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The Changing of Knowledge in Composition (CKC) is a book about a book—The Making of Knowledge in Composition (MKC)—but it’s also a book about a field (or is it a discipline?). It’s a book about anxieties and ambivalences, pluralism and cohesion, nihilism and faith. It’s a book about composition, and it’s a book about Composition.

Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Stephen North originally published MKC, and the questions it raises remain as relevant today as they were in 1987. Is Composition a discipline? Is there a Theory of Composition, or are there only theories? How do we make knowledge in the field, and how can we demonstrate to those outside of the field that what we make is knowledge? What methods do we use in our inquiries, and how do we employ them? Is the best that we can build a rambling “House of Lore?”

In many cases, the authors of this collection grapple with the same issues that North did in MKC, but to call this volume a mere response would be an egregious misnomer; CKC is a reflection. In a number of cases, it is a reflection on MKC and how individuals and the field received it. It’s also a reflection on some of the most salient problems in Composition today. Perhaps most interesting, however, is the fact that CKC is a reflection of the field. As the subtitle of CKC states, it is a collection of “Contemporary Perspectives,” rather than a singular “Portrait of an Emerging Field”; it is not a quasi-ethnographic painting, but instead it is a photomosaic.

Lance Massey and Richard Gebhardt group the essays in CKC into four often-overlapping sections. Part 1, Personal Responses to The Making of Knowledge in Composition, juxtaposes two personal responses to North’s original book: Edward White’s “The Significance of North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition” and Lynn Bloom’s “The World According to North—and Beyond: The Changing Geography of Composition Studies.” These two essays capture just how divisive MKC was when it was published and how tempers still flare over the book. White fondly remembers North as a firebrand, pointing out foibles and pedantry as he found them, and he believes MKC can produce a necessary demythologizing effect for graduate students. Bloom, on the other hand, sees this same fieriness as leading to “scorched-earth scholarship” (33) and laments the time she spent teaching MKC.

In part 2, Working the Field: Knowledge-Making Communities Since The Making of Knowledge in Composition, the contributors directly engage with a number of central concerns that MKC raises. Richard Fulkerson, in “The
Epistemic Paradoxes of ‘Lore’: From The Making of Knowledge in Composition to the Present (Almost),” wonders whether compositionists can find a way to distinguish good lore from bad lore, or whether these efforts are methodologically “predoomed” (60). In “Makers of Knowledge in Writing Centers: Practitioners, Scholars, and Researchers at Work,” Sarah Ligett, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price peruse twenty years of writing center scholarship, coding articles according to North’s methodological categories. Their findings point to a widening, and potentially troubling, gap between writing center practices and the types of writing center scholarship that are actually disseminated. Kelly Pender’s essay, “Philosophies of Invention Twenty Years after The Making of Knowledge in Composition,” focuses on North’s “Philosophers” category, showing how a vibrant community of “Philosophers” has coalesced around the dialectic between neoclassical and postmodern approaches to invention. Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski’s “Making Knowledge, Shaping History: Critical Consciousness and the Historical Impulse in Composition Studies,” presents MKC as an early model of the type of critical historicizing that subsequently shaped a great deal of Composition scholarship: MKC is the first major work in Composition that focuses on an individual’s historical and methodological location within a discipline rather than the discipline’s location within larger institutional ecologies. Victor Villanueva’s chapter, “Rhetoric Racism, and the Remaking of Knowledge-Making in Composition,” takes an opposing critical view of MKC, ironically noting that although North repeatedly calls for methodological self-awareness, he is blind to “the biases in his gaze” (122) and deaf to the voices of scholars of color. In short, North never speaks of gender or color in MKC—Villanueva points out that no persons of color are cited in MKC (122)—let alone the relationship of these identity categories with epistemology in Composition or Rhetoric.

Part 3, The Making of Knowledge in Composition and Education: Undergraduate, Graduate, and Beyond, gathers more structural or institutional essays together. Dunn argues, in “Practice as Inquiry, Stephen M. North’s Teaching and Contemporary Public Policy,” that compositionists need to capitalize on the wealth of scholarship done in the field to help their colleagues, their secondary-school counterparts, and the public at large understand and implement the best practices in writing. North, in his addition to the collection, “On the Place of Writing in Higher Education (and Why It Doesn’t Include Composition),” takes a much more insular stance. He feels that the “promise of Composition” (203) to transform the writing practices of a group of heterogeneous college freshmen into something stylistically inoffensive to other faculty, has remained, and will remain, unfulfilled. The only viable corrective is a “writing studies” program populated by self-selected students and faculty not responsible for any universal writing requirement. Joyce Kinkead recognizes the importance of closer professional relationships between writing professors and undergraduate compositionists, and in “Undergraduate Researchers as Makers of Knowledge in Composition in the Writing Studies Major,” she urges compositionists to engage in greater
collaborative research with undergraduate majors, to both teach future colleagues and to learn themselves. Matthew Jackson echoes the importance of the reciprocal relationship between compositionists and their students in “Pedagogy, Lore, and the Making of Being,” but he moves beyond knowledge construction and argues that an essential point missed by North is that pedagogical interaction is fundamentally intersubjective: teachers and students not only jointly construct knowledge, but they also jointly constitute one another’s being (167).

In the final section of CKC, Disciplinary Identities, Disciplinary Challenges: Unity, Multiplicity, and Fragmentation, the contributors try to locate Composition within larger disciplinary and discursive spheres. Drawing on the disciplinary criteria North originally used in MKC, Kristine Hansen in “Are We There Yet? The Making of a Discipline in Composition,” argues that Composition has not achieved disciplinarity, though it has made some progress since North’s original mapping of the field. The creation or adoption of more “writing studies” programs, an increase in writing majors, and a movement to produce greater experimental replication all point to the possibility of disciplinarity; however, a dearth of qualified staff, administration, and institutional support continues to vitiate this possibility (258-59). On the other hand, David Smit, in “Stephen North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition and the Future of Composition Studies ‘Without Paradigm Hope,’” argues that the increasing situatedness of Composition at theoretical, scholarly, and pedagogical levels (i.e., its postmodern status) precludes any possibility of disciplinarity: if compositionists do not share epistemology, methodology, ontology, or teleology, then there is no way to talk about their differences, let alone their similarities (225). Lance Massey, in “The Dis(Order) of Composition: Insights from the Rhetoric and Reception of The Making of Knowledge in Composition,” paints a more complicated picture of the field and MKC, arguing that both oscillate between modernity and postmodernity in potentially generative ways. Massey also tempers the more apocalyptic and all-or-nothing voices in the field, by arguing that Composition has always been a field in crisis and, “rather than dampen the present sense of urgency, this realization simply reminds us that, while we may never not be responding to a crisis of one sort or another, one of our jobs is always to try to understand this critical moment as clearly as possible” (319). Patricia Web Boyd, in “Making Space in Composition Studies: Discursive Ecologies as Inquiry,” and Brad Lucas and Drew Loewe, in “Coordinating Citations and the Cartography of Knowledge: Finding True North in Five Scholarly Journals,” try to understand this critical moment—Boyd explores how Ecocomposition might offer the sort of rich methodological pluralism that is integrative rather than disintegrative, while Lucas and Loewe show how bibliometric analysis could uncover ways in which a seemingly fragmented field can cohere over time through the scholarship its members produce.

CKC should be required reading in every graduate program in Composition, as MKC once (largely) was. This collection not only focuses on some of
the more pressing issues facing compositionists today, but it also contains some of the most influential voices in the field, and a short review like this one cannot capture their sophistication, elegance, and clarity. True, the voices contained in CKC speak in different registers and often at cross-purposes, and some might argue that any coherence in the collection is artificial. But the same arguments have been made about Composition, and these arguments miss the point that univocality or consensus is not a precondition of knowledge, nor is it desirable in many contexts. The variety of perspectives, methodologies, and conclusions in this volume give hope for a robustly pluralistic approach to knowledge-making in Composition, an approach that will not tear itself apart.

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Works Cited