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## Chapter 6: Network Sense: Patterned Connections Across a Maturing Discipline

I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that *we can know more than we can tell*. (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4)

There is a growing mountain of research. But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down as today's specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers—conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less remember, as they appear. Yet specialization becomes increasingly necessary for progress, and the effort to bridge between disciplines is correspondingly superficial. (Bush, 1945, para. 6)

This book began with sketches of three problems facing rhetoric and composition/writing studies (RCWS), and these operated as driving exigencies for the distant reading and thin descriptive methods theorized and applied by way of spotting turns, graphing citation frequencies, and plotting cartographically institutional-programmatic locations and professional pathways. Recall these three problems:

One: We have over the last three decades witnessed the continuous production of disciplinographies concerned with the field's constitutive activities, its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and its worldviews, values, and epistemological attachments. Such projects have relied extensively on anecdotal evidence, intuition, and local experiences, on tacit knowledge lodged in what Stephen North (1987) counted as his "10 years of 'living among' the people of Composition" (p. 4). Noting this tendency is not to devalue these forms of evidence, nor to characterize them as lacking rigor or substance. Instead they purposefully tend to strain for a generalizing extensibility, surfacing a locally or regionally bounded perspective to account for larger-scale trends, patterns, or turns. Distant reading and thin description methods aid our corroborating claims about the field in these accounts, presenting augmentative forms of evidence to cases grounded in local experiences and, thus, these methods supply leverage for inquiring into the reach and plausibility of subjective claims about where the field at-large has been and where it is headed.

Two: Data essential to disciplinary patterning, particularly involving graphesis, has to this day been uneven and unsystematic in its collection,

maintenance, and open accessibility. Consequently, inquiries concerned with enduring patterns in the field have done little more than tap into idiosyncratic and fleeting forms of evidence: local experience, anecdotes, and glancing impressions, on the one hand, or ethereal, painstakingly gathered data sets that blinker in and out again too soon after they have been procured for one-time claim-making. For example, in attempts to survey the current state of the field, scholars such as Mark Bauerlein (2008), Susan Peck MacDonald (2007), and Michael Bernard-Donals (2008) have keyed on patterns appearing in the titles of CCCC presentations listed in the convention program. This practice suggests that, since NCTE started making the conference program available online, its standing as the best available data-set has caught on. The trend of arriving at conclusions about the field judging by conference paper titles alone certainly raises some unavoidable questions about the gains and the limitations of distant and thin methods. More importantly, the title-skim operation points to the dearth of well-established data available for grounding claims about the field. The methods advanced in this book—as perhaps in any book—are out of necessity limited in their scope of application. And yet, moving forward this project should illuminate an expanded horizon for related projects, noticing that more expansive efforts aimed at data-collection, organization, and maintenance become ever more overdue as the field continues to grow. The neglect of data curation in RCWS indicates with ever-rising urgency a need for a new and sustainable curatorial ethic. Addressing this would do well to begin with the establishment of an information officer among the three consortia of RCWS programs described in Chapter Five. That information officer would keep up to date the directory information related to programs and program leadership. The role of an information officer could be defined and supported in a variety of ways. Funding could come from an annual stipend collected from consortium membership, underwritten by a national organization, such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), or funded by a donor or sponsor. At the very least, the role would require support and infrastructure sufficient for lists and contacts to be updated annually.

Three: Like all modern disciplines, we continue today to face a reading dilemma that has skyrocketed in the past three decades of disciplinary growth and expansion. More disciplinary material is generated than any one person reading by conventional strategies alone could reasonably, meaningfully engage. Richard Lloyd-Jones (2006) mentioned this quandary in his 1978 chair's address "A View from the Center," an address I will return to later in this chapter. A number of other scholars have engaged the closely related matter of excessive specialization since. One of the first to consider the challenges of specialization for RCWS was Janice Lauer in her famous 1984 essay "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline." In that essay, Lauer took up the problem of curricular plan-

ning of graduate programs in RCWS. She acknowledged pioneers of the field who, in the 1960s, balanced teaching responsibilities with the problems of how best to pursue training (of themselves and others). The formative work by early scholars in the field led to deeper investigations of the natures of writing and how best to teach them. Lauer noted that these prescient scholar-practitioners did much more than seek answers to early theoretical questions about teaching; they also took risks by venturing into other disciplinary areas to inform their inquiries. Lauer further explained that the interdisciplinary theoretical influences were complemented by an early commitment to multimodality in methods ranging from linguistic and hermeneutical work to empirical studies and so on. Compositionists recognized early on the value in a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and research methods to get at answers to the persistent questions that concerned them. To put it another way, the dappled, fanned-out purview of RCWS meant that for those doing the work of the field to be effective, they needed to create for themselves a *network sense* of the expansive domain. Tendering network sense requires 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, difficult questions and myriad stakeholders. Working *effectively* in a dappled discipline involves grasping to the extent one can the meshwork of ties among those who self-identify with the field, their institutional situations, geographical locations, methodological preferences, and areas of specialization. As if this wasn't enough—and Lauer's essay implied it wasn't—RCWS's dappledness also requires familiarity with extradisciplinary domains of knowledge and activity with the potential to shed light on writing practices, processes, research methods, histories, and theories.

I recount these three problems for RCWS because this book's conclusion calls for further development of the ways in which distant reading and thin description methods support, reinforce, and catalyze network sense—an ongoing and unfolding sense of disciplinary networks and their interrelationships. A sense of these networks intervenes into the problems described above. I must avoid too tightly coupling distant reading and thin description methods and the problems listed above in a tidy problem-solution or quandary-remedy relationship. If this project has been successful in showcasing the application of these methods, it will have persuaded you to accept, in addition to a problem-solving function, the generativity of these methods as they promote invention and inquiry by rendering patterns we did not realize existed. Network sense, in that it is a powerful epistemological corollary to distant reading and thin description methods, counters the problem of excessive specialization and provides scholars with formal, often exploratory, tools for the pattern-tracing essential to knowledge production in and across domains.

## Text Sense, Felt Sense, Network Sense

In effect, network sense renders as cognizant the multiscale, patterned connections constitutive of a maturing and expansive disciplinary domain. To bring network sense into fuller view, it is instructive to situate the concept in relation to two notable forbearers: *text sense*, developed by Christina Haas (1996) as qualities of textual knowing involving memory, annotation, and attending to formal and informal features, and *felt sense*, developed by Sondra Perl (2004) as qualities of tacit, bodily knowing, capacities of feeling, and registers of intuition. Insofar as text sense focuses on texts and their epistemological extensions, and felt sense keys on inwardly focused contemplative practice, network sense names an epistemological wherewithal, or an awareness, of a collective's activities as they bloom across a conglomerate of language practices, meetings and conferences, referential linkages, and locative markers. Although this collective bloom of activities and practices is distributed unevenly in space and time, it is constitutive of a complex, expanding academic discipline.

In *Writing Technology*, Haas (1996) applied empirical research methods to study the ways writers interact with their texts differently depending on whether those texts are composed using pen and paper or whether they were composed using a computer. Haas used the phrase *text sense* to describe a writer's degree of awareness about the text while in the process of writing it. "Clearly," she wrote,

writers interact constantly, and in complex ways with their own written texts. Through these interactions, they develop some understanding—some representation—of the text they have created or are creating. [ . . . ] One of the things that writers come to during the course of text production is an understanding of the meaning and structure of their own written arguments; I call this understanding or representation of one's own text *a sense of the text*. (p. 117)

Haas went on to define "a sense of the text":

What is a sense of the text? *Text sense* is a mental representation of the structure and meaning of a writer's own text. It is primarily propositional in content, but includes spatial and temporal aspects as well. Although text sense—as an internal construction—is distinct from the written textual artifact, it is tied intimately to that artifact. Text sense is constructed in tandem with the written text and seems to include both a

spatial memory of the written text and an episodic memory  
of its construction. (p. 118)

Distant and thin methods complement the sense of the text Haas (1996) identified with a sense of the network because these methods afford insights for both readers and writers and are more expansively concerned with a range of activities and materials extensive to identifiable acts of composing. The mental representations of these methods are inscribed, rendered visually, externalized, and expressed as articulations set on visibility and interconnection. Furthermore, the animated index, citation frequency graphs, and maps of scholarly activity from Chapters Three, Four, and Five articulate as permeable the edges among the more than 500 articles published in *College Composition and Communication*, survey data, directories from the three consortia, job listings, and the world at large. Methods for visualizing disciplinary activity generate network sense by illuminating connections among texts themselves and their extensions—the linkages among words and phrases, source materials, and sites of production. Network sense expands upon and is highly compatible with text sense. The sense of the network enhanced by word watching, citation frequency graphing, and mapping adds layers and dimensions to a sense of the text. Rather than singling out any text as an end or product, network sense connects and reconnects texts (also places, people, moments) as nodes in dynamic, shifting compilations of meaning that extend in and across a variety of dimensions.

A second forebearer and influence on network sense, Perl's (2004) notion of felt sense, tends to be individualistic, bodily, and in-dwelt. As such, it is more difficult to locate as empirically verifiable or directly knowable, much less as ready-to-articulate. In fact, what makes felt sense "felt" is the way it operates just beneath the surfaces of direct observation or linguistic expression. Felt sense names the impactful implicit. The notion extends from Michael Polanyi's (1966) important work on tacit, personal knowing in the sciences, and, in this way, it rightly honors a writer's hunches and intuitions, recognizing that, as Polanyi famously framed it, "we can know more than we can tell" (p. 4).

Perl (2004) wrote about felt sense as "a kind of knowing . . . that is tacit because it is embedded in the body and nowhere else" (p. xiv). With respect to this locative definition, network sense proves complementary for its operating as a somatic knowledge, potentially radiant and hosted in and circulating across the body and (potentially) anywhere else. Network sense understands a discipline to be a mega-body writ broadly, extensibly, and organizationally complex, manifesting as a loose and distributed structure of participation.

In their focuses on writers writing, Haas (1996) and Perl (2004) attended to microshifts and focused primarily on a single composition, or a serialized

compositional act that culminated in a focused text. By way of differentiation, network sense extends out into a scalar spectrum, working across multiple texts and long periods of time to conceptualize connections and relationships irreducible to individual experience or a text unto itself. Network sense helps us cognize the growing mountain of research insofar as it provides additional means for grasping patterns latent in the accumulating textual materials usually produced by multiple authors in different times and places. We cannot hold it all in our heads, except distantly, thinly. As a suite of tools for tracing associations, distant reading and thin description methods do not inherently favor production or reception (which is to say they are not inherently predisposed to reading or writing). Word watching, graphing citation frequencies, and plotting maps need not be confined to representations of the text or of the text-in-progress while composing. The visual models showcased in this book can encompass just about anything, from texts and textual citations to institutional locations and affiliations, inclusive of programs, departments, colleagues, mentors, friends, and a boundless range of anything else that can be articulated as a linkage. Network sense is as concerned with connections among people and places as with texts and characteristics of texts. In this generous, flexible capacity, network sense is imbricated with knowledge production, a tremendously relevant handle on the field, both for initiates and long-timers.

Network sense further mitigates the negative consequences of excessive specialization. Excessive specialization has commonly been examined as an intellectual problem threatening all the humanities, not only RCWS. Bruce McComiskey (2006), in *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s)*, characterizes three typical responses in English programs to “radical specialization”: *secession*, *corporate compromise*, and *fusion*. According to McComiskey, secession within English studies, such as one might find when linguistics, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, or other groups of faculty split from English and function as an independent academic unit, “leads to further specialization” (p. 36). Of the three alternatives, McComiskey identified fusion as the model that places the greatest emphasis on becoming a generalist, although he noted concern that such a design is rare and will struggle to get beyond a superficial level of engagement with any one area of specialization. Similarly, in *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies*, Stephen North (1999) discussed the deterioration of the *magisterial curriculum* and noted that English studies increasingly struggles for an identity, arguably right along with any of the sub-fields associated with the humanities that have been saddled by continuing trends toward specialization. For how it heightens awareness of connections and relationships and makes these linkages traceable, distant reading and thin description methods intervene into this muddle and modestly alleviate stressors addressed by McComiskey and North.

Rhetoric and composition/writing studies has long embraced the advantages in a dual disposition that aligns with specialization and generalization simultaneously. The spirit of this intellectual history is evident in Lauer's (1984) essay and also surfaces in Lloyd-Jones's (2006) CCCC keynote address from 1977, "A View from the Center." In his address, Lloyd-Jones attempted both to characterize the field's status and assert its legitimacy while also appealing to his audience, as constituents of the field in that place and time. He opened the address by referring to a commitment to language as the primary trait of RCWS. From there, he introduced and then analyzed a series of metaphors, testing each of them out and working through whether each sufficiently accounted for a deepening structure of RCWS. Choice metaphors included politics, foundations, architecture, skeletal anatomy, and, although he named it only by allusion to a telephone operator, networks.

In keeping with his title, "A View From the Center," Lloyd-Jones (2006) identified as his preferred characterization of the centrality compositionists occupy in the academy the rural telephone operator, Mrs. Peterson, who was highly connected and also highly knowledgeable about the community's inner workings, without being recognized for either. She was a generalist, an intermediary, and a connector, cognizant of the many discourses, relationships, and activities playing out around her. Lloyd-Jones's metaphoric figure occupied a central, conductive role because she developed and enacted a network sense of the complex disciplinary scene, a scene that already in the late 1970s existed as a nexus of pathways reaching far and wide into distributed domains. Lloyd-Jones intimated that this connective aptitude was essential because compositionists tended to occupy roles as "negotiators, explainers, and referees" (p. 50). A high degree of connection was preferable, he argued; without it, we "deserve our present basic position, that is, our traditional place in the damp cellar of the house of the intellect" (p. 50). By implication, Lloyd-Jones raised a question pertinent still today, especially so in the context of trends toward specialization noted by McComiskey (2006) and North (1999): How will compositionists perform their centrality in the future, both in the academy and beyond?<sup>26</sup> This is, of course, a question about actively seeking ways of being both a specialist and a generalist, one who knows a lot about a little and at the same time one who knows a little about a lot.

Lloyd-Jones's (2006) imaginary telephone operator effectively allegorizes the network sense I have set out to define in this concluding chapter. Network

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26 We can look again at the work by Fulkerson (1979, 2005) and Hesford (2006) cited in Chapter One as performances of centrality. Perhaps any claim leveled about disciplinary formation, emergence, stabilization, or fragmentation is a performance of centrality, to some degree, and thus it implies something like a network sense, whatever forms of evidence might ground it.



sense refers to a connective facility and adeptness at recognizing patterns, relationships, and associations. It is a *sense* that allows us to reconcile a contextualist worldview,<sup>27</sup> rife with an overabundance of information, with intuition and imagination—those experientially shaped faculties for making sense of complex phenomena playing out in the world around us (and the world with *us* in it). Further, network sense is commonly assisted by technological apparatuses that aid inquiry by laying bare traceable associations in a collection of materials. Out of necessity, it is shaped through a blend of active, motivated tracing and assembling and situated experience. In each of the visual models—the animated index and turn-spotting hubs, citation frequency graphs, and scholarly activity maps—we should see the ways these treatments promote a sense of the field as a networked phenomenon. The insights that these models, as new media objects, bear out fall on both sides of the framework I have used to examine distant reading and thin description methods. On the one hand, the models mitigate problems created by small-scope disciplinographies, such as disorganized data and a “growing mountain of research” (Bush, 1945, n.p.); on the other hand, they introduce us to patterns, both known and new, with a generative, heuristic quality useful for posing questions and engaging with them differently than we have before. Other aspects of distant reading and thin description remain to be explored, but in these two aspects—a problem-solving orientation and a heuristic orientation—distant reading and thin description methods are prime for myriad uses in combination with other research methods.

Even with distant reading and thin description methods, certain aspects of disciplinarity will lurk and lurch along, remaining opaque, elusive, and indeterminate; this is unavoidable. Yet, because these methods foreground the hybrid quality of this collective we so steadily refer to as a discipline, they are capable of great flexibility, adaptation, and inclusion. If these forms of knowledge—the animated index and turn-spotting hubs, citation frequency graphs, and scholarly activity maps presented here—bear insights; if in distant reading and thin description, in related model-making and abstracting practices, we might begin to reckon with some of the nonobvious patterns proliferating in an ever more vast arena of scholarly activity; then we can justify expanding these initial efforts, all the while deepening our sense of the discipline as a networked phenomenon.

## Network Sense in Expanded Practice

Although I do not argue for a nostalgic return to the bygone days of literary generalists, I do think that a certain amount of institutional power is lost when common purpose dissolves. For with radical specialization,

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27 See Phelps (1991) *Composition as a Human Science*.



as English studies has experienced in the last half century, we are no longer able to represent ourselves to university administrations or public audiences as having coherent goals (other than the material fact that we work side by side). (McComiskey, 2006, p. 30)

In addition to tracing a dotted perimeter around network sense and suggesting its importance for generating new knowledge in addition to its many responses to the challenges that accompany excessive specialization, I seek to extend an account of its value, to sketch more pointedly who specifically gains from distant and thin methods and the epistemological interventions that follow from them. This section takes up the matter of who is served by network sense and presents selected projections—horizons of possibility—to shed light on how many are served by the visualization approaches featured in this book.

## 1. Established Professoriate

The established professoriate can apply distant reading and thin descriptive methods and the visual models created by these techniques as devices for deciding how to focus and differentiate curricula, programs of study, and specific courses. Much like an individual article abstract aids in the decision about whether to read or whether an article fits adequately with an established line of inquiry, distant and thin methods span scales of materials to render them more readily identifiable, individually and collectively. Upon grasping patterns of interrelation, we can more fastidiously and responsibly establish explicit ties in the collection of materials we are working with, whether for research, curriculum, or policy-making. I do not intend for this to imply that faculty members need assistance with generating associations and establishing clusters of materials for curricula and courses. Yet, distant reading and thin description intervene productively into what are already established practices. This is especially true in situations when faculty members feel isolated or when they are, like newcomers, venturing into unfamiliar areas, such as when teaching a new class for the first time, or when developing a new project at any stage of a career.

A second contribution of these methods for cultivating network sense can be found in the respect for differences Gary Olson called for at the end of his 2000 essay, “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline.” Olson explained that the viability of the discipline depended for two decades upon “exciting cross-disciplinary investigations of the interrelations between epistemology and discourse” (p. 24). According to Olson, the field must remain concerned with pedagogy, though not exclusively so. Olson strongly and repeatedly emphasized “intellectual diversity”; he argued that RCWS’s

disciplinary future depended on specialization that included shared terms. Distant reading and thin description provide a necessary precondition to respect differences and find shared terms in the midst of intellectual diversity—a network sense of the field. For the established professoriate to heed Olson’s argument and take seriously the intellectual expansiveness of the discipline, we must be better at knowing *what we know* and better at knowing *what we do not know*. Distant reading and thin description offer devices and incentives for doing so.

## 2. Newcomers and Initiates

Newcomers to the field continuously face different challenges than does the established professoriate. The takeaways listed above pertain to this group, as well. Graduate students, the clearest sub-group among newcomers, gain from improved findability, from patterns that aid in decidability (e.g., of a program of study), and from a grounding in the many forms of knowledge produced and engaged with by a longer established professoriate. But newcomers also face a more pressing challenge: where to begin. Recalling Heather Love’s (2013) interruption of Clifford Geertz’s (1977) “turtles all the way down” maxim, we too must facilitate more patient and long-dwelt encounters with *first* turtles. Of course, these methods do not solve this problem outright (i.e., distant reading and thin description are among the many ways of dwelling with first turtles). But they do lay plain layered and connective patterns that, because they can be apprehended, provide a basis for sensing more extensively the connections that hover just beyond the point where one decides to begin. It does not replace or diminish the long list of well-established resources already available to aid in committing these early gestures (e.g., works cited; informal conversations with mentors, advisers, and peers; listserv discussions; special issues of journals; conference themes; and graduate courses). Distant reading and thin description, do, however, add to these resources, providing a greater range of traceable associations than is already available, much less circulating.

“Where to begin” applies to more than the conceptual foraging that usually precedes (and also persists throughout) any sustained inquiry. It also pertains to the pragmatic challenges of identifying and selecting graduate programs to apply to in the first place. Yet, even when the question shifts in this way toward the practical considerations about where to apply, network sense makes a significant difference. Prospective graduate students might, for example, see patterns in the publications produced by faculty or alumni at a particular institution. Using these methods, they can see connections between certain themes and *topoi* in the scholarship produced by current

faculty and recent course offerings in the program (from both course descriptions and full syllabi, where they are available). They can also zoom in on programs by region or state. There is little question that much of what I have described is already attempted informally and idiosyncratically by applicants who seek admission to graduate programs in RCWS. The point is that distant reading and thin description methods guide more systematic treatments for surfacing patterns in whatever information is available, and these forms of knowledge serve newcomers just beginning their processes of determining where to start.

These methods also aid in preliminary and ongoing processes of sampling. Network sense brought about by distant and thin methods provides the heuristics one must develop early in any act of inquiry, whether disciplinarily invested or otherwise. Further, these uses can aid students working relatively independently on research projects or it can occupy a greater part in a common course, such as a graduate seminar. To illustrate this more tangibly, consider a graduate seminar focused on the history of computers and writing since 1980. Collectively, students could produce an animated index rendered from all the articles published in *Computers and Composition: An International Journal* or perhaps render the articles into lists of bi-grams separable into 5- or 10-year increments. Next, students could collectively decide on 20 or 25 words and phrases that they would trace back through the scholarly record. Here, data-driven word watching functions as a heuristic and a relay, returning the students to a generative activity. And finally, the students would develop a glossary of short essays, or what I characterized in Chapter Three as deep definition essays, that ground the terms in the record of scholarship and account for the varied connotations, the place of the term and concept in certain arguments, the locations where it operates as a given or commonplace, and so on. A project such as this is highly flexible and could be adapted to a great range of materials, including a selection of articles, a collection of syllabi from a writing program, or a sample of scholarship produced by faculty or alumni in a program during a given time period.

### 3. Public

These methods and the visual models they produce can also have an effect on general audiences, including people who do not yet realize that such a field as RCWS even exists. This does not mean that one would have to apply the methods to realize the insights the models suggest. For instance, consider the ways maps of programs could touch off greater awareness of the basic presence of writing programs in colleges and universities across the United States and Canada and, increasingly, abroad. The map of the three consortia

in Chapter Five is but one suggestive example, and, of course, more of this work is due. With improved handling of data and more regimented surveys or reporting procedures, we would have simple maps showing not only the three consortia but also the locations of university writing centers, writing across the curriculum programs, first-year writing programs, undergraduate minors, and perhaps even programs that emphasize cultural rhetorics or other important disciplinary concentrations. Maps like these prove tremendously useful for making arguments to administrators and other decision-makers about the viability of developing a program or the geographic gap in any similar offerings such that an institution, by beginning an undergraduate major, would distinguish itself from other institutions in the region. Maps of this sort can also help non-academics recognize the vibrancy of the field as it has continued to grow and mature over the last 40 years. Also, such maps, if developed systematically, could have powerful bearing on the attitudes and actions of university administrators and public officials, such as legislators, whose decisions about funding shape higher education.

#### 4. Students

The network sense catalyzed by distant and thin methods has much to offer to students at all levels of study and in many fields of study beyond RCWS. For many of the reasons recounted above—corroboration, findability, patterning—students can apply variations of these methods as a complement to any project involving research and writing. For example, with the availability of TagCrowd and Wordle, a pair of word-cloud applications, students can convert a text they are reading or writing into a visual model that follows a database logic of word watching rather than a narrative logic, thus, reintroducing them to a text by amplifying their text sense. These processes are useful, whether motivated by summary (an abstracting practice in its own right) or by wonder (the pursuit of discovery and possible insight).

Consider the following pedagogical applications of distant and thin methods as a more specific illustration of word watching in a pedagogical context. In the fall 2008, I taught a Studio for Transfer Students class (WRT 195) at Syracuse University where the students created Tagcrowd-based word clouds to assist them in the work of summarizing several texts assigned for the course. They were asked to read the full text, produce a word cloud for it, and then use the cloud as a heuristic to refocus on key vocabulary in the piece. Working with Caleb Crain's (2007) article "Twilight of the Books," students were alerted by this process to the large number of references to "American" and "percent" in the first quarter of the article. The frequent appearance of these two terms served as a powerful reminder that Crain focused almost entire-

ly on examples of a decline in traditional reading among people in the US (“Americans”), and that he introduced quantitative data, much of which is drawn from surveys, to make his case that reading as a print-bound phenomenon has changed significantly in the past decade. In this teaching context, the word clouds alerted students to the forms of evidence (survey statistics) and demographic assumptions.

Similar processes might apply to student writing, as well. Shortly after TagCrowd and Wordle made their services publicly available, many graduate students, myself included, created clouds rendered from their dissertation prospectus or from individual chapters or articles they worked on. On the surface, these processes might seem to serve only hermeneutic invention. But reflective word watching also confronts the writer anew with the openness of the text and its possibilities, thus matching distant and thin methods with *proairetic invention*, a counterpart to hermeneutic invention that privileges a generative approach within an “ecology of invention” (Brooke, 2009, p. 63).

A distant and thin process I applied to the entire collection of seminar papers I produced in two years of doctoral coursework at Syracuse University illustrates one final example of how these methods might serve students. Just before preparing for qualifying exams, defining my reading areas, and formally developing a proposal, I aggregated into a single list all the works cited from papers and projects I produced throughout coursework. By compiling and sorting the citations into a single list, I found concentrations (i.e., patterns) that might have otherwise been unapparent to me. This proved a generative complement to the processes I was already relying upon, involving memory and my own felt sense about intellectual influences and inspiring readings. Absent distant and thin methods, my reflection on coursework would have undoubtedly resulted in overlooking relationships among many items in the pool of citations. In a situation such as this, we gain much from a smaller scale network sense—an awareness of the interconnections across and among our own materials, ever extensible into potential adjacencies.

Consider how an approach like this could ground a research project (whether for undergraduates or graduate students) in which students selected a figure in RCWS (or another field) to explore that person’s scholarship based on the most frequently cited authors or works enlisted throughout an entire career. For instance, taking all the monographs, chapters, and scholarly articles produced by, say, Geneva Smitherman, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Victor Vitanza, or Sharon Crowley, what patterns, and surprises, would we begin to see in their work? This is one more tangible example of the ways distant and thin methods and the generative elucidation of connective patterns—and resultant network sense—can make possible.

## Thickening Agents for a More Durable, Dappled Discipline

Foremost, I have written this book with newcomers to the field in mind. I am committed to making RCWS visible, durable, and responsive, given changes in how invitation into the discipline works. Such invitational conditions are not as they once were. Localist disciplinographies, a dearth of well-curated data, and growing mountains of research complicate contemporary invitational conditions. They make it more difficult to identify the field: These are the precarious edges at the thresholds for RCWS, as for many emerging disciplines.

Up to this point, I have argued that network sense finds genesis and anchorage in the distant and thin methods introduced and applied in this book. Network sense capacitates a wide berth for disciplinary inquiry. It honors the necessarily tacit, felt, and text senses of identifying with a discipline as an experiential aperture for continuously re-knowing the field. For as strong a case as can be made for network sense, or for the distant and thin methods that bring it about, situated experience and context-specific engagements remain essential to disciplinary knowledge, action, and participation. Nevertheless, the approaches advanced in this book combine as thickening agents the explicit and traceable connections that are all the more available to us in the abstracting practices I have sketched related to word watching, citation frequency graphing, and scholarly activity mapping. By boosting visibility, providing wide-scope perspectives, and insisting on the ever-refreshed curation of disciplinary data sets, distant and thin methods support the thicker and more specialized work of continuing as a dappled discipline. They ask us to notice that the bases for knowing a sprawling and aging disciplinary formation inevitably evolve, as they must if we are to honor the groundbreaking work of forebearers and to forecast a future horizon hospitable to a durable disciplinary locus of knowledge and activity. As such, this book assumes durability and disciplinary development are implicit goods.

And it is on this note about persistence that we should begin—albeit upon this book's concluding—to see parallels between the returns and consequences of distant and thin methods and questions about the field's durability. If we accept as a legitimate omen the vulnerabilities of the field's knowledge, as Stephen North did in 1987, we begin to realize the need for a different curatorial ethic than the current one that has, for far too long, gotten us by with knowing enough of the field at large. Such a curatorial ethic is not easy to establish or pin down with a definition; the premise itself is bound to be fraught with controversy and with pitfalls. Everything from the utopian dreams of capturing some fleeting totality of the field to the well-known challenges of

power, authority, and agency in establishing a grand database—these problems mix and mingle in the very suggestion of an improvable curatorial ethic. Still, there is room for improvement.

One framework for this curatorial ethic is available in The Long Now Foundation, an organization spearheaded by sustainable systems champion Stewart Brand and British composer Brian Eno, among others. The Foundation has taken up the challenge of long-term thinking on a global scale by committing vast resources to the development of a 10,000-year clock. Called “The Clock of the Long Now,” the time-keeping device will be built to renew awareness of our own active roles in shaping the future. Michael Chabon (2006) explained the clock this way:

The point of the Clock is to revive and restore the whole idea of the Future, to get us thinking about the Future again, . . . and to reintroduce the notion that we don't just bequeath the future—though we do, whether we think about it or not. We also, in the very broadest sense of the first person plural pronoun, inherit it. (para. 1)

While I am not proposing a similar clock for RCWS, I am suggesting that we take a hint from The Long Now Foundation's interest in a collective inheritance and in the shared responsibility that it produces for us—now in the first decades of the 21st century and for those who will be doing RCWS's work in 50, 100, or 300 years. Chabon continued,

Can you extend the horizon of your expectations for our world, for our complex of civilizations and cultures, beyond the lifetime of your own children, of the next two or three generations? Can you even imagine the survival of the world beyond the present presidential administration? (para. 3).

Whether or not we can “extend the horizon” of expectations beyond our own careers, the lives of the students we teach, or whether or not we can imagine the continuation of the field beyond the terms served by the current organizational leaders, perhaps we can at least realize the generative returns distant and thin methods provide for aiding us in grappling with large-scale and many-lives-long patterns, patterns that are often nonobvious to us at the smaller, more local (and often default) scales of engaging the field. Until we do a better, which is to say more effortful and sustaining, job of grasping the “complex ongoing event,” why should we expect anything other than more graceless turnover and fragility? Distant and thin methods and the network sense they promote create the invitational conditions to answer the problems listed at the beginning of this section. They thicken and strengthen conditions



compatible with specialist ventures. And they also inch us closer to a full, ethical realization of long-term, future-oriented thinking for the discipline.