

## Translating (Within) the Spaces Between Rhetoric and Composition

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In the initial responses that examined rhetoric/composition encounters, I read expressions of melancholy mixed with anxiety about "belonging." Do rhetoric and composition belong to each other, do they belong to the academy, and does each (together and apart) belong to an epistemic tradition? "To belong to" alludes to territories and borders, memberships and exclusions, and the means by which belonging is determined. As bonds of affiliation evolve (and evaporate), differends can occur. To secure admission into intellectual culture, scholars in rhetoric/composition have had to respond to the German model of doctoral education (noted by Peter Vandenberg) that has influenced academic study in the United States by establishing the terms of belonging in the form of having something to give, something that resembles a body of knowledge that can be disseminated relatively intact over time. Both rhetoric and composition are at odds with this framework, an alienation that has announced itself historically, after rhetoric, and then composition, were pushed to the margins of English studies because their field of inquiry did not provide what the modern university came to value: empirically demonstrable truth claims, either scientific or aesthetic. [1] Living with the legacy of having been shoved from center to margin has compelled scholars in rhetoric and composition to wrestle with the question of how, and indeed, whether to shove back. Do scholars want to work to restore the centrality of the discipline? Does undertaking that work require us to verify allegiances to an epistemic model that configures knowledge in terms of production and distribution?

To prove that rhetoric, at least, can claim membership as a legitimate academic discipline, scholars have summoned "the tradition," which typically means the classical tradition, or the art of discovering the available means of persuasion in a given case. As Christine Farris (referencing Susan Miller) points out, the work completed in the name of this tradition takes on overtones of a "rescue" that may be imagined in a number of ways: Composition's rescue of the tradition itself, which fell into decline once literature became the focus of study within English departments; the rescue of composition by rhetoric, which provided a "disciplinary pedigree" and a methodology to replace current traditional practices; or even, the rescue of students from merely acquiescing to the social order by instructing them in how to think critically and participate in public life.

But as *Enculturation* respondents point out, the work accomplished on behalf of this rescue may say less about what constitutes the discipline of either rhetoric or composition, and more about how scholars in the field, as a marginal group, have learned to identify with the terms established by the dominant culture. Attaching composition instruction to a classical rhetorical tradition appears to give composition as well as rhetoric

discernible content, if not an identifiable epistemology. But questions have been raised about the legitimacy of this endeavor. The disciplinary apparatus that makes knowledge production and disciplinary identity seem possible is itself a rhetorical construction that serves "the order of things" (as Vandenberg, and earlier Foucault, put it), in part by referencing strategies that have become accepted as natural parts of a field of inquiry. Those strategies have included the deployment of the dualistic logic that identifies knowledge claims by simultaneously designating what they exclude, lending support to the idea that there are distinct centers/margins, insiders/outside, those who know/those who don't.

Farris points out that the binary logic that establishes disciplinary identity is the same logic that instigated the "prejudice against composition" by designating writers as either authoritative or "unentitled". Further, given that rhetoric does not prioritize the type of factual discourse associated with the research institution, and is interested instead in strategically choosing from a variety of discourses made available in culture, its study can be characterized as interdisciplinary. A similar point is made by Cynthia Haynes's tribute to "the slash," which positions the space between rhetoric and composition as a barrier to the logic of either/or, and in so doing clears an arena in which to reconsider the benefits of the reclamation project itself. The consequences of the modernist penchant to create hierarchies via categories might tempt us to reject the urge to posit a history and a disciplinary identity.

But if rhetoric/composition programs do not aim to produce knowledge, how might the work be described instead? Naming an alternative reenacts exactly the same problem of establishing rhetorical exclusions. I would like to suggest that the rhetoric/composition encounter act as a testimonial to the work of translation, work that is ongoing and itself not fully translatable. Admittedly, this revised framework will not satisfy those who savor definitions. But given that the work of translation, its methods, its overarching goals, its acquiescence/consent to the norms and conventions already established by dominant discursive practices, is paradigmatic of misunderstandings and power struggles, what we know about it can never be complete. The term "translation," like the term "rhetoric," speaks of a specific activity and a general domain that is ever-present in all communicative acts. It can be described as both the object of study for scholars in rhetoric and composition (as noted by a helpful anonymous reviewer of this essay), and that which causes controversy over whether to establish recognizable criteria to determine how the work of translation ought to proceed. Theorists interested in critiquing the academy's objectification of knowledge will have to ask themselves if they can be satisfied with sustaining self-reflexive analyses of interpretive practices that, for example, challenge and rewrite modernist narratives and their rhetorical constructions of identity/difference oppositions. Can we find legitimacy in critiquing the disciplinary values embedded within institutional norms, in devising alternative practices, without offering a full account of how or why?

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar has argued that the attempt to identify a

proper subject for rhetoric constitutes a "flight" from rhetoric's "mereness," from its status as enabler, or place-holder for acts of persuasion that take place no matter what rhetoric is called.

"Academically, rhetoric . . . lies embedded in the cultural practices of the time. It is always already there as a supplement. . . . Extract it from that to which it is a supplement or from that within which it is embedded and it evaporates" (201). Joseph Kelleher makes a related point when he describes rhetoric as a "two-handed technology" and "an ambivalent mediator" that "binds and ruptures" the speaker's connection to norms that govern expectations of speech acts within a social milieu. On the one hand, rhetoric examines how to use language to achieve desired practical and political effects; as an epistemic tradition, rhetoric references the practical advice that has been collected over time to inform speakers and writers about methods of persuasion. But it simultaneously disrupts the satisfaction such knowledge can bring because it is also a method for metacritically analyzing, for example, how that practical advice will be implicated in "power plays" and "ideological sleights of hand" (77-78) that engender competition over rights and privileges of which speech produces knowledge that is worth having. Rhetoric also names endeavors to analyze how the subject is trained to adopt socially constructed discursive practices that come to be regarded as inevitable, producing not objectified knowledge but perhaps a willingness to disrupt the seeming natural desire for organizing narratives, the climax of final meanings, the pleasure of the habitual and routine. The endeavor to critique the conditions that make truth claims possible is simultaneously read as an indictment of modernist narratives that have constructed academic knowledge as a commodity that can be accumulated, replaced, managed, and recuperated within systems of exchange.[2]

The doubled construction of rhetoric as enabler and destabilizer poses a threat to the demand for disciplinarity favored in the academy, leaving scholars in rhetoric/composition with the question of how to address a rhetorical ambivalence that, on the one hand, gathers speech acts into discursive networks that allow for communication (and perhaps understanding) and on the other hand, frustrates an ability to reproduce these strategies as if they are inherently legitimate. In response to this question, the phenomenon of the parergon is central. As *Enculturation* editors [Lisa L. Coleman](#) and [Lorien Goodman](#) explain, Kant invoked the word in an attempt to distinguish a proper field of study from that which frames it, "something that enhances or sets off the central subject (the ergon) without detracting from it." Derrida's deconstruction of this attempt underscores the difficulty of determining which terms lie inside or outside of the frame to constitute the proper subject. This difficulty is pertinent to what those inhabiting the space "between" have to say about the rights of their "property." There is a robust unpredictability in rhetoric's ambivalence about whether to highlight content, a given set of strategies to effect persuasion, or the contexts that make such strategies intelligible. This unpredictability is exactly what contributes to a sense of rhetoric's "mereness" because the shifting attention to content/context is also what effectively devastates any attempt to fully systematize and encompass all of the elements at work in a scene of

communication/persuasion. (Another freighted slash.) But thank goodness for this devastation because it is exactly the ability to disrupt the rule of the rhetorical tradition *by* rhetoric-as-analytic that allows for revision, seeing anew, and recognizing the beauty and effectiveness of modes of speech previously overlooked, silenced, or disregarded.[3]

If rhetoric is enigmatic, then so is composition's invocation of it, and the frame that gets invoked to read these enigmatic qualities will determine how they will be regarded, what expectations they will raise, and what programmatic policies will be put in place to meet those expectations. For the composition instructor, the question becomes whether and how to negotiate the unwieldy slash that divides regulatory management (composition) from language's inconstancy (rhetoric). Even if composition instructors take Farris's advice and devise classes that examine how "everything is rhetoric," they nonetheless must evaluate how well students make that case in their writing. The cultural-rhetorics rubric (which I find compelling) does not necessarily resolve the familiar ethical quandaries: Whose disenfranchised speech is to be brought into what community and what form should it take? Should practitioners and theorists of composition harbor the expectation (or hope) that students will internalize a desire to speak and write in ways that affirm a "shared" sense of communication? Does the instructor who doesn't encourage linguistic conformity put her students at a disadvantage in a corporate world that reads homogeneity in speech as a form of membership?

A similar question of ethics arises for the composition administrator who is called upon to explain the logic and purpose of the writing program. When composition scholars seek to bind administrators and colleagues to a conviction about the necessity and value of scholarship about writing pedagogy, its usefulness, its contribution towards learning, the ways that the discipline of composition adheres to an intellectual tradition, they are constructing composition as being more than a locus for the practice of "mere rhetoric" by offering substantive explanations that will be recognizable to those empowered to reward merit. If, in honoring the enigmas of composition and rhetoric, we refuse this strategy, we encounter a differend in the attempt to articulate what we do instead. A differend is "a state or a feeling" that "arises when '[o]ne cannot find the words' to express that state" (Lyotard 13: qtd. in Coleman and Goodman), and, I would add, when the dominant terminology is inadequate to the situation that requires translation. Melancholic frustration might name one response because this disjuncture raises the difficult question of who is obligated to do what to enable understanding. What do we have to know about the work of practitioners in disciplines outside of rhetoric/composition to let them know about what happens within "the slash"? Can we expect others to reciprocate and genuinely attempt to understand what we do? How else might we respond to perceptions of the "mereness" of our field that continue to read "mereness" in pejorative terms?[4]

When I went to graduate school in the 1990s, I expected a revolution involving a shift in the demand that those in subordinate positions speak in terms recognizable to the dominant group. This kind of work can pose

difficult questions about whether familiar terminology can adequately name and explain the social and political dimensions of pedagogies that are informed by institutional mandates even as they seek reform. Such work may not lead to the production of the type of argument that academics are expected to value. My hope was that academics would experiment with form, both in writing and in dialogues.[5] Everyone I knew was reading Lyotard and Kenneth Burke (and even the classical tradition), and many were galvanized by feminist applications of such theories to the study of both rhetoric and composition. It seemed that the years ahead would bring opportunities to engage in the difficult yet enthralling labor of putting theory into practice, while wrestling with the question of whether theory can/should inform what happens in the classroom. At the very least, I expected more discussion among colleagues in literature as well as rhetoric/composition about the paradoxes that inhere in the need to establish and promulgate disciplinary identity to garner recognition in the academy, knowing that doing so reduces what gets said about the complexity of the work accomplished in the field.[6] And I hoped that scholars in the humanities would actively engage in, for example, the kind of rhetorical listening brilliantly described by Krista Ratcliffe in an article of the same name,[7] and that doing so would be a cause for joy and celebration as we worked locally to revise the rules, be more inclusive, and revel in the unruly possibilities of acting with and against the discursive constraints that regulate communication and make it possible.

What I did not expect: All of the quantifying. The demand for visual evidence of "good teaching"—the upbeat evaluations, the scrupulous syllabi, the explanatory teaching philosophies, the proof of doing something "new" (like web design or service learning). Of course, each of these practices can be a wonderful resource. But I wonder if the push to document good teaching began to curry favor because scholars in the humanities (including rhetoric and composition) grew tired of trying to make sense of that which eludes the easy translation (like describing what one hopes to do in the classroom). It is physically and mentally draining to engage in active listening. And it is even worse to be perpetually misunderstood.

Within the rhetoric/composition encounter, I see: amazing, generative, inventive explorations that rethink how to be in the classroom and how to narrate those experiences, tempered by a desire for recognition in the academy that can lead to practices that place too much emphasis on proving rhetoric/composition's worthiness by showing how its study delivers discernible "results." [8] My continued hope/desire is that the ambiguous collective "we" I've been invoking here will recover our energy and endeavor to situate what we do in terms that speak to how alienating and fulfilling the work of translation can be. Devising the parameters of the problems of translation is itself an exercise in translation, situated in the shifting domain of rhetoric. So many questions get raised, such as how "the problem" should be rhetorically configured, whether its configuration will affect speakers in the same ways, whether the work of translation demands that private interpretive acts be translated into public, socially sanctioned discursive codes. The drive to fully name

and definitively know what constitutes translation (or rhetoric or composing a text for a required course) precludes the possibility of reformulating conceptions of what else might be involved in each of these acts; it precludes our abilities to acknowledge doubt and ambiguity in our encounters with language. Rather than characterize our engagements with languages as a means of conveying information we already possess, we might shift the framework to consider how we cannot know in advance what anyone else will experience and then express in a given dialogue. We can, nonetheless, continue to explore how the categories that precede us have shaped our experiences as academics and how we talk about those experiences to each other and to students. And we can continue to try to develop rhetorical frameworks that allow for the not-yet articulated, the not-yet imagined.

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## Notes

1. For elaborations on this history, see Thomas P. Miller; Sharon Crowley; James A. Berlin. ([Back](#))
2. See Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* for a fuller examination of connections between the modern university and consumerist ideologies. ([Back](#))
3. In *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African-American Women*, Jacqueline Jones Royster undertakes the work of recovering rhetorical strategies used by African-American women in the nineteenth century and effectively challenges historians to reconceive the canon of nineteenth-century rhetoric. By examining how African American women succeeded in gaining public voices, Royster's work demonstrates how speakers can simultaneously challenge and work with inherited discursive traditions. ([Back](#))
4. And if I might bear witness to the fact that this perception is alive and well, at least at regional state schools: At one school where I taught, the dynamic, expanding composition, rhetoric, and professional writing program was accused of stealing "the soul" of the department by turning attention away from the study of literature. This statement was made at a public meeting, where the speaker expected that he would be understood. Such a statement expresses both a legitimate concern about the English department's relationship to corporate culture and an illegitimate projection of that concern onto a developing Ph.D. program in professional writing. Literature faculty constructed literary scholarship as untainted by corporate concerns, undertaken to "ennoble" students by teaching them to appreciate great works of literature. They simultaneously constructed the composition/rhetoric program, and its affiliation with professional writing, as solely utilitarian in scope and aim. This dusty and ill-informed perception of composition/rhetoric was so entrenched, dialogue between those affiliated with composition/rhetoric, on the one hand, and literature, on the other, was very difficult. I have since left that school but am told that divisions remain. ([Back](#))

5. Of course there has been such experimentation, as Victor Vitanza's *Enculturation* response demonstrates. I am not sure, however, that those who do not have the same institutional authority could launch such experiments with the expectation that colleagues would pay attention. ([Back](#))

6. As any WPA knows, even the question of what counts as work involves issues of translation that can be problematic in departments that prioritize publishing over teaching and administrative duties. On this point see Tom Fox; Evan Watkins; Richard E. Miller. ([Back](#))

7. Ratcliff writes, "I want to suggest that rhetorical listening may be imagined, generally, as a trope for interpretive invention, one on an equal footing with the tropes of reading and writing and speaking. Although rhetorical listening may be employed to hear discursive intersections of any cultural categories . . . and any cultural positions, . . . my particular interest lies in how it may help us to hear the discursive intersection of gender and race/ethnicity (including whiteness) so as to help us to facilitate cross-cultural dialogues about any topic" (196). Perhaps the success composition/rhetoric programs have had in garnering recognition as a discipline within the context of university culture has precluded an ability to fully explore how to enact this type of theory. To listen is to be placed in a potentially vulnerable position, and to not necessarily claim expertise, exactly the subject position that scholars in composition/rhetoric have taken pains to shed. ([Back](#))

8. This is a word that Lyotard uses when describing how knowledge, in the postindustrial age, takes the form of an informational commodity that can be circulated as a kind of capital and then recuperated into deceptively coherent patterns of thought. See *The Differend* and *The Postmodern Condition*. ([Back](#))

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### **Citation Format:**

Wiederhold, Eve. "Translating (Within) the Spaces Between Rhetoric and Composition." *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004): [http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5\\_2/wiederhold.html](http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_2/wiederhold.html)

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