Emerging Voices: The Geographies of History: Space, Time, and Composition

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“It is not that the interrelations between objects occur in space and time; it is these relationships themselves which create/define space and time.”

—Doreen Massey (“Politics” 263)

“In acknowledging areas of both light and shadow, we suggest that there is a clear and present need to pay more attention to the shadows and to how unnoticed dimensions of composition history might interact with officialized narratives to tell a reconfigured, more fully textured story than we now understand.”

—Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams (581)

This article is about the spaces of our disciplinary histories: spaces both real- and-imagined, the settings of our historical stories. It emanates from a fundamental premise: when we tell historical stories, we engage in spatiotemporal work, acting as the cartographers of disciplinary time. In this way it draws inspiration from Michel de Certeau, who, in his Practice of Everyday Life, reminds us that stories “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them” (115). Here, I want to draw attention to the interplay between space and time in these historical stories and how revisionist histories in composition—historical accounts that operate outside of what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams call our disciplinary “dominant field of vision” (565)—reflect a broader move toward rethinking the relationship between space and time within systems of meaning. To do so, I focus on how works of revisionist

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historiography discursively represent space: how space is invoked and how we might read the political implications of these invocations. Through these close readings and theoretical interventions, this article seeks to provide tools, derived from critical spatial theory, to assess the politics of the story-maps we construct when we write historical stories, when we produce “spatial trajectories” (de Certeau 115).

A consideration of the spatial is not, currently, an altogether uncommon thing, with space and spatial inquiry very much being on the agenda in fields across the social sciences and humanities (Massey, “Politics” 249). Across disciplines, this turn toward the spatial has been prompted by the recognition that space is not the static, absolute field imagined in Euclidean geometry, but rather what Henri Lefebvre calls a “social morphology,” an active producer and product of social relations (94; see also: Soja, Postmodern 81). Composition and rhetoric has been no exception in this broader spatial turn, with critics working to puncture notions of transparent disciplinary space and to draw attention to the specificity, politics, and dynamic nature of the spaces in which we work. This line of thinking has largely been concentrated in a strain of scholarship dedicated to what Scot Barnett and others call critical spatial theory, an umbrella term that includes postmodern spatial theory, cultural and human geography, critical cartography, and critical geography. Writing studies has, perhaps, a particular affinity for appeals to the spatial in that, as Nedra Reynolds notes, “writing itself is spatial, or we cannot very well conceive of writing in ways other than spatial” (“Composition’s” 229). With this in mind, writing scholars have been interested in how the practice and product of writing, the ways we discuss writing, and the spaces in which writing and research occur contribute to the social production of space. 1

Yet while scholars in composition and rhetoric have drawn from critical spatial theory, their work has been largely misunderstood as distinct from—and indeed, seen as an alternative to—historical work in the field. This either/or relationship between spatial and historical thinking is evident in the dearth of work that explicitly brings them together but is perhaps most clear in Sidney Dobrin’s contribution to composition’s spatial turn. In “The Occupation of Composition,” Dobrin writes, “Much more so than its embrace of the spatial, composition has entrenched itself in concepts of the temporal. Composition (as a field) is obsessed with its own history, with its own identity, and how that identity is manifest historically” (28). 2 This division between historical and spatial thinking reflects a longstanding tension between the traditional aims of history and geography: “Scholars in the two disciplines are fond of saying that history is the study of when, geography the study of where” (Knowles 3). While Dobrin is certainly correct that composition spends a great deal of time historicizing itself—a tendency perhaps understandable given our oftentimes precarious role in the university hierarchy (Miller)—in setting up a fixed binary between historical and spatial scholarship, his diagnosis implies a possible suspension of historical or spatial forces while the other is pursued. This possibility for suspension is predicated, I argue,
on a clear binary between time and space, between temporal and spatial thinking.

In this article, I argue that revisionist historiography in composition and rhetoric challenges this either/or understanding of spatial and historical work by producing historical scholarship sensitive to the spatial politics of a given site. By attending to the politics of particular spaces, revisionist historians produce what Paul Carter calls “spatial history,” or historical inquiry that “recognizes that our life as it discloses itself spatially is dynamic, material but invisible” (xxi). Yet while I see revisionist work representing an important spatiotemporal turn in historical analysis, one with myriad consequences for the future of historical research in our field, it has largely done this implicitly. In the absence of a direct recognition of the spatial nature of revisionism, I argue that our field risks (re)producing the conditions for what Carter calls “imperial history,” or historical inquiry that divorces artifacts from their “unique spatial and temporal context[s]” (xvi). Here, to bring to the fore the spatial elements of our field’s turn toward revisionism, I construct a space-time lens through which we might begin to read and assess narratives of disciplinary originations. I argue that a spatial sensitivity derived from critical spatial theory will enable us, as readers and producers of revisionist histories, to better account for and recognize the spatial politics of specific sites of historical significance.

I make this argument in two ways. First, I look to revisionist histories in composition and rhetoric to reveal the ways in which the language of space is already being deployed in the service of representing an epistemological break from the knowledge production found in more macro approaches to historical inquiry. I argue that this proliferation in spatial language works rhetorically to represent a more dynamic and produced understanding of space, one that accounts for both the material and linguistic elements of spatial practices. In reading this spatial language against critical spatial theory, I work to offer readers and producers of these histories a lens to uncover the spatial politics implicit in revising and challenging grand narratives of disciplinary origination.

Yet there is more at play here than simply locating and reading spatial language in historical work and much more at play than simply injecting spatial language into history. By attending to the dynamic role that space plays in historical progression, the work of revisionist historians (re)presents a challenge to a fixed understanding of the relationship between time and space in research. That is to say that as we more reflexively em-place our histories and resist more totalizing narratives, we simultaneously resist the notion that our objects of inquiry are either historical or spatial. This distinction becomes much messier, overlapping. The second move of this article is to argue that the spatial language found in revisionist historiography indicates a collapse of a time or space approach in our research, and represents a movement toward what Doreen Massey (and others) has called “space-time,” a concept roughly akin to Mikhail Bakhtin’s more widely known “chronotope” (Dialogic; see also: Mutnick). Space-time is predicated on the idea that space and time, as ontological categories,
are never as separate as they are commonly understood, but rather always function in dialectical, and mutually constitutive, relation. As such, when we do research, “the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time” (Massey, “General Introduction” 2). Within this refigured ontological system, our disciplinary objects of inquiry shift from being either temporal or spatial to always already being temporal and spatial, suspended within a web of complex interrelations between spatial and historical forces. When we do history—and by do, I mean produce historical interpretations or respond to them through reading and analysis—we must be tuned in to the ways in which space and time rely on each other for the generation of meaning. Absent of this, we fall back into notions of space as a transparent and apolitical stage on which history unfolds. As a unified concept, space-time provides an explicit vocabulary for the rhetorical work being done, implicitly, in revisionist historiography: a hermeneutic through which to engage the political implications of spatial (dis)placement in historical stories. It alerts us to not only attend to the when or the where, but to the when and where, the ways in which time and space have interacted to construct our disciplinary identity.

I begin by looking to revisionist historiography in composition and rhetoric to highlight the spatial implications of some of its most pronounced shifts. By identifying the spatial language found in these accounts, I demonstrate how reading revisionist histories against critical spatial theory reveals in these texts a more dynamic and interactive notion of space. Next, I turn to feminist geography’s revisions of spatial theory, most specifically its critique of foundational geographic binaries. Looking to the work of Doreen Massey, I outline the ways in which space and time do not exist as separate categories, but rather as dimensions caught within an unceasing dialectic. Finally, I return to some foundational spatial language found in revisionist historiography and reread it against the lens that space-time provides. I conclude by pointing to the future implications of this theoretical realignment, especially in relation to the transdisciplinary field of the GeoHumanities. In all, this article seeks to answer a fundamental question: What would it mean to formulate a historiography for composition that brings an interrelation of space and time, of spatial and historical work, to the fore? This article expedites this foregrounding by highlighting the ways in which the divisions between time and space have already grown increasingly tenuous in our scholarship, and providing this interrelatedness a vocabulary—a space-time hermeneutic—to highlight and predict its theoretical and political implications.

**Space and the Reading of History**

Broadly conceived, revisionist historiography in rhetoric and composition has worked to reinterpret entrenched historical claims by revealing ideological, methodological, and theoretical biases, often, but not always, through the investigation of previously
un-or underexplored spaces. The term \textit{historiography} here denotes the exploration and evaluation of the practices of doing history, and within this turn, scholars have scrutinized our existing corpus of historical work while producing new scholarship more attuned to the politics of historical inquiry. Revisionist historiography has challenged a linear model of our field’s progression (beginning in prestige spaces) and has outlined the contributions of individuals and institutions too often placed on the periphery of historical inquiry. Within this move toward revisionism is the local histories movement, in which critics have eschewed the positionality of researchers constructing histories at the disciplinary level and have, instead, located their histories within single sites or programs to demonstrate the situated nature of all historical inquiry. Collectively, revisionist historians have not simply worked to \textit{add} new histories to our collective understanding of disciplinary origination—although they have certainly done that—but also to demonstrate how these so-called peripheral histories challenge some of our most fundamental understandings of our field’s identity, both historically and contemporarily. David Gold argues that due to this turn toward more local historical sites, as well as the foregrounding of ideological positioning in the process of historical inquiry, composition and rhetoric has experienced a “dramatic transformation” in the ways it conducts and assesses historical narratives (“Remapping” 16). The transformation has indeed been so dramatic that Chris Gallagher, in his response to Rebecca Brittenham’s call for more revisionist histories, argues that revisionist historical principles “have become so commonplace in our field that they have come to be taken for granted” (843).

Yet despite—and perhaps, because of—the increasingly commonplace nature of doing revisionist historiography, it will be useful here to identify some of its major principles in order to understand them in new ways. Gold, in his attempt to outline some of the challenges in the practice of producing revisionist histories, provides a useful overview of the three most pronounced shifts in our turn toward new methods and interpretations. First among these shifts, “scholars have complicated and challenged the conclusions drawn by more general earlier histories by considering alternative rhetorical traditions and sites of instruction and production” (“Remapping” 16). Moving away from the disciplinary grand-narrative approach of scholars such as James Berlin (\textit{Rhetorics; Rhetoric and Reality}), Sharon Crowley, Robert Connors, and Albert Kitzhaber—whose dissertation-turned-book \textit{Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850–1900} continues to have immense influence on our collective historical imagination—revisionist scholars have pursued objects of inquiry that complicate and challenge these overarching accounts of disciplinary genesis. As Gretchen Flesher Moon writes, local histories “challenge the dominant narrative of composition history, located in primarily elite research institutions, disrupting its apparent simplicity as the myth of origin and proposing alongside it a complicated and discontinuous array of alternative histories” (12). Second amongst the shifts, Gold writes, is that
“the field has begun to reassess its ideological inheritance from scholarly work of the 1980s and 1990s, becoming more reflective about its practice” (“Remapping” 16). This more critical approach to existing scholarship has revealed the illusions under which the more canonical histories have labored, including narrative construction that begins in prestige spaces (Harvard, Yale, Michigan, etc.). This shift involves a challenge to the tendency to locate historical artifacts in the archives of elite universities and use them to abstract discipline-wide historical narratives. Related to this, the third shift in our disciplinary turn toward revisionist historical practice has increased “attention to research methodologies, formerly a somewhat ad hoc affair” (“Remapping” 16). Historical research methods are no longer tacit practices, but rather debated and contested procedures discussed in several avenues of disciplinary dialogue.5 These three shifts lead Gold to conclude, “borrow[ing] a term from Cheryl Glenn, the field of rhetoric and composition historiography is undergoing a rapid remapping” (“Remapping” 16).

What each of these shifts has in common, and what I wish to draw attention to here, is an underlying attention to the active role that space plays in disciplinary history. By looking to alternative sites on which to build disciplinary histories, interpreting the places in which we do our historical work, and becoming more reflexive about our methodological decisions (including the theorization of archives themselves as sites for historical inquiry), scholars have begun to focus on, rather than abstract from, the specific spaces of historical inquiry. So while Berlin might seem to subordinate the spaces of his research to focus on the taxonomy of objective, subjective, and transactional rhetorics (Rhetoric and Reality), or Kitzhaber might appear to elide spatial specificity in order to emphasize the shift in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century from abstract, esoteric knowledge making to more utilitarian, practical concerns, a more revisionist reading of their work would demand greater attention to the significance of their spatiopolitical choices.

Yet while I see these revisionist historiographical shifts away from overarching histories resulting in an increased attention to historical spatiality, these conversations have occurred largely disconnected from critical spatial theory, reflecting the aforementioned tensions between historical and spatial thinking. Despite this distance, I want to argue here that both revisionist historiography and critical spatial analysis are predicated on the same active and produced notion of space. Lefebvre urges critical theorists to see space not existing as a singular, preexisting entity, but rather as inextricably intertwined with the social relations that surround and constitute it: “We have already been led to the conclusion that any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships—and this despite the fact that a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)” (83). Space, then, is always in motion, always affected by and affecting the social relations that constitute it. There is no space outside of the social, and “the social is inexorably also spatial”
Edward Soja highlights this constitutive interplay between social relations and space when he articulates a “socio-spatial dialectic,” or the notion that “social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent; that social relations of production are both space-forming and space contingent (or at lease insofar as we maintain, to begin with, a view of organized space as socially constructed)” (81). To analyze a space, then, is to analyze the social relations that mark it. By anchoring composition histories in specific spatial sites, revisionist historiographers have begun to demonstrate that social relations do not merely unfold in space, but rather interact with, and form, particular spatial spheres.

The movement toward recognizing the active role of space in historical progress has immense political consequences. Paul Carter, in his classic study *Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, distinguishes between “imperial history” and “spatial history.” For Carter, imperial history is the sort of inquiry that “reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone” (xvi). It is *imperial* in the sense that its “primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate.” It “shows a preference for fixed and detachable facts,” which “unlike the material uncertainties of lived time and space, are durable objects which can be treated as typical, as further evidence of a universal historical process” (xvi). Within the imperial-historical paradigm, lessons drawn from particular moments and places can be extracted and repurposed to suit structures of power. This is what Lefebvre refers to as the “illusion of transparency,” or the treatment “of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places” (28). Spatial specificity—the real politics of space—is effaced in order to enact hegemonic manipulation of events through terministic screens of commonsense, naturalness, and universality. Grand narratives of origination tend to elide spatial specificity in order to cohere a particular, and far-reaching, identity: institutional, national, disciplinary, etc.

By methodologically foregrounding specific physical sites—from universities to writing centers to archives—and using these spaces as not mere settings, but as historical objects of study themselves, I believe that revisionist historians have moved the field into the production of spatial histories. This movement, predicated on the more socially fluid understanding of space outlined here, works in direct tension with imperial history:

Such spatial history—history that discovers and explores the lacuna left by imperial history—begins and ends in language. It is this which makes it history rather than, say, geography. If it *does* imitate the world of the traveller it is in a different sense. For, like the traveller whose gaze is oriented and limited, it makes no claim to authoritative completeness. It is, must be, like a journey, exploratory. It suggests certain directions in historical texts, leaves others for others to explore . . . But like a journey it opens up the possibility of going back, of turning a private passage into a road, a road reaching more places than the first traveller imagined. (Carter xxiii, emphasis original)
Revisionist history in composition has done just this: it is has explored and foregrounded the specific spaces left out of disciplinary-forming, overarching historical narratives. Despite this, spatial analysis has not been made explicit in these texts but rather has existed as something of a subtext of the revisionist turn in historiography. Yet in leaving the spatial significance as an implicit element of the revisionist turn, we risk reproducing and slipping back into the language and practices of space-effacing imperial historiography. In lieu of this, we must identify spatial specificity—the recognition of the spatial work we do as historians—as a central paradigm shift at work in revisionism.

It is not, however, surprising that spatiality has remained a subplot in the revisionist moment in historiography, given the infamously difficult task of articulating a more dynamic role for space in a temporally dominated critical imagination (Soja 11). As Nedra Reynolds has argued, uncritical reliance on spatial terminology is often the result of the difficulty in articulating the role of space in our intellectual endeavors:

Because space is so abstract and intangible, language to describe it tends toward the metaphorical and the narratable. Space is usually described or represented by making comparisons with familiar objects or ideas—like an academic discipline being called a field (giving it boundaries of absolute space). (Geographies 13)

These “imagined geographies” hide material consequences from us, an understandable desire for obfuscation given the oftentimes cramped spaces, both real-and-imagined, of our discipline (Geographies 27). Reynolds argues that composition relies on foundational metaphors—namely, the frontier, community, city, and cyberspace—in order to formulate a coherent disciplinary identity in spite of the material spatial realities in which it finds itself: “Spatial metaphors have served to establish what composition should be or to lament what composition has become” (Geographies 27–28).

Like the texts that Reynolds reads, revisionist work in composition has too relied on a series of spatial terms in an attempt to articulate a desired spatial condition, one that distinguishes more localized accounts of disciplinary origination from their more totalizing, “imperial” predecessors. While this is a necessary preliminary step toward guiding the field to more spatially explicit historiography, we must continue to orient readers toward the significance of this emergent spatial language, particularly the relationship between the material and representational nature of spatial designations. Space always exists at the intersection between the real (material, concrete) and the imagined (discourse, mental renderings). The ways in which we write about space already intersect and interact with the physical spaces of our discipline. Reynolds argues that when we talk about space, we are actually talking about a complex of metaphor and materiality, a “swirl of spatialities” constituting real-and-imagined dimensions (Geographies 175). When we rework the historical landscape through
narrative, we project a desired disciplinary cartography while simultaneously either emphasizing or obscuring the material politics of spatial realities. As Carter notes, spatial history is wrapped up in this intersection between materiality and discourse, between language and historiography. He argues that the subject of spatial history “is not geographer’s space, although that comes into it. What is evoked here are the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence” (xxiii, emphasis added). Critical spatial theory offers us—as readers and producers of historical narratives—a more explicit vocabulary through which to make these “declarations” and intersections between language, materiality, and space more visible in our historical work. A few cases will make this clearer.

In “History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies,” Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams instruct us on how composition and rhetoric has constructed a historical narrative that grants primacy to dominant spaces, thus rendering the experiences of African Americans and others invisible. By predominantly looking to official narratives of origin and development, compositionists subscribe to a narrative in which “the viewpoints of African Americans are typically invisible, or misrepresented, or dealt with either prescriptively, referentially, or by other techniques that in effect circumscribe their participation and achievements” (579). That is to say, these official narratives result in some spaces, particularly those occupied by African Americans and other underrepresented groups, being “left” out of our disciplinary historical imagination. Space is invoked directly in the title of the essay, and allusions to spaces recur throughout the text. The authors recognize that while “narratives of composition have been successful in increasing our understanding of long-range views of the field,” these narratives have also “directed our analytical gaze selectively, casting, therefore, both light and shadow across the historical terrain” (581, emphasis added). The terrain here is both a real and an imagined spatial approximation. As Reynolds writes, “As they exist in our memories, in our daily lives, in our rooms or our imaginations, places and spaces are a swirling combination of metaphor and materiality” (Geographies 175). So, too, in our disciplinary histories. When we, as composition scholars, subscribe to a particular narrative, we construct an imagined terrain of the discipline, an interpretation of the discipline as a whole. Yet the terrain is real and material in the sense that official narratives select particular locations—often prestige institutional locations—in and on which to base our projected disciplinary identity. One way to correct this, according to Royster and Williams, is to develop “methodologies for seeing the gaps in our knowledge and for generating the research that can help us fill those gaps” (583). This requires historians to explore previously overlooked (real) spaces in order to modify the (imagined) geographies of our disciplinary imagination. It also requires us, as readers of historical texts, to attend to their spaces and political orientations.
David Gold, in *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in America, 1874-1947*, likewise shifts the historical lens from prestige spaces to spaces previously underexplored. Again, we need look no further than the title to encounter the first and dominant spatial designation in the text: margin. As a spatial term, margins carry with them certain political motivations and alliances. Like “left” in Royster and Williams’s work, margins are involved in a conflictual relationship with the center, an asymmetrical encounter between inside and out. Margins do rhetorical work in relation to a center constructed through disciplinary attention. Gold locates his historical inquiry in the material spaces that constitute what we might consider the margins of our historical imagination: Wiley College (a historically black college); Texas Woman’s University (a woman’s college); and East Texas Normal College (a normal school). By identifying these institutions as marginal, Gold outlines a center/periphery model on which composition has traditionally based its historical inquiry.

Gold’s inquiries into these three specific institutions seek to puncture the myth that innovation only occurs in so-called prestigious American institutions. Along with serving large groups of students from diverse backgrounds, the schools Gold outlines “belonged to a rich, alternative tradition of rhetorical education in America,” one that “did not simply adopt, respond to, or even transform pedagogies practiced elsewhere; they created their own” (*Rhetoric* x). Pushing this further, Gold contends that “[b]y looking to the margins of rhetorical history . . . we may find a new center” (xi). By locating pedagogical and theoretical innovation in spaces formerly understood as “marginal,” Gold seeks to remap our disciplinary terrain (imagined) to be more inclusive to formerly excluded sites and peoples (real). This remapping relies on a dynamic, political, and fluid spatial model.

And yet there is risk in remapping our historical terrain without careful attention to the ideological work at play in all spatial representation. As Reynolds writes, “Generally, as composition has encountered postmodernism, metaphors of inside and outside, margin and center, boundaries and zones have become increasingly familiar, appealing, even comfortable” (“Composition’s” 230). While Gold’s work of destabilizing the boundaries between what is inside and what is outside is necessary thinking for revisionism, critical spatial theory would have us imagine cartographies that resist these notions of inside/outside. Feminist geographers particularly have sought to imagine spaces of transcendent potential, ones that move beyond reifications of rigid and punishing binaries: male/female; inside/outside; here/there; space/place; time/space. Gillian Rose has termed this transcendental sort of spatial formation “paradoxical”: “This space is multi-dimensional, shifting and contingent. It is also paradoxical, by which I mean that spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map—center and margin, inside and out—are occupied simultaneously” (140). In drawing attention to the “shifting and contingent” nature of these spaces, Rose is able to disrupt the naturalization of marginal spatial positioning,
drawing attention to the political dynamics at work in such a model of distinction. As we seek to remap our discipline along new dividing lines, critical spatial theory instructs us to avoid inheriting the spatial designations of imperial iterations, and look for new and innovative ways to describe spatial realignment.

While Royster and Williams and Gold invoke spatial politics in a way that requires the close readings shown above, Kelly Ritter foregrounds the significance of spatial anchoring in her contribution to composition’s turn toward local historical analysis. In *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920–1960*, Ritter demonstrates that careful attention to the actual spaces in which we do our historical work can reveal oversights in the official narratives. Like Charles Paine in *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present*, Ritter does not seek out an alternative site for historical work, but rather challenges existing narratives of writing within the prestige spaces of Harvard and Yale. Yet while Paine finds the metaphor of the body, and particularly the immunization of the body, to be most salient, Ritter looks to spatiality to provide an apparatus for reexamination. Of the thinkers outlined here, Ritter is the most explicit in drawing attention to the spatial significance of revisionist historiography, no matter where it occurs. Ritter’s text challenges master narratives of basic writers and basic writing instruction at American universities, and thus challenges the way that our research—even that which anchors itself in elite institutions—can homogenize the complexity and diversity at work within these sites. Rather than a catchall term that describes a static population of underprepared students, Ritter implores us to recognize “that basic writing is exclusively an institutional construct, a locally specific course designation that stems from, develops from, and ends with the unique culture of each institution” (9, emphasis original). This is a remarkably important observation, as it not only rebukes top-down historical narratives by grounding them in local contexts—for Ritter, Harvard and Yale—but it also grounds historical concepts in local contexts as well.

More recent microhistorical work continues to invoke the language of space. In a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Emily Legg recovers the composition space of the Cherokee National Female Seminary in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Legg’s work is likewise spatial in both the material and imagined senses. Her text opens with her “driving down a rural, dusty road” in Oklahoma, the type of methodological materiality that often falls out of large-scale historical texts (67). Yet she recognizes that the spaces of composition’s imagination, (re)inforced by canonical histories of the field set in prestige locales, cast a particular shadow on the field, one that often does not align with the realities of composition practitioners: “The beginnings on which we settle create locations for our discipline’s histories, and these locations often are seen as the spaces of our pedagogical practices” (71). The real spaces of our research and teaching translate into the imagined spaces of our discipline.
Nedra Reynolds makes a similar claim in her reading of Harvard’s “Shaped by Writing” video, a video produced as the result of a longitudinal study of writing conducted at Harvard. Reynolds finds the placelessness of the study’s mission—to translate results to other institutions—to be in tension with the specific, material places of Cambridge: greenspaces, Charles River, spacious libraries, and so on. These places ground the Harvard study in a particular location, and in doing so, project an imagined spatiality of the college writing experience onto the entire field. Reynolds notes that in moments of such momentous spatial changes to the university, the Harvard video produces a reductive notion of sameness out of step with the diversity and challenges of the specific spaces of the field. Like large-scale histories that generalize prestige spaces, the video “assumes a placelessness to writing instruction, or the idea that teaching writing in colleges and universities is part of a universal effort with shared premises” (“Cultural” 254). Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clay-Lemon apply to graduate student education a similar critique of placelessness. Graduate school, as a scholarly endeavor, celebrates “the capacity to write one’s way into a ‘hyperreality,’ a conceptual or transcendent ‘where’ whose authority in some measure derives from the perception of being cut loose from place and time” (95). Legg’s work extends these contemporary critiques to demonstrate the importance of spatial acknowledgement—the “where” of our research practices—in historical inquiry.

The examples outlined here are in no way meant to be exhaustive. The language of space arises in almost every account of revisionist history I have read for this study. In her Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911, Jessica Enoch situates her study in the “nontraditional spaces outside the American university” (10) and “pedagogical locations” (11) that educators Lydia Maria Child, Zitkala-Ša, Jovita Idar, Marta Peña, and Leonor Villegas de Magnón occupied. In her local study of English 1-2 at Amherst College under the tutelage of Theodore Baird, Robin Varnum seeks to move composition historiography away from the tendency “to look at practice in the classroom, or at the materials and ideas presented there, without acknowledging the larger forces that created the classroom itself,” a shift that weds the production of classroom spatiality with broader social relations (Fencing 7). In invoking the language of dynamic space as essential to charting our historical trajectory—“We need to know where we have been in order to know who we are and where we are going” (33, emphasis added)—revisionist historians seem to have answered Lefebvre’s motivating question—“Was space therefore a divine attribute?” (1)—with a resounding “No!” We as readers are implored to consider space as an active product and producer of the social relations we examine and not as a “container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it” (Lefebvre 94). What I have done here is identify and unpack the language that reveals this more dynamic notion of space. I believe that by incorporating lessons drawn from critical
spatial theory, readers and producers of revisionist historiography can better account for the spatial implications of historical revisions, both in current and future historical work in composition. Yet I believe that there is more at stake in this turn toward the spatial in historical inquiry, something about the nature of space itself: specifically, the interdependence of space and time.

**Space-Time as Hermeneutic**

As we have seen, revisionist historians in composition have begun to shift our field toward a more spatialized historiography. I have argued that this turn is made richer and more politically significant when viewed through the lens and language of critical spatial theory.

Here I want to think through what this spatial turn in historiography means for our larger collective understanding of space and time, and for the future of historical inquiry in composition and rhetoric. I want to complicate the notion that the historians discussed here have simply injected spatiality into historical thinking. Instead, I argue that they have directed us toward thinking in terms of space-time: a collapse of the binary relationship between space and time in recognition of their constitutive interdependence. There is a range of theoretical approaches to staking out this position: sources ranging from Einstein’s work on the general theory of relativity to Bakhtin’s chronotope (Mutnick). I focus here on the feminist critique of foundational geographic binaries because it is explicitly rooted in real-and-imagined spaces, as opposed to the literary-generic significance of particular chronotopic formations. Drawing particularly from the work of Doreen Massey, I seek to formulate a new lens—a space-time hermeneutic—to (re)evaluate representations of space in composition historiography. This lens offers us new ways to read the theoretical and political significance of histories that orient readers toward spatial and temporal analysis, as well points us in new directions for research in composition.

To understand the political impetus for deconstructing the binaristic understanding of space and time (or spatial and historical scholarship), we must first understand the nature of the binary itself. As Massey notes, in critical theory space has historically been treated not as merely different, but rather hierarchically below time in terms of political significance. She recognizes that space is often treated as stasis, as devoid of any potential political action. Time is treated as motion, as active, as political ("Politics" 252, 256). Here she echoes Michel Foucault, who notes that space is often dismissed as “dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile,” while time is embraced as “richness, fecundity, life, dialectic” (70). Feminist geographers have taken this distinction as mimicking and enacting a gendered division along male/female lines, resulting in what Massey terms a “dichotomous dualism” (“Politics” 255). Like rigid gender binaries, a distinction between space and time is not one of
mere difference, but rather a form of asymmetrical critical categorization in order to reinforce particular structures of power: “It is neither a simple statement of difference (A, B, . . . ) nor a dualism constructed through an analysis of the interrelations between the objects defined (capital: labor). It is a dichotomy specified in terms of presence and absence, a dualism that takes the classic form of A/not-A” (Massey, “Politics” 255). The maintenance of this clear distinction between space and time is not only theoretically unconvincing, but also serves to perpetuate and justify asymmetrical power relations.

From this perspective, the elevation of space to the level of time—or spatial inquiry to the level of historical work, or even layering spatial thinking on top of historical inquiry—while perhaps an appropriate start to critical spatial thinking, ultimately preserves definitions predicated on hierarchical difference. More politically compelling than this response to the hierarchization of space and time is to deconstruct the very notion that a clear distinction exists at all, “to argue that what must be overcome is the very formulation of space/time in terms of this kind of dichotomy” (Massey, “Politics” 260). Massey does so by looking to contemporary, post-Newtonian physics to demonstrate that space and time do not exist as preexisting categories, but rather constitute each other through a series of dialectal encounters: through a process, activity-based approach to ontology. Massey is quick to point out that this does not imply a “total collapse of the differences between something called the spatial and the temporal dimension” (“Politics” 261). Instead, it breaks down any constitutive distinction between the two outside of the ways in which temporality and spatiality interact in given systems: “In so far as such systems exist—and even in so far as they are merely postulated as ideal—they can in no sense be simply spatial nor exist only in space. In themselves they constitute a particular space-time” (“Politics” 262, emphasis original). This reorientation away from space and time and toward space-time moves us toward the recognition that our objects of inquiry, our systems of meaning, never “occur in space and time; it is these relationships themselves which create/define space and time” (263, emphasis original). Within this restructured ontology, we move beyond constitutional divisions and toward investigating the ways in which concepts, such as space, time, and history, generate meaning through encounter.

Once we have established and advocated for this interdependent definition of space-time, we can go back and reread through this lens some of the dominant spatial language found in revised and emplaced approaches to composition historiography. By doing so, we are able to uncover the spatiotemporal implications of this revisionism: a breakdown in the space and/or time categorization and practice of historiography that results in fixed and “imperial” renderings of history. Recall how Royster and Williams invoke the “historical terrain” as a means to demonstrate how compositionists might better understand the “negative effects of primacy.” I quote the passage in full here:
This imperative indicates that, while we recognize that narratives of composition have been successful in increasing our understanding of long-range views of the field, we recognize also that these same narratives have simultaneously directed our analytical gaze selectively, casting, therefore, both light and shadow across the *historical terrain*. (581, emphasis added)

By “suggest[ing] that there is a clear and present need to pay more attention to the shadows . . .,” Royster and Williams present an imperative to explore sites—both real and imagined—that have existed on the periphery of our historical cartography. In terms of space-time, the “historical terrain,” alternately illuminated by our disciplinary gaze, is a wonderfully evocative phrase, one with both spatial and temporal implications. A terrain is a markedly spatial term, one that refers to both a physical section of land (material) and a projected spatial identity (imagined). Historical, of course, carries the temporal signification of past. Yet together, “historical terrain” bends a distinction between time and space and renders their separation utterly uneasy. It instructs that when we construct these historical maps, we are constructing spatial renderings of our field that carry with them immense material consequences for present study. “[H]istorical terrain” is sensitive to the fact that “[s]pace is not static, nor time spaceless. Of course spatiality and temporality are different from each other but neither can be conceptualized as the absence of the other” (Massey, *Politics*” 264). The spaces within the spatiotemporal matrix Royster and Williams construct are temporally interpreted: historically “left” out, yet central to the historical figures that occupied them.

The space-time implied in the “historical terrain” is intended to alert readers to the assumptions in and consequences of setting our historical narratives in particular prestige spaces. It indicates that all historical work is necessarily imbued with spatial and temporal significance. David Gold’s “margins” present us with a similar recognition, one shot through with a dynamic intermingling of space and time. As we have seen, in critical spatial theory, margins are understood as more than simply reified border zones. Rather, they exist as spaces of generative tension, dialectics of, and resistance to, inside and out. Yet through space-time, margins take on a different meaning: a spatiohistorical marker. Gold recognizes the temporal implications of this: “Though at the margins of historical consciousness, these schools are far from marginal” (*Rhetoric* ix). The schools Gold outlines are marginalized only now, in the projected retrospective of disciplinary identity, yet served a central function in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by providing education to an increasingly diverse American student population. As Gold writes, “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, significant numbers of rural, working-class, female, and black students were attending college” (*Rhetoric* ix; see also: Crowley 54). Demographic shifts resulted in immense curricular changes in the nineteenth century, shifting the center/margins of classical education. The margin/center model is as
much temporally situated as spatial in that its motion is predicated on the moment to which it is applied. Invoking the margin signifies a location—a brick-and-mortar schoolhouse or a periphery of historical consciousness—within a particular time. The historical currents infuse the location of the margin with meaning, representing a relation between the spatiality and historicity of marginality. The margin, as a spatial metaphor, gives us language to depict relations found in and of space and time, and to read a margin outside of the interrelation between space and time renders it ultimately decontextualized and static.

Kelly Ritter’s tracing of basic writers, as a concept, reveals a similar melding of space and time. I see this particularly at work in her deployment of the term “location.” She derives this notion of location from, among others, Jonathan Mauk, who writes, “In a very literal sense, I am suggesting that the physical geography of an institution, and the human geography that surrounds and constitutes it, have an impact on the topography of composition courses, and ultimately influence the success or failure of pedagogical strategies” (374). Yet while Mauk situates his study of location within the contemporary university—Mauk’s work is specifically interested in “the disintegration of traditional academic space” within the modern university (370)—Ritter takes this concept and demonstrates its dynamism within the context of the historical academic space that Mauk holds as a constant. To trace basic writers through time without attention to the politics of space effaces the specificity of the concept. To combat this effacement, Ritter argues that we “cannot speak about composition at the first-year level as if it were always a static, universal course common to all institutional types and all institutional missions, or as if it were a compartmentalized product that can be moved from place to place without regard for deep and sometimes difficult pedagogical revision” (16–17). Rather, we must attend to the ways in which the spatial realities of a particular historical moment imbue the concept with meaning. As readers of historical artifacts, then, we must seek to account for space-time dynamics: the historical locations of particular things, their location within our real-and-imagined “historical terrain.” It is what Ritter means when she writes that “location is physical and metaphysical; in the case of composition studies, it is practical and theoretical” (19). Ritter’s (re)deployment of location in historical inquiry indicates, albeit implicitly, a methodology sensitive to the co-constitutive interplay between space and time. Reading her work through a space-time hermeneutic allows us to more fully articulate this innovation.

Reading Emily Legg’s historical recovery work through a space-time lens likewise reveals the spatiotemporal innovation of revisionist historiography. Drawing on the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Legg argues that “the disciplinary history of rhetoric and composition is indeed landscaped—through histories, archives, and institutions” (71). This landscaping of history is inevitable in that all histories require certain spatial anchoring, regardless of how generalized they claim to be.
Legg argues that “[o]ur materials cast shadows, hide our landscapes, and argue for a singular origin and singular story” (73). In challenging the narratives that our archives most easily tell—an ease generated from the propulsion and ability of prestige spaces to cement their centrality to future generations through documentation—we can construct an “often-overlooked counternarrative to the available narratives of current-traditionalism and Harvard that appear to be the prominent history of nineteenth-century composition history” (68–69). In recovering the Cherokee National Female Seminary, Legg’s work is an attempt at “re-landscaping” that history of composition. This landscaped understanding of history reveals the spatial and temporal interplay at work in all historical accounts. Legg is quite explicit about the necessity of thinking spatially and temporally:

Even as we construct metaphoric locations of the discipline, we are acting as geographer and landscaper, imposing our own frameworks that can ultimately create boundaries and borders that divide our landscapes and locations along accepted and othered. Ultimately, locations are contested. However, these contested locations can be unbound and re-landscaped in ways that can be empowering and act as a recovery of narratives that are buried under the contested canons of history. (87–88)

Legg’s revisionist methodology—“undoing the practice of unseeing” (73)—alerts us to the ways in which our historical research practices can, in the absence of spatial thinking, allow an inequitable landscaping of history, a necessary precondition for imperial historiography. The ways in which we landscape history—both in the sense of the archives we choose to visit and the stories from those archives that we choose to tell—are choices infused with temporal and spatial significance for the future of our disciplinary identity. We never simply do or read history; rather, we encounter historical narratives as both historians and cartographers, as investigators of space-time.

Conclusion

In “Finding New Spaces for Feminist Research,” Jessica Enoch calls for a “feminist rhetorical history of space” in which historians would work “to investigate how the composition of space creates, maintains, or renovates gendered differences and understandings” (115). Enoch goes on to offer readers descriptions of projects that might begin to approach this spatially attuned historiography of feminist rhetorics:

To give two examples: We might study the physical construction of Harvard’s campus to understand how it reinforced the idea that the school was a preserve of white, aristocratic masculinity; or we might examine how black female rhetors such as bell hooks have revised white feminist visions of the home as a site of domestic entrapment to see it instead as a space of resistance that can “heal the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (384). (115)
Enoch’s call is an important one. As we continue to create new and more inclusive histories of our discipline, we must pay attention to the dialectical interaction between space—both in the material and imagined senses—and the social relations it enables and rejects. What I hope to have accomplished here is the demonstration that this work is already under way, as evident in the representations of space-time in revisionist historiography. I’ve argued that a readerly sensitivity to the concerns of critical spatial theory can enable us to better attend to the politics of past disciplinary spaces as they are already constituted through discourse. This sensitivity orients us toward the interrelations of space and time as they (in)form disciplinary identities.

I believe this is a crucial and generative moment for composition to more explicitly integrate our spatial and historical imaginations. The type of space-time work I examine here has been occurring across disciplines with increasing frequency, especially within the transdisciplinary field of the geohumanities. Broadly understood as “the rapidly growing zone of creative interaction between geography and the humanities,” the geohumanities have staked out “transdisciplinary perspectives and a combination of methodologies,” resulting in a “kaleidoscope of intellectual and artistic outputs . . .” (Richardson, et al. 3). Scholars within the varied disciplines that comprise the geohumanities seek out tools—discursive, technological, and artistic—to combine geographic and humanistic inquiry in order to bring space and time to the fore of our theories and practices of research. A significant aspect of the geohumanities is what Douglas Richardson calls “Geohistory” (209). Geohistorical inquiry employs technologies to assist us in overcoming the oftentimes uneasy relationship between space and time in our crafting of historical narratives. Edward Ayers argues that despite the fact that “[h]istorians have always loved maps and have long felt a kinship with geographers,” space and time have long remained “uncomfortable—if ever-present and ever-active—companions in the human imagination” (215). Despite the challenges in overcoming this divide—Ayers even considers that humans simply “do not have the neural bandwidth to deal with space and time simultaneously . . .” (215)—combing space and time as a singular research heuristic might enable us to “glimpse the plasma of time in which we move and live” (Ayers 225).

Geographic information systems (GIS) have been a significant component of this turn in the geohumanities toward more spatially focused historical inquiry. GIS enables researchers to layer more traditional artifacts of historical inquiry with advanced mapping of spatial landscapes, thus acknowledging how temporal progression and spatial politics interact within systems. GIS, or historical geographic information systems (HGIS), although incredibly diverse in practice, are “animated by a common interest in situating history in its geographical context and using geographic information to illuminate the past” (Knowles 5). This drive “compels writers to think graphically and forces spatial thinkers to come to grips with the subtlety of historical texts” (Knowles 5). There have been significant hurdles in integrating GIS into humanistic inquiry, hurdles including “underlying ontological and epistemological
issues associated with integrating a predominantly positivist science with humanistic disciplines” (Harris, Bergeron, and Rouse 238). Despite these hurdles, researchers within the humanities have begun to adopt GIS to strengthen and diversify their representations of the spatiotemporal nature of history. Richardson writes, “Many historians are just now beginning to grasp the significance of incorporating a spatial dimension across multiple scales into historical research, despite the barriers of disciplinary tradition and training to its adoption in history” (210).

To this point, composition and rhetoric has remained distant from this larger turn toward the disciplinary collision between space and time, including a lack of engagement with GIS technologies in historical analysis. However, as evinced by collaborations between our discipline and the digital humanities, I expect to see an emergence of methods and theories influenced by the geohumanities. In their introduction to the special issue of *College English*, “The Digital Humanities and Historiography in Rhetoric and Composition,” Enoch and Gold write that technological innovations, such as GIS, “have garnered the attention of humanists across the academy, but especially historians, and we might say that the digital humanities is breeding a new type of scholarship: digital historiography” (107). Within this digital historiographical moment—and on the precipice of the geohumanities and its associated technologies becoming integrated into the work of composition—it will be important for us to think through both the practical skills necessary for these types of analyses, as well as the theoretical underpinning of space-time codependence on which this work is based. This integration will have to occur in both the practices and products of our own historical work, as well as the ways in which we structure graduate courses on the methods and theories of historical work in composition. In the face of technological innovation, we must continue to explicitly recognize the spatial significance of our work as historians and researchers so as not to reproduce the pitfalls of imperial history.

Critical spatial theory, at its best, infiltrates all areas of intellectual thought. While I have chosen here to focus on an admittedly small and circumscribed sampling of revisionist historical texts, I believe that the implications for a space-time hermeneutic stretch into other objects of inquiry within our postprocess, postmodern moment of composition studies. Through space-time, we inherit the spatial politics of composition past and impose our own on composition future. It is imperative, then, that we recognize the geographies of history: how the politics of our field are rendered through matrices of spatial and temporal dynamics.

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Notes

1. Scholars such as Rhonda C. Grego and Nancy S. Thompson (Teaching/Writing), Christopher Keller and Christian Weisser (Locations), Valerie Kinloch (“Suspicious”), Derek Owens (“Multitopia”), Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser (Natural Discourse), and others have taken up this call to investigate the real and imagined spaces of composition.

2. For Dobrin, this elevation of time over space is done in order to secure the discipline a place (stable, secure) in the university, one removed from space, which he perceives as “unstable and uncertain . . .” (17). This distinction between space and place is one of considerable debate within critical spatial theory. For more on the relationship between space and place, see Cresswell, In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression and Place: A Short Introduction; Massey, “A Global Sense of Place”; and Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.

3. For a more extended discussion on how this binary between space and time structures thinking in composition, see Mutnick 41–2.

4. For an overview of the local histories movement within revisionist historiography in composition and rhetoric, see Donahue and Moon. I should note here that there are clear concerns with an unceasing propulsion toward localizing histories, namely disintegration and disciplinary incoherence. Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen fear that our turn toward “more locally (or at least regionally) grounded” histories has perhaps led to “a collection of fragmented histories read by an equally fragmented, narrowing audience” (754). Julie Garbus responds to this by arguing that “our field should be able to encompass both grand narratives and smaller-scale histories. We need both big picture and detail work—especially since the detail work can lead to changes in the big picture” (121). Ritter argues that while she does “not aim to celebrate the local,” she does believe it is an important term when “characterize[ing] the local composition program in many ways as an embodiment of the values and priorities of the institution itself” (24). Debra Hawhee and Christa Olson have recently called for the development of “pan-historiography,” or histories “whose temporal scope extends well beyond the span of individual generations” and that “leap across geographic space, tracking important activities, terms, movements, or practices as they travel with trade, with global expansions, or with religious zealotry” (90). While the goal of this article is not to sort out the local/global tension in historical work, it is worth noting that much critical spatial theory deals with that very tension and might be considered in an attempt to sort out the implications of particular spatial scopes in historical work (see especially Harvey).

5. For example, see College English 76.2; CCCC 64.1

6. To be clear, I do not wish to imply that there was ever a time at which the entirety of historical inquiry was totalizing and aspatial. As Gold writes, “Despite the increasing interest in diverse local histories, as a field we have not always drawn on the deep well of revisionist historical work long available to us. Indeed, the façade of the master narrative began to crack almost as soon as it had been established” (“Remapping” 17). Gold is right to cite Robin Varrum, whose 1992 Journal of Advanced Composition (JAC) article critiqued the generalizing tendencies in some of the most canonical works of history in the field (“History of Composition”). Despite this, I do see revisionist work as a reaction and response to prior historical work, so it is useful to set up a distinction, however tenuous it may be.

7. I derive this intersectional understanding of the real and metaphorical from Lefebvre’s “conceptual triad” of the “multiplicity of intersections” embraced by each space. Perceived space (spatial practice) is grounded in the materiality of space, the interactions and systems of communication, and the daily realities of spatial experience. Conceived space (representations of space) is the cognitive and linguistic construction and manipulation of space. Lived space (representational space) is the symbolic interaction experienced through encounter—both mental and physical—with signs and images; it is the space of “inhabitants” and “users” (39). These three dimensions of the triad are ahierarchical in that they rely on trialectic encounter. Thus, representational space relies on spatial practice, and vice versa, in order to produce meaning and spatial coherence.
8. “Normal school” here refers to institutions of higher education that emphasized teaching and practical application. See Gold *Rhetoric* 119–22.

9. For an overview of the history and current practice of the geohumanities, see Dear, et al. For additional reading on GIS/HGIS and historiography, see Knowles and Hillier.

**Works Cited**


Dobrin, Sidney I. “The Occupation of Composition.” Keller and Weisser 15–34.


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