If recent critical scholarship is any indication, the “social turn” has hardened into repressive orthodoxy and failed to keep pace with a changing world. In its policing of essentialism, refusal to engage nature or biology, and reliance on culture and language as exclusive routes to meaningful analysis, the social turn, at least dominant forms of it, seems to have plateaued. In current theoretical discourse, complexity reigns, as do nonoppositional stances weared by critique’s taste for subtraction, which has failed to slow the commodification of identity and culture, capitalism as an engine of social life in the United States, or abuses of dominant ideology. Primary tools of the social turn—textual and linguistic analysis as well as ideology critique—have proven important but limited. More to the point of this special issue, these tools have narrowed the scope of what counts as the social by foregrounding the constructed nature of texts, objects, activities, and bodies with little attention to how such constructions interact with natural systems, biology, animals, and other forms of matter. Karen Barad, in “Posthumanist Performativity” (2003), expresses representative disenchantment with the social turn as follows: “Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (120).

Laura R. Micciche teaches writing, rhetorical theory, and writing pedagogy at the University of Cincinnati. With Dale Jacobs, she edited A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies (Heinemann, 2003), and she is the author of Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching (Heinemann, 2007). Her current research focuses on writing partnerships, the topic of a book in progress and the basis for “Composing With,” a new section in the journal that she edits, Composition Studies (www.uc.edu/journals/composition-studies).

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What’s at stake in reconfigurations of social theory is nothing less than the big wide world that both includes and exceeds subjects, altering understandings of agency, identity, subjectivity, and power along the way. What follows is a selective summary of interdisciplinary efforts to make matter matter in theoretical conversations that I’m bundling under the category “new materialism,” a capacious enough naming to account for various movements aimed at foregrounding a relational ontology: ecosocial theories, material feminism, affect theory, complexity theory, digital humanities, animal studies, and actor-network theory. This research has helped me recognize writing as radically distributed across time and space, and as always entwined with a whole range of others. These ideas have made inroads into composition studies, as I’ll discuss in what follows, but the transfer to writing theory and practice remains very much in progress. Thus, after overviewing new materialist efforts to draft a robust concept of matter, I explore the value of this work for twenty-first-century writing studies through the lens of acknowledgments, a genre wherein relationality is dramatized. Because writing remains a central activity to the work of English studies broadly, this exploration resonates beyond composition studies, connecting to diverse contexts for writing practice and study.

**On New Materialism**

New materialism is a transdisciplinary effort to reshape materialist critiques in order to acknowledge and reckon with a much-expanded notion of agency, one that includes humans, nonhumans, and the environmental surround. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, editors of *New Materialisms*, argue that “any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century” requires focus on a multidimensional understanding of materiality, one that does not launch a de facto dismissal of nature and biology on grounds that they are “naively representational or naturalistic” (3). They find textual analysis, structural Marxism, and “radical constructivism,” for example, incapable of describing complex material realities and resulting radical agencies (2–3). Intersecting forms of matter frame our existence in large and small ways; political and cultural theory cannot afford to ignore or belittle this insight, as the following makes clear:

> Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives. (1)

Coole and Frost identify the following issues as salient exigencies for new materialisms: climate change, global capital and shifting population flows, the “biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms,” eating practices, methods of
procreation, and technology-drenched life activities (5–6). As they note, constructivist paradigms, in which I would include the social turn, are not equipped to address many of these issues because of their “allergy to ‘the real,’” particularly within hardcore postmodern discursive versions (6).

Finding equipment elsewhere, new materialism is indebted to René Descartes’ view of matter as corporeal, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *assemblage* concept, Bruno Latour’s view of comingling human and nonhuman actants, and various versions of chaos and complexity theory, all of which contribute to the guiding belief that matter is *active*, monkey-wrenching explanations of agency that attribute causality exclusively to human action. In short, humans and their intentions are decentered in this model in which every *thing* pulsates with what Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter.” Though new materialists find the insights of social constructionism valuable to political and cultural theory, they object to the automaticity that often accompanies the social, aptly summarized in the well-worn idea that everything is a social construction. On the whole, new materialists seek critical frameworks that honor daily life experiences in coexistence with ordinary and complex matter, from the life-supporting activity of worms to the web-like structure of geopolitical conflicts (compare to Bennett).

For new materialists, human exceptionalism is a dangerous fiction that distorts reality, identity, culture, and politics by giving little due to energies or actors that coexist with humans. Bennett terms this partnership “confederate agency” composed of “assemblages” (compare to Deleuze and Guattari), which she defines as living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. [...] Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. (23–24)

The 2012 outbreak of fungal meningitis across the United States can be understood through this framework. Some of the actants involved in this potentially life-threatening infection include the patients who sought treatment, the New England Compounding Center’s failure to sterilize drugs at minimum levels and to clean sterilizing tools, government deregulation of compounding facilities, the unchecked practice of moving drugs in batches across the nation, the use of metals and other tools to create and dispense medicine, the medicalization of back pain and high cost of physical therapy, and so forth. Agency is distributed across things and people and structures, resulting in a kind of Dewey-inspired collective public (compare to Bennett 100–104). For Dewey, as Bennett notes, publics form in response to problems:
“Problems come and go, and so, too, do publics: at any given moment, many different publics are in the process of crystallizing and dissolving” (100).

New materialism reconfigures agency in relation to individuals, things, and publics by delinking assumed relations between action and causality, generating instead diffuse, unstable configurations of blame and responsibility that make for less clear targets but for more robust accounting of the interstitial qualities of any single problem.

The political dimensions of new materialism are most pronounced in feminist work. Barad and Hekman argue that political discourses are not freestanding but are deeply embedded in other swarms of activity. Barad’s analysis of fetal imaging demonstrates how seeing the fetus as matter, made possible through sonograms, is necessary in order to attach political significance to the fetus. As Hekman notes, the fetus becomes a “political actor, and this fact has profound consequences for feminist politics” (106). Embodiment and agency, for feminists, are notably not treated as de-politicized effects of complexity or networked realities, as is the case in some versions of new materialism circulating in composition studies, most notably, by postprocess theorists (Dobrin; Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola; Kent, Post-Process). Within the current wave of postprocess research is a longing for theory unfettered by the distraction of pesky subjects and their unruly bodies. The aversion to diverse fleshiness is reaffirmed by the overrepresentation of men among the sources that tend to drive this research: Bruno Latour, Jean-François Lyotard, Edmund Burke, Jacques Derrida, Thomas Kent, Gilles Deleuze, and others (see Sandra Harding on Latour’s failure to account for feminist contributions to science studies). Meanwhile, some advocates, especially Sidney Dobrin in Postcomposition and a handful of contributors to Beyond Postprocess (Dobrin et al.), substitute talk of bodies, identities, and differences with the materiality of texts. In the grips of this approach, writing becomes an effect of tools and technologies, an activity that is unteachable, a ghostly production, and the province of theory and men (more on postprocess to follow).

Feminists, in contrast, have revised corporeality to acknowledge the mingling together of human and nonhuman matter, setting the groundwork for understanding identity as never entirely divorced from environment, medicine, science, toxins, and so forth. This view creates a case for distributed agency and for intersections with nature and environment, long a troubling pairing for feminism because of women’s long-standing vexed relation to nature. One of the main points that emerges from material feminist research is that all forms of matter, living and nonliving, are significant to sociocultural, political, as well as biological systems.

Affect is also an important partner for new materialism. An especially evocative example, Kathleen Stewart’s Ordinary Affects, develops a poetics of everyday affective experiences and cultural politics. Ordinary affects, she writes, are “a problem or question emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers; a tangle
of potential connections” (4). To represent the woven texture of ordinary affects, Stewart develops a series of vignettes and observations that illustrate affect’s coequal relation with objects, places, things, time, and more. Echoing the work referenced earlier, Stewart views agency—whether affective or otherwise—as incredibly diffuse, codependent, and unstable. She writes that agency is

lived through a series of dilemmas: that action is always a reaction; that the potential to act always includes the potential to be acted on, or to submit; that the move to gather a self to act is also a move to lose the self; that one choice precludes others; that actions can have unintended and disastrous consequences; and that all agency is frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things. (86)

There’s nothing comforting or familiar about this explanation for teachers, theorists, or practitioners of writing. And yet, those of us who organize ourselves around writing in one way or another have to reckon with a shifting critical consciousness and the implications for writing after the heyday of the social turn.

**Comp Matter**

The social turn in composition studies widened contexts for theorizing writing, shifting attention from the individual writer (the legacy of expressivist and cognitive process models) to larger political, institutional, and cultural contexts of writing. Along the way, process pedagogy got a makeover that is aptly represented by Bruce McComiskey’s social-process model, first articulated by him in 1999. He advocates “a cyclical model of the writing process, one that accounts for the composing strategies of individual and collaborative writers as well as the socio-discursive lives of texts.” Building on Marx’s materialist “cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption” (382), McComiskey uses magazine advertisements to illustrate this model in practice: students focus on the general purpose and slant of a magazine, its distribution and circulation, and socially derived consumption practices. The latter point is achieved in several ways, one of which is by asking students to research how representatives from diverse cultural groups respond to particular ads. “These different responses,” writes McComiskey, reveal “the polysemous character of cultural values, and they foster a more inclusive ethic in students’ critical writing” (395). The social is not monolithic in this account but shifts in accordance with orientations and attachments.

McComiskey’s model, representative in its general approach of the pedagogical imprint made by the social turn, prioritizes superstructural forces—institutions, culture, politics—over minuitia of producing and distributing writing, elements that, in my view, have become heightened as writing practices have become more ephemeral. Digital composing environments, the likes of which were in their infancy when McComiskey and advocates of the social turn were writing, constitute the new
normal. The simultaneous increasing invisibility and hyper-pervasiveness of writing activity, vividly detailed by Kathleen Blake Yancey in her 2004 CCCC chair’s address, illuminates why materialism has begun to find its way (back) into composition scholarship (for earlier contributions, see Cooper, “Ecology”; Haas; Prior; Syverson). That is, as delivery modes change, and as the very materials used to produce writing undergo dramatic transformations, awareness of writing platforms, tools, habits, and supports has intensified.

That awareness has translated into an uptick in research focused on what might seem the mundaneness of writing practices, in effect widening social scenes of writing (Geisler and Slattery; Rivers and Weber; Shipka, “This”). Kendall Leon and Stacey Pigg’s study of graduate student writing practices serves as a case in point. For their research participants, digital multitasking is normative. Writing is anything but single-minded: “Filling out forms is juxtaposed against creating academic knowledge through writing acts; checking email and connecting with friends, family, and acquaintances happens in the same moment as producing words that will eventually become presentations or publications” (8). Writing isn’t a private activity, one that happens only in classrooms, heads, a room of one’s own, or at kitchen tables, nor is it a set of linear tasks or a unimodal endeavor. It is elliptical, immersive in diverse environments, dispersed, ordinary (not rarified), mediated, ongoing, and coexistent with other activities.

Of course, before digitality became a way of being, writing scholars paid attention to other seemingly mundane writing activities. Early contributions include Janet Emig’s focus on hand, eye, brain activities during the composing process (Web of Meaning); Sondra Perl’s exploration of the sensory experience of writing; and Christina Haas’s work on writing as a technology, “for without the crayon or the stylus or the Powerbook, writing simply is not writing” (x–xi). Working in a similar vein, Margaret Syverson’s sustained study of writing as an ecological system examines the interplay of writers, readers, texts, and environments large and small. Syverson, influenced by complexity theory, foreshadows many new materialist principles, though she does not give as much attention to embodiment and nonhuman participation as do scholars in that movement. Nonetheless, Syverson prepares us to consider writing matter as at once encompassing and minute, complex and ordinary, situated and distributed, individualistic and embedded in “co-evolving” environments (xiv). For Syverson, “writers, readers and texts” make up a larger system that includes environmental structures, such as pens, paper, computers, books, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, printing presses, and other natural and human-centered features, as well as other complex systems operating at various levels of scale, such as families, global economies, publishing systems, theoretical frames, academic disciplines, and language itself. (5; see also Prior)
Admittedly, Syverson’s ecosocial model seems to have been underread in composition studies writ large. No doubt her book’s emergence in 1999, during the field’s political turn, has something to do with this. Ecological approaches to writing studies have not gained much traction for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the perception that natural systems and political ones are oppositional, a perception no longer sustainable in the face of changing realities and, especially, elevated risk—whether environmental, nutritional, or otherwise—that is an ordinary and increasingly visible part of everyday life (for example, Alaimo and Hekman; Parr; Pollan; Sagarin).

How then does writing and its companion terms change within the context of a robust materialism? While the social turn in composition has taken various practical and theoretical forms—collaborative writing and peer review, critical analysis of cultural practices, heightened awareness of sociocultural differences and their reproduction through dominant discourses—the emerging materialist focus in composition studies is as yet inchoate. Next, I catalog some ongoing and possible new directions for writing scholarship suggested by new materialism, and then take a look at the genre of acknowledgments in academic books, where concepts such as distributed agency and human-nonhuman partnerships are often explicitly articulated.

Postprocess and Writing With

The social turn configured writing as a mode of social action—a tool for enacting agency and, quite often, change on a large and small scale. Writing also became a tool for expressing cultural identities, developing awareness of experience as both personal and collective, and joining a conversation that does not begin or end with a single individual. In contrast to cognitive models, writing was theorized as a process embedded in sociopolitical, familial contexts, complete with power inequities and uneven access to literacy tools (see Heath). And academic writing was often viewed as inseparable from the politics of discourse and the complexities of community membership, belonging, and outsider status (see Bartholomae).

None of these configurations of writing is oppositional to new materialism, but the latter pivots away from the individual-community binary and toward writing as a curatorial, distributed act. Writing, through this lens, is not a repository for real or invented identity or a discrete expression of authorship (a familiar postmodern charge against modernism) but is a multimodal, nonlinear process of “collecting, assembling, sifting, structuring, and interpreting”—that is, curating materials to create narrative, identity, community, or other significant meanings (UCLA 9). Geoffrey Sirc, in “Box-Logic,” advances this approach by extrapolating from Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell poetic collector practices valuable for an aesthetic of composition, one that envisions students as “passionate designers” (Sirc 117). Texts become part
of an exhibit, and students become “curators, mounting another show of the ever-evolving permanent collection at their musées imaginaires” (188). The goal is not coherence or linear argumentation; it’s developing “an aesthetic of the found object, of interesting, quirky small-t truths one stumbles upon” (120). Everything matters to writing; all matter is fair game. Like new materialists, Sirc configures agency and energy as emergent not from one site of meaning—that is, a text—but from a conglomeration of source material linked in diverse, often unpredictable designs.

Postprocess theorists also emphasize writing’s “withness,” though from a different point of view. Resistant to describing writing as a process or a product, Kent describes writing from “the postprocess mind-set” as that which “never constitutes a thing-in-itself such as a discrete process, system, or conventional act” (“Preface” xix). If not a “thing-in-itself,” then writing would seem to be a “thing-with-others,” albeit definitively not with subjects or subjectivity. Here’s Dobrin and coauthors describing the logic of this position: “Because writing is nomadic and paralogic, the ability to teach or learn it dissolves along with the impetus for disciplines that specialize in the teaching of writing, demanding instead a greater focus on theorizing writing qua writing sans subject” (17). The causal structure of this sentence, and by extension, some versions of postprocess theory, eludes me. If writing is uncodifiable, irreducible, contingent on use—following Kent’s definition of paralogy (Paralogic Rhetoric)—how do these features necessarily translate into an inability to learn and teach writing? And why or how does this inability lead to the conclusion that we must theorize writing apart from subjects? This anti-subject version of postprocess is a response to the tyranny of “process” in the field’s vocabulary, vision, and sense of self, but it’s unclear why the appropriate response is to install in its place what Sirc I think rightly calls “theory heaven, a spectral world into which one can hypothesize what happens to the text when it encounters the equally unreal audience it conjures” (“Salon” 215). Anti-subject postprocess theory suffers from mission ambivalence: we know what the movement is against, but not what it’s for.

Other forms of postprocess, if a bit opaque, seem less inclined to embrace composition unencumbered by the material reality of teaching, writing, and students. Barbara Couture, for example, states that writing teachers “need to create occasions for students to become more overtly aware of the link between writing and the way they are in the world and to become more critically attuned to this dynamic” (26). For Couture, writing, like being, is always in flux and requires that we attend to shifting consequences that accompany states of change, calling to mind reflective and rhetorical pedagogies (27–28). Taking relationality in a different direction, Joe Hardin contends that postprocess pedagogy, which rejects authorial presence and a universalized writing system, offers instruction in “processes of textual circulation, exhibition, and collaboration,” resulting in a pedagogical cosmopolitanism (66). In
a similar spirit, Byron Hawk contextualizes postprocess as an expression of post-humanism, which “includes humans but decenters them in relational models of assemblage and expression” (77). In this construct, the world consists of always shifting relational nodes that cross species and contexts; thus, writing too should be more attuned to uncertainty and difference because these are key features of life’s rhythms.

An arm of research consistent with postprocess thinking, which does not typically self-identify as “postprocess,” engages with materials and technologies of writing often overlooked, in no small part because of print culture’s centuries-long relative stability. Although a great deal of work in composition studies has shed light on digital technologies in relation to writing practices, I’ll highlight here scholarly work on low-fi, ubiquitous technologies like paper, which have received less attention (see also Baron). This work is significant for the way it brings notice to production and consumption practices tied to ordinary writing props that have long ceased to be novel, and are mostly unrecognizable as technologies. In one such instance, Peter Mortensen investigates the toxicity of paper production—the environmental, health, and safety threats posed by papermaking. Linking material culture and literacy rates, Mortensen argues that “literacy as a material practice [is] bound up in cycles of production, consumption, and waste” and is “felt unevenly across regions in the United States and increasingly, across regions worldwide” (398).

Following this trail, Catherine Prendergast and Roman Ličko contrast paper consumption in a US university and a Slovakian one, revealing how, at the former, faculty expect paper to be widely available yet fail to realize how costly it is (Prendergast’s department spent $11,424 on paper during 2007–08; 204). In Slovakia, however, the scarcity of paper and minimal access to a photocopier make plainly evident paper’s expense and identity as a central technology of writing. English department faculty are allotted seventy copies per month of teaching, and those copies are limited to exams. The authors note that “Roman, with 60–75 students in one course, is hard pressed to adhere to the 70-photocopies a month limit, even if only for exams. In order to fit his exam into the limit, he narrows margins, chooses small font sizes, and worries about the resulting legibility” (205).

A. Suresh Canagarajah’s research makes all too clear that rendering ordinary writing tools invisible runs the risk of overlooking the material complexities of composing in specific social and political environments. Canagarajah identifies as a periphery scholar from Sri Lanka who has migrated to the center as his career has taken him to the United States. Describing the conditions that framed academic research in the 1980s in his home country, he explains that paper was hard to come by, so he and his colleagues used recycled pamphlets. Revision, in these circumstances, “depended on the amount of paper one could find” (9). Because electronic and postal communication was also severely limited, he and his peers frequently learned of new developments in their fields, new books, or announcements of fellowships or
conferences after the fact, limiting their ability to participate in the conversations of their contemporaries. In his own research on periphery scholars, Canagarajah faced extreme circumstances, such as when an interview with a research participant was cancelled because “of a bombing raid or some other emergency” (14). In another example, he describes writing by kerosene-fueled lamps in the absence of electricity.

Shifting from environmental effects to ones of form, John Trimbur and Karen Press focus on the page. Far from an empty site of inscription, a page is “active and alive, with its own invisible understructures and semiotic potentialities” (95). A written page, they explain, consists of “material forms, such as the type and quality of paper and ink in use; its own conventions, such as the rhetoric of transparency and the grid as an underlying compositional matrix; and the labor of composing pages through the available means of production, which change over time” (95–96). This argument is consistent with Trimbur’s discussion of delivery as a neglected rhetorical canon, which he believes “has led writing teachers to equate the activity of composing with writing itself and to miss altogether the complex delivery systems through which writing circulates” (189–90; see also Ridolfo and DeVoss). This work highlights the materials of writing. In order to make something, we need materials that are themselves endowed with energy and agency, contributing to the final product in nontrivial ways. Without a page (screen, stone tablet, scroll, wall, and so on) as a framing device, for example, what is writing? How would it present? The line of thought developed here operates as a thinking partner for shifting attention onto relational matters, in addition to tools and forms, as writing essentials.

Frameworks for understanding writing are no doubt a necessary part of this discussion. Modern composition studies has largely relied on the rhetorical canon and social construction as central explanatory systems of writing and communication. Looking elsewhere illuminates the extent to which our orientations are stuck, not adventurous enough to match the creative complexities of our time. For example, depictions of collaboration in composition studies, largely informed by social construction and second-wave feminism, have not yet caught up with worldviews depicted by scientists, animal advocates, and other contemporary thinkers. To cite just one example of how collaboration is being rethought, marine ecologist Rafe Sagarin’s *Learning from the Octopus* transfers knowledge of biological ecosystems and species adaptability to national security systems. Sagarin exploits the co-materiality of humans and nonhumans—both live in risk environments, both develop adaptation skills for survival—to demonstrate that security is a biological issue as much as a political one. This insight, helped in part by his study of octopus adaptation strategies, leads Sagarin to argue for a new mindset about security, one based on distributed agency, collaboration, and adaptation rather than on costly solutions that create “heavy” responses to threat, ultimately not adaptable to evolving threats. Heavy-handed security measures at US airports are a case in point. Rather than adapting to a flux
environment composed of threats that are themselves flexible and highly adaptive to changing environments, airport searches announce their intentions through intrusive and expensive measures. These measures are so specific, so dependent on certain kinds of threats, that they practically solicit inventive work-arounds.

Scholarship in the transdisciplinary digital humanities movement also offers revised concepts of adaptation and collaboration. Collaborative authorship is a mainstay in digital humanities, perhaps most clearly materialized in the open source community. The authors of *Digital Humanities* explain that open source is rooted in software development initiatives and offers “a fresh way of thinking about how robust, stable systems could be the product of multiple, autonomous hands rather than of centralized, top-down, proprietary models of development” (Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, Presner, and Schnapp 78). Digital humanities projects transform the “singularity of the ‘I-subject’” into the “collaborative authorship of a ‘we-subject’” (84).

These examples suggest a need to redefine collaboration as partnerships that include and exceed intentional ones established between people. Such partnerships might be described in terms of coexistence. To think of writing as a practice of coexistence is to imagine a merging of various forms of matter—objects, pets, sounds, tools, books, bodies, spaces, feelings, and so on—in an activity not solely dependent on one’s control but made possible by elements that codetermine writing’s possibility. As Collin Brooke and Thomas Rickert put it, “[T]he world and its objects are essential to the ability to think, speak, write, make, and act” (168). They seek a reconstitution of the social, one that acknowledges “our situations—as constituted both by ourselves and by the ‘objects’ around us” (169). Likewise, Jody Shipka frames the profoundly collaborative experience of composing as foundational to communication: “when our practices do not ask students to consider the complex and highly distributed processes associated with the production of texts (and lives and people), we run the risk of overlooking the fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice” (*Toward* 13).

Writing is more than something one is called to do, dependent on time and energy, a linchpin to academic advancement; it is also codependent interaction with a whole host of others—materials, power grids, people, animals, rituals, feelings, stuff, and much else (see Cooper, “Being”). With such complexity in mind, what kinds of theories and models can do a better job accounting for writing’s materiality? If, as Barad asserts, “[a]gency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world” (135), then what are implications for writer and reader agency in collaboration with diverse forms of and partnerships with matter? In lieu of ready answers, I put ideas about writing, collaboration, and agency into play in the final section by focusing on the genre of written acknowledgments, a textual site where writers tip their hats to active co-participants in writing processes seldom recognized by theories of composing or models of practice. Right under our noses, writers reveal the
ordinary and extraordinary forces that make writing possible. The expected nature of this mundane, overdetermined genre offers unexpected insights about writing.

**Writing Debts**

Acknowledgments in academic books have gotten longer and more personally revealing over the past twenty years or so (Caesar; Cronin; Hyland, “Dissertation”). Despite the marginal status of acknowledgments, they are frequently read first and with great interest, as I’m discovering in my research for a book on acknowledgments where these ideas get fuller treatment. Most of the acknowledgments I have read average three to four pages; the majority conform to the following formula, roughly organized in this order:

- Opening statement signaling that, like every other writing project, this one benefited from insights, commentary, and advice from others
- Listing of those others and of institutional, personal, and emotional supports along the way
- Listing, where relevant, of venues where earlier versions of the work were presented, followed by thanks to groups who made those presentations possible and permissions granted to publish chapters or excerpts of previously published works
- And, finally, thanks to close family and friends, without whom the project would not have been possible

Despite the more-or-less general observance of genre conventions across acknowledgments, I have found that writers do more than reproduce clichés. They produce gestures of indebtedness that reveal writing’s economy of connectedness, often repressed by the argument or exploration that follows. Thus, the genre shouldn’t be dismissed as euphoric, mere formality, or rote expression. In addition, its value exceeds gift giving, assertions of scholarly identity, and sycophantic dissertation conventions—purposes that have been identified in existing literature about acknowledgments (for example, “Gratitude”; Hyland, “Graduates’ Gratitude”; Thompson). Odd confessions and occasionally maudlin expressions of gratitude aside, acknowledgments present a unique view of writing practices and writers as enmeshed in varying partnerships with others, organizations, animals, feelings, sound, and places. Partnerships that constitute the very condition of writing itself.

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In the acknowledgments section of my dissertation, I thanked various people—my mentor, committee members, family, friends—and then I wrote, “I also want to express my deep appreciation for Peanut and Tiny, who taught me the importance of wit, sound sleep, and playfulness. Peanut’s acrobatics have especially convinced me of the importance of mobility and spunk” (Micciche vi–vii).
I don’t think there’s anything particularly unusual about the mention of cats (or other nonhuman creatures) as significant to writing projects. In fact, while researching for my larger project on this subject, I learned that I’m in pretty good company. Here’s Donna Strickland’s acknowledgment in *The Managerial Unconscious*: “On the home front, a number of cats lent a great deal of warmth and a general sense of well-being to the composing process, including the much missed Kitty and Clyde and the current throng consisting of Casey, Gabe, Hansel, and Simon” (xiii). The cats, as it happens, figure more prominently than her “dearest companion,” a human, named in the next brief sentence. In another example, an author of *GenAdmin* moves seamlessly between thanking her coauthors and animal friends: “To my coauthors for making me think and laugh. To Cima and Eva for their furry friendship” (C. Charlton, J. Charlton, Graban, Ryan, and Stolley v). The proximity of the sentences, revealing proximity in thought and feeling, suggests that animals are not mere props or background to the work of writing but are intimately intertwined in it.

This point is echoed by Patricia Donahue, who calls attention to dogs in her acknowledgment of *Local Histories*, “The bichon frises, Lily and Isabelle, remained steadfast in their devotion” (xiv). Her like-minded coeditor, Gretchen Flesher Moon, also praises four-legged contributions to the collaboration, noting, “Brisk early morning walks with Fritz and Jeb (dogs of no discernible breed, but of great curiosity) made long days poring over the manuscript physically bearable” (xiv). Editors of a scholarly collection credit the meals they made for their “cooperative household of seven students and two dogs” as the beginning of their collaboration (Freedman and Holmes xv).

Just recently, singer-songwriter Fiona Apple wrote an open letter to her fans in South America, explaining that she was canceling her tour there to be with her dying dog Janet. Listing the ways in which Janet has been faithful to her and important to her well-being, Apple notes that Janet was “under the piano when I wrote songs, barked any time I tried to record anything, and she was in the studio with me, all the time we recorded the last album” (Popova). The pervasive presence of animals in scenes of composing like the one Apple describes is anecdotally apparent in Facebook posts as well. I regularly see posts by friends and colleagues featuring photos of cats, dogs, and, notably, lizards perched beside computers or slumbering on or near open books or drafts. The accompanying text often suggests that animals are fully present in composing scenes—and very often light-heartedly depicted as direct contributors to composing. A friend recently posted a photo of herself reading in bed, flanked by her dog, who she identified as a “research partner.”

Feeling, too, especially love, figures prominently in writer acknowledgments. Victor Villanueva, writing of his wife’s importance to his work, confides that from her he knows “of magic, of loving. And knowing love opens up possibilities, allows one to be utopian in the midst of all that sometimes seems hopeless” (ix). Ann Cvetkovich,
author of *Archive of Feelings*, likewise writes in euphoric terms about the role her partner has played in her life: “And then there’s Gretchen Phillips, who for over ten years now has loved me passionately and extravagantly. In her perpetual insistence that I follow my heart’s desire, she has helped me remember that writing can be a labor of love, and she has given me a constant supply of reasons to love her back” (xi). Frankie Condon links her book to her husband’s generous love: “The writing of this book is but a small portion of what that love makes possible” (xii–xiii).

Also in the confines of the acknowledgments, writers frequently reveal locale, environment, and place, rooting writing in particular scenes and temporal contexts. Editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, for example, insert readers into intimate scenes, attaching tangible meaning to the environmental surround that made their work possible. Melissa Gregg begins, “Partway through the introduction to this collection, it will become clear why it was significant that I read Greg’s final draft while I was cramped on the floor of a late train during a long and crowded commute. I write these words from a new home, having embarked on an experiment to disrupt some old habits and hopefully allow more time to register ‘the stretching’” (ix). Her coeditor, Gregory Seigworth, adds that “While Melissa composed her acknowledgments in the cramped space of a late-night train from Sydney, I write mine within another kind of cramped space, another kind of long, dark train—it is the end of eight years of the Bush-Cheney administration here in the United States” (xi). Others are less specific but no less grateful for the places where they encountered inspiring or strengthening exchanges. For example, Megan Boler thanks “the strangers with whom I’ve conversed at bus stops, in cabs, at academic conferences, and along the wild path of life” (xxviii).

These selective examples begin to sketch a reality of writing perhaps more true to lived experience than existing models of writing have yet recognized: writing is part and parcel of the dwelt-in world. Anthropologist Tim Ingold’s description of “ontology of dwelling” is relevant here. This concept signifies “taking the human condition to be that of a being immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical, and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world” (34). Writing is codependent with things, places, people, and all sorts of others. To write is to be part of the world, even when viewed as an ironic turn away to an interior space of quiet and mystery.

Yet we often proceed as teachers and scholars as if writing can be plucked from the everyday and treated as a stand-alone activity, one that reaches outcomes, fills preexisting genres, serves as stable evidence of one kind or another. As critical perspectives shift and writing studies continues to mature, we can seize this opportunity to imagine writing as something more than fulfilling outcomes and satisfying utilitarian purposes, both of which tend to dominate national conversations about educational standards, moves toward making (noncreative) writing only as valid as the
assessment tool devised to evaluate it, and writing as something to be waived and/or administered. There’s a significant body of research in composition studies, as noted earlier, already challenging static approaches to writing pedagogy by engaging the whole material surround of writing, going beyond process-product binaries. But in a highly professionalized field with a stubborn service identity, and an educational climate that devalues the liberal arts, it’s tempting to forget that writing is an expression of the human condition, a worldly activity.

For a shift in orientation, Donna Haraway is a reliable thinking partner. Writing about how critical projects relate to nature, she offers a potential challenge to writing studies made apparent when substituting “writing” for “nature” in the following excerpt: “We must find another relationship to [writing] besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia. No longer able to sustain the fictions of being either subjects or objects, all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute [writing] must find a new ground for making meanings together” (158). Haraway offers a provocation for a renewed relationship to writing that migrates away from the familiarity of “the social.” Writing involves everything you do, everything you encounter, everything you are when making sense of the world through language. Writing is contaminated, made possible by a mingling of forces and energies in diverse, often distributed environments. Writing is defined, ultimately, by its radical withness.

Works Cited


———. “Preface: Righting Writing.” Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola xi-xxii.


