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## COMPOSITION AND THE POLITICS OF THEORY BUILDING

"I am not interested in choosing between balance and tensions."

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,  
*"Rhetoric and Cultural Explanation:  
A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak"*

Since Aristotle, scholars in the sciences and the humanities have held the epistemological assumption that theoretical knowledge is superior to knowledge deriving from praxis because it is generalizable and therefore more universally useful. This traditionally accepted view of theory has been challenged by contemporary scholars. Criticism coming from various sources, including the neo-pragmatists and postmodernists, has argued that theory cannot be assumed to answer local problems generally and universally, and current thinkers instead argue for what Clifford Geertz has labeled "local knowledge." In other words, current debates about the role of theory ask the question, What is useful knowledge? Within the academy, and in composition studies in particular, this inquiry has begun to call into question the "usefulness" of theoretical knowledge in various—and often unproductive—ways.

Contemporary scholars as diverse as Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Donald Schon, and Stephen Toulmin have argued that we need to approach theory with a more pragmatic agenda. These and other thinkers are adamant about the need to focus on local practice: Toulmin claims that "there is probably no legitimate role for theory" (Olson, "Literary" 306), and Fish goes so far as to argue that theory *cannot* serve as a foundation for practice. In his argument against the usefulness of theory, Toulmin claims that the process of developing theories requires abstraction, and he posits that theories argue away from real life and deny direct application to specific situations. Likewise, Fish argues that it is not theory that perpetuates change but action. Toulmin writes that despite the apparent attempt "not to

build new, more comprehensive systems of theory with universal and timeless relevance," we need "to limit the scope of even the best-framed theories" (qtd. in Olson "Literary" 305).

Yet proponents of theory still see a need to found practice on theory. Scholars such as Lee Odell and Peter Elbow bring this argument to composition studies and—in contrast to Fish, Toulmin, and others who argue against theory—have attempted to identify ways in which theory is useful knowledge and can influence practice. Elbow, C. H. Knoblauch, Lil Brannon, and others who see value in theory posit that taking a "theoretical stance" in determining practice benefits the execution of practice. Knoblauch and Brannon claim that a pedagogy's underlying philosophy (or the theory on which it is based) is extremely important in developing that pedagogy.

This debate has a direct impact on those of us in rhetoric and composition since our task as teachers and scholars seems to be twofold: to participate in a practice, our pedagogy; and to produce theory that explains the nature, function, and operation of written discourse. In other words, on a daily basis we are forced to participate in this argument, or at least to acknowledge how this debate affects the profession. There is a great need to examine the ways in which compositionists bridge the gaps between current composition theories and classroom practices because current composition theories are generated from a variety of ideological and epistemological backgrounds. Many competing theories have evolved along with discussions about how to use theory in developing successful composition pedagogies, and with this relatively new questioning of the role of theory and the importance of theoretical knowledge in mind, we need to examine the ways in which contemporary composition theory informs pedagogy: In what ways has theory been imported into the composition classroom? How has it succeeded or failed? *Should* theory inform pedagogy? Can it?

Four principal concerns must be considered in answering these questions: the ways in which current pedagogical scholarship incorporates or discredits current theory, the ways in which current theory accounts for—or doesn't account for—pedagogical needs, the ways in which the profession perceives the interaction between theory and pedagogy, and new ways in which compositionists can better use the tensions and balances between theory and practice to create pedagogies that will benefit students. I have quoted Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in my epigraph as not being "interested in choosing between balance and tensions"; nor am I. I do not want to relieve the tensions created by a debate over the privileging of practice or theory,

nor do I want to find balances in this debate, since these tensions and balances perpetuate continuing discussion and thought in the field. Instead, I want to try to better understand the ways in which tensions and balances between theory and practice are most beneficial. Patricia Bizzell argues that, while theory helps inform pedagogy, pedagogy must be indigenous—a recognition that both theory and practice are important in rhetoric and composition. It is this sort of *connection* I wish to explore.

## WHAT IS THEORY?

For centuries, scholars have searched for ways to explain how aspects of both the physical and metaphysical worlds work. The search for universal explanations, or “truths,” about how the world generally operates derives from a tradition of empiricism and inductive reasoning. In order to explain how things work, scholars have traditionally observed phenomena and translated these observations into universal explanations. In other words, there has been an attempt to explain how a category of things operates by observing a representative number of those things and then drawing conclusions about how all such things must necessarily operate. Such generalizable explanations depend on experience, observation, speculation, and analysis. Essentially, this activity of attempting to describe how certain phenomena work *in general* and therefore to predict how they will work in the future is what has become known as theorizing or theory building.

Etymologically, *theory* is derived from the Latin *theoria* and the Greek *theros*, both of which refer to the “spectator,” which is closely related to “speculation” and to “speculum.” *Theory* is also derived from or related to *theasthai*, “to observe or view,” and *theōrein*, “to consider.” The word itself suggests an empirical grounding: that a theory is derived from direct observation. Thus, someone who theorizes is a kind of “spectator,” closely “observing” some reality and “mirroring” (as a speculum, or mirror, does) the observed phenomenon in precise descriptions of its nature. The theorist then “considers” or “speculates” on the nature of the phenomenon in order to arrive at generalizable statements, or universal truths, about how all members of the class to which the observed phenomenon belongs work. By reasoning that there are general characteristics and an identifiable true nature of like things, theory presupposes that the conclusions based on empirical observation and speculation must hold true in all

cases of that phenomenon. For example, Aristotle, who is often credited as being the first botanist, observed various plants, noted their characteristics, compared and contrasted them with other plants, and arrived at general conclusions as to which plants belong to which families, what conditions certain plants need in order to thrive, when certain plants would blossom, and so on. Or, as one of the great early theorists of poetics, Aristotle observed the drama of his time, noted characteristics of successful and less successful drama, speculated about what made good drama work (as in his discussion of *catharsis*), and thus derived his theory of poetics. In short, theory is the inference of how all like things operate based on repeated instances of observation, speculation about those observations, and the construction of accurate explanations of what the phenomenon in question is and how it works.

Theory is often contrasted with law, as in “a law of physics.” Occasionally, but very rarely, what begins as a theory reaches the status of law—that which has been verified beyond any doubt. It is this high degree of certainty that characterizes a law. So, for example, given the law of gravity, we can be reasonably certain that an apple rolling off the edge of a table will always plummet to the ground below and will do so at a rate of velocity relative to its weight and mass. In a certain sense, theories strive to be but can never quite attain the status of law. Whether explicitly or not, the act of theorizing is an attempt to move toward the certainty of a law, constantly refining and adjusting a theory’s “truth value” in an attempt to approach ever greater degrees of certainty in its explanation of phenomena. While a law is often a tacit goal of theory, theory, for the most part, cannot reach that level of confirmation since most theories cannot (with the possible exception of some aspects of physical reality) be tested to the extent of absolute verification. Of course, postmodern theory has put into question even the once sacrosanct absolute reliability of laws. For instance, a law of physics stipulates that water always boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit; however, the boiling point of water is also dependent upon other variables, such as altitude. Context must always be considered. So even physical laws may not always operate with the kind of absolute certainty once thought.

Although theorizing is an attempt to arrive at accurate explanations of some phenomenon, theories are not necessarily rigid, didactic, or even stable. In fact, most often theory is organic, receptive to new observations, additional facts, further speculation. Theory accounts for experience and allows new experience to alter or con-

tribute to the evolution of that theory. Theory provides a framework within which one can operate, ask questions, even alter or refine principles of that theory based on new experience, new observation. That is, theory does not allow itself to stagnate; it pushes and pulls its way to understanding how a set of phenomena, a field, a body of knowledge, operates. Because of their evolutionary quality, theories are not usually seen in terms of *true* or *false*; rather, new theories are seen as more adequate or more useful explanations of phenomena for which past theories could not account. Theory leaves room for revision; universal explanations can be rethought. Thus, the real value of theory has been its evolutionary, generative power, its ability to adapt and change over time in the light of further speculation. And, of course, theorizing can be at times a subversive or revolutionary force, overturning previous assumptions or theories.

Ever since the ancient Greeks, theory has been considered a superior form of knowledge to that deriving from local practice. *Theoria* and *praxis* have most frequently been placed in binary opposition, with *theoria* serving as the privileged term, despite various attempts to argue that the two are always in some dialectical (not hierarchical) relationship. That is, despite the fact that Aristotle and other thinkers since have occasionally acknowledged that theory and practice can and should inform one another, the actual intellectual politics has been such that theoretical knowledge has always been privileged. Because theory is perceived to have explanatory power well beyond any local or particular instance or situation, it has been deemed more generally useful than knowledge deriving solely from local practice. This assumption can be seen most concretely in the academy's privileging of scholarship or research over teaching. Thus, we find in the academy in general and composition in particular that theory is pitted against practice, as though one could exist in some pure form without the other. Despite arguments to the contrary, however, even if we wanted to, we cannot force theory and practice into binary opposition: this is theory; this is practice. The two are so bound up, intertwined, enmeshed in one another—to the point of actually depending on the other, or of even becoming the same thing—that we cannot actually discern between the two at points.

Practice cannot be separated from theory. And yet we can talk about theory for theory's sake but not practice for practice's sake. Why? Because practice cannot exist without theory. Practice (particularly classroom practice) evolves from some theory, whether consciously or tacitly. Even the most inexperienced teachers who may be completely unaware of the origins of their practice use a pedagogy that was

founded in some theory. For instance, many beginning teachers come to a classroom and operate based on a model that they enjoyed as a student or that was professed to them by a more experienced practitioner. This practice still originates in some theoretical standpoint. Practice is not produced through some form of immaculate conception; it is derived, in one fashion or another, from theoretical roots. And while beginners or “amateurs” may operate tacitly from some theoretical perspective, most “professionals” operate consciously from some theory; they recognize that some theory contains the basic assumptions under which they have chosen to operate.

Despite the debates over whether theoretical or practical knowledge is more useful and over whether the two can even really be separated, what *is* generally agreed is that theory has the potential to usefully inform pedagogy. Theory allows itself to influence, to inform how practice operates; it encourages general, universal explanations for how phenomena occur in the classroom, but it does not necessarily answer specific, local problems. Arguing about *the* precise role of theory in composition has become an important and at times polarizing debate. Before addressing this debate, however, it is necessary to explore how various postmodern theorists have problematized the very nature of theory and even questioned whether in fact theory *qua* theory exists.

## BIG TS AND LITTLE TS

Since theorizing has been a major part of traditional knowledge-making processes, critiquing how we use and produce theory has become prominent in intellectual discourse. In the traditional view of theory that I have described, all theory attempts to provide explanations that are always true everywhere; that is, theory aspires to the condition of law. This tradition might recognize that there are areas in which the theory-governed behavior might be variable, or less lawlike. Also, this tradition might recognize that rhetoric enters while theories are being developed, tested, and spread, but that kind of theory-talk ceases once the theory becomes established, becomes lawlike.

A Cliff’s Notes version of Western intellectual history might say that modernism takes this traditional view of theory to an extreme by attempting to bring everything under the rule of science. Scientific theory becomes paradigmatic theory in modernism, and scientific theory claims to subsume (or claims soon to subsume) everything

humans can experience or know. This overly-summarized version might then go on to say that postmodernism calls these claims of scientific theory into question. Postmodernism attacks the traditional view of theory at the root by denying that human rationality can operate in a pure form, but in the traditional view, human rationality must so operate in order to generate theory. Rather, postmodernism claims that human thinking is always influenced by personal, social, and historical circumstances. Thus, there can be no "rationality" of the kind on which the tradition—and modernism a fortiori—based its claims to scientific hegemony.

One of the core arguments made against theory comes from the postmodern position that contends that a move toward generalizable, universal systems of explanation is an Enlightenment rationality maneuver; it is an attempt to erect a foundation of truth through rational processes. Generalized theory establishes a type of grand narrative that cannot really exist; it is only an illusion, and this is why we have many exceptions to various theories. Scholars like Rorty, Fish, and Toulmin attack theory, the real essence of what theory is supposed to do. This argument revolves around, as Toulmin and Rorty suggest, distinguishing between *theory* with a small *t* and *Theory* with a big *T*. They argue that *Theory*—universal, generalizable, grand explanations—cannot reliably answer local problems even while the activity of theoretical speculation itself may be useful, though in a limited way.

The postmodern critique of theory argues that it has no place in postmodern discourse. Or as Toulmin puts it, "There is probably no legitimate role for theory with a big *T*; we should be prepared to kiss rationalism goodbye and walk off in the opposite direction with joy in our hearts" (306). Unfortunately, given the way this debate is presented, this position (as held by Rorty, Toulmin, and Fish, in particular) frequently appears to posit the activity of theorizing (as opposed to theory building) as misguided. This is not what these scholars actually mean, though they are often interpreted as arguing so.

It is clear that the postmodern critique of theory stems from the idea that the foundational project from the Aristotelians on, particularly that of Enlightenment rationality, has been an attempt to establish kinds of "almost-law" explanations for phenomena, natural or metaphysical. According to the anti-theory position, this tendency to look for grandiose explanations is misguided for multiple reasons. This camp argues that it is impossible to devise a satisfying, generalizable universal answer that actually explains all facets of a phenomenon because particulars will always dictate. In other words,

theory building, according to the postmodern critique, is simply another aspect of essentializing, of trying to grab hold of the essences of things, of trying to find stable truths, of trying to offer universal solutions. Scholars who adopt this line of thinking argue against the prototypical Enlightenment move: that once one has theorized about a lamp, for instance, one can derive explanations about how all lamps operate. This argument makes sense in the postmodern critique in that it perceives theorizing as necessarily another way of creating a type of grand narrative. In a postmodern world, we recognize that the urge to fashion totalizing narratives is misguided. But it ought to be said that these thinkers do not argue that the whole activity of theorizing—that is, engaging in some sort of hermeneutic speculation—is meaningless. If this were their position, their arguments would be hypocritical, since they too are engaged in theorizing even while they denounce theory building.

While the postmodern critique of theory is certainly correct in its criticism of the attempt to create master narratives through theory, Fish, Toulmin, and others perhaps dismiss theory too readily as having *no* impact on practice. Earlier, I mentioned Bizzell's argument that theory does inform classroom practice while classroom practice must also be indigenous. It is this connection between *Theory* and *theory* that is most beneficial in considering the role of theory in composition studies or in intellectual endeavors generally. Theory, and theoretical speculation, must be pursued more thoroughly in order to find connections between *Theory* and *theory*. The search for ways in which theoretical speculation informs local practice must be pursued from both theoretical and practical angles in order for such pursuits to be beneficial.

## ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM AND THEORY FEAR

Anti-theoretical stances deriving not from the postmodern critique but from a conservative perspective often assume that in order for theory to be of use it must lead to relevant practice; theory for theory's sake, according to the anti-theory position, is useless. Though perhaps misguided, this complaint is at least understandable, but what is equally bound up in the anti-theory position, though not as immediately obvious, is a fear of the ways in which contemporary theory sees the world. I am speaking particu-



larly of theories that have been labeled by Fish and others as “anti-foundational.” This term refers to current theory that, as Ruth E. Ray puts it,

denies the existence of universal truths, claiming that all inquiry, all findings, all “truths” are inseparable from the historical, political, and cultural contingencies that produce them. In short, all knowledge is “socially constructed,” and the inquiring self is always “situated” within a belief system, whether one realizes it or not. (11–12)

Or as James C. Raymond sees it:

What is most frightening [about theory] is its antifoundationalism. No one can alleviate that fright in those who feel it; relativism, antifoundationalism, postmodernism—all facets of the same phenomenon—do, in fact, threaten assumptions many people think they need to make sense of their lives. (91)

In other words, anti-foundationalist theories reject absolute standards by which truth can be found, since, as Patricia Bizzell puts it, “the individual mind can never transcend personal emotions, social circumstances, and historical conditions” (*Academic* 204). The notion of an ungrounded truth that anti-foundationalism suggests is a difficult idea for many to accept, particularly for those who want to ground theory in accountable, recognizable, stable practices. Because anti-foundationalism seems to cast theoretical and intellectual pursuits into a chaotic relativism in which nothing can be specified with certainty, many on the anti-theory side of the debate stand against theoretical advancement of this sort in fear of what these theories suggest about both the world and how we teach. “There is, on the one hand,” Raymond tells us, “a denial of theory or a profound anxiety that it will result in a bottomless relativism, a chasm yawning into nihilism and despair” (87). Because anti-foundationalist theory shakes the very ground of the Western tradition and thereby seems, at least at first, counterintuitive, it should be no surprise that it frightens people; we have all invested much in the myths of “progress” and truth building, and now they are slipping away. It becomes easier to argue that such theoretical lines do not serve any positive goal and are, in fact, counterproductive to established ways of thinking than it is to engage these theories in more productive ways.

Ultimately, as I have suggested, this conversation revolves around knowledge making: How does theory inform practice? Does it? Should it? Is practical knowledge or theoretical knowledge privileged? All of these are issues that are of great concern to compositionists. While some compositionists operate from within the field to voice their concerns about theoretical pursuit, the theory debate has not been limited to composition or even to the academy. In fact, this debate has become a crucial issue to the academy as a whole, both in terms of how the academy engages knowledge making—what is useful knowledge?—and in terms of how the outside world perceives the academy.

## ANTI-THEORY FROM WITHOUT

The issue of theory/anti-theory is one of epistemology, meaning making—a matter as important to the rest of the academy as to our small field. The theory/anti-theory debates have been voiced in numerous contexts through various media. We read or hear of other departments, entire universities, and even individuals and groups outside of the academy damning academics for ignoring what appear to be obvious practical problems in the classroom—for example, why our students are not as literate as they should be—and for pursuing theoretical enterprises that do not help solve “real” issues of education.

The problem of how the intellectual world is perceived has been noted by many, particularly by those who locate themselves in the anti-theory camp. Maxine Hairston writes, “I’m also very concerned about the image of the profession I think the magazine [*College English*] would convey to the public if they read it (thank goodness they don’t!); that of low-risk Marxists who write very badly, and are politically naive, and seem more concerned about converting their students from capitalism than in helping them to enjoy writing and reading” (“Comment” 696). Hairston, though incorrect in her assessment of theory production, as I will discuss in a moment, has reason to be concerned. On any given day, in just about any mass media forum, one can find sentiments of anti-intellectualism and condemnations that academics are not doing their jobs—educating students—but are wasting time and taxpayers’ money studying useless topics for no apparent reason. Take for instance Bill Watterson’s “Calvin and Hobbes” comic strip from February 11, 1993. In this strip, Calvin (a hyperactive five-year-old with the vocabulary of an intellectual) comments (in three frames), “I used to hate writing assignments, but now I enjoy them. I realized

that the purpose of writing is to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity. With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog! Want to see my book report?" Hobbes (the real brains of the duo) reads Calvin's paper title, which sounds curiously evocative of any number of papers presented at the MLA convention: "The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in *Dick and Jane*: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes." Calvin smugly adds, "Academia, here I come." The sentiment is obvious. What makes this particular display of anti-intellectualism interesting is that readers who are familiar with Watterson's daily strip recognize that he is keenly aware of current trends in the academy; he makes reference to feminism, postmodernism, and various other contemporary academic movements. This particular strip, while targeting academic writing, conveys a general feeling from outside of the academy that academics are hiding behind an "intimidating and impenetrable fog" of jargon used to "inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity." This sentiment is not limited to the funny pages, but it is particularly telling that the subject has found its way there.

Many spokespersons of the conservative right also have taken opportunities to create an anti-intellectual spirit through mass media. MLA bashing, as you well know, has almost become an annual sport. Columnist George Will, for instance, is particularly aggressive toward English departments and their engagements in theoretical pursuits. In one column he writes, "It might seem odd, even quixotic, that today's tenured radicals have congregated in literature [English] departments, where the practical consequences of theory are obscure. Obscure, but not negligible" ("Literary" 72). More recently, Will specifically targets writing programs as particularly negligent and the place where "The smugly self-absorbed professoriate that perpetrates all this academic malpractice is often tenured and always comfortable" ("Trendy"). Like most critics outside the academy, Will sees theory as needing to lead to practical, accountable application.

One can easily find similar attacks in various media and conversations just about every day. For instance, on a recent fishing trip, I spoke with a retired Air Force officer about the decline in fish on the beaches near Cape Canaveral. We had both heard of the large amounts of sand that had been dumped there to curtail beach erosion, and we were both aware of the damage this dumping had caused on the grassy bottom just off the beach. The officer assessed blame for the disaster this way: "The problem is that a bunch of college boys sat around theorizing about how to solve one problem

without thinking about other problems. They needed to get out here and see what was going on. Seems that's what's been wrong with colleges these days—too much theorizing, not enough seeing how things really work." Even during this brief vacation from academic journals and conferences, I had found my way back into the crux of the theory/anti-theory debate. It is precisely from this misunderstanding of theoretical pursuit that the anti-theoretical stance grows. Those who find no use for "off-the-wall" theories argue that unless theory directly influences the ways in which our students learn, unless it leads to practice, it is merely a "far-out" way for scholars to waste time and money while leading relaxed lives in which the day's tedium seems to consist of pondering universal silliness.

## ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND THE BATTLE WITHIN

This attack on the "activity of theorizing," arguing that theorizing is an activity people engage in as a kind of clouded state of thinking that is not in touch with reality, has also found its way into rhetoric and composition. Generalizations, this argument suggests, are too close to abstractions. Because this debate is perpetuated by the sentiment that intellectual theoretical pursuit promotes unclear, abstract, useless theory, the anti-theoretical stance in this debate becomes one of anti-intellectualism. This anti-intellectual position grows from the misunderstanding of theorizing as an activity, and it stands against the jargon, careerism, and clouded thinking that this position believes theorizing promotes. As Raymond puts it, "What's most disagreeable about theory is its jargon" (91).

I do not want to give a genealogy of how theory as a mode of inquiry or a knowledge-making tool has progressed in composition; this has been done often enough (see Ray or North, for example). I am more concerned with articulating how theory is viewed both within and outside of composition. Not only has theory taken on a significant role in composition, but also it has come to fore in larger debates over the role of the university in society as growing disdain for theory is becoming a crucial component in the creeping anti-intellectualism that now surrounds discussions of the academy. Within composition, the question of which sorts of knowledge to privilege over others has become a conversation that is central to the development of the field's identity as well as to that of the academy as a whole. In

his 1991 plenary address to the Research Network of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Gary A. Olson stressed to the community of compositionists the dangerous level to which this debate has evolved:

More than any debate over which modes of scholarly inquiry are most valuable, or which journals privilege which mode, the theory/anti-theory split emerging in the field threatens to polarize us in unproductive ways—in ways that serve to silence debate and to narrow our conception of the discipline of rhetoric and composition. (“Role” 4)

Normally, I would disagree with Olson’s concern over this debate; after all, such discussions over other modes of scholarly inquiry have propelled us into our current, shifting identities. In other words, such conversations generally have been a productive method by which we have shaped our evolving discipline. However, unlike previous debates this particular conversation has turned ugly and, thus, counterproductive.

Recently, our journals, monographs, books, conferences, and other scholarly forums have seen an explosive increase in the amount and quality of theoretical scholarship. At the same time, there has been a tremendous retaliation against this theoretical outburst—not only from within the field but also from many outside rhetoric and composition and even from some outside of the academy.

Within the field, this debate was most visibly manifested in a series of letters printed in the Comment and Response section of *College English*. Led by Hairston, past chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, several scholars voiced, in what were ultimately to become known as composition’s “theory wars,” a dissatisfaction with the theoretical road down which the field had been traveling. Hairston writes:

I find the magazine [*College English*] dominated by name-dropping, unreadable, fashionably radical articles that I feel have little to do with the concerns of most college English teachers. . . . And do you think many readers of CE have the interest or patience to wade through such stuff? I don’t. (695)

She continues:

I hate to see the journal attempt to elevate its standing in English departments by publishing articles that are as opaque

and dull as anything in *PMLA* or *Critical Inquiry*. . . . I can't help but believe that most of us want clear, thoughtful articles on reading and writing theory and on teaching, not articles that are larded with the fashionable names and terms but which, in my opinion, seek more to serve the ambitions of the authors than the needs of the readers. (695–96)

Hairston is not alone in her concern. There are many examples from the Comment and Response section, but the following statement from Mary Margaret Sullivan is representative:

I agree with Maxine Hairston regarding the content and style of articles that appear in *College English*. . . . My students need to know how to read and write, to think clearly and communicate effectively so they can become productive members of society, which are the basic needs of all of our students. (477)

Steve Kogan also agrees with Hairston and writes that the kinds of theoretical scholarship being discussed are “nothing but the voices of vested academic interests and a kind of political-professional careerism” displaying “almost perverse pleasure” that avoids confronting “the problems of the classroom, or rather, an engagement that is so theoretical (or seemingly theoretical) as to bury reality in clouds of words” (474). Jean Shepard offers a particularly telling comment:

I know about the text, the signifier, and the role of the reader; I've learned about Derrida and Fish, but I really don't know why. The sun is shining today for the first time in about a week. The breeze is moving loose branches on the trees outside my window; and I can't see why anyone cares about all of this terminology. Do the people who write these articles even have windows? (934)

Finally, Janet Hiller and Barbara Osburg bluntly assert that “no useful connection exists between composition theory . . . and the needs and practices of classroom teachers” (820).

Clearly, the sentiment seen in these and other of the Comment and Response letters, as well as in other forums, displays the anti-theory position: one that sees theorizing as an act designed to shut people out of a discourse, to promote careerism, and to engage in

(perhaps, intentionally) clouded thinking. Of course, these and the other anti-theory positions that began to emanate from within the field have not gone unanswered. John Trimbur finds in Hairston's argument a recognition of why the field has taken this turn, and though he does not explicitly defend or privilege theory, he does recognize a key issue in why this debate has evolved as it has:

It all depends on what you're interested in and how you align yourself in the current debates and projects within composition studies. . . . The fact of the matter—and what I think is really annoying Maxine—is that the intellectual context of composition studies has changed over the past five or ten years as teachers, theorists, researchers, and program administrators have found useful some of the ideas and insight contained in contemporary critical theory, whether feminist, poststructuralist, neopragmatist, or neomarxist. . . . The “mainstream” Maxine refers to isn't quite there anymore, at least not in the sense it was in the mid seventies. . . . Some teachers, and I would include myself, do indeed want to do more than help students “enjoy writing and reading.” I see writing and reading as powerful tools for students to gain greater control over their lives and to add their voices to the ongoing debate about our communal purposes. (699–700)

Here Trimbur identifies a crucial issue: the changing mainstream. In order for rhetoric and composition (or any field, for that matter) to evolve, debates concerning useful knowledge must proliferate. As I mentioned earlier, writing teachers are necessarily positioned in this debate: we must participate in our practice, and in one way or another, whether directly or not, we must engage theory. As Trimbur puts it, “It all depends on what you're interested in and how you align yourself in the current debates . . . and projects within compositional studies” (699–700). The inherent problem, though, is consensus. In order for this debate, unlike many others, to be productive, we must not reach consensus. This debate must not be resolved and necessarily must lead to further debate. This is where Olson's fear comes to the fore. The “theory war” letters are only a skirmish compared to what has become a decidedly anti-intellectual attack on theoretical pursuits from within and without the academy.

Obviously, for our concerns, the theory debate must have proponents on both (all?) sides in order to perpetuate dialogue. Some of the anti-theory stances posed in this dialogue come from established,

recognized, and respected scholars who engage the debate and are eager to dismiss theory for the wrong reasons: careerism, clouded thinking, jargon, lack of connection to practice. I do not necessarily mean to imply that all of these positions are presented as “attacks” directly associated with the “debate”; instead, many scholars dismiss theory in fear of how it changes our view of composition. What is most counterproductive is that it is specifically this fear of the changing mainstream that causes many scholars to see the theory camp as dangerous and to participate in a lynch-mob anti-intellectualism. I’ll draw on a slightly unusual source for my example: a book review essay.

In his review of Lester Faigley’s award-winning *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, David Bleich takes a decidedly anti-theoretical stance in his condemnation of Faigley’s text. Bleich, voicing his concerns that Faigley’s theorizing neglects practical application and ignores important classroom-related issues, pans the book as an unnecessary theoretical exercise. He writes:

For me, however, this book is frustrating because it does not relate the conjunction of writing and postmodernism to the urgent needs of today’s academy. While the book may be well enjoyed by those who have no problem with the jargon of today’s literary theory, it was hard for me to detect in it concern with the issues of collectivity now affecting schools and classrooms across the country, or enough sympathy for the new populations of students that are about to become minorities in school and society. (291)

Bleich continues, “I think that if concern for practical collective issues doesn’t appear in a serious treatise such as this, then something is wrong with academic ways” (291). Here Bleich vocalizes an overriding concern of the anti-theory position: that theory is being produced that does not directly relate to practice. Because composition is seen by many as a solely service-oriented field, some scholars argue that theoretical inquiry must move toward practice in order to be of any use. In other words, much of the debate in composition concerning theory stems from the belief that all theory necessarily must somehow be tied directly to a practice in order to be useful. But scholarly endeavors pursued solely as theoretical inquiry are as necessary in continuing knowledge-making processes as theories that lead to practical application; that is, theory for theory’s sake is or



can be valuable. Within the field of composition, there are issues concerning written discourse or classical rhetoric, say, that have absolutely nothing to do with pedagogy. Yet such studies can provide valuable insights into the operations of written discourse or the relevance of classical rhetoric to contemporary concerns. If we define the field as solely service oriented, then, certainly, all theory in order to be useful must lead to helpful classroom practice. Rhetoric and composition, however, entails more than this limited definition. We, as scholars, are obligated to consider other aspects of written language if we are to move toward a fuller comprehension of composition and of written discourse in general. Making pedagogy a necessary end of theory places unneeded constraints or limitations on composition scholarship.

When Bleich attacks Faigley's theoretical pursuits, asserting that Faigley's work is "narrow, devoted mostly to theory, and not too much to the moments of human action and development," he speaks from the position that theory only has value when it exists as a means of deriving practical application (295). Bleich also contends, "It is clear that we teachers cannot wait for the revolution to teach us how to teach our students. So Faigley's solution of more theorizing, while plausible, is simply wrongheaded" (295). This critique illustrates a central assumption of the anti-theory position: that theory must inform praxis. This argument, coming from various sources in addition to Bleich, suggests that we curb intellectual theoretical pursuit that exists for reasons other than pedagogical development. But such sentiments do not go unchecked by other members of the composition community, though much of the anti-theoretical discourse that works its way into our conversations is blindly accepted. Bleich's attack comes in the form of a book review—a medium that generally serves as a terminal point in conversation in that it typically does not allow response or dialogue. However, the journal in which the review appears, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, claims as part of its policy to "promote a forum for scholars interested in all issues of 'theory'" (Olson, *On v*), and thus offered Raul Sanchez the opportunity to respond to Bleich's negative review.

In "David Bleich and the Politics of Anti-Intellectualism: A Response," Sanchez claims that Bleich's faulting of Faigley for excessive theorizing and lack of attention to practical issues fails to acknowledge the important role that theory plays in the continued development of composition. Sanchez writes, "This disdain for the theoretical and the political in composition, when mistaken for serious intellectual activity (as it was in Texas), drains our field of the

insights it has accumulated over the last decade or so, insights that have made our discipline one of the most exciting and useful in the university" (579). Sanchez takes Bleich to task for what he sees as an oversimplification of the theory/anti-theory debate and a poorly thought out alliance with a hardline practice stance:

Bleich seeks simple solutions to complex problems, problems that do not lend themselves, if we mean to confront them honestly, to the kind of theory/practice distinction upon which he bases his critique. He believes that all this postmodern theory, with its fancy words and playful attitude, keeps us from discussing the "real" issues at hand. His frustration at Faigley's call for more theorizing is based on the assumption that theorizing itself is not a useful activity because we have enough of it already, as if we had topped off all the theory reservoirs as specified in our intellectual owner's manual. (580)

Sanchez continues:

Theory and practice, if they are to inform each other meaningfully, must operate in a constant state of mutually transformative flux, and this is not the same as paralysis or aporia. Books like *Fragments of Rationality* help us begin to envision a future wherein such a relationship is possible. Reviews like Bleich's remind us of mistakes we have made in the past. (581)

Sanchez points to what he sees as the dangers Bleich and, by implication, others pose to rhetoric and composition's development. Arguments such as Bleich's are prolific in our conversations, and attacks like this do not benefit the field in ways that legitimate discussions about the theory/practice or theory/anti-theory debate should. By taking the position that perceives theory as a vehicle for careerism, misuse of jargon, and misdirection of theoretical pursuit, Bleich, and others who argue similarly, force the debate about the role of theory to pursue a line of argument that must defend against these attacks. Conversation proliferates that essentially operates at a playground level: "Theory is bad." "Is not." "Is too."

Bleich's and other anti-intellectual, anti-theory proponents' positions against theoretical pursuit are born from a misunderstanding of the use of theory and how the activity of theorizing operates. If, as

Bleich suggests, continued theorizing is “wrongheaded,” then composition scholarship will stagnate, and composition as a field will be defined within the narrow confines of a service orientation. Bleich and others call for theory to directly influence their “real” classroom issues, but by dismissing theory—essentially calling for theory’s stagnation—they opt for a static view of practice as well. If we are to cease our engagement with theory and its transformative nature, even the kinds of practical advancements the anti-theory/pro-practice camp calls for cannot be achieved.

Part of the anti-intellectual attack on theory derives from the sentiment that the discourse theorists use is seemingly out of touch with the discourse of “normal people.” Bleich, for instance, comments that Faigley’s book “may be well enjoyed by those who have no problem with the jargon of today’s literary theory” (291). Certainly, this argument is correct in that people who participate in certain kinds of theorizing tend to have their own vocabulary, but is this necessarily a valid criticism? Jargon is the specialized vocabulary of a field, and the reason discourses take on a specialized vocabulary is so participants may communicate efficiently. If members of a discourse community know what is meant by a specific word, there is no need to define the concept each time it is discussed. Take the word *prewriting*, for example. Like other jargon, it carries with it a disciplinary understanding; there is no need to unravel all of the baggage associated with what *prewriting* entails when it is used within the discourse of composition. Jargon, in this sense, is beneficial, in that it allows compositionists to engage in conversations about the invention process efficiently. Granted, somebody who does not operate within the discourse, other than that he or she may intuit what the word means, may be mystified by its use, but the function of such language is not to appeal to the understanding of laypersons; it is to further discussions among members of a specific community.

Part of the problem that those who argue against theoretical language have with the activity of theorizing is that it seems gratuitously incomprehensible. Certainly, we can concede that certain theorists *might* be gratuitously incomprehensible, but it is not true that the entire notion of jargon, of specialized discourse, is designed to exclude people from a discourse. Jargon is a means by which discourse operates more efficiently, and that is what many who take this anti-theory position fail to comprehend. When outsiders encounter theoretical discourse, they often do not understand the jargon—“big words” such as *postmodern*, *antifoundational*, *poststructural*, *feminist*, and so on—and they become confused and frustrated, as Bleich does. Of course,

this is a negative characteristic of jargon if a discourse is intended for a lay audience, but it is not a negative property if a discourse is directed at participants in that discourse. For example, the word *difference* is a word that resonates with multiple layers of meaning in postmodern discourse, and people who engage in postmodern discourse understand that it has many different tiers: gender difference, otherness, ethnic difference, systems of domination, and all the other connotations the word carries. Imagine what one would have to do if he or she were using that word and had to define its use in conversation. The amount of time and the number of sentences needed for such explanations would make the discourse unwieldy and inefficient. The argument against disciplinary language is ill conceived.

Theoretical language is frequently seen as a method that scholars use to make scholars appear more intelligent or to promote their personal careers—the careerism about which Hairston and others complain. No doubt there are people operating in any field who do this, and careerism exists in theory work. There is careerism everywhere—in the academy and without. However, it is unfair to allege that because a scholar works in theory that that scholar is necessarily a careerist. It is a non sequitur to argue that because one engages in theory and uses theoretical language that one does so solely to get ahead in the world, and that is not the purpose of specialized vocabulary in theoretical discourses. Of course, these allegations make sense to a certain degree: perhaps, there are theorists whose scholarship we have to work at in order to comprehend; we may have to wonder, “Could this have been presented more clearly?” Yet, the move to dismiss theory on these grounds is not well founded; it is a dismissal based on misunderstanding. Thankfully, the study of the theory/practice interaction is being pursued in more formal, disciplinary, and responsible ways than some of my previous examples might suggest, as is the study of the resistance to theory.

## THEORY, KNOWLEDGE MAKING, AND COMPOSITION

Though he doesn't pit practice against theory, Stephen M. North's taxonomy of participants in the field suggests varying contributions to the development of knowledge making in composition. This is central to the field's development: we need multiple modes of inquiry, multiple types of knowledge. Current thinking