Introduction: The Distant and Thin of Disciplinarity

> An inventive culture requires the broadest possible criteria for what is relevant. (Ulmer, 1994, p. 6)

At its heart, this is a book about research methodologies: Its central arguments, premises, and motivations adapt, extend, and apply two recently named methodologies, *distant reading*, introduced in 2000 by Franco Moretti, a scholar of literary history and the evolution of literary forms, and *thin description*, theorized by literary scholar Heather Love and set in sharp relief against anthropologist Clifford Geertz's well-known and widely adopted approach to ethnography, *thick description*. Weaving together these two methodological orientations—the distant and the thin—I argue for their convergence as suited to theoretically underpinning a suite of methods used to visualize patterns indicative of the ongoing growth and maturation of an academic discipline: rhetoric and composition/writing studies.[1] Distant and thin treatments foster primary, if tentative and provisional, insights into what I refer to as a *network sense*—incomplete but nevertheless vital glimpses of an interconnected disciplinary domain focused on relationships that define and cohere widespread scholarly activity. When inquiring into disciplinary emergence and maturation, network sense names a facility for recognizing and tracing relationships, for engaging in focused reading and exploratory reading, and for noticing connections among programs and people, publications and conferences, activities and their material castings, difficult questions and myriad stakeholders. When this pursuit of network sense is fortuitous, disciplinary patterns—the field *itself*—become ever more evident to those who identify their work with it, to newcomers, such a graduate students, and to diverse stakeholders, including higher education policy makers. Accepting the invitation to read this work is accepting an invitation to consider the epistemological value of *network sense*. By way of description and example, the book demonstrates ways that a distant–thin methodology renders dynamic disciplinary patterns obvious. I en-

1 Throughout the book, I refer to the field as "rhetoric and composition/writing studies" because, although it presents somewhat inelegantly at times, it matches with the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) designation 23.13, as established by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). This phrasing also underscores ongoing developments in the field with regard to a richer disciplinary history associated with "rhetoric and composition" and a contemporary relabeling that has taken hold unevenly under the designation "writing studies." To ease the inelegance, the phrase is often abbreviated here as RCWS.

courage you to imagine even more expansive applications of these approaches to under-examined areas of rhetoric and composition/writing studies (RCWS) as well as to other, yet-emerging disciplinary domains.

The questions motivating this research stem from an inventive exigency, a purpose that must be understood as epistemologically generative for how it participates in the project of making disciplinarity knowable, but knowable such that it is future-oriented, participatory, and heuristic. Rather than pursuing the production of fixed, static representations, this project promotes distant reading and thin description and celebrates them for their dynamic, generative qualities—adaptiveness, flexibility, open-endedness—and for their suitedness to making visual models that support efforts to continuously shape the field. These methods do not anchor one-time answers to the wicked problems they help us disentangle. Rather, they underscore interests in invention and provocation; the models and the data sets they build upon are living and responsive, updated as new information is added. These methodologies are highly suggestive and probabilistic. I think of them as a companion of *heuretics*, in the way Gregory Ulmer (1994) used the term to commingle aesthetic and critical qualities of inquiry—open to the eureka! moments in research. Much like heuretics, distant reading and thin description complement and, to varying degrees, even replace rational logics with networks of association that afford inquiry and discovery for newcomers and seasoned scholars alike. These inventive dimensions are among the strongest aspects of the argument advanced here. I implicitly promote these methodologies because of their potential to create an expansive range of possibilities in each encounter with an abstract visual model: new forms of knowledge, new insights, new questions. The visual models are not proofs, finally, but provocations; not closures, but openings; not conclusions or satisfying reductions, but *clearings* for rethinking disciplinary formations—they stand as invitations to invention, to wonder, as catalysts for what Ulmer described as "theoretical curiosity" (p. xii).

So that you have a vivid though admittedly cursory illustration of the network sense that coalesces between distant reading and thin description, consider the tag cloud of this project presented in Figure 1. Leaving aside for now some of the subtler distinctions addressed in Chapter Three's elaboration of semantic networks, the tag cloud simply presents a cluster of key words and phrases that appear most frequently in a selected text or set of texts. A tag cloud resembles the list of indexical keywords commonly assigned to an article by an editor, but it is different because of its condensed visual presentation. Tag clouds also have much in common with article abstracts, which likewise function as an abridgment of the content of the article. Tag clouds reduce and simplify a corpus (whether a single text or batch of texts), rearranging the syntactic elements (sentences and paragraphs) and, in turn, presenting words

and phrases as units of data that occur repeatedly in the text itself. The word frequency cloud, or keyword confluence, is not the only variety of tag cloud, of course, but is one fairly common and pervasive use. Tag clouds, as I will demonstrate much more thoroughly in Chapter Three, constitute one variety of distant reading, one variety of thin description, and, as such, they prompt an acutely language-based instance of network sense—one impression of disciplinarity as constituted by a discoverable and traceable semantic network. These methods—and the tag cloud created with them in mind—create a *temporary clearing*, holding the text at bay so that we might see it instead as a semantic network with concentrations of terms coalescing throughout it.

Figure 1. A tag cloud of this book. Tag clouds commonly present weighted lists of terms occurring in a text, offering them as a gestalt model and alternative abstract.

Still other commonplace varieties of distant reading and thin description, like abstracts, further exemplify the methodological basis for this work. For example, consider the ways an ordinary movie trailer offers a succinct account of the full-length feature film. The trailer is a concentrated version constructed to suggest just enough of the film itself to compel prospective viewers to take in a full viewing. Movie trailers function, in one sense, as abridgments, not unlike article abstracts. Article abstracts tend to be summary-like. They reduce and simplify the full-length article, offering a version adequate for providing just enough sense of what the article holds so that we can make a semi-informed leap. Movie trailers tend to rely on explicitly promotional en-

ticements more so than do scholarly article abstracts, but they function similarly: By deliberately reducing something complex (i.e., the movie, the article) into something simpler (i.e., the trailer, the abstract), they provide thinned out, yet adequate, insight to decide how to proceed or whether to proceed at all. The point here is that we can identify a number of everyday examples where distant reading and thin description already do their thin–distant work in the world: from tables of contents, indexes, and the notes on a book jacket to product packaging and nutritional labels or from weather maps and forecasts to scatterplots of economic data.

The purpose of this book is to articulate a set of methods appropriate to investigating aspects of the disciplinary maturation of RCWS from the mid-1980s to the mid-2010s. While in part I will be drawing on the methodological precedents for distant reading initiated in Moretti's scholarship and thin description sketched in Love's work, I seek here both to enrich the methodology and to suggest its adequacy for revisiting some of the ways in which the discipline of RCWS has been depicted in the scholarship of the field. As the discipline grows increasingly complex and ever more acutely specialized, we share a need for operations that will assist us (all of us, but particularly newcomers) in apprehending some of the prevailing patterns that have characterized the field up to the present moment. This relates to one of the project's key concerns: When scholarship and conversations are piling up *en masse*, how does one grasp the insurmountable complexity sufficient to participate in disciplinary conversations? There are any number of plausible responses to this question, the most commonplace of which involves vague truisms about diligent attentiveness and hard work. No one would argue that being an active, engaged reader by conventional methods is anything short of requisite to a life as a rigorous scholar. But such a time-honored adage as "read everything" or "read steadily" (i.e., all day, every day) does little to acknowledge the unbridled accumulation of disciplinary materials—the too-muchness of entering conversations that started many decades (even centuries) ago and that, therefore, demand back-reading while also tuning in to current conversations and, ultimately, preparing to participate knowingly and responsibly in them. Underlying the hard-work approach so pervasive in the American academy are highly differentiated repertoires of tacit skills in reading and selecting what to read as well as determining the degree of investment with which to read it. Distant reading and thin description acknowledge that there are constantly new challenges involved in making sense of a vast store of materials—materials that are diverse, challenging, and continuously produced. Further, if successful, distant reading should allow us to bolster (and better understand) the skills necessary for keeping abreast of disciplinary currents, both in their antecedent and contemporary trajectories.

These methodologies will not ultimately eliminate the need to reconcile personal knowledge with the influx of scholarly disciplinary materials—a quandary I refer to as the *reading problem*, which is a matter I will address in Chapter One and return to in Chapter Six. Distant reading and thin description do, however, combine to provide a basis for enacting an expanded set of abstracting practices that culminate in scalable visual models, a suite of patterned images useful for stirring questions about disciplinary trends and relationships.[2] Specifically, this project is concerned with three types of visual models: word clouds, citation frequency graphs, and maps of scholarly activity. Each of these models is dealt with substantially in Chapters Three through Five. Without question, there are more visual models that might be of interest to those whose work with data constructs tangible iterations of the field, but these three models provide an initial selection and a right-sized sample. The data that grounds these visual models comes from numerous sources: from more than 500 articles published in *College Composition and Communication* between 1987 and 2013[3] and from survey data gathered by the Master's Degree Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists and a study of Canada–U.S. interdependencies. Data sources are always unavoidably limited, but these are sufficient to demonstrate some of the ways distant reading and thin description methodologies might be applied to well-known disciplinary data sets in the interest of pattern-finding and its epistemological corollary, network sense, a concept I delineate in Chapter Six. While this project, if successful, gives distant reading and thin description methodologies a concentrated push, the prosperity of these heuretical, experimental methods beyond this limited demonstration will continue to be settled in the future as we perpetually reconcile the field's maturation, its growing complexity, and its means of substantiation and sustainability.

Thin Descriptions of the Chapters

Chapter One, "Methods for Visualizing Disciplinary Patterns," establishes the contemporary exigence for the integrated methodology that defines network

2 "Patterned images" names a class of visual objects that allow us to reckon with trends in large collections of data and metadata. Patterned images are generated with the aid of computational processes. This phrase is an admittedly slight variation on "data visualization," and I use it primarily to emphasize the constructedness of the visual images, their rhetoricity, and the interests in pattern-seeking that motivate their development.

3 Bibliometric data informing Chapter Four was drawn from *CCC* articles between 1987 and 2011. Semantic data used as the basis of Chapter Three comes from a 25-year set of *CCC* articles published from 1989–2013. These slightly different timeframes are due to the sequence of the research as it developed and my preference for working within a 25-year timeframe in both cases.

sense. The chapter begins by locating 1987 as a moment of complexity when distinct shifts in publishing hinted at conditions of continuing growth that meant it would be increasingly difficult to keep up with the expanding arena of scholarly publication. Stephen North's (1987) well-known methodological portrait, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, surfaced as the first theoretical monograph in the field. Changes in the peer review process and citation format for *College Composition and Communication*, one of the field's prominent journals, also signal a shift in the late 1980's to disciplinary activity at a broader scale. Since 1987, scholars have continued to produce disciplinariographies, or accounts of the field, but such accounts have resorted in large measure to localized cases and, as such, have accorded with close and thick methodologies. In this chapter, I argue that important aspects of the field's formation are differently available when massive collections of disciplinary materials are subjected to distant reading and thin description.

Chapter Two, "Patterned Images of a Discipline: Database, Scale, Pattern," sketches three foundational concepts for network sense: database, scale, and pattern. Treating each concept in turn, I first revisit a tension between narrative and *database* that is well documented by Lev Manovich (2001) and N. Katherine Hayles (2007). I contend that, although they have been tremendously important, hyper-local, narrative-based accounts of disciplinary emergence operate more powerfully when paired with data-based accounts. In addition to composing narrative accounts, scholars must also begin to build and curate the field's databases more systematically (e.g., program profile data, directories of programs, journal indexes, etc.). Second, I examine the importance of *scale* as a quality, naming the possibility that aspects of disciplinary formation become evident at different orders of magnitude, from the nano to the macro. With this in mind, network sense is constituted by what I characterize as *planeury*, an aerial, altitude-minded alternative to Michel de Certeau's (1988) walking *flaneur*, who knows a city by foot. In the context of scale, planeury names a gliding, bird's-eye sensibility that seeks the right distance while attending to the ways perspective shifts across distances. Finally, Chapter Two discusses *pattern* as a visual-representational articulation with great promise for orienting newcomers and stakeholders to the field. Visualized patterns intervene into disciplinariography as an important epistemic technology whose thin, distant qualities provide handles on complex, distributed disciplinary activity. Understood in this way, pattern intervenes as rhetorically *descriptive*, in the Latourian sense of the word, which refers to prospective, future-oriented script-making (Johnson, 1988; Latour, 2007). In other words, semantic, bibliographic, and geolocative patterns surfaceable from materials and activities *describe* and in effect set up ways of knowing and participating in an emerging disciplinary future. Database, scale, and pattern coalesce as

three concepts vital for understanding the illustrations of network sense featured in the following three chapters.

Chapter Three. "Turn Spotting: The Discipline as a Confluence of Words," focuses on the relationship between the keywords that surface and circulate in scholarship and the notion of *turns*, or widespread attention events that indicate concentrated interest and curiosity (e.g., interpretive turn, new materialist turn, global turn). Methods for corroborating turns are only beginning to catch up with the frequency of turns being announced nowadays. I contend that turns ought to be evidence-based and that they manifest gradually, first as patterned phenomena discernible across scales. The chapter features a Google motion chart that displays a sample of 25 keywords across 25 years as they rise and fall in usage frequency within more than 400 articles published in *College Composition and Communication* since 1989. The installation, which amounts to an animated index, foregrounds an aspect of network sense located in a lexicon rendered from published scholarship. I extend this to considerations of the relationship among projects such as *Keywords in Writing Studies* (Heilker & Vandenberg, 2015), emerging studies of threshold concepts (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), and the vocabularies that substantiate them. As such, I not only claim in this chapter that so-called turns must be methodologized but also show how distant reading and thin description contribute distinctly to this undertaking. The chapter also explores the relationship between turns and threshold concepts, suggesting that attention to the evolving character of a disciplinary lexicon provides insight into the temporal nature of these discursive events.

Chapter Four, "Graphs: The Thin, Long Tail of *CCC* Citation Frequency," features a bibliometric report on more than 15,000 citations in *College Composition and Communication* over 25 years. Figures whose work was frequently cited (e.g., Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, and James Berlin) reflect influence, affinity, and concentrations of interest circulating in the journal, and yet tallying *only* the most frequently cited figures provides a small part of the picture. A thinner, more distant treatment of the same data set, such as the graphs themselves, which are presented as static images and as a dynamic sequence (i.e., animated GIF), indicates a declining citation density within the journal. Steadily over the 25-year sample, the most frequently cited figures have trended downward, while the single, unduplicated citations have grown. Reflecting on this phenomenon using a Poisson distribution (long tail) offers compelling evidence for disciplinary diffuseness that may be framed as promising or ominous and that returns us to the necessity of continuing to share concerns for the evolving definitional basis of disciplinarity (n.b., a version of this chapter was published in *College Composition and Communication*).

Chapter Five, "Emplaced Disciplinary Networks: Toward an Atlas of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies," considers the prospects of a geolocative disciplinary atlas, or collection of cartographic representations of disciplinary activity, by turning to three illustrative examples: 1) a map of the locations of doctoral, master's, and undergraduate majors consortia members, 2) a map of the hosting locations for three major conferences (Conference on College Composition and Communication, Rhetoric Society of America, and Computers & Writing), and 3) a map series modeling differently the emplaced, traversive career paths (i.e., institutional affiliations) for 55 Canadian scholars who responded to a 2014 survey inquiring about Canada–U.S. interdependencies in RCWS. The chapter contextualizes the exigencies that gave rise to each of these mapping projects and examines the specific data types (e.g., GeoJSON, geocoded Google Sheets), platforms (e.g., MapBox, Google Maps), and maintenance regimens involved in building and maintaining each of them. Recognizing the field as a North American phenomenon with trends toward internationalization hinges on an array of thin, distant, and scalable cartographic representations of disciplinary data concerned with the locations of programs and institutions, job openings, and career paths. But mapping disciplinary activity can also assist with regional coalition building, recruitment of graduate students, and strengthening local program culture by inviting as consultants and guest speakers colleagues of all ranks and specializations from nearby programs.

The book's concluding chapter, "Network Sense: Patterned Connections Across a Maturing Discipline," reiterates the rationale for visualizing disciplinary patterns, noting the timeliness of improving systematic data collection and representation both as a supplement to continuing discipliniographic efforts and as an intervention into the rising complexity of the field. In this chapter, I argue that the thin and distant methods introduced and enacted in the book facilitate *network sense*, which stands both as a loose structure of participation necessary for welcoming newcomers to the field and also as an aid to awareness that provides casual stakeholders with tools for understanding disciplinary activity in many of its divergent and distributed manifestations. In addition to reasserting the relationship between thin and distant methods and network sense, the chapter acknowledges the vital importance of methodological pluralism for understanding the rich array of activity associated with the discipline. In its concluding section, "Thickening Agents," the chapter sketches the stakeholders in the field who are well-served by network sense before finally calling attention to prospects for continuing studies of disciplinary patterns using distant and thin methods alongside close and thick methods.