awareness before we become aware of it again, before we come to learn it once more, differently. To know a texture is to have pressed the thing against oneself, to have sought to close the distance, knowing that the space between remains, even if it is as small as a layer of atoms. As I seek to touch it in this project, ambiguity might mean: things being otherwise; inversions/subversions; sitting with questions; questioning universals; resisting foreclosure; inhabiting the impossible; not knowing as praxis; deprioritizing inductive or deductive reasoning; proliferating possibilities; seeking to exist in/as contradiction. I suppose it also means when a word or phrase can mean more than one thing. But that's the low hanging fruit, if I'm being honest. I follow Olufemi's (2021) epistemic rebellion in *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*: "So, excuse me if it seems at times like I am grasping at nothing. I am. Hold on with me" (p. 10).

CHAPTER 3: HOW WE GOT HERE, WHERE WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN

"To profess composition, very often, is to study one thing and to do quite another."
(Strickland, 2011, p. 2)

"How dead we kill this thing we love."
(Michaels, 1951, p. 391)

By 1960, just less than a decade into the formalization of the new discipline, there were already calls to end the course called Freshman English. Warner G. Rice (1960), for example, offers several reasons in "A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, as It Is Now Commonly Taught, from the College Curriculum" in *College English*. The situation, according to Rice, was grim: students lack competence upon entering the university and are therefore wasting their own and their teachers' time (p. 361); if students haven't already learned to read and write by college, Freshman English isn't going to change that (p. 361); students lack motivation (p. 362); the course is expensive for departments and since the content amounts to "elementary education" it should not be the responsibility of higher education (p. 362); and that by abolishing this course teachers would be able to put their "energies into different, and more attractive, channels" (p. 362). Rice doesn't speak for the entirety of the discipline at this time, but throughout the decades there have been arguments suggesting that the "Freshman English" course should no longer exist because it cannot accomplish what it sets out to do. Kane (1961) in his *CCC* article, "Rhetoric and the 'Problem' of Composition" points to difficulties in achieving these aims:

> Certainly the times do conspire against us. Classrooms are crowded, and the student-teacher ratio seems steadily to mount; few students read widely, and many students have grown apathetic about acquiring a skill seemingly so remote from the notion of success to which life in a prosperous technocracy has conditioned them; media mass

> communication, on the whole, debase rather than enhance the art which we teach. All this is true. (p. 504)

Kane's purpose is to think through these difficulties rather than to abolish the course entirely, and many of these issues remain today, whether in 'reality' or opinion. However, what Rice's abolition argument misses, likely because he was living through it and unable to see it with the clarity of retrospect, is that the Freshman English course was becoming more deeply entrenched in the essential functioning of the post-war university, and that the hopes of a young discipline to establish itself only served to deepen this entrenchment. Freshman English was here to stay, not because its teaching or administration were going particularly well, but because it found itself to be a useful tool in an expanding market.

In Chapter 2, I pointed briefly to the impacts of World War II on higher education broadly, and the early development of Rhetoric and Composition more specifically. The war caused crises of purpose and concerns of participation/complicity for professors in the liberal humanities, while it simultaneously shifted the economic/industrial objectives of the U.S. and by extension its central institutions, including higher education. In *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies,* Donna Strickland (2011) argues that traditional histories of the discipline that focus on pedagogical development have obscured the role that administration and management have had on the discipline. She presents three main revisions to the existing histories of the discipline: first, that writing programs emerged as a result of the importance of writing, not its institutional marginalization; second, that the discipline formed at a time when the division of intellectual and mechanical work was prominent; and third, that this division was imbued with gendered and racialized conceptualizations of the proper place of intellectual work. Through these revisions, she is able to capture and rearticulate the central role that administration

has played throughout the development of the discipline, despite efforts to relegate it. Strickland explains that the conditions for this reluctant need for management existed long before the CCCCs was founded, and that it was

> with the emergence of the New Deal and Keynesian economics after World War II that managed state intervention was extended into what has formerly been considered private domains. With the more thorough saturation of everyday life with managerial logic, the required composition course and the supervised teaching staff were no longer at odds with the dominant cultural logic. (p. 57)

Management had become a *de facto* mode of professional life, so it was accepted as a requirement for professionalization and an answer for the problems that rapid growth posed for the nascent discipline.

At the 1950 CCCC there was already concern that the composition course had lost effectiveness in large part through the proliferation of objectives; in addition to clarifying measurable objectives, the coming conferences worked toward "improving working conditions so that *administrative* objectives could be met" (Strickland, 2011, p.72). Using the early documents of both the conference and the journal, Strickland shows how the organization was founded as "a forum for the systemization of the composition course - a concern that reflects the importance of management and the subordination of teachers" (p. 63). She explains how this resulted in both centralized and diffuse management, since a managerial approach must be adapted at multiple levels of the educational experience to be effective.

As enrollments increased and capitalist neoliberalism became the status quo for industries and even social institutions (such as education), management presented a way to ensure productivity and efficiency, at a time when the discipline was already experiencing pressing

issues including class size, teaching load, course content, student placement, 'remedial' curriculum, low proficiency in composition, and administrative tasks and structures (Shuck, 1955). Management happened both in human relationships (i.e boss/employee) and through the introduction of semi-autonomous management tools. Writing became a "management tool" for student learning in the university (Strickland, 2011, p. 20). Teachers managed the management tool and the students. Program directors (soon to be Writing Program *Administrators)* managed the teachers and their interpretation of the management tool. College and university level administrators managed the program directors and their administration of the management tool. Throughout the organizational structure of the university, "management" became the nebulous and multilevel audience that student writing had to contend with to be deemed valuable and credit worthy, although few university administrators or program directors would actually read specific student work. As this chapter shows, this conceptualization of audience significantly shaped what the discipline assumed as its central questions and concerns.

The effectiveness of the curriculum and the quality of student writing was (and still is) based on how well it prepared students for other courses in the university and by extension how well it prepared students to enter the workforce. This is evident even in the first decade of the founding of CCCC. In 1952, CCCC invited W.K. Bailey, the Vice President of Manufacturing at the Warner and Swasey Company, to give a speech at the annual conference, which was published in a 1953 issue of *CCC* entitled "The Importance of Communication for the Advancement of Industry." In the article, Bailey suggests what communication and composition courses should be teaching to better prepare students for their jobs. His recommendations focus on clarity, accuracy, and efficiency: "how to get the desired result as quickly as possible and as easily as possible" (p. 13). In that same issue is an article titled "What Employers Expect from

College Courses in Composition and Communication" by T.R. Schellenberg, the Director of Archival Management and Records Service in Washington D.C. He explains that

> All that will be required of the employee who enters government service is that he must be able to write a sober prose, in simple language, and in a style that is candid, direct, and pointed" and that to support this goal there should be more English classes focused on writing, not just an improvement to the one students currently take. (p. 11)[22]

So then, the composition course is a service to the university and, less directly but no less importantly, to the complex hiring structure just beyond the university. As is shown throughout this chapter, objectives connected to employability have been foundational to communicating relevance both to students and to university administrators.

Given the historical context at the development of the discipline and the pressures it placed on higher education as an institution, Strickland (2011) argues that there is an "inextricable connection" between program administration and teaching writing (p. 23). She explains that "writing programs…were made possible not by the devaluing of student writing in the university but by its central function in an institution that depended on writing as a tool for surveillance and assessment" (p. 25). The writing program, outside of the goals and intentions of the scholars who built and participated in it, enabled the growth of surveillance management. Perhaps this was an effort for more radical inclusion, perhaps a shifting interest in the university as a profit generator, perhaps both. With these administrative and managerial strings made clear, the space between what Rhetoric and Composition sought to do and what it actually

[22] He adds a humorous, perhaps jaded, explanation of why this is so: "But these conditions are not so disadvantages to the writer as they may seem; for a byline is less frequently the symbol of credit than of blame. It is good to be paid for producing our little monster of English without having to suffer the penalty of avowing forever our parenthood. Salaried oblivion is not an unhappy fate" (p. 11).

participated/participates in grew vaster. As Olufemi (2021) observes of capitalist, neoliberal education: “The classroom was not a refuge; it was not even a place to explore the relationship between thought and action anymore. It was just another layer of the metric or an exercise in surveillance” (p. 92). As a teacher of composition, I have felt the presence of Olufemi’s critique while actively trying to work against it. That tension is what I aim to examine in this chapter, to better understand how the questions we consider as a discipline are so often distant from the realities we’d like to see in our own classrooms.

After World War II, the late 1960s and 1970s posed the next significant opportunity (necessity) for even more robust administrative scaffolding in the university. Like with the war, which gave pause for reflection and reiteration of humanistic and democratic disciplinary allegiances, an era of open admissions beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s sparked both discussion about the ethical and moral commitments of the discipline *in context of* the new administrative challenges that open admissions posed. It is not by coincidence that the Council of Writing Program Administrators (C-WPA) was founded in the 1970s with the accompanying journal, *Writing Program Administration,* publishing its first issue in 1978. Strickland sees this development as “an instructive moment for illustrating this discipline-tension between the quest for potential and the urge toward normalization and order” (p. 74). On the one hand, the development of a more robust approach to management and administration of writing courses and programs could allow for more discipline-informed practices, but on the other it could also eventually lead to courses and programs that merely reflected the managerial expectations and logics of the institution. Strickland makes the argument, however, that the WPA actually sought to obscure its own management, because of the general distrust of management within the discipline (p. 79). So while there was an urgent need for a number of different

managerial positions to respond to the influx of students from open admissions, the discipline's focus was concerned with the radical and democratic potentials of open admissions in the name of equity and inclusion but was immediately confronted with the realities of complex institutional management (pp. 81-82).

I find Strickland's revisioning and analysis of management and administration as a determining factor of the development of the discipline both a helpful re-balancing and an important intervention that gives pause for how we view and approach our work today. I do, however, believe that Strickland's overarching argument also seeks to foreclose the story. Central to Strickland's history is the idea that writing programs emerged as a result of the importance of writing, not its institutional marginalization. Yet, given what exists throughout the scholarship on the cusp of the new discipline, as highlighted in Chapter 1, the composition course was marginalized and undervalued even in the departments that housed it, by the very people who taught it. I agree with Strickland's analysis of writing's centrality *and* with the evidence in the scholarship that supports a different story. It seems to me that writing in the university in the 1940s-1950s was both central and marginalized and that this tension continues today. It was/is work that few people intrinsically wanted to do, and it was/is work central to the functioning of the university. What I think Strickland misses in her analysis is that centrality in a capitalist neoliberal institution does not always amount to respect; it is simply usefulness. Capitalism consumes usefulness to maintain itself but does little to nourish the labor from where it grew[23]. In this sense, the exigence to develop a distinct discipline was both in relation to capitalist specialization and division of labor in service of efficiency/scale *and* the catalyst for an

[23] Or, as Beauvoir (2018) has observed: "Oppression tries to defend itself by its utility" (102).

easier split from English since that work was devalued by many English scholars and, therefore, sensible to acquiesce.

This reading of the emergence of management and administration as foundational tenets of Rhetoric and Composition helps to show how the work we do is as much informed by the institutional context we find ourselves in as it reflects the knowledge that we uncover through our praxis. In fact, with this lens it is possible to suppose that the administrative context weighs more heavily in the work we actually do in the classroom, and that research that isn't already in service of these administrative aims therefore becomes aspirational or idiosyncratic at best, since the conditions do not currently exist to express the idealized version of our disciplinary knowledges. Mark Garrett Longaker's (2005) piece in *College English* "The Economics of Exposition: Managerialism, Current-Traditional Rhetoric, and Henry Noble Day" traces how language arts instruction "contributed to the contingent formation of a managerial class necessary to industrial (monopoly) capitalism" (p. 508). Longaker identifies the main features of Current-Traditional Rhetoric, which include:

> an ontological assumed objective reality that can be represented accurately; the pragmatic effort at codifying and controlling reality through representative discourse; the stylistic abstemiousness and lack of formality; a taxonomic arrangement reflecting a desire an an effort to control the 'objective' world by dividing it into manageable and monitorable parts. (p. 513)

Even as we have seemingly moved on from current traditional pedagogical approaches in our classrooms, our programmatic standards still seem to adhere to these assumptions.

Strickland (2011) also makes the important argument that denying or downplaying the managerial influence on the discipline, in the past and the present, is to "practice the dominant

sort of management, which is based on a control that seeks to change the affective stances of workers in order to secure the benefits of their surplus labor" (p. 119). WPAs today may not see their work as such, but even a cursory review of the labor conditions in the discipline (increasing numbers of adjunct faculty in high precarity, more demands on course loads for lower paid adjunct labor, slowly rising class caps, etc.) confirms that management is not only complicit in the capitalist university structure but maintains conditions that enable the proliferation of that structure. It is a frustrated stuckness, between wanting to do the good work of democratic scholarship and knowing exactly what one is up against.

My intent in this chapter is not to admonish those in administrative roles; we are all complicit in these systems even when we seek to change them. It is a call, however, to think critically about our history as a discipline and the role that administration and management has had on it, and to connect the dots to the present moment, as we urgently see the need to do things differently, to create a more humane institution. In *A Third University is Possible,* la paperson (2017) suggests that those interested in radical change in the university should "figure out how technologies operate. Use a wrench. Technologies can be disrupted and reorganized" (p. 24). This brings to mind Audre Lorde's notion that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, but la paperson suggests that perhaps they can, at the very least, redesign it. In fact, the epigraph to *A Third University Is Possible* comes from Lorde: "Even when they are dangerous, examine the heart of those machines you hate before you discard them." And this is what this chapter seeks to do.

As a discipline it seems that there is always some 'problem' preventing us from realizing what we aim to do. The problem is content. The problem is delivery. The problem is students. The problem is teachers. The problem is too low enrollments. The problem is too high

enrollments. The problem is assessment. The problem is replicability. The problem is standardization. As I think about these 'problems' and the steps taken to find solutions, I'm brought back to Beauvoir and her incisive read on the history of philosophy, which lead to her proposal of ambiguity as a framework. She critiques prominent Western philosophy for ignoring the fundamental ambiguity of existence and, rather, seeking comprehensive, coherent systems and believing that once those are articulated, the work is done. She sees this as an oversight in philosophical thinking, to attempt to resolve the condition of life, to attempt to settle it once and for all. According to Beauvoir, assuming ambiguity first and thinking from that space would change the types of questions we ask and the quality of answers we receive.

In relation to Rhetoric and Composition, I have the same sense as I look at the distance between individual thought in the discipline and the movement of the discipline as a whole, or perhaps the movement of the discipline as a reflection of the institution that enables its existence. Maybe these things we are trying to solve do not need or want answers. Maybe there are many answers. Maybe there is no answer. Maybe the entire notion of an answer or a problem is irrelevant. What I'm trying to say is that many of the questions we've asked have been out of necessity, and we have inherited answers driven by that need. They may not always be the answers that serve us or our students, since it appears their primary audience is the power and profit structure of the university, the system to which our existence is currently entangled.

In the next section, I detail some of the outcomes of this managerial history and how it has influenced what we teach, how we evaluate learning, and even how we define what the discipline is or should be. The purpose of this contextualizing is to understand why engagements with ambiguity have not taken a more central place in the scholarship and practice of the discipline, even though some spaces in our scholarship seem to support it.

The Relevance Problem

"Good branding is good rhetoric." (Rhodes, 2010, p. 58)

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The Question: How do we gain respect and demonstrate our relevance to the institution?

The Assumption: Respect is appointed by others.

The Answer: Emulate the sciences; prioritize standardization; try to cut ties with English.

The Otherwise: Our work is inherently valuable to all aspects of life because everything begins with communication. Internalizing and centering irrelevance/lack of respect is a distraction.

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An ongoing problem for Rhetoric and Composition has been that of relevance, and just beneath relevance the desire for respect. English was an established and, historically, well-respected discipline in the university, although the interest in scientific development had already posed problems for English - concerned as it was with beauty, language, theme and guided by a theoretical and methodological framework that didn't value emerging concerns with objectivity, reliability, or validity. As enrollments grew and a need arose for a more standardized general curriculum that could scale, it made sense that English departments would teach the required courses for writing in this new curriculum. However, for English faculty trained in literary theory, teaching writing to students not always particularly interested in learning was often unappealing. Take for example, Robert Russell's (1968) "A Question of Composition - a Record of Struggle," a lamentation from an English department with nine faculty, all men, trained in literature, having to teach mostly composition. He says: "The most embarrassing reason for our accepting the burden of composition arises from our secret fears about the integrity of our subject, and our egos require that we scrape kudos wherever we can" (p. 174). It was not only

egos wrapped up in this work, but budget lines too. If English departments wanted to keep up with the budgetary demands of growing institutions, they needed ways to enroll more students.

In "The Problem of Freshman English in the University" Bryan (1951) identifies credibility as one of the major issues facing the composition course, explaining that along with staffing and research, the reputation of Freshman English among both students and faculty significantly limited development of the course. In his article "In Defense of College Composition" Glicksberg (1950) also points to a lack of respect within the institution, claiming that many people in the university do not see a need for a year of composition courses, especially when students might put those credits somewhere else. Glicksberg saw particular pressure from the sciences, as their importance to both the university and the larger society grew under post-war development. He writes:

> The scientific Huns[24] are on the march, and their objective is not only the elimination of English Composition from the curriculum. If they had their way, they would sack the buildings in which the liberal arts are taught, raze them to the ground, and pour salt on the foundation. The new scientific barbarians, now that they have produced the atomic bomb, are determined to capture the citadel of education, adapt it to their own special ends, and establish a dictatorship of the physicists and the technocrats. (p. 91)

Clearly, if Glicksberg's account is any indication, there was some anxiety surrounding the increased importance of the sciences. Wykoff (1949) picked up on this too, and in "Toward Achieving the Objectives of Freshman Composition," suggests that "we might adopt a more scientific attitude toward the details of our work and apply, in addition to our objective tests, much more of the experimental method, either formally or informally" (p. 320). He also suggests

[24] I recognize that this is a problematic turn of phrase, and have intentionally left it out of transparency

that perhaps those within composition could have a better sense of disciplinary esteem, and that "literature teachers of an intolerant type might also be persuaded to cease disparaging the life, work, and the achievements of teachers of composition" (p. 321)[25]. The problems of respect and relevance are foundational to the identity of the discipline, and a particular challenge that directors of writing programs/writing program administrators often seek to address as they represent the discipline and its courses to university administration[26].

The respect issues presented by Rhetoric and Composition's slow and varied shift from English also impacted the direction and speed of growth in the new discipline. At some institutions Rhetoric and Composition made a quick and clean break from English, some phased into their departure, and many Rhetoric and Composition scholars are still housed in English today. The call for a distinct discipline with a separate home has recurred over the decades, especially as the discipline itself formalized, administration of composition programs became more complex, and the discipline produced more Ph.D.'s. In, "Some Speculation About the Future of Writing Programs," Maxine Hairston (1988) argues that a large portion of disrespect comes from within the English departments where composition was still housed. Her call to split was to improve the esteem of scholars in the discipline and to regain control over its own area of knowledge production. In her view, compositionists are populists and literary scholars are elitists, since compositionists want to teach large numbers a practical skill, literary scholars want

[25] It's not uncommon in the scholarship of this time to find that even those calling for a new attitude toward composition also simultaneously disparaged it. From that same article: "Whenever I read or hear statements about the so-called 'failure' of freshman composition, I am invariably reminded of a statement by Dr. Samuel Johnson: 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.' Freshman composition may not be done too well; but, all things considered, we are agreeably surprised to find it done as well as it is" (Wykoff 322).

[26] Some of the things said about the discipline in the peer reviewed scholarship are hard to believe, for example this 1969 quote from an article in CE by George Stade: "No doubt college composition is in a bad way. Everyone says so, even people who are responsible for its being as it is...it has become as embarrassing and superfluous as it is difficult to part with: our feelings towards it, that is, are like a bridegroom's toward his pornography collection" (143)

to gatekeep and further specialize (p. 14). This perspective, shared both in this article and in her 1986 CCCCs Chair Address, shows just how deep the rift between English and Rhetoric and Composition has been at times, framing the focus on addressing problems of relevance and respect at multiple levels: within the university, among related disciplines, and within itself.

The problems with relevance and respect result in questions that seek solutions. These questions include: How do we formalize our knowledge? How can we use epistemologies from other more respected disciplines to earn similar respect? How do we demonstrate our usefulness in the university, industry, and community? A point I make throughout this chapter is that asking questions is an assumptive practice. Even the most open questions assume particular things about the phenomenon under examination. For example, to wonder how to formalize knowledge assumes that formalization is good, possible, and appropriate. The questions one asks shape the boundaries of the answers ultimately found.

Of course, since we asked these kinds of questions, we produced some answers. The major answers that stuck in the discipline for the problems of relevance and respect were employability, transfer of skills, student retention, and writing across the disciplines/curriculum. It is beyond the scope of this project to detail each of these areas, but generally these 'solutions' aimed to show how Rhetoric and Composition had significant impact beyond the discipline and how it was also a direct benefit to the university and student success. Of course, within each of these there exist ongoing anxieties about their effectiveness, whether transfer of skills is really possible or if it can be appropriately studied, whether the writing training students receive in the general education curriculum actually helps them in their disciplines years later, and whether the skills that students graduate with in communication actually help them to attain jobs and whether their skills are stable enough to support success in their careers. But again, these questions and

the resultant answers perhaps begin with faulty assumptions - that as a discipline we needed to make relevance and respect central concerns of our work in scholarship and in the classroom. If, for example, the discipline self-affirmed relevance and respect, there would have been less concern with how to attain it. This would have led to different questions, perhaps some of the same answers, but answers garnered from an entirely different framework.

The Content/Standards Problem

"Rhetoric must not pretend to be a book on Freshman English." (Bailey, 1964, p. 116)

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The Question: What do we teach? How do we formalize a curriculum?

The Assumption: The teaching of writing exists within definable boundaries; therefore a 'proper' content also exists; unification of program objectives across institutions is the marker of an established discipline.

The Answer: Debate content in the scholarship to determine the 'correct' (comprehensive) approach; prioritize efforts to standardize and make objective shared curriculums.

The Otherwise: Content and standards in our discipline are varied, just as writing as a practice and product is varied. To aim to change this is to ignore the foundations of what we do, and perhaps to ask irrelevant questions

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The beauty of Rhetoric and Composition is that it is everything all at once, since communication exists in all aspects of our daily lives. To learn rhetoric is to be able to see the world both more clearly and with more nuance, like uncovering a view of the world that exposes the internal workings and the (often ulterior) motives of seemingly mundane communication. When expressed this way, it seems sensible that there can't be a single, standardized curriculum for teaching a new way to understand the world, especially as the world we seek to understand is

multifaceted and always changing. And yet, we've hashed and re-hashed this question throughout the decades of our discipline.

The issue of relevance and respect covered in the last section merges into issues regarding content and standardization. In "Rhetoric and the Quest for Certainty" Hans P. Guth (1962) articulates this merge:

> Freshman English has long had the reputation of lacking reliable procedures and concrete results. Recently, there have been numerous proposals to remedy uncertainties by modeling it on presumably more respectable academic disciplines…. Such knowledge would be authoritative as the result of a rigorous methodology. It would be pursued because of its intrinsic interest in fascination. Teaching in this area would produce results that could be objectively measured and statistically evaluated (p. 131).

Likely, he could see this because it was showing up in the scholarship in the 1950s and early 1960s. For example, David Kerner (1960) published an article about the use of "controlled materials" (like an anthology of materials on a particular topic) in composition classrooms to finally apply "something of the methods and standards of the sciences to the teaching of composition" (p. 388). Similarly, John F. Huntley (1962) published "Programmed Teaching Involves Patience and Love" in *CCC,* which draws on the "strengths of insights into human behavior" that is also sometimes called "automated" or "machine" teaching (p. 7). A subsection of the paper asks, "Can Style Be Programmed?" and Huntley's goals for this standardized mode of content is to produce better results for more students, in briefer time, at an earlier age, and with greater certainty" (p. 7). He makes an analogy to football, explaining that if the writer could

just learn five basic moves (essentially: thesis, defense, exploration, revision, nuance) then the writing product would easily improve[27].

These calls for automated and programmed learning came from the rise of behaviorism (a la Skinner and Pavlov) in psychology. This thinking influenced Robert Zoellner's (1969) article "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition" to consider students as "organisms" who have a "behavior repertory" with "freely emitted behavior" that could be "reinforced" (p. 278). Although this sounds so obviously skewed to the present-day reader, this input-out model continues to lurk. For example, the curriculum-wide assigned textbook for the first first-year writing course I taught in 2015 was *They Say/ I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Graff, Birkenstein, and Maxwell (a new edition was just published in 2021). *They Say/ I Say* presents templates for writers to construct academic writing, in a no-fluff, no-nonsense tone. From programmed learning to template-driven teaching - simplification, standardization, and automation all appear to have been goals or ideas for composition pedagogy throughout the history of the discipline.

The 'proper' content for Rhetoric and Composition has been a question well before the formal establishment of the discipline in the 1950s. Herbert Weisinger (1941) claimed in *College English* that there was an agreement about the aims of the course but little consensus about how those aims should be achieved (p. 688). Personally, he was in favor of teaching the course as a "theory of democracy" that posed the study of language as an instrument of communication through which the student "ought to have clear thinking, a realization of the limitations of

[27] English Literature was also struggling to translate its value to an institution that saw the hard sciences as the gold standard for knowledge production. Kenneth S. Rothwell in "Programmed Learning: A Back Door to Empiricism in English Studies" (1962) believed that literary studies was capable of "total coherence" and that through programmed learning/automated teaching "a well programmed machine accomplishes what every good teacher has always struggled for" (245).

language, and a suspicion of large generalizations and vague propositions" (p. 689). This makes some sense given the prevailing pedagogical theory of the time. Woods (1981) explains that an influential educational approach by the late 1940s was "life adjustment theory" which prioritized the holistic needs of the learner and sought a curriculum designed around those needs (p. 394). But in the decades after World War II and into the technological battles of the Cold War, "a pervasive desire for achievement, discipline, and academic substance swept through the schools and colleges, motivating teachers of writing especially to reexamine their methods and goals" (p. 394). Woods' argument is that these swings, which happen recursively as new generations of scholars inherit the discipline, move "between student-centered and…discipline-centered teaching" (p. 395). The discipline-centered approach is concerned with audiences - university administrators, faculty in other departments, the 'public' - who do not directly experience the content of our courses, and this subtle shift has a tremendous impact on what we ask and what we discover.

For example, in an issue of *CCC,* Jim Corder (1961), concerned with the issue of 'proper' content in composition classes, explains: "Judging from our own complaints and those of others, present standard methods - remedial study of grammar, the new fashion of structural linguistics, or the old habit of studying essay content - have obviously failed to produce acceptable writing" (p. 93). Of course, the qualities of "acceptable writing" are left for the reader to imagine themselves. The purpose of Corder's article is to explain and propose a course approach based entirely on rhetoric, which he found effective despite the fact that "the percentage of failures has been somewhat higher in these sections" since the "surviving students are demonstrably better than similar students…in other sections" (p. 93)[28]. So, the course was successful enough to

[28] Perhaps it also follows, then, that Corder's syllabus included these thinkers: Mark Twain, George Orwell, John Donne, John Milton, Winston Churchill, Thoreau, George Washington, Lincoln, Swift (p. 94-95)

warrant an article in *CCC*, while it simultaneously failed more students than courses prior. This points to a troubling confusion about the purposes of instruction in the classroom, and what 'improvement' should look and feel like for all students, not just those who manage to survive the experiment.

By 1964, Dudley Bailey claims in *College English* that "'English' courses have become things, like Aunt Minnie's skirt, which cover everything and touch nothing" (p. 111). He attributes this "mushy confusion" to the history of rhetoric which had moved "from a discipline with clear aims and methods, which occupied a place of importance in the medieval trivium" but had "degenerated in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to a study devoted mainly to the least consequential…" (p. 111). But of course, as society changes so too must an approach to teaching rhetoric and composition; if the communicative world becomes more complex and more varied, so too should the pedagogy that aims to teach this communicative world. However, Bailey hopes that

> a modern rhetoric would concentrate on the sorts of logical connections between facts, things, events -- whatever we call the stuff of our thought. And its primary task would be to consider those connections in a systematic way and to explain their logical assumptions with some thoroughness. (p. 115)

Here too we see a push for a "systematic" and "logical" approach to the content of rhetoric and composition courses.

In the 1970s problem-solving as a technique of inquiry became a way of constructing content for the composition course that caught some traction (see Larson, 1972; Flower and Hayes, 1977; Carter, 1988). Larson's turn to problem-solving came out of a desire to (re)reconnect the teaching of writing with the art of liberal studies:

> If we teachers of composing claim that our courses are more than laboratory sessions on linguistic and social conformity, if we believe that they have a place in the liberal studies curriculum more honorable than that of servant to other disciplines, attention to problem-solving techniques in our teaching may be one way to help us make good on our claim. (p. 635)

This turn to a problem-solving heuristic for the composition classroom came from a desire to downplay the focus on standardization and unification of curricula, and to reinvigorate a critical participation on part of both teachers and students. Flower and Hayes observe that "because writing as an act of thinking is messy and mysterious compared to the concrete reality of the product, we tend to leave composing up to the vagaries of change and God-given talent to relegate it to independent warm-up exercises designated as "pre-writing" (p. 449). They encourage teachers of composition to figure out how to treat writing as a "thinking problem, rather than an arrangement problem" but then provide a complex and rather inflexible heuristic (inspired by Aristotle) to automate that problem-solving process for the writer (p. 450). There are numerous moments like these in the scholarship, where we get close to radically revisioning how and what we teach, only to return to the comforts of structure, certainty, and objectivity by the conclusion. Being aware of these tensions in past and current scholarship brings a more critical lens to the conversations about how and why it is we do what we do: Even experts of rhetoric are at its whims.

I won't rehearse the entirety of the composition pedagogies here since this has been done several times throughout the discipline. A particularly clear and well-organized text is *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies,* edited by Tate, Taggart, Schick, and Hessler. It includes a chapter on each of the major movements in pedagogical theory and practice including: basic writing,

collaborative writing, community-engaged, critical, cultural studies, expensive, feminist, genre, literature and composition, new media, online and hybrid, process, researched writing, rhetoric and argument, second language writing, and writing across the curriculum. Overall, there is recursive progress in this trajectory of praxis, and approaches are discovered and rediscovered in new times and contexts that allow them to breathe anew. There are many individual practitioners that have done great work in their own classrooms and have tried to share this with the discipline through conferences, publications, and workshops. But the issue is that until we look critically at why we ask the questions we do, about content or otherwise, and more importantly what *assumptions* these questions carry, we struggle to wield innovative and radically new approaches to have a larger impact on the discipline.

The Teacher/Student Problem

"How do you teach composition to thousands of youngsters who are not, and probably never will be, very zealous to compose?" (Laird, 1956, p. 138)

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The Question: Why aren't teachers better trained? Why don't students care? Why are they unprepared?

The Assumption: There is a way to train teachers to achieve the same outcomes across multiple contexts; students don't like reading or writing and will do anything to avoid it.

The Answer: Standardize protocols for teacher training; categorize and divide students based on 'ability.'

The Otherwise: Neither teachers nor students are standardizable, and neither should their education be; both teachers and students have unique perspectives and abilities that emerge in learning spaces with space for individuality, flexibility, and innovation.

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Increasing enrollments after the war both provided the exigence for Rhetoric and Composition to come into its own as a discipline and posed immediate challenges to pedagogical

practice. In “Freshman English During the Flood” Charlton Laird (1956) asks: “Where are the teachers to come from? Those who direct freshman English, measuring the run-off from the post-depression and World War II baby deluge, and observing the limited sandbagging facilities provided by the post-depression Ph.D.'s, see little but mounting enrollments and sagging standards” (p. 131). Included in the push for a standardized university “general” curriculum at most schools, the freshman English (or first-year writing) course became a service to the university, promising to teach incoming students the basics knowledge and skills they would need to write in the university. Rising enrollments required existing professors to teach more sections while also demanding new instructors to cover new sections created each year. This posed problems for departments trying to administer this course. Laird explains,

> We believe there is no substitute for a good teacher with plenty of time to do a thorough job, and we surmise that good, experienced teachers usually work out their own methods of obtaining results. But if the floods come, if the population watersheds continue to pour more and more untamed young upon us, we hope we have a method of stretching the levees a little, even though not enough. (p. 138)

Laird recognizes the agency and ability of teachers working “out their own methods of obtaining results” but must weigh this against the programmatic demands of a rapidly growing course, expanding into an unknown future. But why did the “floods” necessitate moving from what Laird sees as the sign of an experienced teacher - that of effective self-determination?

Here we end up in a loop: a complaint regarding teachers was that they did not know or know how to teach composition, and yet at the same time the scholarly conversation in the discipline seems to suggest that no one quite knew what composition was exactly, much less the correct content or mode of teaching it. Thomas Kane in a 1961 issue of *College English* felt that

there was a clear cause of the "failure" of freshman English: "the fault belongs to us and not to an unsympathetic culture about us. Bluntly, that fault is our own low level of competence. Too many teachers of composition are not teaching composition; too many do not even understand what a composition is" (p. 504). Later, Ken Macrorie (1966) laments that "the myriad of approaches to teaching freshman composition existing today in America testifies to me that everyone is working out of failure. And using a wrong method" (p. 629). These both point to the underlying assumption that there is *a* way to teach composition and *a* content to be taught, and that the goal of research in the discipline should be to narrow in on the best approach rather than, for example, investing in how to help different approaches communicate with and be influenced by one another.

Strickland terms this focus on the teacher-as-obstacle the "so-called problem of the undisciplined teacher" and the solution was more systematic management, better training, and better knowledge. The reward of this discipline for teachers was "rarely improvement in the conditions of their work but ideally a better product for the consumers (that is, the students)" (p. 54). I'd go further to say that perhaps the outcome wasn't even a better product for students, but a more legible (and therefore acceptable) product for university administrators. This tension between teacher's 'lack' of professionalism and students' 'lack' of preparation or interest has continued to shape the way we think about the questions and problems of this discipline. The drive to professionalize the discipline through training, administration, and standardization is potentially not a good fit for the inherent structure of writing programs, especially large ones, with so much human variance. Trying to predict, control, standardize inevitably shapes the thing, and, I argue, for the worse given what the experience of teaching and learning to write in the university could be.

The concern that teachers were unprofessional was matched with the concern that students were unprepared. Bluntly, it should seem obvious that an unprepared student is the point of education. But the concern of composition teachers and administrators throughout the second half of the 20th century was that students entering the university were still working on skills that should have been developed in their secondary education. U.S. Secondary education is a shadow throughout this dissertation; the space between secondary and post-secondary education in relation to the development of writing skills warrants a dissertation of its own. For now, it must suffice to say that whatever the educational context, students should not be made responsible for an education system that they inherited. Macrorie was concerned with this tendency to blame students for poor outcomes:

> In healthy mind one does not keep redesigning a course out of desperation or unfounded hope. A good writing course produces good writing. If it doesn't do this, it's an unsuccessful course. Strangely, teachers in America have inferred that if the course doesn't produce good writing, the students are incompetent. (p. 629)

But even within this clarity about instructive responsibility, Macrorie digs into conflicting notions. He claims that things would be improved if teachers were given more freedom in their classroom, asking them to work with others' ideas, methods, and theories which they never earned through experience or reflection, was "requiring teachers to teach, not at their strength, but at their weakness" (p. 630). And on the same page, suggests that if an administrator wanted to revise a course, they should only "listen to persons who can show you student writing that is patently better than average student writing" (p. 630). However, according to Macrorie's own logic, the person producing "patently better" student writing (we must suspend disbelief about definition) is likely doing so through following their own strengths, not a standardized

curriculum. So, the administrator interested in successful cases is really looking at an idiosyncratic success that may not work for another instructor, and to ask that instructor to teach that method may produce entirely different results. Does this mean the method is wrong? That the teacher is bad? No, neither. It means that what works for one person may not work for another, and the teaching of composition is likely done best when each person is able to chart their own approach.

The Assessment Problem

"Our ability to resolve the current "writing crisis" will depend upon our ability to make valid, useful judgments about the writing that has prompted us to claim that we do, in fact, have a crisis". (Odell and Cooper, 1980, p. 5)

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The Question: How do we show that our students are learning, our teachers are effective, and our programs are meeting their overarching objectives?

The Assumption: Learning can be evaluated and captured objectively and accurately; teaching can and should look a particular way; nuance is unimportant in programmatic evaluation.

The Answer: Research grading practices for standardization; regularly review teacher performance based on predetermined benchmarks

The Otherwise: Learning and teaching are complex activities that do not lend well to objective assessment; situated, unfolding assessments of students, teachers, and programs may not be easily communicated to an audience outside those spaces, but that is a rhetorical problem not an assessment problem.

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An entire dissertation could be written on the history of assessment in the discipline, but my purpose here is to briefly show how assessment concerns tie into administrative/management themes and how the questions we have asked of assessment assume particular boundaries that shape the translation of these answers into practice. Like management (or, perhaps, as an extension of management) assessment happens at multiple levels. We assess student writing. We assess teacher performance. We assess program effectiveness. Even though each of these is an

entirely distinct and unique issue, considerable similarities exist among approaches to these assessment issues. The outcomes of assessment have become the key to institutional legibility and relevance, and since these have kept programs running, they've become the immediate audience of assessment initiatives. To make this section manageable and work as a preface to the coming two chapters, I focus primarily on assessment of student writing, and by extension assessment of teachers and programs. The questions and concerns I highlight about assessment at one level can be applied to the others; namely that the questions that drive assessment practices pre-determine or boundary the answers one expects and finds valuable.

In "What Freshman Composition Cannot Do," Bunker H. Wright (1945) makes the point that faculty in English are responsible for educating colleagues throughout the university about what they can reasonably expect Freshman Composition to do under its current circumstances. Namely, he argues that it can only prepare the student for further college training, that it cannot be a beginning and end to writing training and instruction and that non-composition professors in other disciplines need to continue the education started in Freshman Composition by holding students to a particular standard in their own classrooms, not just lamenting that they cannot write (p. 100). This was a few years before Rhetoric and Composition began to establish itself as separate from English, but this type of thinking clearly influenced the notion that - as a service course to the university - there needed to be some guidance on what composition instructors knew about the possibilities and limits of their own course.

In order to communicate these expectations, formalized research in student and program achievement and effectiveness was required. For example, M.V. Marshall (1944) published "Predicting Success in Freshman English" in *College English,* in which he describes the outcomes of a quantitative research project tracking 310 students through the course of Freshman

English. In the process of this research, Marshall began to consider the importance of local context in assessment research, finding that instead of expecting to be able to use the results obtained at other institutions, "each university or college should study, in its own particular circumstances, the possibility of more accurate prediction of success or failure" (p. 221). This points to a recognition of the idea that large-scale, objective assessment was needed to both establish the coordinates of this growing course, and to communicate to multiple stakeholders what might reasonably be expected from a composition course and how to study its development over time and across institutions.

J. Gordon Eaker (1954) also wrote about "Measuring Success in Composition" in *CCC*. He begins with an insight about how the art of writing reflects so intimately the personality of the writer and is subject to so many interpretations on the part of readers, that one might feel that no one way of measuring success in composition could command universal agreement…." (p. 81). But by the end of that same opening paragraph determines that objective tests are the answer to this variance, specifically the Cooperative English Test. In Eaker's view, objective tests are good for placement, "diagnosis," and maintaining standards. Eaker was also adamant that testing like this should not lead to the establishment of national entrance requirements. The colleges will probably continue to take students where they find them and do for them what they can" (p. 84). And this seems to be the general result of developing effective and efficient tools within capitalist institutions - one cannot expect that the good sense of something in one context will not be applied holistically to contexts where it is inappropriate. The culture of testing and assessment may have started with the intention of understanding how students are moving toward learning objectives so that a discipline could better understand itself, but when co-opted for the university as a way to optimize learning, those good intentions skew.

The nuanced promise of objective testing Marshall points to in the 1950s turns into a central interest and concern in the 1960s. In 1963 Jack Thomas Leahy believed he found a solution to grading such that "subjective judgment is satisfactorily eliminated" (p. 35). His article in College English "Objective Correlation and the Grading of English Composition" looks like it belongs in a mathematics journal. The process goes a bit something like this: The instructor adds up the total number of words by class per assignment and then divides that by the number of students to get an average. Then the instructor consults the Modified Table of Errors Rating Board which "the board lists diagrammatically the various mistakes in Grammar, Punctuation, Manuscript Mechanics, Spelling and Diction in qualitative as well as quantitative order" (p. 37). There are complex equations to use this data to determine the quality of an individual paper in relation to the class set. It is very difficult for me to believe that this process was actually easier and while the system is valid within itself, it likely had little reflection of the quality or content of the actual writing. It is humorous to consider grading in this way, but it reflects what can happen when the assumptions behind questions are not more clearly considered.

In the 1960s, F.C. Osenburg (1961/1963) was a voice in opposition to objective testing, publishing "Objective Testing, The New Phrenology" in 1961 and "Is There an Error in this Modern Horoscopesis" in 1963. He writes that "knowledge that has to be prodded out of us may still be knowledge, but in many situations in life it is useless" (1963, p. 240) and "blind confidence in the capacity of the scientific method to solve all problems and of scientific instruments to measure all things has grown among the scientifically naive into a superstition as credulous and as unreasonable as any that ever plagued the Dark Ages" (1961, p. 106). Here again is the tension between recognizing that measures like objective testing and other empirical approaches to teaching and learning have their limitations, while they exist as a necessity in a

system that expects these kinds of evaluative assurances. By 1980, Odell and Cooper write a summative analysis of current objective testing approaches, which include General Impression scoring used by ETS (Educational Testing Services); the Analytic Scale developed by Paul B. Diederich, and the Primary Trait Score developed by Richard Lloyd-Jones for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (pp. 35-36). These types of objective tests are sometimes used in the composition classroom or as a means of larger programmatic evaluation and reflect the kind of "big business" that has developed around assessment and standards-based education models. Carolyn B. Matalene (1982) raised concerns over this kind of approach in her *College English* article "Objective Testing: Politics, Problems, and Possibilities." She felt that "as teachers of writing we must resist oversimplified and reductive tests as short-term solutions" (p. 368). She suggests that tests like the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) is not a suitable test for composition classrooms, even when scholars within the field seem to suggest so, since scholars such as Paul Diederich had taken paid positions with companies such as ETS and so blurred the lines between profit-motivated promotion and scholarly knowledge. In Matalene's program they were not able to entirely abolish objective testing with shared measures, but eventually developed the Revision and Editing Test which sought to "get beyond the level of the sentence and had to ask students to respond to a piece of writing in a full rhetorical context" (p. 370).

All throughout these times there are voices of clarity, suggesting that objective testing and inflexible, shared standards do not apply to the work of teaching or doing composition and rhetoric. Karen L. Greenberg (1992) reflects on the trend of borrowing the quantitative empiricism of the physical sciences, and that although this "reverence for objective data" wanted in the early 1980s, we continue to apply its basic principles even to measures that purport to be

less rigid and more "naturalistic, context-rich, qualitative models of evaluating students writing" (p. 10). She explains:

> Those of us who are committed to the direct assessment of writing understand that we do not have to model our programs on multiple-choice assessments, that there is no need to create the 'perfect' essay test. Readers will always differ in their judgments of the quality of a piece of writing; there is no one 'right' or 'true' judgment of a person's writing ability. If we accept that writing is a multidimensional, situational construct that fluctuates across a wide variety of contexts, then we must also respect the complexity of teaching and testing it. (p. 18)

By the 1990s, there was some critical distance from the initial years of objective testing, and the conversation regarding assessing student writing and writing programs developed some self-awareness through historical research. Kathleen Blake Yancey (1999) published "Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment" in *CCC,* forwarding three major waves of thinking on assessment. The 1950s-1980 was focused on objective testing; 1970-1986 was focused on holistic scoring; and 1986-1999 when she was writing focused on portfolio and programmatic assessment. She suggests that these trends are like "overlapping waves, with one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing waves that came before" (p. 483). She also positions assessment as a both evaluation *and* knowledge making (p. 485), which echoes a point that Strickland makes regarding the need to make assessment and administration part of recognized scholarship since so many scholars in the discipline were required to take on administrative roles which conflicted with their competing demands to produce new knowledge in the discipline. For Yancey, assessment at its core is a rhetorical act: "its own agent with responsibilities to all its participants" (p. 501). These waves that Yancey identifies certainly

appear in the scholarship of the discipline, but additional approaches also exist, including abolishing grading and contract grading, and perhaps they do not appear in her research because she carried into the project an assumption of what assessment is and looks like in the classroom.

Yancey's historical analysis misses one major approach to assessment that appears in the scholarly literature in the 1970s: contract grading. The conversation regarding contract approaches has spanned decades and seems to be revived during times of social transition or struggle, partially regarding representation and diversity in higher education. Geoffrey Grimes (1972) writes about contract-based grading systems in *CCC*. He is careful to note that this is not a new educational theory or practice, but it is among the first times for it to show up in a major scholarly publication in the discipline. For him, the contract system means a "flexible course format which allows students a range of alternate assignments required for satisfactory completion of a single exercise or even an entire course" (p. 192). John V. Knapp (1972) also writes about a contract system, paired with conference evaluations, in *College English,* noting that the current grading approach we take

> actually discourages trial-and-error, represses communication between craftsman and apprentice, and diminishes rather than elevates the chances of the novice attempting anything personal, or risky, or even craftsman like in the original sense of the word. It does encourage imitation, reward the pallid, non-personal prose statements of the masters of those who may have discovered early on what the teacher wants, and take. (p. 648)

Additionally, Dwight H. Purdy (1975) published "A Report on an Ungraded Composition Course" in CCC, which does not use the term "contract" to represent the grading approach but follows with many of the principles of a contract-based classroom. Purdy faced issues because of a lack of clarity about what would constitute a "satisfactory" completion of the course, which

shows that even within this radical approach, the dominant concern with objectivity, standardization, and clarity prevailed. There is another moment where we can see this same dynamic. Alex Page (1960) published "To Grade or Retrograde" in *College English* with the idea that someone outside the classroom should grade student work. Page observes that the instructor of composition is in a conflicted role: both the support and guide for student writing and the judge of that same writing and argues that this leads to conflicted sense of purpose and relationships in the classroom, especially as education expands and enrollment increases (p. 213). Page is correct that the role of the composition instructor is a multifaceted and often conflicted one, but to attempt to absolve that through outsourcing the grading work does not result in more objective grading or a better relationship with students. In a Beauvoirian sense, Page and other scholars seeking to resolve this ambiguity for composition instructors and their students miss the possibilities of assuming that ambiguity and using it as a foundational framework for a more critically engaged praxis. Or, as Veit (1979) argues in "De-Grading Composition: Do Papers Need Grades?":

> If we want students to grow as writers, we need to create a different environment where experimentation is encouraged...by grading each writing they produce, we burden them with the sense that their every step is being rated to determine their worth, that each word they write will have some bearing upon their academic careers. (p. 434)

It makes sense that an interest in contract grading appears in the scholarship when it does - as open admissions and rising college enrollments change what the classroom looks like and the diversity of rhetorical and communicative practices therein. Contract-based assessment has reemerged in the past few years, with particular prominence at Asao B. Inoue's 2019 CCCC Chair's Address. In 2009, Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow published a piece in *CCC*, which

connected the approach to Freirean critical pedagogy, and present it as a shift that allows for more concentration on the actual writing rather than predetermined guidelines for assessment that does not leave much room for critical thought, linguistic or cultural diversity, or the unexpected. There have been other approaches throughout the years that did not gain as much traction as the ones mentioned thus far. These include things like having students grade their own essays (Moxley and Eubanks, 2015), team-grading (Grogan and Daiker, 1989), and many others that missed in my approach to data collection.

The 1990s saw the rise in portfolios as an approach to assessment of student writing, but scholarship on the portfolio system appeared in the literature in the 1970s[29], published in *College English* by Ford and Larkin (1978) as an attempt to "end backsliding writing standards" which again centers the narrative that student writing was getting worse and that new approaches to assessment might be able to create more effective writing products (note: not necessarily better writers). Smit (1990), Kearns (1993), Sommers et al (1993), Haswell et al (1994), Borrowman (1999), among others all published on the question of portfolios as a new approach to assessing student writing and also as a method of assessing writing programs. Kearns makes an interesting observation about the portfolio approach: it aimed to solve a set of problems with assessment that were never confirmed as problems (p. 53). He says:

> We must teach the most fundamental paradox in writing assessment; namely, the more we standardize the assessment, the less we assess genuine writing ability…. The more we specify topic, strategies, and audience -- the more we diminish originality and narrow the range of "writing ability" tested." (p. 57)

[29] Kearns reports that the portfolio system originated with Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff at Stony Brook in 1986, but the published scholarship does not support this claim.

Given this perspective, Kearns felt that any promise that portfolios might offer to the project of assessment could be fulfilled only if we first develop more valid and reliable methods of assessing student writing, recognizing that valid and reliable in our discipline might look quite a bit different from valid and reliable in other disciplines.

A strange blip on the radar of assessment practices in the scholarship was an interest in "total quality management" in the late 1980s mid 1990s. For example, Burnham and Nims (1995) published "Closing the Circle: Outcomes Assessment, TQM, and the WPA" in *Writing Program Administration.* Their opening call seems promising, critiquing the "cash cow" of the standardized testing industry and urging WPAs to "resist such reductionism" (p. 50). For them, it isn't that assessment is a problem, in fact they argue that it asks us to "articulate our objectives in concrete terms, develop instruments to measure student performance in terms of those objectives, and use that information to initiate reforms and revise curriculum in response to student, institutional, and public needs" (p. 50). What they avoid in reductionism they inherit in complexity with TQM, which prioritizes accountability with "multiple-endpoint measures" to demonstrate outcomes. TQM is a continuous assessment, rather than iterative like standardized testing, but it comes with the same concern of whether the questions we ask match with the diversity of the outcomes we seek.

As the molds for more objective, standardizable, and reliable assessment practices set, many scholars have questioned whether we are asking the right questions of this challenge at all. Brian Huot (1996) in "A New Theory of Writing Assessment" articulates this tension as the spaces between procedures, purposes, and assumptions. He claims that traditional writing assessment practices are based on a version of epistemology that holds that there is a reality that exists and that it can be measured (pp. 549-550). For example, a common procedure is scoring

guidelines, which has a purpose recognizing "features of quality writing," and together that procedure and purpose upholds the assumptions that "writing quality can be defined and determined" (p. 551). Huot hopes to see a shift in procedures that result in stronger underlying assumptions and that recognize the importance of context, rhetoric, and other characteristics integral to a specific purpose and institution" (p. 551). These principles would be site-based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically-based, and accessible. O'Neill, Schendel, and Huot (2002) also argue for a reimagining of assessment as a knowledge making endeavor and not simply an administrative one, and in changing this conception it becomes both teachable and learnable, and therefore - theoretically - more democratic (p. 12). They explain: "Changing our perceptions about and uses of assessment requires that we resist the idea that assessment is something done to us *by them* or done by us *for them* -- and *them* could be accrediting institutions, state legislatures, or institutional administrators" (p. 22). This consideration of the ultimate audience for assessment research and reporting is critical, and points even to the idea that we might have multiple assessments, or at least multiple ways of communicating the results of our assessments, seeing that we remain couched between the good knowledge of our discipline and the expectations of the larger university structure.

The Reform Question

This story of how we got here, where we have always been, is split between two predominant paths. The first path is the scholarly conversation that has been in response to the increasing demands from the university to make composition more efficient, effective, and standardized. Or, to make it more easily legible in the neoliberal capitalist university. The other has been to question this drive, to merge disciplinary knowledge with programs and classes that actually reflect this knowledge. As I've stated before, this tension is inherited anew by each

generation of scholars in the discipline, and I believe feels new to each as well. However, these roots clearly trace back to the formation of the discipline, as we've seen throughout this chapter. The problems posed throughout the formation and maintenance of our discipline have been met with a continual question: how we might change the path, how we might do things radically differently, how we might *re-form*.

Frederic Reeve (1949), in an issue of *College English,* captures in one sentence what I'm trying to achieve in the entirety of this dissertation: "It would seem to me that no abstract rules can be established simply because institutions and their students and faculties are so varied. The Freshman English course can be successful only if it grows from actuality, if its theory is grounded in observable fact" (p. 33). Of course, I'd argue that what is "observable" and what is "fact," even in a localized analysis, stem from deeply entrenched assumptions behind the questions we ask and the observations that follow. However, the notion that we cannot develop abstract rules that describe or determine the 'proper' or most ideal execution of composition courses is as radical as it is simple. Simple and radical in a way that is akin to Beauvoir's call to assume ambiguity as the foundation of our lives. It should be clear by now that these calls to think and do things differently in Rhetoric and Composition often do not gain traction because, amongst the competing demands of the university, there isn't a clear place to go with this insight. What I'd like to show in this section and the two following chapters is that there is space for this kind of idea, and it isn't going to show up in the places that communicate directly with the university, but that does not make them less valid or less important. We as composition teachers and scholars have more agency than we often recognize or claim, so overtaken by the narratives of crisis passed from one generation to the next. There is a space to do things differently; reform does not have to be total to be significant, and this section aims to demonstrate that.

Frederic Reeve was writing from Michigan State University in 1949, at a time when the university (both MSU specially and the general institution) was changing rapidly. For example, enrollments at MSU went from 15,000 in 1950 to 38,000 in 1965. Reeves suggests that truly good curricular development in Freshman English should come from a deep consideration of the following questions:

1. Who are our students?
2. What are their interests?
3. What other courses do they or will they take?
4. What work are they going to do, and where are they going to live?
5. What is the nature of our institutions, and what functions in the community does it serve?
6. What is the nature of our staff, what is their training, and what are their plans?
7. What is good communication for our students? (p. 33)

These are strong questions that would hold up in a curriculum committee meeting today, but the issue when we look at them in their historical context is that the answers would shift significantly from year to year. The students, their interests, their general curriculum, the work they would do…all these questions would change as the institution changed both with increasing enrollments and a growing diversity of students' expectations, needs, and goals. Reeve gets that "the classroom is too often an unreal situation, in which the student is asked to act in a fashion totally unrelated to his own experience or environment" (p. 36) but at the same time would have has little ability to meaningful anticipate or track the "experience or environment" of students in a rapidly shifting learning community. Erwin R. Steinberg (1951) recognized this as well, proposing that all research into what should be done with composition must be highly

contextualized and site specific, while trying to determine some basic assumptions that move from context to context and can be reinterpreted. He proposed five basic assumptions. First, that "a person's language activity is an integrated part of his whole behavior pattern and cannot be considered as a separate entity" and therefore teachers cannot "set up an 'ideal' course and then pour students into it" (p. 12). Second, "writing is best taught functionally, as a means of communication" (p. 12). By this he means not as a set of abstract linguistic or style principles but as an embedded part of our naturally occurring communicative practices. Third, "there is no one subject matter which is particularly appropriate for all or even most courses in freshman composition" (p. 14), meaning that multiple approaches are equally valuable. Fourth, "studied and generalized about descriptively rather than prescriptively, language and communication can be shown to have relation to the student' real world and will thus become matters for their practical concern" (p. 15). I'm particularly interested in this assumption because it positions the project of composition teaching as not showing students things they don't already know but helping students name and describe the practices they already use in their lives. Finally, Steinberg held that "modern English is an analytic language, not a synthetic language, and so cannot be taught the way Latin and Greek are taught" (p. 16), so any hopes that a course with rigid rules and practices would result in competent products is misguided. Steinberg suggests that for a composition course or program to be effective, faculty in the department that teaches it should have deep discussions about these assumptions and to then evaluate how their classes are actually speaking to these assumptions. This way of thinking and this language seems surprising to see so early in the development of the discipline and demonstrates how this tension between what we know as a discipline and what we do to answer the needs of the growing neoliberal capitalist university has existed as long as the discipline has. Throughout the rest of this section, I

want to highlight some moments in the scholarship where folks imagined another way that we might teach and administer the composition course, and these highlights will carry over to the second half of the dissertation, where I introduce and situate what a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity might look like and how it might function under our current contextual constraints.

The scholarship is full of examples of individual instructors experimenting with different approaches. For example, Charlton Laird (1956) wrote about how he was managing the growing enrollments and changing demands in the university after WWII. His approach is radically flexible and attuned to change even over the course of a single semester. His is also one of the first mentions of a conference forward approach to instruction, in which he met with students in small groups once a week to discuss the course and their work in it. He offered that students could request individual conferences in addition to their group meetings but found that most students got what they needed from the group conference format. Laird didn't grade everything, but rather a selection of papers over the semester. He found that the benefit of this approach was its ability to change and adapt to each course, as situations changed over the semester, and as students' interest and preparedness in the topic varied. This type of approach is not necessarily scalable, and as I've discussed in the Student/Teacher Problem section, might not work well for every instructor, but it did work for Laird and shows how adjustment to change may not require large-scale programmatic change but rather the space for individual instructors to decide how to address changing circumstances in the ways that best suit their teaching style, particular content, and expectations for the course.

This type of flexibility also eventually shows up in the scholarship on training and assessment of composition instructors, in the name of programmatic consistency and development. Michael C. Flanigan (1979) focused on how to develop an individual teaching

style. He notes that while many teacher evaluation programs are in the name of programmatic accountability, their program is designed to meet teacher's needs and not administrative expectations. They worked with three hypotheses: 1) "knowing what individual teachers want to accomplish is essential to helping them with their teaching" 2) "that teachers need information about their own teaching styles and not about some hypothetical 'best' way to teach" 3) detailed information about teaching is more valuable to teachers than generalized evaluations (p. 17). They conducted a pre-observation interview, an observation, and a follow-up conference to explore these hypotheses, and found that teacher's felt more positively about their work in the department because of this approach to evaluations. This approach does not rely on communicating *to* teachers how they might best achieve the aims of the course but starting *with* teachers to better understand their own aims and how they hope to achieve them.

The 1990s saw a more sustained conversation regarding the role of the WPA in the ever-expanding discipline, and many parts of this conversation imagined a reform of that role and by extension a reform of composition programs. We see this clearly in Jeanne Gunner's (1994) piece in *WPA,* "Decentering the WPA," in which she argues that "if the true goal of reformulating the WPA position is to achieve increased professionalism for all those in the profession, and if 'professionalism' is to mean something greater than 'tenure' then we need to consider how the position can be linked to faculty conditions and status and to reconsider the role faculty should play in the direction of a writing program" (p. 9). Gunner was concerned with the discrepancy between administrative roles in the department and those being administered and wanted a greater sense of collective resistance to the hierarchizing that happens within the complexity of higher educational institutions. Francis Sullivan et al (1997) pick up on this in "Student Needs and Strong Composition: The Dialectics of Writing Program Reform." Building

on arguments made by Richard Bullock and John Trimbur in *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary* they ask, "on what basis can a writing program lay claim to liberatory goals when it is so deeply embedded in a contradictory system?" (p. 372). That contradictory system is fueled by "forces of exclusion and late monopoly capitalism" (p. 372). They show how, because of this dynamic, student/teacher relationships become oppositional since evaluation is already in favor of the academy (p. 373). Joyce Kinkead and Jeanna Simpson (2000) echo this in their article in *Writing Program Administration* titled "The Administrative Audience: A Rhetorical Problem" suggesting that rather than working against the institution, writing program administrators should acknowledge that they "are part of the institution and can be effective change agents" (p. 72).

By the early 2000s, the role of the writing program administrator was fully established even though the spaces and modes through which the composition course was administered varied (and continues to vary) greatly from one institution to another. Some scholars called for department administrators to try to climb the ranks of university level administration to have better leverage for their own departments. For example Charles Schuster (2001), promoted to Associate Dean, shared the "view from there" and urged that faculty and program administrators come to see the importance of recruitment and retention in bottom line logistics, claiming that we need to think of FYW "as more than just learning how to write academic analyses and arguments: it must become a comprehensive program wedded to recruitment and retention, goals that resonate with college and university administrators" (p. 92). Chris Anson (2008) also speaks to this tension, explaining that compositions scholars need more than just a belief in our methods if we are going to be able to articulate our programs and their benefits to an outside audience,

whether institutional or otherwise. He wants to see better research, better connection with publics, better graduate education and training, and improved research communities (p. 24-31).

However, others were more critical about the role of administration in the university, skeptical that change from within would be either possible or grand enough. Kelly Kinney (2009) published "Fellowship for the Ring: A Defense of Critical Administration in the Corporate University," suggesting the responsible thing to do given our disciplinary knowledge is to use the administrative position to work against the trends of profit and corporate logics infiltrating universities. Chris W. Gallagher (2011) connects this same critique to the assessment scene, "to show how neoliberalism undermines faculty assessment expertise and underwrites testing industry expertise in the current assessment scene" (p. 450). His main argument is that because we as a discipline ascribe to a "stakeholder" understanding of power, we have not been able to disconnect from the "defensive position the current assessment scene assigns us" (452). By this he means that we use assessment not as a form of broad inquiry into what and how we teach, so that we might learn more for the sake of learning more, but that the cards have already been stacked against us in the sense that our assessments must produce useful information that confirms the effectiveness of our programs. Tony Scott and Lil Brannon (2013) continue this critique in "Democracy, Struggle, and the Praxis of Assessment" arguing that "in spite of the intentions with which they are enacted, more constructivist and qualitative assessment can also easily align with, and even legitimate, exploitative labor practices through portraying consensus and resolutions in sites in which dissonance and struggle are everyday realities" (p. 275). To address this, they explain that assessment must be able to account for power and its relation to labor practices, along with themes of dissonance and irreconcilability within the discipline writ large (p. 276).

Bruce Horner's (2015) "Rewriting Composition: Moving Beyond a Discourse of Need" speaks directly to the hidden assumptions framing I use throughout this chapter and presents another potential view of what an "otherwise" might look like in Rhetoric and Composition. Horner argues that the challenges in composition

> arise in part out of the tension built into the term itself as a referent for not only an activity and the product of that activity, but also the material social conditions of that activity: not only what is understood to be the composing process(es) of individual students or groups of students (or other writers) and the textual products of these processes, but also the panoply of material social conditions and practices out of and within which such processes and product appear - the 'field' of composition, composition programs, and the history of these. (p. 450)

Because of this complexity, and because of the competing demands between these areas of scholarly and pedagogical expertise, the discipline has accepted what Horner calls a "discourse of need" which accepts that, from the start, the project of composition was flawed and impossible to complete or deliver. Horner sees this as an incomplete assessment, drawing too closely from the realities of need projected upon us by the demands of the institution. Horner explains that the markers of this discourse revolve several interlocking assumptions, including:

- An understanding of writing that is "a stable, internally uniform entity"
- An understanding of teaching as transmission of this "stable entity"
- An understanding of power relations as set, preventing meaningful change and/or "violent breaks with the past"
- An understanding of the past as finite and stable; inherently different from what is new
- An understanding of difference as deviation rather than inevitable

- An understanding of theory as an escape from practice, rather than practice itself (p. 453)

Given the limitations of these assumptions, Horner argues that what Rhetoric and Composition needs is a new understanding of itself that divests from this discourse of need. He warns that to fail to do so "is to align oneself with dominant ideological constructions of these that consign composition to mere service to the dominant, or worse, of what might constitute legitimate alternatives or 'improvements' to it" (p. 474). Tyler S. Branson et al.'s (2017) notion of collaborative ecologies and emergent assessment presents what this new understanding might look like both in theory and in practice. Drawing on Ryan, MacMillan, and Fleckenstein, Branson defines collaborative ecologies as "blending quantitative and qualitative approaches while situating both forms of interpretation within their local contexts" (pp. 288-289). His attempt at Texas Christian University to apply this approach to assessment led to some intriguing implications that shifted how the program thought of composition. The most notable for this project and the coming two chapters is the idea that emergent and unexpected learning is valuable and can instruct planning and assessment for future approaches, but that most of the present methods of programmatic assessment are unable to capture these moments of emergence.

Finally, in "For Slow Agency" in *WPA* Laura R. Micciche (2011) writes about the potentials of the hypermiling movement for writing program administration. Hypermiling draws on the "arts of productive stillness, resources preservation, and slowness" or that is holistically called "gradual arrival" (p. 73). For Micciche agency includes action and change, along with the less visible practices of "thinking, being still, and processing" (p. 73) which would "entail giving up what's familiar for what's counterintuitive" (p. 78). Essentially, she suggests that there is value in "residing longer than is comfortable in the complexity, stillness and fatigue of not knowing how to proceed" and that this shift in perspective regarding the purposes and aims of a

writing program administrator has the potential to radically shift what our programs look and feel like for all that interact with them (p. 80).

Holding in view the 'problems' of our discipline with the numerous voices for experimenting with an otherwise, the second half of this dissertation considers what an otherwise guided by principles of ambiguity might look like in Rhetoric and Composition. To call back Strickland's notion shared at the beginning of this chapter - that to study and to *do* composition are often two entirely different things - I intend to close the gaps between what we know and what we do, but showing the ways in which we have already, in small and big ways, been doing what we know, but have yet to see these ideas as a singular body of knowledge. Engagements with ambiguity often do not name themselves, may not even be aware of alliance and affinity. The second half of this dissertation is a first step at naming and drawing connections within this body of knowledge, so that it has both a stronger theoretical and practical foundation for future research in this area.

CHAPTER 4: INTERLUDE

"You gave me a flashlight and pointed me to a hole in the ground. But like the best teachers, you didn't tell me what I'd find there." (Chang, 2021, p. 77)

Historically, rhetoric - both in scholarship and in the popular mind - has been concerned with persuasion, or the ability for a rhetor to move the thoughts and/or actions of a particular audience. Persuasion comes with many given assumptions, both ontological and teleological. It assumes that knowing can (and should) be resolved and that successful communication should result in consensus toward a particular direction. But scholarship in the 1960s, building on the work of I.A. Richards, sparked a conversation regarding the 'new rhetoric' that might disrupt these definitions, assumptions, and goals, explaining that the new rhetoric is about *misunderstanding* and its remedies. Richard Ohmann (1964) outlines three of the foundational ideas of a new rhetoric: 1) movement away from persuasion 2) a more complex understanding of the truth and 3) a centering of inquiry and self-discovery (p. 19). In this sense, a new rhetoric offers a vision of communication that centers *pursuit* of understanding rather than transmission of it. Ohmann explains that "truth is not a lump of matter, decorated and disguised, but finally delivered intact; rather it is a web of shifting complexities whose pattern emerges only in the process of writing, and is in fact modified *by* the writing" (p. 19). Hans P. Guth (1972) extends these ideas in the following decade, explaining that "as a rhetoric of discovery replaces the rhetoric of order, a new set of watchwords replaces the old insistence on coherence, unity, and clarity. We begin to make a virtue of open-mindedness, skepticism, tentativeness, flexibility, diversity, dialogue. We become more tolerant of complexity, irony, paradox" (p. 33). This contrasted with the conservative rhetoric of order, which was concerned with "structure, organization, coherence, unity, clarity, exactness, accuracy, precision, simplicity. Good writing was informative, purposeful, rational - free from digressions, repetition, and *wooly ambiguities*"

(emphasis added, p. 30). Guth makes the point that while there is promise in the new rhetoric of discovery, there are potential weaknesses and limitations as well, since the writer becomes perhaps too aware of nuance and complexity, resulting in an inability to make sense or "take sides" (p. 38). He says, "When Rome burns, we lose patience with those who tell us that the problems involved in fighting fires are complex, and that the cases of the fires are diverse" (p. 38).

In the early 1980s, Maxine Hairston (1982), inspired by Thomas Kuhn, imagined the paradigm shift for Rhetoric and Composition, moving away from the current-traditional paradigm (which assumes knowledge, imagines the writing process as linear, and equates writing with editing) to a vision of teaching writing and rhetoric as an act of discovery regardless of confidence or expertise (p. 85). This process of discovery is not linear, but messy and recursive. She explains that one of the aspects slowing this paradigm shift is the ongoing influence of English on our own disciplinary knowledges. She explains, "the people who do most to promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing are those who define writing courses as service courses and skills courses; a group that probably includes most administrators and teachers of writing" (p. 79). Yet, she could see that a shift might be possible, and that it was already taking root in scholarship and classrooms. For her, the shift: focuses on writing processes and sees them as recursive; teaches strategies of invention and discovery; focuses on the rhetoric of situation: audience, context, purpose over the rhetoric of style; uses writer's own intention and audience needs to evaluate the final product; holistic, including both rational and intuitive/non-rational; imagines writing as both a mode of discovery and a communication skill; includes many modes of writing; draws from other disciplines, including psychology and linguistics; stresses that writing teaches should be people who write and study writing. These principles reflect what

Ann E. Berthoff (1984) saw as the necessary shift from current-traditional leanings, in which the goal of a writing class is to show students "how meaning makes further meanings possible, how form finds further form" (p. 755). This paradigm shift, this new vision of what writing might be, calls for a new (or perhaps revived) set of approaches to theorizing and teaching rhetoric and writing.

A paradigm reflects an accepted or enforced ideology. Berlin (1988) argues that rhetoric is "always already ideological," and so the first step in analyzing the teaching of rhetoric must seek to understand its own ideological underpinnings (p. 477). Essentially, what is possible is determined by what we can imagine and how broad we can make this "phenomenological experience." And yet, as Berlin observes, what is possible is highly implicated in power, because even if there is a desire for change, if the dominant ideology limits that change, practical intervention will also be limited.

The second half of this dissertation proposes that a paradigm shift has been slowly, quietly evolving throughout the history of our discipline. As chapters two and three showed, the demands of the neoliberal corporate university have kept this body of scholarship and practice in the margins, since it does not easily translate to the expectations of standardization, uniform modes of assessment, or replicable empirical study. This chapter brings together these approaches to create a legible history of the concept of ambiguity in the discipline since the 1950s. Of course, these are not discrete categories but rather blurring and overlapping; even the boundaries between rhetorical theory and its pedagogical interpretations holds no clear delineation. And yet, for the compositional constraints of a project such as this, I've had to find some ways to group and categorize knowing that these categories are insufficient and

incomplete. The following chapters are led by a guiding verb that encapsulates the movement of a line of thought in relation to ambiguity in the discipline.

Chapter 5, Imagine, brings together diverse scholarship on imagination, problem solving, inquiry, design thinking, and other projects that consider what it would be like to use an imaginative approach in our scholarship in teaching. For this project, I connect these moves to their contribution to a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity, as it is conceptualized and articulated in this dissertation.

Chapter 6, Emerge, brings together scholarship on emergence, ecologies, complexity, and chaos to show how engagements with ambiguity in scholarship and teaching open possibilities and potentials that are inaccessible through intentional design and planning alone.

Chapter 7, Expand, brings together scholarship on existentialism, feminist theory, and queer theory to show how an ongoing critique of societal norms opens more possibilities for freedom and expression. This section draws heavily on a Beauvoirian conceptualization of ambiguity, since to see the social world around us and its inherited values as constructed and relative (even when they are presented as natural and absolute) is a foundation step in being able to see and engage with the world from a space of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Chapter 8, Intuit, brings together scholarship on paralogical rhetoric, non-discursive rhetoric, and affect to offer alternatives to the logo-centric mode of persuasion dominant in Western rhetorical practices and, therefore, also dominant in many of our composition programs and syllabi. It offers an entry point to ambiguity through the starting premise that communication, even when it appears clear, concrete, and logical, often is not.

Finally, Chapter 9, Situate, brings together scholarship in difference, alternative rhetorics, and the the art of recontextualization to show how these require a commitment to ambiguous

ways of thinking and being, so as to de-center and upend the faulty sense of homogeneity and normative rhetorical practices of dominant (usually, Western) perspectives.

Additionally, we return to consider how ambiguity speaks back to the tenets of white supremacy culture. I introduced this connection in Chapter 3 ("For Our Existential Crises"), explaining that anit-racist pedagogy can teach anti-racist content and it can seek to actively address the ways that white supremacy culture shows up in our scholarship and our classrooms. The fifteen tenets of white supremacy culture include: perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness and/or denial, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, the belief in one "right" way, paternalism, either/or binary thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress defined as more, the right to profit, objectivity, and the right to comfort ("Characteristics" n.d.). In the last section of each of the following chapters, I provide a brief discussion of how each concept speaks back to some aspects of white supremacy culture. I refer to this speaking back as "shifts" since it is unlikely that any of the concepts presented have the capacity to entirely deconstruct white supremacy culture alone, but I do believe that they at least have the potential to shift commonly accepted practices and perspectives that refiefy and reaffirm white supremacy culture in our classrooms and research. This is an initial attempt to show how this thinking might work, rather than an exhaustive explanation. There is much room for additional scholarship and inquiry on this topic, and I hope that my work here provides exigence for questions, ideas, and inspiration.

The demarcation created by separate chapters does not quite capture the overlapping nature of all these concepts, and yet I needed to make these initial concepts comprehensible and legible. This is to say that if you wonder if a particular idea might fit better in another chapter, or that two chapters could merge into one, or that all these ideas are pointing to the same thing - you

are correct. This is the way they have taken shape throughout my research and writing, and I hope the categories I've ended with here encapsulate, as well as they can, the scope of the potential contributions and influences that ambiguity has had and can continue to have on the discipline. As you read, make connections, ask questions, push back, formulate critique. There is no one way to present ambiguity as it has existed in the discipline, and there is no one way to articulate a vision of ambiguity into the future. This is where I have arrived; perhaps you will arrive somewhere else and I welcome that. Perhaps we will both arrive in the same place from different paths. Either way, my hope is that the following chapters will provide you with both a flashlight and a place to explore, but as Victoria Chang suggests, I cannot tell you what you will find there.

CHAPTER 5: IMAGINE

"Anyone looking for a magic formula for teaching composition will have missed the point of most of what I have said." (Miller, 1974, p. 366)

Where Have All the Oracles Gone?

Ambiguity was a critical element in some of the most important decision making in Ancient Greece. Existing for centuries before the reign of Plato and his forms, the *pythia,* or high priestess*,* channeled and transferred messages from the Gods to those in search of advice at the Oracle of Delphi. *Pythias* were selected and trained for their positions from a young age and maintained the practice for over five centuries. Their prophecies were often enigmatic, mysterious, or ambiguous even when they appeared straightforward, since they required that the questioner assume the responsibility of interpretation. Lynda Walsh (2003) explains that if the relationship between oracles and rhetoric reveals anything "it is the eternal perversity of logos" (p. 74). This "murkily polyvocal" messaging answered urgent questions about major geopolitical conflicts and so played with modes of human agency (p. 55). The most famous example might be that of Croesus, who sought advice from Oracle of Delphi regarding war with the Persian Empire. The Oracle replied: If Croesus goes to war, he will destroy a great empire. Leaning into his confidence, Croesus decides to invade Persia - but destroys his own empire in the process. The Oracle was correct; Croesus' interpretation was the problem. Walsh argues that "this openness is exactly the beauty of oracles" because they make human agency more complex, dynamic (p. 74).

Yet, this rich and interesting history is not often included as part of an understanding of rhetoric in ancient Greece. From that tradition, we held a tight grip on the rhetorical appeals of logos, pathos, and ethos - likely the most common a first-year writing student will learn - but have distanced or entirely forgotten that of *muthos,* or myth. The Oracle at Delphi shows the

influence and prominence that *muthos* held for some of the most important issues in ancient Greece. It also shows the broad acceptance of ambiguous guidance, even among the most powerful. Walsh ties the distancing of oracular rhetoric to warped interpretations of rhetoric in the modern university:

> This cyclical praxis, this refusal of closure, this demand for action -- these aspects of logos should alarm us, perhaps more than a little, as we seek to discipline rhetoric, to achieve clean departmental boundaries and academic status, we feel we have been denied since the birth of the modern university. For the logos will not do it for us. It resists self-fashioning by taxonomy. It relentlessly connects, interfolds, messes up, and generally drives us both outside ourselves and into ourselves in the process of "knowing ourselves." (p. 74)

Along with the overreliance on logos as a way to garner space in the university, we also focused on the attributes of *techne,* or artful trade, that would further carve out space for a respected discipline. Yet through this focus we have distanced from the other half of *techne: tuche*, meaning fate or chance. And yet it is in the balance between logic and myth, between fate and agency that we work out an embodied existence. And so, as Walsh argues, a goal for a more modern rhetoric should be to move away from dichotomization and into entangled, murky complexity.

The Oracle at Delphi wasn't exactly experiment in imagination[30] but rather a shifting engagement between *muthos* and *logos* that reflected a perspective toward knowledge and agency essential to Greek civilization at the time that, for the most part, has not continued in the

[30] Although, some historical evidence suggests that the placement of the Oracle over a crack in the earth's surface through which a "vapor" (geochemical gas) arose, may have intoxicated the pythia, perhaps significantly changing the classification of this form of rhetoric (National Geographic, 2001).

modern understanding of the Western 'rhetorical tradition.' However, there is a need in the present moment for a more oracular rhetoric, that complicates assumptions of knowledge, the capacities of language, and our assumptions of agency. In "Rediscovering the Rhetoric of Imagination" James E. Miller (1974) writes that our goal in composition should not be changing habits (style, grammar, spelling) but rather

> changing attitudes toward the possibilities of language in exploring and discovering the world, attitudes toward the power of language in affecting and moving individuals and groups, attitudes toward the delicacy of language in discriminating and limning the subtlest of human feelings or the most complex of human situations. (p. 362)

For Miller this prompts the question of what our classrooms might look like if we taught language as symbolic and creative, or to put it in my own terms here - oracular (p. 365). A challenge is that the oracular resists assessment, standardization, or measures of validity which have been central concerns of the discipline since its beginning. And yet, there have been scholars throughout the history of the discipline who have experimented and played with what a more capacious pedagogy might look like in writing classrooms. This chapter presents some of those moments in order to form a foundation for the use of imagination as an entry to ambiguity in our praxis.

Against Correct Usage, Rigid Rules

Notions of correct usage are antithetical to an imaginative approach to writing and rhetoric. Sweeping histories of the discipline tell a story of a preoccupation with grammar, style, and the privileging of a 'standard' English at the foundation of the discipline. Yet, some scholars at the time highlighted the problematics of this approach. In his *College English* article, "In Defense of College Composition," Charles I. Glicksberg (1974) observes that if we "bow to the

crude doctrine of correct usage, there is no further incentive to think about what we are doing when we use language" (p. 92). For Glicksberg, I.A. Richards poses an alternative, in which language is seen as experimentation and so there is no single precedent to guide the instructor in every case, since no two classes or 'experiments' are alike. In this view, a course in composition becomes "a voyage on strange seas of the imagination, and a reconnaissance flight over unknown territory…a laboratory in which the miracle of creation out of nothing, as it were, takes place" (p. 98). Ken Macrorie (1954) provides another voice against correct usage. In "The Hypocrisy of Perfection" Macrorie points out that error happens in all forms of writing, even finalized published writing with the help of an entire team, so why are we so concerned with it in our composition classes? Part of the answer to this question seems to exist in the ways that popular composition textbooks at the time conceptualized writing. For example, Janet A. Emig (1964) in "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing" makes a plea for more creative, expansive composition textbook:

> It could be said that I am asking - primal sin - for such books to be something other than they are meant to be; and perhaps they are used chiefly for their prescriptive annexes on usage. But, nonetheless, one longs for them to make at least a small obeisance in the direction of the untidy, of the convoluted, of the not-wholly-known…. (p. 7)

Like Macrorie, Emig points to the messy and mysterious writing processes of famous writers like Hemmingway, Stein, and Kipling, and wonders why we expect students to have such a different experience of their own writing processes. She peeks into the future of this proposition and realizes that in order to allow for more room to play with mystery we would need to radically change what we expect to receive from students, both in terms of their process and their product. Douglass Bolling (1971) suggests that we "put aside all prescriptive forms of organization for

paragraphing and theme writing, that we stop counting the words in a theme, the points off for errors, the fringe things…." so that we can see students' writing as a means to grapple with uncertainty and deepen personal exploration (p. 352).

Also concerned with what popular composition texts were implicitly teaching students, Richard Ohmann (1979) conducted a qualitative study of textbooks from the 1970s[31] to see how these textbooks teach students to be definite, specific. Ohmann recognized that these priorities "may inadvertently suggest to students that they be less inquiring and less intelligent than they are capable of being" (p. 390). He finds that these textbooks paint a clear ideology about composition formed by ahistoricism ("a truncated present moment"), empiricism, fragmentation ("obscures the social relations and the relations of people to nature that are embedded in all things"), solipsism, and denial of conflict (p. 396). He concludes that

> when in the cause of clarity or liveliness we urge them toward detail, surfaces, the sensory, as the mere *expansion* of ideas or even as a *substitute* for abstraction, we encourage them to accept the empirical fragmentation of consciousness that passes for common sense in our society, and hence to accept the society itself as just what it most superficially seems to be. (p. 397)

Not only do textbooks often present a view of writing that is wholly different from practice, but this representation of the writing process can unintentionally disempower students from their own voices, since they become more fixated on the 'right way' rather than their own unique way of expression. Mike Rose (1980) explores this in "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," finding that students who tended to

[31] David Skwire and Frances Chitwood, *Student's Book of College English* (Glencoe Press); Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester's *The New Strategy of Style*; *Composition: Skills and Models*, by Sidney T. Stovall, Virginia B. Mathis, Linda C. Elliot, G. Mitchell Hagler, Jr., and Mary A. Poole (Houghton Mifflin).

experience writer's block more regularly were those who applied to their writing process more rigid rules, whereas those who did not experience writer's block used some rules to guide them, but that those rules were more flexible and better suited to the complexities and uncertainties of the writing task (p. 390). Rose explains that this opposes popular findings from Flower and Hayes that knowledge of rules actually empowers students of writing (p. 393). Rose proposes that seeing writing as a problem-solving process, with an open approach to systems thinking, would achieve the balance of rules as guidance but not rigidity. Problem-solving became a prominent pedagogical approach in the 1960s and 1970s - but not without problems. Or, as Berthoff (1972) explains, the problem solver is often not "aware of the problems his solution has generated" (p. 637). As the next section shows, problem-solving was one way to try to open more space for the imaginative or creative in the writing classroom, but quickly fell to its own sense of a 'right way' to approach and solve a problem.

Problem Solving Problem-Solving

Ann E. Berthoff (1972) was a resolute voice against the ways that problem-solving was taken up in the scholarship and pedagogy of the discipline. She felt that although it purported to develop critical thinking, it did the opposite, providing near equations for how to work through complex or ambiguous problems or situations. She explains:

> The problem solving approach has the sanction of educational psychologists, systems analysts, defense intellectuals, and other technocrats because it promises guidelines, 'structure,' models; problem solving and programming are virtually the same. Certainly, problem solving is supposed to tell us what to do, but it requires neither fundamental questioning of assumptions nor the study of the solution's implications: problem solving

> offers no guarantee that a critical assessment will be undertaken of either the problem or the solution (p. 636)

This conceptualization of problem-solving, she argues, supports the increasing complexities and demands of a bureaucratic, technological society "in order to realize the philosophy of education that is most in keeping with its institutional biases. The concept of problem-solving serves the belief that the school's function is to prepare citizens for life in a technological society" (p. 239). Berthoff connects this interest in problem-solving approaches to the outcomes of the Dartmouth Conference in 1966 (at which, she notes, no philosophers or poets were present) and questions how those outcomes might have changed the trajectory of the concerns of the discipline if someone like I.A. Richards had been present (p. 639). Part of the problem was that the conference established dualisms between the creative and the intellectual, and posed language as a sign system, rather than a symbol system (p. 645).

As a contrast, she draws on Paulo Freire and his critical pedagogy, to suggest that instead of problem-solving to prepare for bureaucracy, we should be "problematizing the existential situation" and that we should "join our students in the rediscovery of the reality of our common lives; the critical assessment of the language which builds our knowledge of the world is the primary step in the transformation of that reality" (Berthoff, 1971, p. 241). Hoping to see a shift to engagements with a philosophy of knowledge and a theory of imagination (Berthoff, 1972, p. 638) , she suggests that perhaps we view rhetoric as a hermeneutical enterprise, rather than a scientific one (Berthoff, 1971, p. 281). Here, interpretation and representation would be the focus of theory and instruction, and might reflect the triadic approach (reference, interpretant, representamen) presented in Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (Berthoff, 1991, p. 282). Through this approach we can make space for and prioritize variant readings and

misreadings; ambiguities can, once again, be recognized as 'the very hinges of thought' as Richards puts it" (Berthoff, 1991, p. 282). In all of this, Berthoff hopes that students and their instructors will be learn to "keep things 'iffy' and build a deeper relationship with language" (Berthoff, 1991, p. 284)[32].

Lee Odell (1973) saw some potential in problem-solving as an approach to teaching rhetoric and writing but agreed with Berthoff that the current translation of it into the discipline was too aligned with programmed approaches to teaching and learning. Odell still draws on psychology but proposes Piaget's theory of disequilibrium as the core for a problem-solving framework. Through Piaget, Odell comes to a definition of problem-solving that moves away from formulas and set methods to "any situation in which an individual identifies some dissonance or disequilibrium and explores both the internal and external world in the hope of arriving at an insight or intuiting a hypothesis that will allow him to restore equilibrium," which centers an acceptance of "continual change rather than the achievement of certainty" (p. 37). Beginning with the premise that life is composed of continual changes and revisions, it follows that our responsibility as composition scholars and instructors is to help students develop appreciation for and resilience in shifting conditions, whether communicative or otherwise. In short, our pedagogy should help students "live satisfactorily with the uncertainty implicit in continual change" (p. 37).

Michael Carter (1988) also sought to revise how problem-solving is engaged in composition classrooms. Like Berthoff and Odell, he sees the version proposed by Flower and Hayes as overly mechanistic and scientistic and sees the potential to shift the ideological underpinnings to better suit the unique situation of the composition classroom. Notably, Carter

[32] For an in depth discussion of this from a linguistic perspective, see Berthoff "Problem-dissolving by Triadic Means" *College English* 1996.

suggests that we return to a deeper consideration of what a problem is, and find that it rests deeply, as Odell (1973) also saw it, in incongruity. Rather than seeing the purpose of problem-solving as a focus on the final solution, a revised approach to problem solving would envision it as "an epistemic act, a way of learning, of coming to knowledge" since "problem solving is a search for knowledge that is sparked by a perceived gap in a knowledge structure" (p. 554). In this model, rather than drawing on Flower and Hayes, we might look to Young, Becker, and Pike in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970) since their "epistemic concept portrays a problem as an incongruity, existing in and of itself, and not simply in contradistinction to a goal state" (Carter, 1988, p. 555). Moving away from pedagogies overly informed by programming and computational metaphors would return the writing task to its messy and unpredictable home. Frameworks of inquiry, discovery, and imagination - which are not new to Rhetoric and Composition but have consistently struggled to find meaningful expression - provide language and shift conceptualizations of the all-encompassing nature of any writing practice as *both* an intellectual and a creative endeavor.

Inquiry, Discovery, and the Happening

What does it look like to disconnect from standardized, mechanistic approaches to teaching writing to those that meaningfully engage inquiry, discovery, and imagination? Scholars throughout the discipline have considered this question and provided some possible answers or approaches. The majority present nuanced understandings of inquiry and discovery, both as facets of critical thinking *and* imagination. Donald M. Murray (1984) has been a prominent voice for this approach, holding that students become writers when they write what they don't expect and that writers in general "are, like all artists, rationalizers of accident. They find out what they are doing after they have done it" (p. 1). Murray calls this "purposeful unknowing" (p. 1). This

understanding of writing as discovery may have found expression in individual classrooms but, as Chapter 3 showed, struggled to speak to the programmatic assessments needs of the modern university.

Another problem has been the constraints of the classroom itself and how teaching materials and methods have had to conform to that. David V. Harrington (1968) in "Teaching Students the Art of Discovery" laments that we don't give space for true discovery and inquiry, since the common approach to invention is to settle on a topic that a student knows well and can write about confidently (p. 7). He explains that "these recommendations, which may encourage hasty decisions and narrowness, leave no room at all for the richness and sophistication in thought obtainable only from a more comprehensive and leisurely introduction to the subject" and that we "should quit imitating the tactics in scientific research of controlling variables by closing off opportunities for unexpected influences" (p. 8).

It's not simply about designing different approaches to assignments or lesson plans, but an overhaul of curricular goals and structure to make the space required for discovery. Jean Pumphrey (1973) maintains that our dissatisfaction with the quality of student writing actually comes from our own, mismatched methods, since when we push the student too quickly into writing without enough time for creative or expressive exploration, we unwittingly teaching "the style we then sit back and criticize" (p. 666). Pumphrey's answer lies in re-working pedagogy approaches to truly look like mutual (re)discovery. Robert M. Gorrell (1977) indirectly builds on Pumphrey, proposing that generative rhetoric might better balance the need for some structure with the value of openness, flexibility, and space since it "needs to draw from analysis and description, needs to avoid the neglect of the fact that characterizes many traditional rules and precepts, but it needs also to draw on intuition and to seek workability as well as descriptive

accuracy" (p. 25). Gorrell admits that this approach "may not launch a thousand ships, but even a few rowboats would help" (p. 25).

Heuristics, as a feature of generative rhetoric and a mode of invention, also open space for an *otherwise* in the writing classroom. Susan Wells (1977) provides an inspiring and expansive definition for invention: "a method of thinking about the world, often performed without putting pen to paper; it is also a method of reducing the perceived world to a form hospitable to writing" (p. 469). Her article "Classroom Heuristics and Empiricism" goes back to Descartes, who identified the need for a heuristic, since classical rhetoric was capable of demonstrating what was always known, but that "other rules of inquiry were necessary for generating new knowledge" (p. 469). Yet, 18th century Western rhetoric shows a preference for clear and accurate description, and a view that "ambiguity, abstractness, overt logical proof from general principles, and unverifiable statements" were "unconvincing, unnatural, and of dubious truth" (p. 470). Like Michael Carter (1988), Wells forwards Young, Becker, and Pike (1970) as a promising alternative framework to theorize with and develop a praxis that better suits the writing situation and students' needs within it. For Wells, even with a more fitting framework, present demands limit what might actually be achievable (not to mention responsible) and in the classroom,

> We cannot transcend the forms of discourse that are most commonly accepted today by an act of will: we must teach them to our students if they are going to survive, if not flourish. But we cannot avoid asking ourselves what we mean by "clear coherent prose," whether that style is simply a staple of current values, decorated with vividly rendered chunks of realia. We may need to write such prose; we may even teach students to generate it; we need not pretend that it is the best of all possible styles. (p. 476)

Inquiry in the writing classroom served as a nuanced revision of the problem-solving approach that many found overly deterministic and lacking in space for critical and imaginative thought. Janice M. Lauer (1982) defines inquiry simply as "the ability to go beyond the known" (p. 89) and an capacity to accept that for most things there is no single right answer, and that there is value in the process of coming to and engaging multiple solutions. For Lauer, this is true both of what we hope our students will do in the classroom, and what we might hope for ourselves as pedagogues as we plan those spaces and experiences. For an inquiry model, the center is compelling questions that spark a sense of disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance, or the "gap between a current set of beliefs or values and some new experience or idea that seems to violate or confound those beliefs" (p. 90). To teach from this framework would require an entirely different set of pedagogical questions:

> How can we encourage students to become sensitive to the enigmas in their experience? How can we help awaken questioning minds often numbed by an educational system that rewards right answers? What kinds of writing assignments can we set to avoid trapping students in contexts so narrow or artificial that they preclude genuine puzzlement or curiosity? What strategies can we offer to guide students to state unknowns well? (p. 91)

Lauer explains that these questions, radically different themselves, would also result in radically different classrooms. These classrooms would not be concerned with completion or closure, but the processes of coming to know, of learning how to stick with the questions, and allow for an unfolding that simply cannot be scaffolded or lesson planned. To accommodate this shift, Lauer offers that we might lean on Lonergan's notion of "inverse insight" or the realization that "no understanding is possible at this time" (p. 92). Certainly, the temporal constraint of the university classroom poses a significant challenge for constructing a curriculum that covers the requisite

skills while still leaving room for imagination and discovery. The program from which I write currently uses a curriculum centered around inquiry but includes five papers (called "projects") over the course of sixteen weeks. The curricular approach supports a valuation of open-ended inquiry, but in practice I found it challenging to provide students enough space to fully enact that inquiry with the cascade of deadlines we were all up against. Seeing inquiry as a valuable idea in a writing classroom and creating the conditions for it to be realized are two entirely different challenges.

One way to operationalize concepts of inquiry into the writing classroom is the exploratory essay. William Zeiger (1985) traces this genre back to Montaigne, whose approach to 'proving' an idea was to examine it in order to find out how true it was, rather than to begin from an argumentative position that needed to be defended (p. 455). This is in opposition to the argumentative/persuasive focus of rhetoric today, which Zeiger maintains stops inquiry rather than starts it. He says of this approach that "we 'prove' an idea not to learn about it, but to fix it in certainty" (p. 456). On the other hand, inquiry:

> does not pursue a linear sequence, but holds several possibilities in suspension simultaneously, inviting the inquisitive mind to play among them. Rather than refute counter-arguments, it cultivates them. The art of inquiry entails a readiness to entertain alternatives, to examine two sides of an issue, to permit contradictory elements to coexist, the better to appreciate their differences. (p. 457)

Given this, a potential revision to a curriculum centered around inquiry might ask students to write the same paper, in different ways, five times rather than five different papers that approach inquiry from different angles. By reworking the same idea in several ways, finding new and different conclusions, or resisting conclusion altogether, would ask students to deeply wrestle

with what it means to play with language and argument, and show them that even within themselves there is the capacity to hold multiple truths. For example, Chuck Guilford (1990) found that when trying to adopt more exploratory approaches into his teaching and becoming increasingly frustrated that it wasn't transferring to students' writing practices, his teaching goals and methods were out of alignment. He explains that he "wanted to encourage [his] students to use writing to inquire into unfamiliar and often intimidating subject areas, but the overall sequence and structure of classroom activities leading to completion of an essay was not designed to do this" (p. 460). The methods of freewriting, clustering, and mind mapping were limited in their benefits because students still had to produce a final, completed piece of writing within a truncated amount of time. This was the obstacle that Guilford and other scholars interested in similar approaches came up against and continues to be the challenge today - with multiple assignments in a single semester, there isn't time to get messy enough, or, if a reasonable mess is made, there isn't enough time to clean it up. Yet, we still seek both the mess and the finished product.

Concern about the waning of imagination in the classroom and in modern life is not new. Edgar Smith Rose (1966) in "The Anatomy of Imagination" observed that "in a day when electronic 'brains' are allegedly on the verge of becoming creative artists, when, as a matter of method not metaphysics, behaviorism and psychoanalysis converge from opposite directions to make of consciousness a diminished thing, the idea of imagination needs to be reaffirmed" (p. 346). It seems that Rose would be deeply concerned about the capacities of electronic brains in the current era, as well as the continual struggle for imagination to emerge as a central concern of the writing classroom. There have been attempts to explore what a creative rhetoric might look like in composition classes. For example, Alvin D. Alley (1974) argued that creative rhetoric is

not merely an aspect of an expressivist pedagogy, but rather a key component of a complete approach to rhetorical knowledge. He explains that of course "basic language skills and basic factual knowledge (or a means to this knowledge) are necessary for the writer to understand that a problem does or does not exist" but there must also be "freedom of the imagination infused with what can be termed 'communicative freedom' if there is to be significant rhetoric" (p. 374). For Alley this means an interest in teaching language mobility, or the "use of language in the most effective way possible in terms of the situation" (p. 374) and achieving some balance between rationality and the imagination to produce a rhetoric that is "incautious, exploratory, venturesome, involving risk" (p. 374). There are a number of qualities that Alley defines as essential to this approach, but the connecting link in all of them is that the teacher must be on board and well informed before they could hope to be successful with this approach. The teacher would need to be able to handle proliferation of ideas and dissensus, be able to be less (traditionally) critical of student work and reimagine their "evaluative climate" (p. 380). The theme that emerges throughout these scholars' work is that simply believing that openness, imagination, inquiry, discovery are worthwhile ventures in the writing classroom will not be enough to move the needle. Neither will one or two carefully designed lectures or assignments. The point is that the entire orientation of the course, the underlying assumptions and their operationalizations, would have to change to accommodate this insight.

One way that this holistic change might be achieved was proposed by a small group of scholars who brought the "happening" from the avant-garde art world into the writing classroom. The notion of English composition as a "happening" is most popularly attributed to Geoffrey Sirc from his 2002 monograph of the same title. Sirc attributes his interest in the "happening" to William D. Lutz (1971), who published "Making Freshman English a Happening." But Lutz

attributes his awareness of the happening to Charles Deemer (1967), who published "English Composition as a Happening" in *College English*. Deemer's article is particularly commendable given its experimental approach, interweaving his thoughts and reflections with quotes and short interludes. As a graduate student in the 1960s, Deemer could already see that the educational system was "undeniably rigid" and so "the English Composition course, as we should expect, is the rigid child of a rigid parent" (p. 121). Building on this, Lutz explains that although writing, regardless of genre, is a creative activity, the classroom structure at that time did not allow for creativity. For Lutz, this meant major changes to both the environment and the process, and he believes that drawing on the "happening" from avant-garde art might be a possibility. From that perspective, Sontag describes the happening as the "art of radical juxtaposition" and might look like "structure in unstructure; a random series of ordered events; order in chaos; the logical illogicality of dreams" (Lutz, 1971, p. 35).

Sirc says of the happening that it "is a negative-space history, one that reverses the conventional figure-ground relations to find the most fruitful avenues of inquiry to be those untouched or abandoned by the disciplinary mainstream" (p. 12). Sirc offers a radical approach to teaching composition-based art movements such as Fluxus, which focused on the experimental aspects of art and prioritized the process over the final product. The book stirred controversy when it was published and continues to struggle to gain traction today because of current trends toward assessment, transfer, and relevance in the discipline as discussed in Chapter 3. Sirc (2002) anticipates these conflicts, observing that "strict boundaries have become maintained in Composition, a separation of (professional-oriented) academy and life, one discipline from another, the specific discourse from a broader lived reality. This is not Freshman English as a Happening, this is Freshman English as a Corporate Seminar" (p. 9). To break from

the corporate model Sirc looks to a "happening" as a pedagogical starting point -- in which the "basic rule is indeterminacy: nothing is previously determined, neither form nor material content; everything is under erasure" (p. 10).

The 2000s and 2010s showed interest in design thinking. This was both in service to growing industry demands, particular in the technology sector, and composition scholars seeking new and innovative pedagogy. James P. Purdy (2014), drawing on Marback's (2009) *CCC* article "Embracing Wicked Problems: The Turn to Design in Composition Studies," says that one of the interesting notions from design thinking that addresses the situation of the writing classroom is that of wicked problems. Wicked problems lack "a single, knowable solution but instead are ambiguous, contingent, and recursive. In other words, wicked problems are not just solved once by finding new information; they must be solved over and over again" (p. 613). Design thinking is iterative in this way, never quite finished but always progressing to new products and understandings. Generally, it uses a forward-looking orientation, focusing on future solutions more than past problems, combining synthesis and analysis rather than flat critique, and seeking to generate many, diverse solutions. In these ways, design thinking as it appears in Rhetoric and Composition seems a revised version of the problem-solving approach that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Purdy explains that design thinking "offers a capacious notion of invention. It emphasizes the importance of considering many different responses to a design task, of not getting locked into one response too early to the expulsion of other options" (p. 629). Scott Wible (2020) connects design thinking to the habits of mind educational framework that was central to the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" (2011) from the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The habits of mind include: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. These are generous and

generative categories for considering student growth, however the ongoing question remains whether we make, or are able to make, meaningful space for these qualities in our writing classrooms.

The Ethics of Imagination

There are important ethical and political implications to teaching inquiry, discovery, and imagination as essential aspects of a writing practice, and an existential orientation more broadly. Lola Olufemi (2021) writes that imagination "not only creates liberatory drives, it sustains, justifies and legitimizes them. It undoes entire epistemes and clears space for us to create something new" (p. 34). Similarly, in "Educating the Imagination" Es'Kia Mphahlele (1993) explains that in times of political conflict and oppressive violence, imagination provides both a salve and a way to materialize a different future:

> In situations of political conflict and violence we can rescue the imagination, at least for an interim period, from the kind of programming that compels us to repeat ourselves. We must surely realize that there is a certain kind of repetitiousness that spells stagnation. The imagination begins to atrophy. For this is when we live on borrowed passion, heroics, certitudes. The imagination may well retreat a bit at this point, reorganize itself, sharpen focus, and restore the fullness of its landscape. The imagination then becomes our sanctuary. (p. 185)

He also notes that the beauty of imagination is that it does not need to wait for us to escape or resolve present conditions to be useful. Imagination resists acceptance and stagnation, flexible and open thinking permits multiple interpretations without rushing to crown one. Similarly, Stephen R. Yarbrough (2003) is concerned with rhetoric's ability to create novel beliefs and ideas, not just reevaluate those already in circulation. He argues that defensiveness has become a

theme of the U.S. political discourse, a communicative culture that values confirming already held beliefs and seeing change and transition as an admittance of defeat. Janice Lauer (1982) explains that "a culture which extols certainty rewards instead the mastery of verifiable information marshaled in support of existing judgments." (p. 92). To prioritize, for example, changing one's mind or coming to a different understanding in composition classes would shift entirely how students view communication. This approach would require a refashioning of our most foundational concepts and assumptions, to include the messy uncertainty of invention, inquiry, and discovery fueled by the imagination alongside logos.

Perhaps part of the point of the Oracle of Delphi's command to "know thyself" is to first know that the self is unknowable and to proceed with the rest of our attempts at epistemology in similar fashion. If I cannot know this thing of which I am the only true knower (my self), how might I maintain the brazenness to claim to know what is outside my self. A rhetoric and a pedagogy of ambiguity begins with this assumption and would holistically shift how we perceive what it is that we hope to achieve in our classrooms and our scholarship. Radical experiments with imagination and inquiry offer potential paths for both students and scholars to begin to circulate intellectual stagnation, to allow for an understanding of communication that does justice to its capaciousness.

Imagination and Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

Imagination speaks to many of the tenets of white supremacy culture, but for this analysis I focus on objectivity, belief in one right way, and perfectionism. In relation to white supremacy culture, objectivity refers to a belief that objective knowledge is both possible and desirable, and that any modes of knowing or communicating that do not rely primarily on logic and seek to move closer to purported objectivity are inferior and/or invalid. A composition pedagogy that

prioritizes imagination as it has been explored here, making the space needed to meaningfully engage this understanding of imagination, has the potential to work against the harmful effects of expectations of objectivity in learning spaces. By beginning with the premise that there are many truths and many ways to come to truth, that perhaps sometimes there is no truth or no need to come to a truth, and that logic is one way of knowing opens space for the otherwise, inquiry as a mode of imagination provides some avenues for making this shift in composition classrooms.

In white supremacy culture, a belief that there is/can be one right way tends to center the practices of the hegemonic culture, which in the U.S. is white, Christian, (monolingual) English speaking and heteronormative. The approaches that are considered normal or right in this hegemony become the gold standard against which all other beliefs and practices are assessed. Imagination as it is understood in this chapter pushes back against this way of thinking by showing that even within oneself there is the ability to construct multiple, even conflicting, ideas. It also allows the imaginer to accept that there may be no understanding possible, or what Lonergan terms "inverse insight" (qtd in Lauer, 1982, p. 92). To assume that there is always one right way is to assume that every problem and every question will also end in an answer. Practices of imagination complicate this assumption by allowing for multiple answers or none at all in the present moment.

Finally, imagination problematizes affinities with perfectionism. In white supremacy culture, perfectionism is closely tied to individualism, since the need to be perfect unto oneself is a denial of interconnectedness and the benefits of collaboration and coalition. Our education system often produces students who are overly concerned with perfectionism, since perfection and grades are intertwined, and grades are protagonists in the narrative of future success. Perfectionism in white supremacy culture is foundationally a fear of critique at the same time it

is the perpetuation of critique. To enter the space of imagination is to believe simultaneously that everything is perfect, and nothing is perfect and so the entire equation of perfection is canceled out. One enters this space for themselves and also grants this space to others; there needs to be space to take risks, watch risk being taken and, as Donna Haraway (2016) would say, stay with the trouble. This calls into question practices of assessment, since in most common (hegemonic) forms, assessment and critique could be synonymous. It would also require, as this chapter has suggested, radically different ways of conceptualizing time and task in composition classrooms.

Imagination as a facet of ambiguity has the potential to shift often assumed and unstated "best practices" in composition classrooms and does not replace those best practices with another set of rigid ways of thinking and being. Rather, it posits a framework that when adapted to the capacities and limitations of composition pedagogy has the potential to move away from key tenets of white supremacy culture.

CHAPTER 6: EMERGE

Robert Brooke (1989) explains that the "paradox of control" has functioned as a double-edged sword in the discipline, since "as writers, teachers, and researchers,
we know that writing is often a surprisingly complex process of discovery, learning, and change, yet we still often try to teach writing (and sell writing programs to administrators) by arguing that our courses help students "control" their writing processes" (p. 405). To better understand this paradox of control, Brooke reads Linda Flower's work on the writing process through a Derridean deconstructive lens. He finds that traditional rhetoric's interest in control over the writing process has obscured a more problematic paradox about writing processes, which also implicate understandings of human thinking, and that to properly acknowledge these consequences "requires a reconsideration of 'control' as the guiding metaphor for our field, and requires we play with other possible metaphors" (pp. 405-406). Brooke explains that, from a Derridean lens, control in Flower's work becomes a 'hinge' concept, since the purposes of her text seek to help teachers and students with developing control, while the processes she describes are dynamically *beyond* 'control'" (p. 407). Brooke hopes that we might develop ways of helping writers, and ourselves, to see writing as provisional, changing, and dynamic. He says that "what 'being out of control' really threatens is a false image of the self, an image that never holds up anyway" (p. 416). Like Beauvoir's conceptualization of ambiguity, it is in bad faith to continue to assert control when it is an illusion, a wish that things might be other than they are. To complicate control is to be open to emergence in all of its varied forms; distancing one's scholarship and practices from expectation or valuations of control admits that we cannot always know where we are headed or how we might get there from the outset. And, beyond that, it

questions whether knowing the route in advance is more beneficial than discovery along the way, perhaps of paths that were unexpected or seemed unimaginable.

Scholars have considered ways through or beyond control, predictability, and standardization in both rhetorical theory and the writing classroom. These circulate around core concepts such as ecologies, emergence, chaos, and complexity. I offer these concepts from the scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition as they connect to uncovering ways to meaningfully engage a pedagogy and a rhetoric of ambiguity in the writing classroom and in our scholarship. It is beyond the scope of this project to consider each in full relief, but I provide enough connection to these bodies of scholarship to point to the ways that they are in conversation with ambiguity as an essential feature of our communicative landscapes.

Urgent, Emergent Ecologies

Marilyn Cooper's (1986) work with ecologies in writing arises from her critique of the discipline's cognitive turn. She agrees that writing *includes* cognitive processes, but it is not singularly cognitive. The cognitive model of the writing process rests on the vision of a solitary author whose "ideas and goals originate within and are directed at an unknown and largely hostile other" (p. 366). As an alternative, or perhaps an additive, the ecological model conceptualizes writing as an "activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of social constituted systems" (p. 367). Important to this conceptualization is the idea that while some moments might be possible to hold steady and act as referent in the writing process, quickly they change and are constantly changing to new sets of context and parameters as those also change over time. The metaphor offered here is a web, in which a movement in one part of the web ripples through all other parts. Cooper notes that this version of the ecological model is

still an ideal one, and that in practice it becomes more complex. Yet, an ecological model is flexible enough to engage this complexity. She explains,

> Whenever ideas are seen as commodities they are not shared; whenever individual and group purposes cannot be negotiated someone is shut out; differences in status, or power, or intimacy curtail interpersonal interactions; cultural institutions and attitudes discourage writing as often as they encourage it; textual forms are just as easily used as barriers to discourse as they are used as means of discourse. (p. 373)

These are the rich situations and questions that problematize the (artificially) resolved, static cognitive model of writing and writing processes. In later work, Cooper (2011) connects this to retheorizing rhetorical agency. In "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted" she draws on both complexity theory and neurophenomenology, yet another revision to cognitivism. She explains that "emergent properties (such as agency) are not epiphenomena, not 'possessions' in any sense, but function as part of the systems in which they originate. And causation in complex systems is nonlinear: change arises not as the effect of a discrete cause, but from the dance of perturbation and response as agents interact" (p. 421). This reworking of the modern subject, and their corresponding agency, into a vision of Beauvoirian ambiguity, where the "subject is inescapably defined by an agonistic relation to the object/other: the subject attempts to control the object/other in order to escape being controlled" (Cooper, 2011, p. 423). But, like Beauvoir, Cooper recognizes that this antagonistic relation stems from a lack of nuance and a need for foreclosure; this formation of the subject in terms of emergent rhetorical agency gives us a new layer of agential responsibility. As such, she urges that what we need "is not a pedagogy of empowerment, but a pedagogy of responsibility...Rhetorical agency is a big responsibility. It means being responsible for oneself, for others, and for the common world we construct

together" (pp. 443-444). Like Beauvoir, Cooper considers the ways in which an ethics of responsibility must be included in both our teaching and our research. Without the sense that agency is at heart a set of moral and ethical responsibilities is to put the very things we hope to teach in composition classes at risk.

Ecologies not only introduce the notion of agential responsibility, but also complicate the experience of communication as fluid and entangled. Jenny Edbauer (2005), in her work on rhetorical ecologies explains that standard models of the rhetorical situation can "mask the fluidity of rhetoric. Rhetorical situations involve the amalgamation and mixture of many different events and happenings that are nor properly segmented into audience, text, or rhetorician" (p. 20). In terms of translating this to rhetorical pedagogy, Edbauer suggests that we try to close the conceptual gap between thinking and doing, such that it might be "thinking/doing - with a razor thin slash mark barely keeping the two terms from bleeding into each other" (p. 21). She also pushes against teaching students basic skills in the "in order to later" approach, where the application of the skill learned exists in some undefined and distant future. Rather, we could experiment with teaching through doing, helping to develop the skills needed as the situation or task requires. This speaks to an ecological vision of rhetoric since it "reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence, and as an ongoing circulation process" (p. 13). Because there is no clear beginning or end, and because the ways in which rhetoric might circulate cannot be definitely predicted or described, Edbauer's understanding of the role of rhetorical ecologies lays further foundation for meaningfully engaging ambiguity in the discipline.

Ecological approaches also speak to the vexed administrative situation. Kathleen J. Ryan (2012) applies rhetorical ecology and feminist notions of agency to the problems and questions

in writing program administration. She calls for a direct challenging of positivist epistemology with "ecological knowers" who are "situated, embodied, interconnected persons whose recognition of the limits of perspectives positions them to be accountable for what they know and do because they are cognizant of politics of location and relation" (p. 78). This approach contributes to what Ryan terms the "ethics of flourishing" which consists of "committing to hope, enacting epistemic responsibility, seeking eudaimonia or the 'good life'" (p. 79). At multiple levels of disciplinary engagement, ecological thinking contributes to the argument for approaches that are informed by ambiguity. This has the potential to be useful in our research, our classrooms, and administrative offices, as we see the communicative landscape as increasingly complex and interconnected, and as our students struggle to keep pace with this changing landscape.

Chaos and Complexity

In addition to ecologies, chaos and complexity provide another avenue for ambiguity to surface in rhetorical theory and writing classrooms. Perhaps the first use of chaos theory in the scholarship appears in Ann E. Berthoff's (1979) article "Learning the Uses of Chaos." In her reflection on the piece in the *Norton Book of Composition Studies* (2009) she explains:

> In 1979, I hoped that the idea of *chaos* would unsettle linear thinkers (who always begin with 'Think of what you want to say before you begin to write'). I argued that our students, because they are language animals, have a natural capacity to make meaning: that chaos is the source of meanings; and that learning to write is learning to generate chaos and emerge from it, meanings in hand. (p. 647)

Berthoff critiques the beginnings of a "process" approach to writing that does not engage the writing process at all. She calls into question the various analogies that have been used to talk

about writing as a process, for example cooking, and the ways in which those analogies fall short of the complexity and chaos that actually exists in the writing process. Berthoff sees writing as a meaning making process, in which the meanings "do not come out of thin air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed" (p. 648). Ambiguity becomes a key feature of this meaning making, something that stems from the chaos and is a productive (and also inherent and unavoidable) part of the writing process. By attempting to resolve ambiguities for students through assignment sheets, the design of curricula, and the rigidity of rubrics we interfere with a crucial orientation to writing and meaning making. Berthoff draws from I.A. Richardson's definition of ambiguity as the "hinges of thought" as she argues that we should create pedagogical encounters in which students are encouraged to explore the chaos of their meaning formations and to subsequently (re)interpret those meanings in dialogue and conversation with others in the same process. In the end, for Berthoff, chaos and complexity are necessary approaches in the writing classroom because "learning to write means learning to tolerate ambiguity, to learn that the making of meaning is a dialectical process determined by perspectives and context" (p. 649).

Bonnie Lenore Kyburz (2004) later builds on Berthoff's work, considering what chaos as a metaphor and chaos theory more specifically might bring to Rhetoric and Composition and, at a deeper level, how it is already imbued in the ways we think about writing and what we do with that knowledge. She points to other scholars, in addition to Berthoff, who have considered directly or implicitly chaos in their research (including Robert J. Connors, Janet Emig, Linda Flower and John Hayes, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford), who imagined that chaos theory might liberate "previously limited and constraining theoretical models and the practices they inspired" (p. 504). Kyburz identifies three main contributing characteristics of chaos theory for Rhetoric

and Composition. First is the butterfly effect, which pushes back against cause-and-effect thinking, since things are so complexly entangled. Although it is possible to articulate cause-and-effect equations for various phenomena, they are inherently incomplete because they capture but one possible explanation. The characteristic of chaos theory relevant to Rhetoric and Composition is that of self-organizing systems: things will automatically and without consciousness of it move toward self-organization under the right conditions (a move against perpetual entropy). These processes are not predictable, and there is no particular standardization that would result in the same outcome of self-organization, and yet it exists as a contrast to entropy models. Finally, there is Dissipative Structures/Bifurcation Theory, which holds that things can cohere at a level that looks like chaos but has its own logic of organization. Connecting to the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Kyburz sees chaos as an entry to "radically nonlinear epistemologies" and hopes that it might be "capable of conveying the complexity and ambiguity of chaotic dynamics and the epistemological orientations that they appear to shape across disciplines" (p. 507). These dynamics are valuable because they exist, whether we choose to recognize them or not. But, to recognize them and to prioritize working with them allows us to get closer to the nature of complexity in communication. As such, one of Kyburz's hopes is that through chaos and complexity we might

> find ourselves rethinking writing in increasingly complex and promising ways, effectively resisting pressures to define ourselves and our students through standardized testing and retrogressive pedagogies, among other aged practices, as the gatekeepers and worthy practitioners of "order" (that is, Standard Written-white, middle-class-English). (p. 505).

Kyburz sees hope in this approach, since it might "promote what bell hooks describes as 'excitement' in our teaching, where 'pleasure' is a feature of our unpredictable classroom experiences as much as is the notion of 'freedom' (p. 518).

Much later, Chris Mays (2017) writes about complexity as an exciting new development, which speaks to the disciplinary disconnects and continuous processes of re-discovery (sometimes without realizing it has already been discovered before) that our scholarship seems to endure across decades. He explains that "Complexity theory thus upends stable ground we may use for the creation of knowledge and, especially, for the possibility of predicting further events reliably" (p. 560). His concern is that if this is true and if this is how we try to teach writing, is writing really teachable at all?

> What that means is that the same breadth and depth we discover by theorizing complexity and so dissolving the limits of texts and of writing also make texts and writing potentially irreducible, unpredictable, and, perhaps, unteachable. If writing itself is characterized by complexity, and if complexity makes prediction difficult, then teaching writing - how to devise predictable strategies for affecting an audience, for example - becomes a difficult if not impossible task. (p. 560)

I'd argue, like Beauvoir, that we don't "make" texts and writing irreducible and unpredictable, but that they already are so, and it serves us to begin from this point rather than hope to avoid its arrival. Mays is interested in making complexity theory workable in the classroom, but also wrestles with the challenges and limitations. For example, he is concerned that "complexity theory thus upends stable ground we may use for the creation of knowledge and, especially, for the possibility of predicting further events reliably," (p. 560). However, from a Beauvoirian lens, complexity theory doesn't *do* anything - complexity simply exists and any pedagogical,

theoretical, or epistemological work that does not recognize and account for this, works from assumptions that lead to incomplete or potentially irrelevant answers. They will look complete, since they do not engage complexity, chaos, or ambiguity, but they will not speak to the changing and unpredictable conditions from which this arise and develop. Mays thinks that to approach complexity in the writing classroom requires "complexity one stability at a time" which meets particular pedagogical constraints, but potentially undercuts the value of adopting complexity theory to our classrooms at all.

An Unplanned Pedagogy

"The deepest learning comes from those situations in which you must teach yourself" (Taylor, 1964, p. 101)

One of the ways a small group of scholars experimented with actualizing emergent ecologies, chaos, and complexity in their classrooms was what I am calling unplanned pedagogy and was variously termed non-directive teaching or self-instruction. For example, Thomas Taylor (1964) wanted to see "how much a teacher keeps his students from learning" (p. 97). Meaning, if he did nothing at all, would students still read, write, and learn something from the course? His driving question is an interesting one: wanting to know the "extent to which teachers try to reproduce themselves in their students, and if so, is this inevitable" (p. 97). His concern was that by seeing writing as "something to study" rather than something to do, it distances both the teacher and the learner from the practice. He explains that in the general trends of composition pedagogy, "we're always separating ourselves from our experiences and then trying to figure out why we don't experience things very deeply" (p. 100). His only goal was to have students end up where students in other classes did, with a 5,000-word paper at the end of the semester. But, to support a non-directive approach, he turned to conferences rather than lectures,

since he wanted to "to separate content and process without eliminating either so that [he] could look at them and see inherent benefits to the student if there were any to see" (p. 97). Some students struggled with the freedom, accustomed as they are to clarity and expectations in the classroom. But many students found the approach fun and freeing, appreciative of the opportunity to think and work more independently with the help of a knowledgeable instructor as they needed.

While interesting and full of potential, this approach would pose problems for current modes of instructor and programmatic assessment, since there are no specific logical links tying a cause to an effect, making both programmatic and individual student assessment a challenge. However, Taylor (1964) is unconvinced that grades are useful to the education of young minds:

> There is no sense to grades, no reason in ten million pages of the finest arguments that will convince me that grades are anything other than an artificial stimulus derived from the machine structure of a large thing which has to deal with 20,000 young people, and pretend that it has done a tangible, measurable good in only four years. (p. 101)

The questions one might ask of Taylor's non-directive teaching approach - if they are coming from our current assessment and standards priorities - would certainly include concerns about effectiveness and standardization. Yet, to understand the radical shift Taylor was trying to make through this experiment is to also understand that current questions are irrelevant to Taylor's approach. New questions, new ways of assessing would be required to have anything meaningful to say about this non-directive, unplanned pedagogy.

Also experimenting with unplanned pedagogy, Joan M. Putz (1970) conducted a controlled study with two classes at a community and presented her findings in the *College English* article "When the Teacher Stops Teaching - An Experiment with Freshman English." In

it she highlights the potential benefits of non-directive, non-authoritarian approaches to teaching composition, finding that "the time and money now being invested in rhetoric texts and traditional instruction may well be wasted" (p. 50). In the non-directive class students were told that they would in essence be their own teachers and that they would choose their own topics for the eight assignments to be completed in the class (p. 51). The traditional classroom used a popular composition textbook as their course structure and wrote papers on topics assigned by the instructor. Putz found that "the traditional group, despite all the formal instruction it received, didn't write any better than the non-directive group which had received no formal instruction at all" (p. 54). Regarding student experience, Lutz found similar concerns as Taylor (1964), namely that some students felt discomfort in the non-directed class because of the lack of structure, but that this could have been a reaction to leaving the familiarity of directed instruction and did not have an impact on their learning outcomes.

Years later, Craig R. Hogan (1978) became interested in the potentials of *humanistic* self-instruction as a corrective to behaviorist models of self-instruction. The problem with humanistic self-instruction was that it viewed the learner as an empty vessel, or as an identical copy of other learners. A one-size-fits-all approach that mirrored the working of something like computer programming, which makes sense given the overlapping influences between cognitive sciences and computer sciences at the time, both in metaphor and in practice. For Hogan, instruction is least humanistic when "the instructor takes all responsibility for the instruction, ignores the students' unique needs, and does not permit them to become committed to the means or ends of the instruction" (p. 262). On the contrary, humanistic instruction centers individuality and individual choice and freedom: "The more decisions the student makes as a committed, autonomous individual, the more individual and humanistic the instruction" (p. 262).

Programmed materials, which may in fact be carefully designed, are still often too linear and leave little room for individual discovery (p. 263).

These case studies in unplanned pedagogy throughout the history of the discipline highlight a few important points as they connect to what it might look like to truly engage emergence, ecologies, complexity, and chaos in our scholarship and teaching. The first is that within the self-referential system of our current assessment practices, we might successfully identify a set of skills or concepts that we want students to learn and then manage to develop assessment practices that capture those skills. But this misses that there is an entire world outside this self-referential system, and that it is into this communicative world that students will eventually work. Our research also occurs in the larger, less predictable world. So, while current practices and modalities of assessment have potential to work within their own self-referential system, they may in fact be quite limited when viewed against this more comprehensive (and less controlled, less predictable) background.

In this way, working with the benefits and potential of emergence, ecologies, chaos, and complexity would require a holistic rethinking and retooling of what the composition classroom is and does, and the types of questions that our scholarship might need to ask in turn. It might look like further experimentation with unplanned pedagogies, an expansion of the role of the composition instructor to include more than one or two semesters in the student's college experience, and even a different approach to what writing across/in the disciplines looks like. This chapter and the others in this second half of the dissertation provide glimpses into what that has looked like throughout the discipline and what it might look like if we treated this as a viable body of scholarship from which to shift our approaches. Ecology, emergence, chaos, and complexity reflect the ways communication occurs outside the classroom, so they should be the

things we try to replicate to bring into the classroom, regardless of how difficult they are to teach.

Emergence and Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

Emergence speaks to many of the tenets of white supremacy culture, but for this analysis I focus on a sense of urgency, individualism, and binary thinking. In white supremacy culture a sense of urgency results in missed opportunities to make connections, to consider ways to be more inclusive, and to make realistic, workable timelines and plans for intended outcomes. In this sense, a concern with control is enmeshed in a sense of urgency since control makes it appear that urgency is reasonable and can be supported. But as we have seen in this section regarding control, it is an illusion and so the outcomes of an urgent mindset are also likely illusory. Taking on a perspective of emergence pushes back against expectations for urgency, since emergence cannot be controlled and is an expansive and shifting way to understand a problem, question, phenomenon.

Control also enables a belief in individualism. In white supremacy culture, individualism manifests as discomfort working in groups, an inability to see oneself as part of a larger network (or ecology), a need to be recognized personally for one's efforts and an inability to see how others have contributed to personal success. It also enables a scarcity mindset deeply entrenched in competition rather than collaboration. This is the very vision of Cooper's critique of the solitary author (1986, p. 143). Individualism also feeds urgency, since collaboration often takes more time than one person completing a task alone and with complete authority. Yet, it is through the process of complex collaborations that ideas and projects can shift and more widely reflect the truths, experiences, and realities of others. A shift to emergence pulls back the curtain on complexity and interconnectedness, showing how we each contribute to a much larger whole

in irreducible ways. Ecologies also rely on a sense of agential responsibility, since under this framework it is difficult not to see things as simultaneously fluid and entangled.

Finally, white supremacy culture relies on binary, or either/or, thinking. Under the belief that things are one thing *or* another, rather than that they can be both/and or that multiple truths might exist on the same issue, white supremacy culture seeks to make complex things that appear simple, straightforward, and less interconnected. In this calculus, cause-and-effect thinking is not only possible but seen as a stable and reliable truth. Either/or thinking is linked to both perfectionism and urgency, since it is easier to feel correct when there are fewer options/variables, and it is easier to make a rapid decision when alternatives are removed from consideration.

Emergence through complexity, ecologies, and chaos pushes back against these tendencies of white supremacy culture and seeks a mode of communication and questioning that values taking time to consider alternatives, taking time to include more voices and perspectives. Together, emergence and imagination (Chapter 6) show that things can come about organically in several ways, and that our interrelations are not easily reduced or understood as one thing or another.

CHAPTER 7: EXPAND

"Rather than avoid and bemoan the fallibility of language with its ambivalences and failures, we should learn to embrace it - to acknowledge its complexity as its most generative feature" (Murray, 2009, p. 35).

This chapter combines existentialist, feminist, and queer theories to show how they provide insight for incorporating ambiguity into teaching and research in Rhetoric and Composition. Each theoretical lens at its foundation is concerned with disrupting norms and thereby expanding possibilities for individual expression of subjectivity. Existentialism, broadly, highlights the constructedness of social life and the arbitrary nature of normative belief and behavior. We see an overlap between feminism and existentialism when Beauvoir takes existentialist thinking and applies it to gender - famously declaring that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" in *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe* 1949/Borde and Malovany-Chevallier translation 2011, 273). Beauvoir lived a life that questioned and rejected many societal norms; she never married, never had biological children, kept an open relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre[33] and had many loves and lovers throughout her life. Beauvoir, along with countless other feminists, modeled what it might look like to live beyond society's norms and expectations regarding gender. Queer theory expands on feminist theory[34] by applying it to a broader spectrum of identity. Together these approaches provide an expansive framework for reconsidering what Rhetoric and Composition might be and do, offering ways to question normative assumptions. What does a writing classroom look like? What does scholarship look like? What does a successful writing program look like? What *might* these look like?

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[33] The ethics of their open relationship have been called into question, for example, when Bulgarian-French feminist Julia Kristeva (2016) calls Sartre and Beauvoir "libertarian terrorists" for their poor ethics in navigating non-monogamy over the course of their lives.

[34] The direction of influence between feminist and queer theory is complex and contended - Mimi Marinucci's text *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory* (2016) provides a clear overview of these relations.

Questioning norms highlights the ever presence of subjectivity and relativity, which has posed conflicts for what the composition teacher might ever hope to teach if everything is shifting and unstable. George G. Gates (1959) discusses the difficulty of teaching in a time where we see knowledge as primarily subjective, he explains: "In a sense, man is struggling to find an apex from which to redirect his values, to find flexible but permanent measures...A few would at least say modern man has victimized himself with his half-hearted belief in a subjective truth" (p. 19). But Beauvoir would say that subjective truth, vis-a-vis ambiguity, just *is*. It isn't something to be accepted or rejected; a change in stance about it does not change *it*. She argues that in order to move forward, we should first accept this subjectivity (ambiguity) of both self and knowledge, because this is how we make choices that better address present conditions. Gates ultimately concludes, "If we are to teach composition, as it might be taught, we must re-examine our beliefs about the inner being of man and the multiplicity of truth" (p. 20). Beauvoir, no doubt, would agree.

Donald M. Murray (1969) argues that "there is no single standard, no one way to think or write, and we must not give our students the illusion there is. We must glory in contradiction and confusion, the human cacophony" (p. 118). Murray says that this presents four *freedoms* (interchangeable for Murray with *responsibilities*) for both students and teachers of composition to take on their respective agency without prescription. This is particularly important in the choice and expression of a subject, since "the teacher cannot see the student's world with the student's eyes and evaluate it with the student's mind. Every time the teacher gives an assignment he cheats the student, since each step in the writing process - form, style, tone, effectiveness - stems from what the student has to say" (p. 119). For Murray, the successful composition classroom does not hinge on some carefully designed content, but rather a carefully

designed learning space or encounter where this type of intellectual agency can be explored, expressed, and expanded. Expansion often begins with time spent in imagination as experimentation, as the way to see a norm for its arbitrary nature is to envision many other possible ways that something might be. This chapter considers some ways that scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have imagined and experimented with this kind of freedom, a freedom that seeks to move beyond common assumptions and hand-me-down norms.

Questioning Hierarchy

In 1940, over ten years before Rhetoric and Composition would make moves to establish itself as a discipline, Sister Digna published a piece in *College English* titled "We Investigate Together" in which she explains a novel approach to teaching the theme in her composition course. She has the class select a common topic to use as the basis for their papers, they research it together, she helps them to verify their research, and then the students are free to write the theme as they see fit, with what they have learned about the topic. This is not the kind of teaching we imagine happening in the early history of the discipline, and yet careful digging in the scholarship shows that these types of moments were happening, and that they sought to disrupt norms of authority and expertise in the classroom and expand possibilities for other approaches. In another similar moment, Helen McGaughney (1950) published "Co-Operative Planning in the College Classroom" also in *College English.* For McGaughney, co-operative planning was a way to actualize democratic ideals in the writing classroom, since

> the students who assist in the planning, who search out the problems to be solved, who suggest activities and delegate responsibilities, who evaluate, revise, and plan future activities in the light of what they have learned, will find the world more meaningful than those who have the plan handed out in a capsule at the first meeting of the class. (p. 108)

Both Sister Digna and McGaughney show how questioning and actively pushing back on the norms of classroom structure and relations between teachers and their students offers more engaged, inclusive, and democratic approaches.

H.R. Wolf (1969) was also interested in experimenting with norm disruption through expansion of possibilities, which he captures in "Composition and Group Dynamics: The Paradox of Freedom." In it he details using small group work in the classroom to allow students more freedom of communication and expression and to disrupt the "sage on the stage" mentality of teaching. His approach is influenced by existentialism and humanistic psychoanalysis, which posits full engagement with freedom as the path to fulfilling human potential and experience. Wolf explains that the teacher "can encourage freedom only to the degree that he can relinquish power and to the extent that he can face the materials that arise in a context of freedom" (p. 444). Similarly, Thom Hawkins (1976) explains his experiment with group-based learning, which he called the parceled classroom. His intention was to decentralize and remove hierarchy from the classroom, put students on equal footing, and change the attention/focus/goals of the class and the instructor. Although I cannot confirm whether H.R. Wolf or Thom Hawkins intentionally identified themselves as feminists or even recognized this as feminist practice, it speaks to feminist concerns with power and hierarchy, and with the power of collaboration.

As seen in these examples, expansion can set its aims as large as societal overhaul, or as small as opening cracks in the assumed ways that teaching and learning should look and feel like in a singular classroom. To disrupt is to cause a rupture in something previously stable. Not all normative stability is harmful to an entangled notion of freedom, but in many or even most cases it is a historic holdover from a time when privileges and rights were afforded to some but not all, and a continuation of these times as establishing and maintaining equity in rights and freedom is,

as Angela Y. Davis (2016) terms it, a constant struggle. Pushing back on norms expands ways of thinking, which disrupts these ingrained patterns of privilege and power - even in a space as small as a singular classroom. These forces are recursive in a praxis of ambiguity, since the intention to recognize and create more space for ambiguity disrupts norms and assumptions, which then holds space for this flourishing.

Existentialist Expression

The expressive movement in the history of composition pedagogy is often seen as informed by creative writing, particularly creative nonfiction. For many scholars and practitioners, this was true. And still, for others, a different approach to expressivism, one centered around an existentialist definition of self and purpose, provided opportunities for experimentation in the classroom[35]. Even in advance of the existentialist boom in the U.S., J.D. Baker (1943) published "The Value of Writing Philosophies of Life in Freshman English Classes" in *College English.* Baker argues that focusing on the self and articulating a philosophy of life that arises from that investigation of self is as good a topic as any for a Freshman English course, and that it allows students to practice the essential skills a more 'academic' approach would. The course began with model texts, authors writing about their own life philosophies and the social, emotional, and political contexts that shaped them. In the second part of the class, students write a long autobiography "in which they attempt to analyze forces that have influenced their development" (p. 142). The final portion of the class, students reflect and discuss what this practice uncovers about themselves and the world around them, both individually and as a collective. Baker makes the point that students are often already wrestling

[35] See discussion of Matott (1976) in Chapter 1.

with or struggling with these topics and working from that space (rather than didacticism) is a good way to keep their attitudes and perspectives open to more deeply engaging the questions of their philosophical outlooks. While this approach might not seem radical or innovative today, in 1943, asking students to reflect on their lives, what influenced their development, and how this occurred in the context of collectivity disrupted the academic and often literary bent of composition assignments at the time, and pointed to a writing self that was deeper and more interconnected than previously assumed.

Lucky Jacobs (1975) also wrote about "Existential Phenomenology and Personal Writing." Jacobs draws on Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Gusdorf to form the framework for this approach. It is interesting to see here a direct reference to existentialism and a translation of that thinking into a writing classroom practice. Jacobs explains that the common way of writing about the self in Rhetoric and Composition instruction is to imagine the self as a cultural artifact in and of itself, but that this approach built from existentialist thought sees "the self as a lens toward a constructed reality, that could be re-written and reconstructed to infinity" (p. 294). Again, reading this approach to composition pedagogy with the entire context of the social turn dampens how we might see its disruptive capacity, but this interest in seeing the self as a cultural artifact constructed by context and situation - rather than simple an individualistic internal feeling landscape - was, and continues to be, a way to put a small crack in the sense of normalcy of self and social life.

More recently, Nathan Crick (2003) published "Composition as Experience," in which he describes moving from the divides between expressivism and constructivism toward a philosophy of becoming, which is "based on dualist metaphysics that posits either a pre-given mind or a pre-given discourse that then imposes its will in an individual's consciousness in order

to create a language suitable to represent its present state" (p. 272). He finds some support for this approach even with the ancient Greeks, explaining that Protagoras saw Being and Becoming as the same thing, since "existing in this world means by its very nature to be constantly growing and changing" (p. 272). To see this as possible or even as true, according to Crick, requires a philosophy that can explain this process. In the writing classroom, under this framework of composition as an experience of Being and Becoming, success is "judged not by whether they accurately represent their thoughts or resist dominant discourses but whether the words they create inspire themselves and those around them to experience the joy of Becoming in the midst of their own writing" (p. 273).

In these ways, interests in existentialism and existentialist approaches to life narrative in Rhetoric and Composition foregrounds later interests in feminist and queer theories as instrumental to the discipline. Beauvoirian existentialism, like feminist and queer theories, provides ways to consider the self in a larger, constructed context, one whose rules generally support the dominant (if hidden) priorities of hierarchy and power consolidation. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she presents an existentialism concerned with the ways in which we are tempted or tricked to hand over the project of our own freedoms to movements/institutions that actually negate this freedom through oppression of others, and even surreptitiously of self. She captures these in a number of archetypal roles including the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, the sub-man, and the passionate man, all of which believe they are seeking freedom through their existence, but miss the conditions of what Beauvoir terms, *genuine freedom,* which combines the best part of the archetypes while seeking a sense of personal freedom that is inherently tied to the freedom of others.

In order to get to a sense of genuine freedom as Beauvoir articulates it, there must be a process of critique, or demystification of cultural and ideological assumptions. The question then, is how to reconstruct after critique, and for Beauvoir this problem presents itself, anew, throughout our lives. This is why an ethics of ambiguity is crucial to freedom; there is no one system or rule or heuristic that will work across time and contexts. Existentialist expression is, then, the process of recursively and honestly locating oneself in one's finiteness and the infiniteness of the collective, in the facticity of one's life. Engaging in this mode of expression and critique expands possibilities of other ways of being and more directly engages ambiguity, rather than the pre-packaged sense of self and society that are inherited as part of culture.

A Champion of Failure

In the first few pages of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir (2018) writes of the importance of failure for developing a practical ethics. She says,

> The most optimistic ethics have all begun by emphasizing the element of failure involved in the condition of man; without failure, no ethics; for a being, who, from the very start, would be an exact co-incidence with himself, in a perfect plentitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning. One does not offer an ethics to a God. (p. 10).

It is because we are imperfect, because we fail and fall short, that ethics is relevant and necessary in any philosophical, epistemological, ontological endeavor. Similarly, failure has been an important concept throughout feminist and queer theory, and an experimental concept within Rhetoric and Composition. Although not part of the feminist or queer canon, Donald Murray (1969) was a champion of a right to fail and the positive aspects of failure in the writing classroom. He wrote that it is a responsibility of the writing teacher to cultivate a climate of failure since the "writer fails all the time, but he fails to succeed" (Murray, 1969, p. 121).

Josephine Miles (1976) was also interested in the potential for mistake and failure as a useful facet of any education, since an educated life makes deeper and more complex mistakes, not just fewer, and education reading and writing can give superb opportunities for making errors near fatal, but not fatal" (p. 139). For Miles, writing itself can't be taught successfully, once and for all. The teaching of writing, like the practice of writing, is an ongoing experiment with moments of success, and moments of failure, and sometimes the two are indistinguishable.

But, in a culture of grade-based competition and a cultural preference for perfection, how does one actualize a culture of productive (or unproductive!) failure in the writing classroom for students who have been afraid to fail throughout the rest of their education? One possibility has been to rethink grading practices so that they make room for experimentation, incompleteness, and failure of concept or form. Recently, this has taken the shape of a grading contract (see Inoue 2019). But contract-based or gradeless classrooms have been around much longer. For example, Richard C. Veit (1979) published "De-Grading Composition: Do Papers Need Grades?" in *College English.* He explains that grading highlights the tension between the roles of the teacher and evaluator, and that this must be addressed in order to have more spacious and creative classrooms. Veit argues, "If we want students to grow as writers, we need to create a different environment where experimentation is encouraged...by grading each writing they produce, we burden them with the sense that their every step is being rated to determine their worth, that each word they rite will have some bearing upon their academic careers" (p. 434).

The question of failure in composition classrooms goes beyond the desire to make students comfortable with messy writing and to take risks in the ideas they want to explore and how they explore them. Aversion to failure has deep ties to a neoliberal, capitalist structure where worth is evaluated by productivity and productivity is evaluated by profit. Refusing to

agree to these terms is to fail in any number of ways and so, to reclaim the power and potential of failure (whether negative, neutral, or productive) is to push back against these pressures. As Halberstam (2011) argues in *The Queer Art of Failure* "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (3).

To Queery the Subject

Peter Elbow (1983) once described teaching composition as a "paradoxical coherence" (p. 327). Although perhaps not intentionally queer, this is a queer way of imagining what coherence can feel like, steeped in paradox and contradiction, but coherence none the less. Or, perhaps it isn't coherence at all, paradoxical or not, but rather a need to keep a sense of coherence available so as not to entirely lose footing in this endeavor. Either way, paradox, (in)coherence, disruption, and excess are key critical contributions to the conceptualization of the queer subject, in whatever space they might enter.

In *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing,* Stacey Waite (2017) explains that "what can be thought is already within those normative parameters. And to push beyond what can be thought, we must be able to think beyond those norms, to write beyond them, to think of new possibilities" (p. 40). Waite doesn't see a queer pedagogy as being inherently liberatory, not directly tied to its close neighbors in critical and feminist pedagogies. Waite sees queer pedagogy as being first and foremost about an orientation toward interrogation, an interrogation that leads to more complicated notions of self and subjectivity for *all* in the classroom, not just those with already complex or marginalized identities. A queer pedagogy, then, works especially well for "students who have come to understand themselves as solid, as fixed, and make forms who can make fixed and named assumptions…" (p. 17). Here Waite is

pointing specifically to assumptions made about the process and products of reading and writing, however these assumptions feed into the very assumptions that make up one's sense of the world and their place within it.

It is notable that throughout this text, Waite references Kopelson's *ambiguous pedagogy*, which for Kopelson seems to be more of a passing reference than a structured argument or theory. Waite writes: "While queer pedagogy would not be the first radical pedagogy to aim to disrupt binarisms, it does seem that a queer pedagogy might ask that students and teachers disrupt binaries in some very specific, embodied, sexed, and gendered ways -- ways that cut right to the heart of who we are, or who we think we are" (p. 10). Waite's pedagogical project is connected to questions of ontology that speaks directly to engagement of a sense of being tied to ambiguity, explaining,

> This epistemological position is a moveable position, one that wavers; it may, in fact, not be 'a' position at all, but multiple positions, *ways* of knowing rather than *somethings* to be known. Our ways of knowing are inextricably linked to our ways of being, our becoming. In this sense, this project is both an epistemological and ontological meditation on pedagogy, as it is also tied to a shifting self. (p. 49)

Teaching queer through ambiguous pedagogy opens space for all to come to new and perhaps deeper understandings of self as a composition, along with how this understanding relates to text as composition in all its forms. Waite's work provides the framework for making this actionable in a classroom praxis.

Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2011) have long published on the intersections between queer theory and Rhetoric and Composition. In their work they seek "queer rhetorical practices - practices that recognize the necessity sometimes of saying "no," of

saying ‘Fuck no,’ of offering an impassioned, embodied, and visceral reaction to the practices of normalization that limit not just freedom, but the imagination of possibility, of potential” (p. 193). Alexander and Rhodes argue that because “queerness exceeds the composed self” (p. 181) queerness in Rhetoric and Composition is an ‘impossible subject.’ Queerness “challenges the very subject of composition and what it means to compose and what it means to *be composed*” (p. 182) to the extent that we need new language, indeed new *ways of languaging,* to engage the potentiality of a truly queer(ed) composition. This acts as a call to establish a new framework to push against the fixity of “composition” and open new spaces for ambiguity, unfinishedness, potential - but something beyond process, something that implicated both process and product as inherently unfinished, only one version, in one moment, at one point in the sense of the self. Ambiguity can speak to, with, and through these impossible subjects, because of its ability to engage the impossible without reduction. As a function of thinking ambiguously, “queer theory can make not just room, but trouble for composition” (p. 190). Expansion is a process of making room for incoherence, excess, disruption, indeterminacy; to make trouble for the forces that want to reinforce norms.

Rhodes and Alexander (2012) also consider how multimodality as a compositional and pedagogical practice, might open room for the impossibility of the queer subject and its accompanying excess. They write, “queer representation involves not just figuring an orientation; queer representation means the experience - and the potentially critical re-experience - of being “oriented” (p. 203). The notion of orientation is significant in feminist and existential thought as well, particularly as articulated by Sara Ahmed (2006) in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientation, Objects, Others,* since by first understanding where we are, we might begin to uncover the assumptions that keep us in this iteration of place.

While most of the research on queerness in multimodal and mediated spaces has focused on how wider queer (re)presentation has impacted queer communities, Rhodes and Alexander question what queer theory and experience brings to multimodality and what multimodality affords queer expression, representation, possibility. They write: "We believe that exploring queerness through multimodality…may help us develop productive insights into the experiences of the queer, the possibilities of multimodal composing, and the possibilities (and limits) of figuring the queer" (p. 188). Multimodality both "offers rich resources for representing a complex queerness" (p. 189) and opens a "critical gesture of questioning, even challenging, the heteronormative" (p. 196). For Rhodes and Alexander, the disorientation of queer multimodality "reveals the normative and the normalizing in action - the powerful forces that make some lives seem so natural, others seem unthinkable" (p. 201) and "feeling such discomfort potentially creates a space for critical reflection on the various trajectories, the orientations, that point us in certain directions, valorizing some lives, disparaging others" (p. 202). These moments of disorientation illuminate the unseen orientations, opening a moment for critical reflection that might allow for new perspectives, a (re)new(ed) capacity to imagine that things might be otherwise.

As Alexander and Rhodes highlight, both the multimodal and the queer already orient themselves toward ethical ends - *how* we queer the multimodal and *how* the multimodal queers composition matters. They write: "In multimodal, even multimedia representations of queerness we see the possibility not just for fixing identities nor for ushering in untrammeled identity fluidity, but for understanding how the figuring of queerness may work identity and its construction in very specific ways -- both personally and politically" (p. 198). There has to be a

balance here, an engagement with ambiguity, fluidity, and (dis)orientation that holds in view both the fluidity and fixity of any rhetorical situation, any embodied identity.

Sindu Sathiyaseelan (2014) suggests that there are some aspects of identity that are even beyond naming. Sathiyaseelan engages and pushes back against Karen Kopelson's notion of performed neutrality (particularly in reference to sexuality) and proposes instead a performance of "strategic ambiguity" through what she calls the non-nameable identity. In "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning" and "Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary," Kopelson argues for a neutrality of identity performance in the classroom, especially when the materials are highly politicized. Sathiyaseelan questions whether this type of neutrality is ever possible, given that students read teachers and read each other regardless of the intention of the subject under scrutiny, and oftentimes students get these readings wrong (p. 56-57). For Sathiyaseelan, a straight-presenting queer woman, both coming out and remaining neutral entail particular risks that shift the interactions in the classroom. She proposes that teachers attempt to balance a positionality "that disrupts the binary at the same time that it complicates it" (p. 58). She points to Martha Marinara's piece in the collaboratively authored "Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke" as a successful example of this performed strategic ambiguity in which "Marinara is able to negotiate her students beyond their binary thinking into murky territories of shifting subjectivities" (p. 60). Sathiyaseelan says she is able to use this same approach in her classroom, in which she can "step into and out of marks of queerness, and present to my students a constantly shifting identity that resists categorization and dichotomization. My students are unable to comfortably categorize me" (p. 61).

It is difficult to say that Sathiyaseelan, Kopelson, or Marinara have been successful in their identity negotiations in the classroom, whether students have really wrestled to read and

place their teachers, or if students have moved on with their own assumptions and filled in the blanks without seeking permission or confirmation. What is interesting, however, is the question of whether ambiguity is something that exists, *de facto,* and therefore cannot be intentionally manipulated, constructed, deployed. Or, rather, if there is a portion, a type, a way into ambiguity where we can think of it in the ways we would consider other rhetorical strategies - to be used by the 'speaker' to their own ends. It would seem that creating situations and contexts in the classroom where students have to wrestle with multiple meanings, interpretations, perspectives, conclusions aids in critical thought and the ability to 'tolerate' multiplicity. However, to what extent can a pedagogy 'control for' the types of ambiguity that are 'productive' versus the types that get in the way of understanding, or perhaps that are unable to engage their full potential before being filled in, made complete, made direct and clear by the very person meant to wrestle in it.

Queer theory has also been taken up to address administrative challenges and problems. Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace (2009) explain the queer turn in composition studies encapsulates three major moves (confronting homophobia, becoming inclusive, and queering the binary) and that part of the responsibility of this discipline is to develop a better understanding of how heteronormativity "operates in society at large, in our classrooms, and in the pages of our books and journals" (p. W301). Alexander (2016) has reflected on the difficulties of embodied queer practice in the work of writing program administration. In "Queered Writing Assessment" in *College English*, explains that he felt "both strangely powerful and oddly fraudulent" since he and his team were working with data to tell "straight" stories about the program. He explains,

> We led the pack, as it were, in modeling a process of assessment for our campus that moved from data collection to analysis to curricular revision and back again. At the same

> time, my very real queer disposition felt more and more part of a normative - and normalizing - structure that was clearly invested in the production and reproduction of "results," of validating our programs because we were producing the right kinds of writers. Hell, we even called our setting of guidelines of reading and scoring papers "norming" sessions. (p. 203)

But in realizing this was against his personal ethos and classroom practices, he pushed back to slow the process, and to make space for complications and complexity. In the end, they end up with a program that resists assessment, since he "queerly suspended" thoughts about what constitutes a necessary or desirable path for student learning (p. 205). He says, "The goal really was to explore uncharted territory, to open up conversation, to re-experience with a group of smart folks the possibilities of what writing could be for our students, as opposed to trying to reproduce our sense of what writing is" (p. 205). This harkens back to Micciche's slow agency, along with the other more radical queries and propositions in "The Reform Question" section of Chapter 3.

Expansion and Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

Expansion speaks to many of the tenets of white supremacy culture, but for this analysis I focus on paternalism, power hoarding, and a right to profit. Paternalism is essentially concerned with power and hierarchy. Those with power at the top of the hierarchy understand the processes of decision-making and feel comfortable making decisions for those without power, even without communication or consultation. Those in power may or may not be concerned with how those underneath them experience the outcomes of decisions made, and those without power understand this dynamic but are unable to do anything to change it. In the context of Rhetoric and Composition, these power dynamics are played out over several different hierarchies. From

students to their teachers, teachers to their administrators, administrators to upper-level administrators, and upper-level administrators to top administrators. These power dynamics are not separate entities unto themselves, but complexly entangled with each other in terms of influence and effect. Existentialist, feminist, and queer critiques are all concerned with power and how it operates, seeking to establish more transparent frameworks where hierarchies can be dismantled and a fuller expression of democratic practices and be expressed. Classrooms, departments, and universities that merge frameworks of ambiguity with practices informed existentialist, feminist, and queer theories would seek to address these dynamics and curtail the unchecked consequences of this aspect of white supremacy culture.

Power hoarding is closely related to paternalism. Power hoarding assumes a scarcity mindset around power as a resource and, as such, does not place value on shared models of power and governance. Often in power hoarding situations, since power is seen as a scarce resource, there is resistance from those in power to share their power or to approach policies and practices in new ways so as not to risk a shift in present distribution of power. People in positions of power where power hoarding is the norm can appear as if they understand the responsibilities of their power and aim to be ethical in their decision making under this power structure. However, because their position exists on the very conditions of unequal access to power, this is not possible since those with less power are not able to easily voice their concerns, or have their concerns taken seriously when voiced. Ambiguity as explored through existentialist, feminist, and queer theories offer new ways of relating to power, both individually and in community. These frameworks encourage power sharing, an interest in innovation and change rather than stability or stagnation and including as many voices in decision making

processes as possible. This would be equally true in classrooms, committee work, and department meetings.

Finally, the right to profit is central in white supremacy culture. White supremacy has been instrumental in the expansion of empire throughout history, not only as a cultural tool but also an economic one. Under capitalist logics, profit is a moral good that can override other humanistic rights (Chomsky, 1998). Existentialism, feminism, and queer theory all push back against logics of extractive capitalism since it relates to the consolidation of power and the maintenance of oppressive systems designed to protect this power. Just as Alexander (2016) found that a queerly informed approach to writing program administration would have to look dramatically different from what currently exists, classroom and departmental practices that push back against profit as a maker of success or a goal to work toward, particularly when connected to power relations (power hoarding and paternalism) could provide a liberatory practice that all seeks to dismantle covert and overt white supremacy culture in academic institutions.

CHAPTER 8: INTUIT

"The conscious mind knows nothing true; the conscious mind…creates a metaphor, calls it 'reality' or 'life' or 'the world' and forgets that it is only reciting a poem" (Mandel, 1980, p. 372)

In *CCC,* W.E. Coles (1970) explores "the sense of nonsense" in designing a writing course. He designs his class without a clear plan from the outset, but with an attunement to the class itself and how it unfolds. He compares this to a writer of nonsense who

> employs a literary technique which, like my course, depends on its effect on playing with the way meaning is made from the bringing together of words. Nonsense creates its own universe; it has its own point and message...Nonsense consists of a peculiar fusion of pattern and anti-pattern, of ordered disorder…. (p. 28)

Coles sees the purpose of his course as highlighting language as the basis of experience and identity, but as a reflex rather than a particular logical order or plan. In this way, he hopes that students gain a "heightened self-consciousness of themselves as made by the languages they manipulate - or are manipulated by" (p. 28). The historical timing of Coles' approach is interesting, given that the 1970s marked the beginning of the process model of composition pedagogy, which proposes a specific order of a writing process that students might follow to gain more confidence and control over their composition. Like many of the other 'blips' in scholarship, we see here in Coles' piece a different way of thinking, an approach that existed but did not gain traction in any meaningful way until over a decade later, when Thomas Kent (1993) began publishing on paralogic rhetoric. Kent's ideas were fringe and remain so, and one would be more likely to find Rhetoric and Composition scholars today who can explain the history, ideas, and main thinkers in process theory, but far fewer who would be able to do the same for post-process or paralogic rhetoric.

A rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity sees great potential in nonsense, paralogy, affect, and intuition. As with all of the ideas in this dissertation, these are not new or original. Scholars have forwarded these ideas as a counterweight to theories and approaches that sought to predict, replicate, define, and standardize. Toby Fulwiler and Bruce Peterson (1981) identify thinkers such as Macrorie, Murray, and Elbow as "intuitive theorists" who came to and prompted ways of knowing that went against the scientistic culture that has pervaded the modern history of the discipline. This chapter considers the potentials of paralogy, non-discursive rhetoric, and affect in a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity

Process and Paralogy

In *Paralogic Rhetoric: A Theory of Communicative Interaction,* Thomas Kent (1993) defines paralogy as the "uncodifiable moves we make when we communicate with others, and ontologically… the unpredictable, elusive, and tenuous decisions or strategies we employ when we actually put language to use" (p. 3). He argues that rhetoric would be better suited in its overall aims to accept a paralogic definition of rhetoric and communication, rather than a Platonic one concerned with forms and absolutes. Kent (1989) also calls this form of rhetoric "systemic" since it "treats discourse production and discourse analysis as codifiable processes, processes derived from the idea that language possesses a foundational or conventional center of some sort" (p. 492). Systemic rhetoric spans epistemic paradigms, including Kantian, neo-positivist, and social-semiotic. According to Kent, Kantian discourse production is generated "from innate mental categories that constitute human consciousness" which include things like prewriting in process theory and expressivism (p. 494). A neo-positivist approach "understands discourse production to be an empirical phenomenon that can be tested and measured" and includes things like protocol theorists and brain hemisphere researchers (p. 494). And a social-

semiotic understanding of discourse holds that communication is a "communal activity that is socially and historically determined" and includes modes such as ethnography, collaborative writing, and social constructivism (p. 494). While these present different ways of understanding discourse, language, and communication, Kent contends that they do not work against the Aristotelian assumption that "discourse production may be codified in a logico-systemic manner" (p. 495). For Kent, paralogy offers not a shift of current epistemology, but an entirely new envisioning of ways of knowing in Rhetoric and Composition. This echoes Beauvoir's call for an ethics of ambiguity, since ambiguity exists whether we choose to recognize it or not, and in choosing to recognize it and attempt to work with it, we achieve a more attuned ethics (for Beauvoir) and more versatile understanding of communication in all of its forms (for Kent, and others in Rhetoric and Composition interested in similar ideas).

Kent (1993) is careful to explain that paralogy is not "anti-logical" or "non-logical" that it in fact has nothing to do with logic at all, since it "lives beyond logic" (p. 5). He traces the ideas of paralogy from the Sophists to existentialist thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. In this sense, paralogic rhetoric examines the "thrownness" of language via Heidegger (p. 6). Kent's theorization of paralogic rhetoric directly influenced the development of post-process theory, a theory that "endorses the fundamental idea that no codifiable or *generalizable* writing process exists or could exist" (p. 1). One of Kent's main arguments is that writing and reading - because they are paralogic in nature - cannot be taught. He explains,

> neither discourse production nor discourse analysis can be taught as an epistemologically centered body of knowledge, and if we are serious about finding better ways to help our students improve their writing and reading skills, we might rethink our traditional ways

> of doing business and attempt to account for the powerful hermeneutic dimension intrinsic to the production and analysis of discourse (p. 52).

I agree with Kent that the purpose of this teaching is not to lead students to a "once and for all" and "unproblematic" understanding of communication (p. 161). In this way, paralogical rhetoric is a helpful, potentially central, idea from which to develop a theorization of ambiguity for rhetorical and pedagogical ends.

Discussing the Non-discursive

Related to paralogy is non-discursive rhetoric, which is most heavily theorized by Joddy Murray. In Murray's *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition,* ambiguity and indeterminacy shape the analytical lens of the text: "Rather than avoid and bemoan the fallibility of language with its ambivalences and failures, we should learn to embrace it -- to acknowledge its complexity as its most generative feature" (p. 35). From this perspective, Murray considers the unique aspects of multimodal communication and what new theories and approaches to language and writing are needed to effectively teach both writers and readers to interpret multiply layered meanings in multiply modal texts. Murray defines non-discursive rhetoric as "the study of how these symbol systems persuade, evoke consensus, become epistemological, and organize or employ intended results in human behavior" (p. 12). Ambiguity, as both an inevitable and productive part of writing, is a significant player throughout the text. He writes, "The value of non-discursive text, therefore, is that it thrives and derives its meaning-making from the complexity and ambiguity of its medium, whereas discursive language works best when it reifies and reduces complexity and ambiguity as it goes along" (p. 5). While Murray here may unintentionally establish a reifying boundary between the discursive and non-discursive (a theoretical hiccup throughout the manuscript), the idea that

complexity and ambiguity are not simply "weaknesses" of language and symbol systems, but that they provide the cracks through which we might more fully interrogate modes and effects of communication, is an important one.

In "The Ruse of Clarity" Ian Barnard (2010) questions the consistent reign of clarity as a standard of quality writing in composition classes. He makes the point that a concern for clarity likely centers notions of reliability and reader friendliness, but that these standards do not make sense in spaces of learning where the reader is also the teacher who is there to understand, provide feedback, and help the writer express themselves. In fact, he argues, we often give more lenience and a "generous interpretation of ambiguity" for works by published authors, but not for our students who are still learning and experimenting (p. 444). He says that we need to ask, "what kinds of ideas (and what kinds of writing) are being resisted in the name of 'clarity.' We need to ask what values and institutions are being privileged, and what system underlies these values and institutions. We need to ask what clarity really means. And we need to ask what 'unclarity' means and what it does" (p. 447). This is especially true for student writers in "multimodal, postmodern, globalized composing spaces" since it is in these spaces that sometimes something that escapes clarity's bounds gestures toward revelation" (p. 447).

Effective Affect

"Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness.*" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1).

In "Some Thoughts about Feelings: The Affective Domain and the Writing Process" Susan McLeod (1987) argues that:

> We have tended to ignore the affective domain in our research on and speculation about the writing process. This is partly due to our deep Western suspicion of the irrational, the

> related scientific suspicion of anything that cannot be observed and quantified….and the simple fact that we lack a complete theoretical perspective and common vocabulary with which to carry on a cogent academic discussion of affect. (p. 426)

McLeod's call has not yet been fully answered. While there has been some interest in affect in rhetorical theory in recent scholarship, clear applications to classroom praxis are less common. Throughout the first part of this dissertation, I've demonstrated the tensions the discipline was up against in terms of pressures to produce, for university administration, empirical evidence about the effectiveness of composition curricula. And as I've shown, this was reflected, in many ways, in the objectives and content of composition classes. And even as we traveled through the expressive turn, the cognitive turn, the social turn, and the critical/or political turn, there was still an undercurrent of a privileging of objective, empirical evidence. In "More Than a Feeling: Disappointment in WPA Work" Laura Micciche (2002) explains that even the political turn, "has been slow to address the emotional contexts of teaching and learning" (p. 435). Because of this sense of emotion as being out of the bounds of intellectual work or logical expression, Micciche notes that emotion has not been central to thoughts on student learning, since it isn't seen as having a "social or political identity" (p. 436).

Before a deeper discussion, some terms need to be sorted, particularly the porous boundaries between affect and emotion. They aren't the same, and yet subsume each other. Affect emerges from "preverbal, visceral conditions that encompass emotion and feeling" and "refers more to a sense and an atmosphere than it does to a specific, intentioned act of making or unmaking" (Micciche, 2007, p. 15). Holding (2007) describes affect as "emotive but pre-emotional, a volitional intensity produced and circulated between and among bodies and environmental factors" (p. 319). She explains that expansive renderings of affective experience

push back against Cartesian subjectivity - where the mind is the space of logic and the body the space of emotion - to a holistic and encompassing model of intricate entanglements in the bodymind and among affect/logic. Emotions emerge from the affective realm but are experienced consciously. Emotions may have clear, inherent causes and effects, or they may feel mystifying even as they emerge from within our own conscious awareness. Affect and emotion are not paralogical as such, but rather inform what we come to identify as our own logics. In slippery argument, those personal logics are sometimes confused for a universal logic, but this view of logos holds that it stems from personal perspective which is first informed by an ambiguous and sometimes preconscious affective field. For these reasons, affect and emotion hold an important place in a pedagogy or rhetoric of ambiguity.

Other scholars have agreed and investigated the textures of affect and emotion in Rhetoric and Composition. This has ranged from administrative work (Micciche, 2002), teachers' use and management of emotions in the classroom (Lindquist, 2004), and for students in composition classrooms (Micciche, 2007; Blankenship, 2019; Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus, 2020). Micciche (2002) describes the overall feeling is disappointment or disillusionment among Rhetoric and Composition faculty as an "affective dissonance" as they try to negotiate the belief in what composition courses can be and do for students learning against the material realities of the discipline (p. 439). This is especially true for writing program administrators, who are more deeply couched in the tensions between imagining their role as a service to students and teachers versus a service to the university at large (and, specifically, its profit margins). Like Strickland (2011) observes, to study composition and to do composition are often two entirely different things.

Affect and emotion belong in all parts of our praxis as Rhetoric and Composition scholars and educators, precisely because affect and emotion always, already exist in all of the spaces in which we work. Micciche (2007) explains that "emotion matters to teachers because the classroom is alive with bodies, heart, and selves, and because learning is joyous, exciting, frightening, risky, passionate, boring, disappointing, and enraging" (p. 105). In this way, and as a facet of ambiguity, by ignoring or downplaying the effects of affect, we do not resolve this tension, we merely refuse to assume it as a beginning point of our identities and interactions.

Within a framework of ambiguity, how might we make affect and emotion more visible in our classrooms? Lindquist (2004) explores this question in "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy," using economic class as a point of inquiry. She argues that it is the teacher's responsibility to enact a strategic performance so that students can engage with their learning as an affective process (not divorced from the intellectual/logical). Drawing on the work of Janet Bean (2003) to explain that emotion functions as a powerful tool in academic discourse precisely because it opens space for ambiguity (Lindquist, 2004, p. 188). Thinking about the work of emotion in the classroom, both in terms of teachers and students, moves teachers from a pedagogy of critique to a pedagogy of strategic performance, "in which teachers work to tactically position themselves as conduits for students' affective responses" (189). This asks the teacher to intentionally embody ambiguity as performance, in order to "stubbornly resist easy theoretical alignments, becoming, for the moment, staunchly flexible anti-ism-ists" (193). I'd say that since 2004 when Lindquist was thinking and writing this idea, the political landscape has changed in ways where it may not be defensible to remain ambiguous in the face of more overt and targeted dissensus, especially when identity politics through the conduit of power and privilege are at play. But aspects of

Lindquist's original idea continue to provide an alternative to a performance of base neutrality or overt political identification - it is a complex and ambiguous dance between holding the kind of space that is needed for students to radically shift their inherited beliefs and perspectives, particularly those who come from privileged backgrounds that have not required that they hear and carry stories of marginalized others.

In *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching,* Micciche (2007) builds on this line of thinking by suggesting that emotion is a valuable rhetorical resource that can be more effectively used in the classroom. As a rhetorical resource, emotion (as the expression of affect) reflects "how we become invested in people, ideas, structures, and objects" (1). A rhetoric of emotion is but one small part of a rhetoric of ambiguity, since it "requires attention to extralinguistic features around the world of a text - features, often considered ineffable, such as body language, gesture, and movement - because these elements are entry points to understanding emotion as an embodied performative, as that which exceeds and shapes our connection to textuality" (2). This connects also to paralogic and non-discursive, as emotion/affect can be seen as parts or expressions of these approaches as well. Paralogy is beyond categorizations of logic, and affect is both il- and/or para-logical and the very informant of our logical (argumentative) positions. But when we binarize reason and emotion, as we have historically throughout rhetorical thought, it "obscures the fuzzy distinctions" between them (p. 3). In other ways, it attempts to resolve this fundamental ambiguity, which provides a false sense of stability that ultimately takes from students the potential of engaging in the messy analysis of how our emotions inform our perspectives and therefore our ethics, morals, and the arguments that result from them.

Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus (2020) - through their Wayfinding Project, uncover that affect and emotion are important aspects of the "wayfinding process" or the "theoretical

framework to trace how such writers adapt, discover, and learn new rhetorical and composing strategies as they approach unexpected requirements, interests, possibilities, and desires in their writing lives" (pp. 564-565). So, this consideration for emotion and affect in the composition classroom has the potential to have a positive impact on students even after they complete the official curriculum. Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus found that understanding emotion as enveloped in the composition process *and* its contexts aids students as they enter increasingly difficult and more complex 'real world' communicative situations, particularly as related to professional identity. Additionally, Lisa Blankenship (2019) has shown how a consideration specifically for the emotion register of empathy in the teaching of rhetoric and composition, what she terms 'rhetorical empathy,' asks student to consider "*how* and *why* we've come to believe the way we do is a powerful way to learn and enlarge our perspectives" (p. 104). This how and why is often deeply and ambiguously steeped in things like culture, families of origin, and spiritual/religious belief systems, all of which root in early formation of affect and emotion. In this way, it functions as an epistemology. In Blankenship's model, the purpose of engaging rhetorical empathy in the classroom is not to better understand oneself, but to come to know an Other. In doing so it "does not ask that we silence our own perspective but rather than we foreground our emotions and responses to Others' stories and ask how power is circulating and functioning in every speech act and rhetorical situation" (p. 119).

Intuition and Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

Intuiting speaks to many of the tenets of white supremacy culture, but for this analysis I focus on quantity over quality, a worship of the written word, and a sense of progress as bigger or more. In white supremacy culture, quantity over quality reflects a preference for working toward *measurable* goals and, in this way of thinking, things that can be measured are more

highly valued than things that cannot. Specifically, it reflects a discomfort with emotion, feelings, and things outside the realm of observable logical process. Paralogic, non-discursive, affective rhetoric cannot be measured. This is not the same as saying it cannot be studied or taken as a mode or content focus in a course. It is to say that the way this can be studied and adopted into pedagogy will not fit a preference for measurable methods and goals. This is also not to say that such studies or practices couldn't be developed - ones that use an empirical epistemology to guide methods - but that inherently they will not capture the paralogical, the non-discursive, or the affective. This is one of the reasons that I love these as features of an ambiguous approach to rhetoric and pedagogy: to want to work with these concepts *requires* a fundamental shift in normative epistemological and pedagogical practices, and specifically ones that, inadvertently or intentional, support white supremacist cultural ideals.

In white supremacy culture, the worship of the written word reflects a respect only for what is captured in writing. Other modes of expression or communication are seen as inferior and are easily invalidated or ignored. Under this framework, those with strong writing skills (according to a white, Western standard) are seen as more intelligent, more talented, and more trustworthy of responsibility. I believe the connections here to what we do in Rhetoric and Composition are clear, if not glaring. We have, as a discipline, been grappling with this bias toward standardized, Western, academic writing for decades, but we still have work to do. Paralogic rhetoric, non-discursive communication practices, and the modes of affect/emotion provide avenues to imagine a different way to value communicative practices, whether in the meeting room, the classroom, or the conference panel. We've often interpreted this as a more capacious definition of writing *products*, but as I hope this chapter has shown it also requires a more capacious definition of writing *process*, and the ineffable that exists before and beyond the

process. One of the main arguments for sustaining standard, Western, academic writing instruction is that we are preparing students for the 'real world' that will expect this from them, and that it is a disservice to not prepare them for this world. In a different interpretation of that sentiment, we are in fact *reifying* these 'real world' expectations, and in turn upholding - rather than complicating and critiquing - the white supremacy culture that students *already* communicate in.

Finally, white supremacy culture forwards a notion of progress as more or bigger. Tied to the teleology of success, progress means numerical growth, often in terms of profit, with little concern for the social and emotional cost. In departments, this might mean progress defined as growing a program, taking on more faculty (at lower wages, and more precarious conditions), taking on more students without the infrastructure (economic, social, emotional, professional) to support them. In the classroom it might mean more projects with longer word counts and higher standards, assessment practices that serve the interests of enrollment (i.e., concerns for retention) over the needs of individual students, and of course ever-increasing course-caps. Paralogy, the non-discursive and affect all point to a different set of concerns regarding progress and success. Can we get deeper? Quieter? Smaller? More personal? Can we understand each other better? Can we learn how to make space for the whole self in the classroom, in the office? Can we listen through silence? Can we move while remaining still? These are all truly radical questions we could be asking of ourselves and our programs, questions that would get to the heart of assuming ambiguity and moving, with uncertainty, from there.

CHAPTER 9: SITUATE

"An ethical reading must admit that the differences that matter between us or within us are never simply in the present as such, but open up a radically uncertain future" (Ahmed, 1998, p. 197).

Ellen Barton (2008) makes the point that Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline has much to contribute to understandings of ethics, particularly interactional or interpersonal ethics, since we have a "critical perspective on language as interactional and rhetorical" (p. 596). Part of this for Barton is an ability to move beyond binaries and simple ethical formulas of good/bad right/wrong. David L. Wallace (2009) agrees in "Alternative Rhetoric and Morality: Writing from the Margins," explaining that to achieve this position toward situated ethics, the discipline "must also move beyond…nostalgia for supposedly simpler times in which language and rhetoric were neutral tools with which we equipped our students to use as they wish" (p. W35). He forwards intersectionality, copresence, and disidentification as useful concepts, and explains that "we need to actively develop alternative rhetorics that take as their central task the identification and unseating of inequities that substantively account for the ways in which exercising rhetorical agency involves the responsibility of account for the impact of that agency on others" (p. W35).

Of course, these ideas are not new. Don L.F. Nilsen (1974) takes up the importance of better understanding implication in communication. He writes that "our society, our politics, and our style of living have become more complex, thus requiring more subtle and sophisticated modes of communication, the ranges and variety of implication have also become more subtle and sophisticated" (p. 417). His larger argument throughout the piece is that in modern communication landscapes, much is implied rather than objectively or clearly stated, and that these implications impact the assumptions we have and the texture of our understanding of the world without even being able to name the influence directly. This continues to be the case today, as we and our students function on inherited world perspectives while interacting in

increasingly large, diverse, and ambiguous communication spaces. A pedagogy and a rhetoric of ambiguity offer tools for understanding these dynamics and skills work within them. To show what this might look like, this chapter considers Rogerian rhetoric/argumentation, nuanced negotiation of difference, and the art of recontextualization.

Rhetoric After Persuasion

In the 1970s and 1980s, some scholars considered Rogerian argument/rhetoric as an alternative to Aristotelian traditions, seeing that they might provide a different approach to communication in classrooms and subsequently in the 'real world.' Carl Rogers was a humanistic psychologist who is associated with beginning a human-centered approach to psychotherapy. As part of this, he developed Rogerian rhetoric, or a way of entering conversation/dialogue that resisted the common approach to persuasion-based argumentation and focused on collaborative communication toward understanding. Rogerian Rhetoric made its way to Rhetoric and Composition by way of Young, Becker, and Pike in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change.* Maxine Hairston (1976) draws on Rogers in "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation" along with Young, Becker, and Pike to introduce the potential of Rogerian rhetoric to the discipline as an alternative to 'traditional rhetoric.' She explains that "the situations in which classical methods of using proof, evidence, and logical deductions are most apt to fail are just the ones we care about most" (p. 373). She also explains that these communicative situations that are most bound to fail also tend to revolve around issues of difference and identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, etc. The goal of Rogerian rhetoric is not necessarily consensus, which is in contrast to a framework of ambiguity, but about making space for listening and understanding rather than defensiveness and holding forth. Ambiguity is antithetical to consensus because it assumes that things are always more complex and less stable or clear than assumed to be, so

while ‘consensus’ may be reached, it is likely at the expense of some alternate perspective or interpretation which might be equally as valid or valuable. This view of consensus is popular in social justice work presently as well, because of this very analysis - consensus simply suggests that a wider range of opinion is missing, has been ignored, or has chosen to self-silence out of fear or fatigue.

Paul Bator (1980) makes the point that the underlying principle of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is that humans are rational animals and so “the strategy Aristotle uses to analyze rhetorical transactions is focused, therefore, on the processes of logical reasons - rational men using reasonable means (enthymemes) in exhorting or dissuading (deliberative oratory), in praising or blaming (epideictic oratory), and in accusing or defending (forensic oratory)” (p. 427). So, an Aristotelian rhetor looks to establish control and shift the expectation of the audience so as to persuade them to their own point of view (p. 428). I don’t see rhetorical appeals such as ethos, pathos, and logos as contradiction to Rogerian rhetoric, but rather that within a Rogerian framework, the ethics of using these tools becomes the focus. Rather than learning how to competitively wield them in order to persuade an audience to one side or another, a Rogerian rhetor would become *aware* of how their use of the rhetorical appeals has the potential to manipulate a reader, listener, or larger audience and so account for their own responsibility to establish ethical practices for communication while using the tools of rhetoric. Jim W. Corder (1965) calls this orientation to argument, stemming from Rogerian thought, as “emergence toward the other” which “requires a readiness to testify to an identity that is always emerging, a willingness to dramatize one’s narrative in progress before the other; it calls for an untiring stretch toward the other, a reach toward enfolding the other” (p. 26). We are our narratives and when we encounter narratives that impinge on ours (what he calls “contending narratives”), it is

disruptive, shocking, initially incomprehensible, and potentially threatening (p. 18). This is similar to the tension Beauvoir highlights in *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* between the self as both immanent and transcendent. James S. Beamlin (1987) in "Persuasion, Rogerian Rhetoric, and Imaginative Play" expands on this tension:

> If we change with our beliefs, then surely our very identity, our sense of self, becomes threatened along with our belief-structures. For whatever security and certainty and establishment we perceive in ourselves and in the world rests on the stability of our network or web of beliefs. Right or wrong, our beliefs give us our comforting sense of security in a stable, predictable, understanding world; they contribute to our sense of a fixed, stable self. (p. 33)

And yet, to exist in the world as we experience it today is a continual call to change oneself, one's beliefs, as our understanding of the world and its interconnectedness becomes more defined. For Beamlin, this is only possible in a worldview that "conceives of self and reality as fluid and potentially multiple" (p. 36).

More recently, Lisa Blankenship (2019) has taken up the question of Rogerian Rhetoric in communicative landscapes today. In *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy,* she argues that Aristotelian rhetoric forwards a rhetoric-as-argument understanding of communication, in which the goal from the outset is to change the perspective of the other. Blankenship's model of rhetorical empathy suggests that perhaps the first step in any argument should be seeking to change the self, so that a deeper form of empathy between self and other might form. She connects this to Krista Ratcliff's (2005) ideas in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness* since rhetorical empathy shifts "the focus of rhetoric from (only) changing an audience to changing oneself (as well) and extending rhetorical listening in

new directions by accounting for the role of the personal and the emotions in rhetorical exchange" (p. 18). Blankenship's rhetorical empathy connects to and diverges from Rogerian Rhetoric, since it does not ask the rhetor/listener to remove themselves from their situated experience and emotions, but at the same time it does ask that they put their experiences in the context of larger arguments" (p. 118). In this way, "Composition pedagogies based on rhetorical empathy ask students to recognize the contextual and personally situated nature of all arguments and discourse" (p. 118). Blankenship offers a complete revisioning of the purpose and outcomes of rhetorical education, from seeking to change the other to first considering how changing the self might offer a deeper and more meaningful connection to the other, such that the question or problem under consideration might move both to new understandings and perspectives. This framework engages both a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity, as it does not start from a place where the end is known and controlled for but seeks to engage in the process of coming to know together, perhaps ending up in a place that neither side could have anticipated on their own.

Negotiating Difference

Other chapters have shown the interest in collaborative, non-hierarchical classroom practices, and negotiation as a mode of communication could be considered among them. Joan Huddleston (1976), for example, published "The Language of Negotiation" to present artificial (constructed) group negotiation as a learning activity in a communication course. She was not specifically using a Rogerian approach, but the underlying ideas are similar. Importantly, Huddleston was concerned with moving away from linear argument and persuasion into the messier, more nebulous realm of open negotiation where each side has some sense of what they seek but must remain open to unexpected resolutions if the process is to work. This requires an openness to others, a commitment to deep listening, and an ability to revise one's prior

conceptualization to make space for new co-constructed resolutions. It also requires a careful consideration of the ego in communication - a willingness to see agreeing on a resolution different from what one originally felt would be acceptable not as a loss but as a move toward communal agreement and understanding.

Underneath this are deeper questions about the place of objectivity in the writing classroom and rhetorical theory. Ronald A. Schroeder (1979) in "Writing, Knowledge, and the call of Objectivity" considers the issue of objective testing as a site of this question in the discipline. He explains that students feel more comfortable with objective tests since there is a 'clear' right or wrong answer, but that such tests only "create the illusion of verifiable certainty" since they "categorize and dichotomize, rendering even the most complex, sophisticated, and subtle concepts in deceptively simple forms" which reaffirms "a kind of absolutism that presuppose that knowledge itself is objective and unambiguously defined by a principle of exclusivity" (p. 621). By creating any kind of learning space or experience, whether testing or otherwise, that furthers this culture of objectivity, we take from students the opportunity to push the complexity of their thinking and learning processes, and therefore the ability to reflect this learning in their writing process and products. Schroeder explains,

> Too many students already seem to me to have the mistaken notion that writing is something isolated from the learning process, that writing is distinct and separate from something else they conceived to be a body of objective knowledge….If our students do not believe that knowledge is personal and individual and that their ability to articulate and record that knowledge is a dimension of the knowledge itself, then how can they be persuaded that they might personally contribute something to the store of human knowledge? (p. 624)

As Schroeder makes it clear here, taking more seriously our own and students' needs for objectivity is one of the first steps in meaningfully addressing differences in the writing classroom and in our own research. And, as I have argued throughout the dissertation, we need more spacious frameworks of ambiguity to meaningfully approach the topic.

In *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Sara Ahmed (1998) interrogates the discourse surrounding feminism and its relations to postmodernism, arguing that postmodernism is not some stable referent, but is "constructed through the very discourses which write, read and see its existence" (p. 191). Through her focus on postmodernism and feminism on spectrums of universality/difference and sameness/otherness, Ahmed provides helpful frameworks for developing more nuanced theoretical and analytical lenses for these concepts. I'm most interested in the work because of her push to find a "third term" between difference and consensus, through which ambiguity is certainly implicated. She writes, "this term cannot be contained by a demand for theoretical purity, as it entails the pragmatic and inexhaustible meeting of the ethical demands and conflicts that saturate daily life and inform the embodiment of the social subject" (p. 51). She also argues that the feminist critique of universalism/essentialism connects difference to an ethical framework, which Beauvoir echoes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity.*

An important consideration in an ethics of difference in the writing classroom is consensus. A pedagogy informed by an ethics of ambiguity would see consensus as always missing something - some voice or perspective - whether they are physically in the discussion or implied. John Trimbur (1989) considered more closely the role of consensus in his collaborative learning approaches in the composition classroom. He explains that "consensus in collaborative learning is an inherently dangerous and potentially totalitarian practice that stifles individual

voice and creativity, suppresses differences, and enforces conformity" (p. 602) and urges instructors to interrogate their own relationship to achieving consensus in their classrooms while considering meaningful alternatives.

Like concerns with consensus is the "flattening effect" that occurs when an individual is seen as a representative of their entire community or identity group. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum (2012) observes that "discourses of difference that fix individual writers or groups of writers in time and space can frustrate, rather than enable, the development of pedagogical resources that attend simultaneously to broad conceptual categories *and* to the highly individual encounters that occur within writing classrooms on a daily basis" (p. 618). She calls for a move away from fixity to seeing difference "interactionally" (p. 622). In this conceptualization, difference becomes not a space or a gap between two things, but rather a *relation* between them. Kerschbaum explains that "difference-as-relation drives communicative efforts because it is part of a continual interplay between identification and differentiation. This interplay reveals the lived experience of difference as highly dynamic" (p. 624). Drawing on Bakhtin, she connects to a Beauvoirian understanding of temporal ambiguity, in which "difference is not 'out there' waiting to be found and identified but is always coming-to-be through the here-and-now of interaction" (p. 626). She also explains that there is no easy formula or principle for accounting for difference between people or things, there will never be exactly the same relation to another individual and no situation around that relation will be the same either. To account for difference as a relation between things, rather than a lack or a gap, requires that we see each relation as fundamentally unique, composed of a shifting and inherently ambiguous matrix of identity and context.

Relation through Recontextualization

Comparative rhetoric, particularly as articulated by LuMing Mao (2013b) in his "art of recontextualization" presents a framework for engaging with ambiguity, both in our classrooms and in our scholarship. From its conception, comparative rhetoric has faced a methodological paradox, namely that a comparative study must start somewhere and focus elsewhere, but that this framing risks essentializing both points of reference. To address the paradox, scholars like Mao have called for a more nuanced approach to comparative rhetorics, one that "must cultivate and indeed demand an intersubjective, interdependent ethos so that our own historically privileged dispositions can be consistently challenged and made manifest throughout the entire process of representation" (p. 44). Mao presents the art of recontextualization as one way to address the methodological paradox that comparative rhetoric faces. He defines it as "informed by an outright rejection of any external principle or overarching context to determine the context of the other, and it further relies on terms of interdependence and interconnectivity to constitute and regulate representation of all discursive practices" (Mao, 2013a, p. 218)

This speaks back to the problem of starting points as the "inherent power dynamics" in comparisons as well as the tendency to establish hierarchies out of these power dynamics, usually by placing Aristotelian rhetoric at the top and all others grouped below (Mao, 2013b, p. 43). And the classical rhetoric model hinges on two central assumptions. First, that persuasive discourse is grounded in or predicated on conflict or confrontation, which it aims to overcome or eradicate. Second, it sees the audience as both external and oppositional, and the discourse is intended to transform or convert (Mao, 1990, p. 131). Moving away from binary categorization in the study of rhetoric "productively troubles our own modes of thinking and seeks to privilege experiences over facts and relations of interdependence over structures of sameness or

difference" (Agnew et al. pp. 119-120). Beauvoirian ambiguity is also concerned with the position of the subject as both transcendent (a deciding agent in one's own projects) and immanent (subject to the goals and directions of others' projects). Our existences float between these realizations of the self and its positionality in relation to others in the world. To place oneself fully on either end of the spectrum (pure transcendence or pure immanence) is to attempt to resolve the irresolvable ambiguity of our existential condition, or, as the existentialists would call it - an act of bad faith. Working with a Beauvoirian conceptualization of ambiguity while using Mao's art of recontextualization brings this nuance of blurred boundaries between subject and object, researcher and researched, "us" and "them" into finer relief.

In "Reflection as Relationality: Rhetorical Alliances and Teaching Alternative Rhetorics" Vox Jo Hsu (2018) argues that we need a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the relationship of rhetorics to culture and how these relationships show up in students' rhetorical work in composition classrooms. They define "alternative" rhetorics as "discursive practices that decenter normative worldviews" that are "a tireless process - vigilant in recognizing and responding to the appropriative tendency of dominant narratives" (p. 144). Hsu builds from a definition in David Wallace's *Compelled to Write* which sees alternative rhetorics as "negotiating among personal and collective identities in order to 'bring the operation of culture into relief'" (Wallace qtd in Hsu p. 144). Essentially, this approach tries to "engage the individual's subjectivity rather than trying to erase it" (p. 144). Tied to this is rhetorical alliance, which Hsu notes indigenous communities have engaged in throughout their long histories (p. 147). A pedagogy based on rhetorical alliance prioritizes reciprocity and relationality over an "agonistic encounter between individuals and ('dominant') culture" (p. 147). Necessarily, it sees writers as collaborators who are motivated and "invested in the development of their

interconnected futures" (p. 147). Hsu emphasizes that this approach must center the notion of context if it is to be successful and I see Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* as providing some theoretical and ethical frameworks from which to think through the broadening and deepening of context. Or, as Hsu concludes, "Only by rendering our beliefs legible - by fixing them temporarily, imperfectly, and vulnerably in some form - can we create the conditions for discussion, negotiation, and change" (p. 163).

Similarly, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) call into question what they term the "flattening effects" of Rhetoric and Composition's interest in comparative rhetorics and narrating stories of the "other." Flattening effects are the "subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) erasures of difference that occur when narrating stories of the "other" (p. 431). This occurs because an uncritical multicultural pedagogical approach will seek to "contain difference" so that it might be legible and knowable by a normative readership (p. 431). Their call is to develop comfort with the "incommensurability and unknowability" of self and other, that a singular focus on commonality misses the potentials of comparative, recontextualized, or multicultural spaces (p. 432). They note that Elizabeth Ellsworth terms this approach the "pedagogy of the unknowable" which articulated this way merges with a pedagogy of ambiguity. Alexander and Rhodes conclude that even if it is difficult to actualize a pedagogy of the unknowable, since "unknowability is the proper subject of writing itself" (p. 451). I couldn't agree more.

Situation and Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

Situating speaks to many of the tenets of white supremacy culture, but for this analysis I focus on defensiveness, fear of open conflict, and a right to comfort. In white supremacy culture, defensiveness seeks to maintain the status quo through a denial of critique or feedback to the current ideology and power structures that support it. In the classroom, this might look like

students resisting discussion on controversial or 'political' topics out of a fear of having to defend their position or listen to ideas that are counter to their own preconceived notions. Aristotelian rhetoric in a way supports this defensiveness, since it understands rhetoric as the project of getting an audience to agree with an established argument. The successful rhetoric is not the one who comes to a new understanding through their argument, but the one who holds the line and gets others to join in. A pedagogy that encourages students to let go of this need for defensiveness might use techniques from Rogerian rhetoric, negotiation, and recontextualization to forward relation building through inquiry and analysis and would promote that changing one's mind or opinion is a desirable outcome of a learning experience. All of this is to engage in a rhetoric and pedagogy of ambiguity since it does not begin with a clear path but rather engages in an ambiguous process of coming to know together and through relational difference.

In order to tackle defensiveness, the classroom would also have to address a fear of open conflict which contributes to a culture of defensiveness. As a tenet of white supremacy culture, the fear of open conflict manifests as politeness and avoidance of anything that might cause conflict or controversy even for important issues. The tendency for people, particularly young folks, to say something like "I don't really like to get political…" is an example of a fear of conflict in a communicative space, since the person likely has an idea or opinion but does not feel comfortable fully expressing it or does not see the risk/vulnerability of expressing it as outweighing the potential negative consequences. White supremacy functions through (even unwilling) complicity in it, and posits high costs (social, mental, emotional) for going against these expectations. Conflict is inherent in trying to situate oneself in relation to others; there will be alternate even conflicting perspectives and experiences, so the question becomes how the classroom can provide a space for students to work through this discomfort in order to see that

difference is a natural aspect of lived experiences and that to deny this or to seek polite consensus is to miss an opportunity for connection and a broader understanding.

Underneath both defensiveness and the fear of open conflict is the fundamental belief in white supremacy culture that people (meaning, white people) have a right to comfort. To let down guards of defensiveness and to be able to sit in spaces of conflict is risky, vulnerable, and often uncomfortable and because white supremacy culture has sought to protect white people from this discomfort as a consolation for their complicity in the system of white supremacy, it is difficult to encourage white people to see discomfort as a natural aspect of communicating through and across difference, whether racial or otherwise. The sense of a right to comfort also benefits from communicative environments that allow for false closure and conclusion, since it is more comfortable to exist in objectivity and completeness than it is in the murky spaces of the unknowable, the unanswerable, and contested perspectives of experience.

In a classroom interested in dismantling the culture of white supremacy as it covertly appears and engaging a pedagogy and rhetoric of ambiguity would need to tackle all of these characteristics in concert. To push back against the belief in a right to comfort, the fear of open conflict, and an internal sense of defensiveness against the other is to open space for real communication and shifting perspectives based on what is learned. It is highly vulnerable work that asks much of the teacher who wants to construct this space. And there is no one right way to do it. But to consider it, along with all the other ways that white supremacy shows up in our classrooms without our knowledge or permission is to open spaces for radical freedom.

CHAPTER 10: RESISTING CONCLUSION, PRACTICING PAUSE

"Freedom can only be achieved through the freedom of others." (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 169)

"Ambivalence is not another word for freedom." (Olufemi, 2021, p. 79)

We find ourselves in new versions of the same problems again and again, both in the history of our world and the history of our discipline. An implied argument throughout this project holds that this is, perhaps, because we seek final solutions for problems in their immediate context. Regardless of whether those solutions work for the finite, this focus misses the opportunity to simultaneously develop a praxis for the infinitude of personal, interpersonal, and political struggle as an ongoing pattern of (re)emergence. Simone de Beauvoir, deeply impacted by what she witnessed and by her own personal choices during WWII, sought an ethics that could combine an existential vision of personal freedom with a practice that could guide the individual through the impossible web of often conflicting interests of self and other. In the conclusion of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir writes:

> As soon as one considers a system abstractly and theoretically, one puts himself, in effect, on the plane of the universal, thus, of the infinite. That is why reading the Hegelian system is so comforting. I remember having experienced a great feeling of calm on reading Hegel in the impersonal framework of the Bibliotheque Nationale in August 1940. But once I got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it has offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men. I think that, inversely, existentialism does not offer the reader the consolations of an abstract evasion: existentialism proposes no evasion. (p. 158)

For Beauvoir, and for my reading of her ideas throughout this project, it seems we should seek theory, philosophy, praxis that can speak to the irreducible complexity, and the unwanted complicity, of living entangled with others in what often feels like ethical entrapment. We should seek theory that allows us to "stay with the trouble" as Donna Haraway (2016) has put it, and that allows us to reflect on and recall practices that have worked in the past, while recognizing that the echoes and parallels of history are never exact. Working with ambiguity as a guiding concept speaks to these complexities without needing to reduce or resolve.

I have tried to present here a few key insights on the central concerns of our discipline throughout its history and within its sociocultural context. These insights begin with the most basic foundations of an academic discipline - the ways it thinks and talks about epistemology, theory, and history (its own and outside itself). I would say that these are in a loop, but even that would suggest more linearity than I'm comfortable offering. Perhaps a mobius strip is more accurate, where they are each themselves and yet irreducibly traced back into the other. As I discussed in Chapter 2, even the most transparent epistemology begins with unstated assumptions, and these assumptions shape what is asked, how it is asked, and what might be expected in return.

Similarly, when epistemology is attached to theorizing that is competitive rather than collaborative, we limit what we think, how we think it, and how those ideas might come together to form some new alchemy. Competition feeds scarcity, two powerful logics of capitalism, even in the most radical theories. Our understanding of history, both within and 'outside' the discipline, fundamentally shapes epistemological approaches and theoretical lenses since it is the basis of our orientation to the present moment, we find ourselves both inheriting and creating. The telling and retelling of history is probably humanity's longest running 'remix project' and

the more it is retold from other remixes, the further we fragment and calcify those materials. To remix history is to know that there is no original material, that everything has been cropped, filtered, stretched, cut. To form the history presented in this dissertation, I drew on the conversations happening in our top scholarly journals, which too were drawing on conversations from our top scholarship journals, and monographs, and conference panels, which too were….you see where this is going. Of course, if I had chosen a different corpus or a different central concept, I would have drawn a different history. Neither would be wrong, but rather remixed reflections of coexistent realities.

This approach to re-reading and re-telling history also uncovered a different perspective on theory, namely that not all theories name themselves. A theory of ambiguity presented in this dissertation combines a number of named and known theories (feminist, queer, paralogical, etc.) and suggests that they are in conversation with each other in a generations-long collective theory of ambiguity. This process suggests that we use history to articulate meta-theory, a theory that exists without disclosure. In this sense, a theory of ambiguity presents both raw and remixed materials with which to remix again. This project has worked with the materials of imagination, emergence, expansion, intuition, and situation to build but one portrait, one interpretation of what ambiguity might mean to this discipline.

Writing at the end of World War Two, Beauvoir sought answers for the ethical problems she witnessed throughout the war, particularly during the occupation of Paris where she was living. Her answer, ultimately, was that answers must be continuously sought anew in all situations. There is no code, program, or system that one can input and receive a single answer or action that works for a particular problem across situations and contexts. The best we can do is anchor our ethics to a malleable and expansive praxis, which for Beauvoir revolved around

assuming ambiguity and seeing freedom as a project of collective responsibility, rather than individual right. There was no room for nihilism or absurdity in this praxis, a common critique of other existentialist work at the time: If nothing matters, if there is no higher good or God, if the meaning of life is my own existence, then why not be solipsistic? An ethics of ambiguity centered on "genuine freedom" challenges an absurd rendering of existentialism philosophy, since "to declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 129). For Beauvoir, freedom understood as a collective responsibility rather than an individual right requires the ability to think with and act from assumed ambiguity. She writes, "It is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my own situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (97). To consider freedom, meaningfully and radically, is to see that my freedom hinges on the freedom of others, as does theirs mine. To think through how this dynamic functions in questions as diverse as romantic relationships or the right to bear arms requires an ability to approach each situation anew, to ask questions so as to get a sense of the things that resist categorical definition or procedure. Living for nearly a century under oppressive colonial, capitalist logics has impeded our ability to think this way, and this dissertation has sought to explain why this is so important now and where we might begin.

Lola Olufemi's (2021) *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* was given to me as a gift during what felt like a dark night of the soul for this project. Olufemi's words gave me strength to return to my work with a belief that there was still space for beauty, that in seeking poetics in the midst of the academic I might find a sustainable source of creative energy. On the first page

she defines what she means by *the otherwise:* "not *otherwise* as in, the political horizon awaits; *otherwise* as in a firm embrace of the unknowable, the unknowable as in, a well of infinity I want us to fall down together" (7). I had been falling down that well together with Beauvoir and a number of inspiring scholars in our discipline; Olufemi wrote a vision of the well that was alluring, empowering, and profoundly beautiful, one where I could find my way. I am so deeply grateful for her work, and for the fortune of having it come into my life when it did.

A conclusion, I suppose, should give the reader a summary of what has been said and a sense of closure or a call to action. I've tried to tell you a bit here of what I think I've said, or what I intended to say, but perhaps to you I've said something entirely different. There might be a unique conclusion for each reader, like those choose your own adventure books I used to read as a kid - writing and rewriting a new story with each choice. I loved it when the same story could find a different ending. Maybe this story has found a different ending, maybe more than one. I can't *give* you a sense of closure, but maybe you've found one anyway. Maybe more than one.

My call to action is to pause. Throughout the process of researching and writing this, pausing became not just part of my intellectual journey but also part of my embodied practice. It showed up more often in my days. I used to push. I'd push to finish the reading. The article draft. The lesson plan. When I was feeling resistance within myself, when I was feeling the pressure to do more or go bigger, I'd push. Now, I pause. I find that my pauses are full of questions, questions that turn my imagination, give me a chance to see how things emerge from my situated space that is but one view of this world. There is time to intuit and space for expansion - not so that I might quickly hierarchize or classify the abundance, but so that I might sit and stay a while in that flourishing.

Buddhist practitioners say that Westerners rush through our lives on shallow breath. We think of breath as in the lungs, if we ever even think of it at all. But breath can reach all parts of the body with intention, and deep belly breathing is an effective nervous system regulator. I've been thinking about this in relation to scholarship. Perhaps we've also begun to think through our lives on shallow thought, since knowledge has entered an age of informational manufacturing, with tight timelines, production schedules, and even profit margins to consider. The pause is, perhaps, intellectual deep breath work. There we can reorient, ask questions about our questions, push back on a need to conclude, to know.

And there, you'll find good company in ambiguity.

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