Object Oriented Writing Theory: Writers, Texts, Ecologies

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ABSTRACT

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Object-Oriented Writing Theory: Writers, Texts, Ecologies

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What is writing? For most of the history of writing studies, writing has been assumed to be the activities of a writer, a writing subject. More recently, however, scholars have realized writing is ecological; it emerges through complex dynamic interactions of humans, non-humans, places, technologies, bodies, etc. In this recognition of writing’s ecology, writing studies, however, has still not fully theorized writing itself, its being, its ontology. What is it that circulates and connects humans and non-humans, and places to form ecologies and networks? What is writing?

Also, while writing is so much more than the actions of writers, writers still act individually and in groups. As writing studies recognizes that the concept of the subject inhibits ability to explain writing, it must somehow still account for individual experience, individual agency. What is writing, and what is a writer?

This dissertation articulates a theory of what writing is, an ontology, that does not depend on a concept of subjectivity while still accounting for individual experience and agency. It does this through a turn to the new realist philosophies of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). OOO radically defends individual, different, and autonomous objects as the basic unit of being, which allows for an object(ive) agent as an alternative to subjectivity. Theorizing such an agent as a writer reveals that writing emerges as the operation through which objects become aware or sentient;
it is the production of meaning through selective physical marking that begins first as the recording of memory in the brain. The emergence of writing, thus, allows for consciousness. Writing, as an object, is the unification of all continuing selective marking that generates meaning. From this understanding of writers and writing, this project continues on to articulate a model of communication and textual production, arguing for the recognition of all objects, writers, texts, bodies, technologies, etc. as individual autonomous objects.

Building from the agency of objects, then, this project radically connects individual experience with the dynamic interactions of writing ecologies in a way that defends the individuality, autonomy, and agency of all objects.
To Juli, always. To Greyson, Charlotte, Colin, Evangeline, and Taran for making it all worth while. To Joan Clyde Whicker (1947–2009) for always believing in what she could not see.
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CHAPTER 1: WRITING THEORY WRITING

I began this project as an attempt to articulate a process model in the face of the challenges of postprocess. Writing, however, has led me far afield from my original reaction to reading postprocess texts. My engagement with texts, colleagues, conferences, and so forth, took me in the direction of complexity and ecological theories, and this project became an attempt to articulate an ecological model of the writing process. After Sidney I. Dobrin published Postcomposition, I found that Dobrin articulates just such an ecological model and my research began to focus on the speculative turn in continental philosophy as I searched for a way to distinguish my project from Dobrin’s. As I read more and more of the works of Object-Oriented Ontology philosophers like Levi R. Bryant and Graham Harman, I was drawn toward the allure of objects. At about the time I was beginning to make articulating an object-oriented ontology of writing part of my ecological process model in the Spring of 2013, I headed to the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Las Vegas Nevada.

At CCCC, I attended a panel by Dobrin, Sean Morey, and John Tinnell titled New Media Ecologies in which each of the presenters addressed writing in a way that challenged traditional understandings of writing as alphabetic print. They focused on topics from the ecology of multimodal digital texts to the texts of sharks. During the question and answer time, I asked the panelists the very questions that have come to drive this project: “What is writing when we understand that modes from audio to digital to gestural are all still writing? What is writing if we acknowledge that computers and technologically augmented sharks and even non-
augmented animals can write?” In response, Dobrin gave what I immediately felt was an unsatisfactory answer. He reminded me that in the previous session, I myself had given a presentation on an ecological process model and been asked by an audience member how we can know when a text has emerged, to which I had responded that we can only know after the fact. Dobrin’s response to my question was the same, we can only know after the fact what writing is, which, I infer, means we can only know writing happened by its productions, circulations, relations. Writing is identifiable only by a lingering “Writing was Here” note. It was from this moment that I became more committed to articulating a more satisfying answer to my questions.

From the beginnings of my work, I have been pushed and pulled, drawn and alienated by texts, conversations, colleagues, technologies, language, presentation papers, and the other texts that I have produced until I have arrived at the theory I am articulating here and in the following chapters. The intense labor of drafting out these articulations of a complex and difficult theory, one that delves into topics and concepts that often seem foreign to writing studies and alienating to writing scholars, has often felt like an intense struggle with readers, with drafts that simply refuse to be other than what they have come to be, with a language that so often just doesn’t seem to work, and with technologies that often disrupt everything by their actions and affordances. Far from feeling that I have followed an intentional purpose in this journey, I have felt written, drawn toward texts, concepts, and my own emerging ideas; I have felt far from control, far from equilibrium. Even my own usual writing habits have been upended as I have had to labor through arduous
messy texts that at times I cannot believe I produced. Little of this project has proceeded at all like I could ever say I “intended” or even anticipated. This brief sketch of my journey doesn’t even begin to convey the extent to which I have felt, in Avital Ronell’s words, “body-snatched, in a trance, haunted” (D. Davis, “Confessions” 259). To write, as Robert P. Yagelski says, “is continually to confront the impossibility of control” (81).

Writing theory since the social turn has been directed toward explaining this complexity of writing and the recognition that so much of it is outside the control of the writer. This struggle with complexity and lack of control is evident in the ludic postmodern theories of Victor Vitanza (“From Heuristic”) and Gregory Ulmer (Heuretics), in Byron Hawk’s neo-vitalism (Counter-History), and even as the motivating force in postprocess that leads Thomas Kent to argue that “the hermeneutic dance that moves to the music of our situatedness, cannot be fully choreographed in any meaningful way, for in this dance, our ability to improvise, to react on the spot to our partners, matters most” (Introduction 5). Writing, in other words, is too unpredictable to choreograph, even from a perspective that still maintains some limited control of the dance.

It is this unpredictability, uncontrollability, and powerful creativity that emerges from the interactions of forces beyond the actions of writers that led me, and is increasingly leading writing studies to ecological theories of writing.¹ These theories, even more than previous social theories, attempt to account for writing in

¹ See Dobrin Postcomposition; Hawk Counter-History; Rickert Ambient for differing examples of fully developed ecological theories of writing and rhetoric.
ways that decenter the human writing subject. As Sidney I. Dobrin argues, “in order to develop more accurate ways of describing what writing is and what it does, the subject must be removed not just from the center of the stage but from the theater and perhaps the entire theater district” (Postcomposition 76). Writing, in ecological theories is not the actions of a human subject but a production of the emergent agency of ecologies. As Byron Hawk explains, “Rather than objects causing effects or subjects determining ends, they combine with many other elements in the environment to create conditions of possibility that enable potential futures, not necessary ones—if one piece of the assemblage is taken out, changed, or added, possible futures are changed” (“Reassembling” 83). In this case an abundance of contingent factors determining which possible results will actually occur create the unpredictability and uncontrollability of interactions with writing. To explain the complexities of writing, in other words, requires that writing scholars recognize that it is much more than just the mechanical, cognitive, or social activities of writers.

Whatever writing is, it is ecological.

In opposition to this, however, as I have written, I have also experienced myself as a writer, as a choice-maker, choosing to situate myself in particular currents of thought and not others. I have not always simply gone with the flow of the journey I am following. I have resisted many of the theoretical concepts I have encountered, rejected many of those that are part of philosophical agendas not germane to my own work. I have chosen how to respond to feedback, and, whatever their resistance, I have worked to dramatically alter and write these chapters from the materials of earlier drafts. I experience myself as a writer in ways that can’t be
accounted for as merely a node in a network (Hawk, “Toward” 841), or even as a “posthuman” who flows “as the surrounding environment demands or imposes it” (Dobrin, Postcomposition 65). As Marilyn Cooper argues, “We experience ourselves as causal agents, and any theory... needs somehow to account for that experience” (“Rhetorical Agency” 437). Accounting for that experience while at the same time accounting for writing’s ecological sociality, however, seems to be the challenge.

This paradox is not new; Patricia Bizzell addresses it in her critique of cognitive process models where she divides composition theories between inner and outer directed theories, with inner theories being those that focus on the activities and experiences of writers and outer directed those that attend to writing as social (“Cognition”). It is this conflict that Peter Elbow addresses in “Closing my Eyes As I Speak,” in which he argues that writers should attend to their own ideas and experiences first before considering an audience. More recently, it is at the heart of the move toward ecological theories I noted above and those theories critique of subjectivity. Evident in this critique is the fact that writing studies has not been able to overcome this divide, to articulate an account of writing that explains both writing’s sociality and individual writing experiences in a way that does not subsume one in the other. I argue that this is because of writing theory’s continued focus on subjects and subjectivity, as ecological theories of writing argue, but it is also, perhaps more significantly, because writing theory has not fully articulated an ontology of writing, a theory of what writing is as an object of study. The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to theorize writing’s ontology, articulate a theory of what
writing is, that does not depend on a concept of subjectivity while still accounting for individual experience and agency, and that explains writing’s ecological sociality.

In my efforts to accomplish this somewhat ambitious task, I turn to the new realist philosophies of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)\(^2\) based in the works of Graham Harman, Levi R. Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton as well as forerunners to this current of thought like Bruno Latour and drawing on many other realist, materialist, and object or thing oriented thinkers.\(^3\) OOO radically defends individual different and autonomous objects as the basic unit of being. OOO’s account of objects allows me to articulate a possible object(ive) agent as an alternative to subjectivity and, building from this account of agency, to articulate an object-oriented ontology of writing that radically connects individual experience and agency with the dynamic interactions of writing ecologies in a way that radically defends the agency and accounts for the actions of all the objects involved in writing, both human and non-human. In short, I articulate a new theory of writing that attempts to change the way we think of the relationship between our individual agency and experiences and the ecological processes of writing in which they arise through influences and operations beyond our experiences.\(^4\) In doing so, I further

\(^{2}\) I generally reference individual thinkers in my accounts of OOO, but I will sometimes refer to OOO as a unified philosophy when I discuss those definitive concepts on which the various individuals who identify with this current of thought seem to agree.

\(^{3}\) See Sara Ahmed, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda. Roy Bhaskar, Niklas Luhmann, and Quentin Meillassoux for examples of new materialism, object-oriented, and realist thinkers that are not directly associated with object-oriented philosophies but share many similar views.

\(^{4}\) I do not claim that this theory will “solve” the problems or conflicts between those who focus on individual experiences and those who focus on writing’s sociality; I
argue, this theory accounts for individual agency in such a way that allows for effective individual and group political action to alter the course of ecologies, counteracting the seeming determinism of ecological theories.

In the course of articulating this theory, I conclude that writing first emerges as the operation through which objects become aware or sentient; it is the production of meaning through selective physical marking that begins first as the recording of memory in the brain. It is the emergence of writing that allows for consciousness; thought is writing; writing is thought. From this beginning, I show how the ontology of objects allows writing to extend beyond the consciousness of sentient objects to their participation in the emergence of communication and ecologies. Writing, as an object, is the unification of all continuing meaning production and circulation, all the vast system of selective marking that generates meaning.

In setting about this project, then, I face several challenges all of which are complicated by the difficult abstract and sometimes alienating object-oriented philosophy and its terms I draw on. To articulate a theory that does what I argue it does, however, requires that I disrupt and change the familiar in order to arrive at different conclusions. Doing so in a way that is at least mostly accessible, however, is a gradual process. I embark on that process in several stages in the following chapters.

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only claim to offer a possible solution that at least presents an alternative and more complex way of understanding the conflict.
Counter-Points in Writing Theory

In chapter two, while I argue that writing theory has, to this point, not been clearly delineated from composition or rhetorical theory, I begin such a delineation in order to argue that writing theory, at those times when significant attention has been given to it has entailed three significant developments in what has otherwise been a fairly consistent history: the understanding of writing as a process, the realization of writing’s sociality that emerged as research into writing processes began to reveal that process theory did not adequately account for writing’s complexity, and the recognition that this sociality extends beyond humans to non-humans in ecologies. Finally, I note that while the move to ecological and other systems theories is an important and needed development in writing theory, this move reveals the two important gaps in writing theory I mention above: that writing theory does not articulate an ontology of writing, does not clearly theorize what it is as an object of study, and that theory doesn’t satisfactorily account for individual agency within ecologies.

Since the beginning of English departments, writing has been uncritically theorized and largely accepted as the actions—mechanical, cognitive, or social—of a writing-subject. I refer to this as the Process Paradigm. By using the capitalized Process Paradigm, I distinguish it from a simple understanding of process, which, functionally, implies that something involves multiple synchronous and

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5 Making such a delineation is important because, as Levi R. Bryant argues, ‘to be’ is to make or produce a difference (“The Ontic Principle” 263). If writing theory is not differentiated from rhetorical theory with its focus on communication’s effects on an audience and composition theory with its focus on writing education, it will continue to be effaced in the agenda of these other theories.
asynchronous events. From this definition of process, writing is very much one—though one that involves much more than the actions of an individual writer. I am in no way denying that writing is a process, in this sense; I even propose that the theorization of writing as numerous synchronous and asynchronous events is the first important development in the history of modern writing theory, but process theorists have presented writing not just as a series of events, but as the serial activities of a writing-subject. The history of process in composition is a history of the Process Paradigm. As Raúl Sánchez argues, “Process theory’s conception of writing flowed from its theory of the subject: whether in cognitive, expressive, social-epistemic, or sociocognitive manifestations, process theory imagined a writing subject whose decisions are consequential to the act of producing a text” (“First, a Word” 187). As Sánchez explains here, while the usual history of process focuses on disagreements between different approaches to process, the theory underlying process is fairly consistent. In order to highlight this consistent adherence to the Process Paradigm and to challenge the dominant stories of composition’s history, I offer my first counter-point to the history of writing theory. I argue that the history of the Process Paradigm is much older and much simpler than the stories the field has told itself indicate.6 In those accounts, as Sharon Crowley’s chapter title “Around 1971” indicates, composition studies began to turn to process in the 1960s and early 1970s. James A. Berlin, however, cites texts from as early as 1918 that argue for increased attention to process (Rhetoric and Reality,

50, see also Bizzell “Composing,” 177). I will follow Berlin, both in highlighting the attention to process from early scholars and in primarily attending to published scholarship. While, admittedly, this ignores the role of process in textbooks and classrooms, since my goal is to present counter-points in the history of writing theory rather than writing pedagogy, my interest is in the conceptualization of writing implied by or stated in the scholarship and not how those theories informed textbooks and classrooms. My concern is with process as a theory of writing, which asserts, to a greater or lesser extent, that writing is the sequential actions of a writer—the Process Paradigm. This conception of writing based in the Process Paradigm, I show, remains the underlying theory of writing in much of rhetoric and composition. While the Process Paradigm seems to have lost its place as the field’s most discussed concept, it remains, as Lynn Z. Bloom notes, “the default mode in much of our thinking about writing” (31).

Since the early eighties, however, scholars have also made significant critiques of process and subjectivity. My second counter-point in the history of writing theory is to note that the process research of the 1960s and 70s, rather than being the advent of process in writing theory actually began to reveal that process was insufficient to explain the complexity of writing. This is evident in Janet Emig’s criticisms of linear stage models of process. This recognition of writing’s complexity

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7 Much of the late 1970s and early 1980s was focused on the issue of recursivity (see Crowley “Components”). As I will argue in chapter two however, recursivity is not non-linear or non-sequential; repeating activities does not make a process non-linear, a non-linear process is one that involves synchronous as well as asynchronous events and, usually—and especially in the case of writing’s processes, the actions of multiple human and non-human actants (Latour Reassembling).
converged with increasing interest in cultural, poststructuralist, and postmodern theories eventually giving rise to the social turn of the 1980s that realized that writing was more than just a matter of self-expression or cognition. I note this turn as the second important development in writing theory. These critiques of the romantic subject and a focus on cognition, however, did not depart from the Process Paradigm or a focus on subjectivity. Instead they argue that the actions of the writing-subject must accommodate and are constrained by the conventions and genres of discourse communities. Writing is still what writers do, but those actions are also social.

The social turn, however, also gave rise to other, more radical, early and continuing critiques of the autonomous subject from scholars like Victor Vitanza, Gregory L. Ulmer (Applied, Heuretics), Jasper Neel (Plato), D. Diane Davis (Breaking Up), and Susan Jarratt (Rereading). These scholars, as Marilyn M. Cooper notes of Vitanza and “his followers,” “derive a vision of writing as an embodied and open system from their readings of Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari” (“Being Linked,” 17), as well as, I would add, Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Ronell and other poststructural and postmodern philosophers and theorists. These more radical theories, which fully embrace the indeterminacy of both the subject and writing, seem to escape the subject-centricity of the Process Paradigm. As Cooper argues of Vitanza, these scholars seem “to envision writers as merely channeling writing... Writers are not understood to be making choices, but are driven to write”

9 See “From Heuristic,” Negation, “Three Countertheses.”
(“Being Linked,” 18). Cooper then quotes Vitanza’s declaration that “What
writing...wants is a writer! ... A body filled with tics that cannot but (not) write!”
(“Being Linked,” 18). These radical theorists, thus, present theories of writing as
indeterminate, playful, and not subject to mastery, which marks a point of departure
from the Process Paradigm that eventually leads to the final development in the
history of writing theory that I discuss, the recognition that writing’s sociality is
ecological.

Over the last decade, work in posthuman10 and ecological and complexity
theories11 have challenged the centrality of the writing subject and her activities.
These theorists argue that texts emerge from dynamic complex socio-material
ecologies, systems, or networks that writers participate in but neither control nor
are dominantly central to. In chapter two I discuss much of this work and its
emergence in the last decade, but I argue that Dobrin’s recent ecological theory
presented in Postcomposition is the most developed account of writing’s ecology.

10 While I am sympathetic to the work of posthumanism, I find the term, like all
post- terms in theory, incredibly vexed. While Dobrin’s discussion of the meanings
and importance of post- terms in Postcomposition is very persuasive (192–211), I
find that the eternal need to explain that such terms are not intended to imply the
most common understanding of the post as after, and the tendency of such attempts
at apology to ultimately fail undermine theoretical work to create space for further
theorizing. I think such work can be done without a post-, and in doing so theory
often goes beyond an obsessive need to critique what is being post-ed, usually while
explaining all the while why it doesn’t mean after or anti, no matter how much it
seems like it does. See Brooke; Dobrin Postcomposition; Hayles How We Became,
Writing Machines; Muckelbauer & Hawhee; Nealon; Rickert “Engaging Modernisms,”
“Hands Up”; Wolfe for examples of posthuman theory.
11 See Bay; Blakesley & Rickert; Cooper “Being Linked,” “Rhetorical;” Dobrin
Postcomposition; Dobrin, Rice, & Vastola; Hawk Counter-History, “Toward”; Jung
“Systems;” Muckelbauer & Donovan; Rickert Ambient Rhetoric, “House of Doing”;
Rickert & Blakesley; Rivers & Weber; Syverson.
The basis of ecological theories is to recognize that what happens emerges from the complex interactions of all the parts of the system and is not controlled by any central steering mechanism. It is this that explains the complexity of writing. As I describe above, to write is to enter a complex system in which the texts we read, the conversations we have, the actions we take in response to the actions of others, human and non-human, interact in unpredictable ways to give rise to emergent events and emergent texts.

The increasing recognition and theorization of writing as a dynamic complex system provides unique opportunities to reframe and refocus on theorizing writing itself, and it has already led to significant progress in articulating theories of writing’s circulation, productions, and effects. Unfortunately, despite its potential and stated intentions to do so, this work has not yet provided a clear model of what writing is, writing’s ontology beyond its foremost assertion that writing is a complex dynamic system or ecology. As I note above, when it comes to clearly laying out just what writing is, ecological theories only point to flows of texts and the effects of this circulation. They only tell us “Writing was here.” As I also note

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12 Ontology has been understood in multiple ways. Heidegger presents it as an alternative to metaphysics and contrasts it as Being with the ontic or the existence of beings. Contrary to these distinctions, I am purposefully using it here to refer to any theory of being whether general or specific to particular beings.

13 Noah R. Roderick has recently argued that one of the effects of a turn toward systems theories is that “epistemology is being jettisoned in favor of ontology in the description of writing” (“Analogize This!”). I fully acknowledge that these theorists, at different points, present their work as attempts to develop an ontology of writing—the focus on writing as ecological is indeed an ontological argument about the nature of writing. Similarly, they make other assertions that would seem to contradict my treatment of them here. However, I will attempt to show how each of them subtly moves away from ontology because of underlying commitments to epistemological theories.
above, this dissertation is an attempt to correct that, to articulate an object-oriented theory of writing that focuses on writing’s ontology in a way that accounts not just for writing’s relations, and humans’ relations with it, but also for writing as an object in its own right that, however much it depends on humans or other sentient beings for its continued existence, still exists, has a reality, beyond human access to, or interaction with, it. It is also an attempt to account for writing’s ecology in a way that does not subsume individuals into the deterministic fluctuations of systems.

Writing the Object/The Object Writing

I am not the first to argue that writing studies has not yet fully theorized writing. In Where Writing Begins, Michael Carter reports that Dobrin, at the CCCC in Chicago in 2002, argued that writing theory has consistently turned away from theorizing writing itself to instead theorize something else whether the teaching of writing or various social, cultural, or political concepts (xi). However, even Dobrin’s attempts to articulate theories “that consider writing as writing,” concentrating on “the ‘thingness’ of writing, as an object of study in need of serious conception and re-conception,” as I note above, have not fully done so (qtd. in Carter, xi). In every case, writing has remained a mysterious “something,” saturating the world, producing networks, cultures, identities, histories, and places but remaining forever beyond our attempts to theorize its being, its ontology.

Raúl Sánchez, echoing Dobrin, also argues that writing theory has tended to neglect theorizing writing in order to theorize “something else” (Sánchez, 6).
Sánchez argues, “In place of writing, concepts such as knowledge, ideology, and culture have claimed composition theory’s attention as scholars have tried to explain how they appear to work through discourse” (The Function 4). Sánchez here notes that writing theory has often turned away from writing itself to other socio-cultural concepts. As I show in chapter two, however, this tendency emerged as part of the social turn and the realization that process could not account for the complexity of writing. It is this realization that also has led to a turn to ecological writing theories. It is not strange, then, to find that scholars who note that writing theory has not fully accounted for writing, like in ecological theories, argue that it is the centrality of subjectivity in writing theory that has inhibited theoretical efforts.

Sánchez argues that “if we work in the realm of agents, subjects, or consciousness, then our descriptions of writing will only ever present it as an instrument, as a means by which something else is arrived at” (94). In Postcomposition, Dobrin similarly highlights composition’s focus on subjectivity both within theory and in other areas of the field. He notes, “Even much of what is touted as composition theory is not theory about writing but theory about how writers write—or more often about writers themselves, issues of identity” (11). Such theoretical work is certainly important and needed, but it has tended to occupy theory not in addition to but instead of writing.

Posthuman and ecological theories that attempt to decenter the subject, however, have not clearly articulated writing’s ontology either. They have expanded our understanding of writing’s ecological sociality but have not explained what is circulating or how it can do what it does. I argue that this gap indicates that the
problems of subject-centricity are symptoms of a deeper problem of epistemology. What ecological thought reveals about writing is that much of what it is, what it does, and how it does it are beyond the experiences of human writers. Other forces, other actors, other operations act on writers in numerous ways that the writer does not directly experience. As I relate in the story of my own writing above, writing often steers the writer as much if not more than the writer steers the writing. To theorize writing in a way that accounts for these factors, theorists must go beyond the world that humans experience, beyond human epistemology. Writing theory, however, remains closely connected to philosophies based in the idea that what is beyond human experience, if it exists, cannot be usefully theorized. Articulating an ontology of writing, then, requires that writing studies get real.

It is for this reason that I turn to the speculative realism of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in chapter three. According to OOO, the world is filled with agents busily going about both unifying their parts—emerging as something different from an aggregate of those parts—and entering into relations with each other as parts of larger objects. Unlike theories that reduce reality to human experience, OOO radically defends the reality of objects beyond how they are experienced by other objects, including humans. OOO accounts for object’s relations to each other as individual and differing agents, beings that unite their parts in a way that they emerge as something different with different capacities from their parts. They have an enduring reality beyond all relations both to humans and each other but also enter into relations with each other in the formation of larger objects. All this is true regardless of whether any observer is present or not. As Harman explains, “An
object is any unified entity” (*Bells and Whistles* 60). As such, anything that emerges as something that is “irreducible to its component pieces or to its effects on the surrounding environment” is an object, even if it is extended across space and time (Harman, *Bells and Whistles* 39). It is in this turn to objects that I can begin to explain what writing is beyond the activities of writers or ecologies, to explain what is circulating in writing ecologies and how it can produce texts, writers, genres, ideologies, cultures, identities. It is also in this turn to objects that I can begin to articulate a possible alternative to the writing subject.

OOO arrives at its defense of objects through adherence to speculative realism. Speculative realism is a movement in continental philosophy based in the works of thinkers like Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Graham Harman, who are credited as its founders. These thinkers reject both the tendency in philosophy to reduce the knowable world to the world of human experience (one type of overmining) and previous naïve realisms or positivism. They instead argue for new realist philosophies that affirm postmodern and post-structuralist critiques but reject the conclusion that our inability to access reality directly prevents us from theorizing it. Instead, they argue that the world of experience serves as evidence that can be used to theorize the world beyond it speculatively to arrive at contingent knowledge. Object-oriented philosophies are one current of speculative realist thought.

As Ian Bogost explains, speculation derives from the Latin word for mirror, *speculum*, but “the speculum of speculation is not a thin, flat plate of glass onto which a layer of molten aluminum has been vacuum-sprayed but a funhouse mirror
made of hammered metal, whose distortions show us a perversion of a unit’s sensibilities” (31). While this view in the *speculum* is only a shadow, it is a shadow of something. OOO and speculative realism argue that the images we see in the polished metal of speculation—in our experiences of the world—are evidence of what the world beyond our experiences, the ontology of things, is most probably like for it to produce those images.

In this way, OOO doesn’t claim to get beyond human experience but neither does it allow that the problem of access can be circumvented. Rather than theorizing as if the world beyond human experience isn’t there or doesn’t matter, speculative theorizing develops contingent knowledge based in experience as evidence, knowledge that can then be regularly debated, altered, and further developed through continued inquiry and conversation. From this methodological perspective, OOO notes that the world of experience is a world of differing objects of all shapes sizes and capacities, and understanding the world, then, is a matter of theorizing objects. Object-oriented thinkers argue that a great deal can be learned about the ontology of objects beyond our experiences with them through those experiences. In this way the parts of the world that are beyond our experience are not relegated to some separate world “out there” but are all around us, acting on each other, and interacting with us to produce the phenomena we do experience. Everything is an object with a reality that exceeds our experiences of it.

Other scholars have previously drawn on object-oriented thinkers like Graham Harman and Bruno Latour. Both Byron Hawk (*Counter-History*) and Thomas Rickert (*Ambient*) appropriate Harman and Latour’s accounts of objects in their
ecological theories. This is part of a larger growing attempt to account for writing’s, and writer’s, materiality. Work in embodiment, ecological theories, and the material of technology in writing studies has begun to turn toward new realist and materialist theories. Anne Francis Wysocki, for instance, argues that in “our bodies—our primary media... We come to be always already embedded—embodied” (“Introduction” 4), and Christa Albrecht-Crane asserts, “Affect, then, involves sensations and resonances we engage in, on a daily basis, that act on our bodies in such a way that we feel a sort of vibration with other bodies” (577). This sense of bodies begins to treat them as something beyond our consciousness that is not a passive tool.

In these accounts, however, objects remain within the realm of our access to them, within human epistemology; they recognize that bodies, media, interact with us in ways we can’t consciously observe but do not venture into that unknown to theorize objects, to theorize how they can act on us the way they do, or in the case of bodies even be part of us. The very word embodiment is steeped with implications that bodies are the materiality of consciousness. Our interest in bodies has primarily been our experiences with them as “our primary media” in Wysocki’s words.

Hawk and Rickert, in appropriating object-oriented ontology, would seem to take a further step. As Rickert notes, “Thing theory wants to give back a sense of voice, of ‘objectness,’ to the thing, so that it is not understood exclusively within human meanings.” ( Ambient 22). Neither Rickert nor Hawk, however, fully follows through on the promise of this move. Hawk, in his brief use of Graham Harman’s theories, turns away from embracing their implications when he argues, “There is
only relationality” (*Counter History* 158). He notes in an endnote that “Harman comes to the opposite conclusion” admitting that “the main point of Harman’s book is to build a new philosophy of substance and objects that is not based on old models of realism,” but concluding that “for [Hawk’s] purposes... it makes more sense to say that relationality is all there is” (*Counter History* 284). Rickert also stops short of embracing OOO’s realism and account of objects because of his strict adherence to a Heideggerian ontology. Rickert posits a world that “is presenced by humans but not created by them,” or to use Heidegger’s terms, it is only for *Dasein* that objects are presented from the unindividuated world of oneness and withdrawal (*Ambient* 237). From beginning to end Rickert’s project is interested in “the active role that the material and informational environment takes in human development, dwelling, and culture” (*Ambient* 3, emphasis added).

There is a definite reluctance, even in those who express a desire to do so, to step beyond the world we experience. That, however, is what I argue writing studies must do to understand writing and to understand writers in ways that do not reify subjectivity.

According to OOO, Objects, even those we think we know best, like ourselves, can surprise us, be different, act differently, or be acted on differently because they are never fully exhausted by their present relations and behaviors. Given this fact, the real object is not the object that we, or any other objects, encounter but what the object is beyond our access to it that allows it to act on us to produce our perceptions. Even this text, which by this point I might feel I know better than any other document I’ve written, continues to surprise me. I continue to encounter it
differently from one day to the next; I continue to be frustrated by its resistance
to my efforts to change it. I especially continue to be surprised by its ability to evoke
meanings in others that I would never have anticipated. As an object, it exists
beyond my experiences with it; it exists and can act in different ways. The same is
true for all objects; they are more than we ever experience; their reality and agency
are ontological not epistemological. This is also evident in all the surprising readings
and re-mixings of texts we encounter in writing and writing studies all the time.

As I note above, everything is an object. As Harman argues, “Along with
Diamonds, rope, and neutrons, objects may include armies, monsters, square circles,
and leagues of real and fictitious nations. All such objects must be accounted for by
ontology, not merely denounced or reduced to despicable nullities” (Quadruple 5).
In other words, as I note above, anything that unifies its parts and has qualities
different from those parts is an object with a reality beyond anyone’s experience
with it. As Harman further notes, “To be an object means to be itself, to enact the
reality in the cosmos of which that object alone is capable” (Quadruple 74). It is from
this analysis of objects and our encounters with them, following OOO, that I argue
that writing is an object and that some objects can write.

This understanding of objects, as it applies to writing, explains the account of
my own writing with which I began this chapter. It is writing’s being and capacities
beyond my experience that operates to mobilize and write me into the production of
this text. Writing is a vast object that unifies the textual production of meaning and
all the objects involved in that production: texts, writers, readers, technologies,
languages, etc. Each of these things, including writers and readers, is also an object.
All objects, I argue, can involve themselves in writing. Additionally, all texts—both those produced by writers and those produced as “readings” by readers, regardless of their supposed permanence, quality, accuracy, or any other criteria by which texts are judged are included as fully recognized writing objects. Objects, then, become agents in the world. As Latour argues, “In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action,’ things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Reassembling 72). Objects, just as they exist beyond my experiences, have the capacity to act, and both of these factors stem from the ontological structure of all objects. Byron Hawk affirms this conception of objects as writers when he notes, “A body’s agency is not the universal aspect of a sovereign subject but a matter of what bodies can do, their capacity to affect other bodies by entering into relations with them” (Counter-History 119).

The Emergence of Writing in Objects

Having developed an alternative agent in the actions of objects, in chapter four I begin to construct an object-oriented theory of writing based in a writing object. To help me do so, I contrast the theory I build with Charles Bazerman’s recent comprehensive articulation of his theory of literate action (see Theory; Rhetoric). As I discuss in chapter two, activity, socio-cognitive, or socio-cultural writing theories have become the dominant iteration of social process theories, and Paul Prior argues the “dominant paradigm for writing research today” (“Sociocultural,” 55). As such, it serves as, perhaps, the obvious alternative to my
own and other ecological theories. Like most social theories, of course, Bazerman begins with a conscious subject. I, on the other hand have to explain how consciousness could arise in objects. In doing so, I argue that it is writing itself that allows for consciousness.

Where Bazerman, then, argues that “literacy sits as an add-on to an already developed cognitive architecture, which it can draw on from the beginning” (Bazerman Theory 22), I argue that writing is thought. Where Bazerman argues, “Our internal thoughts... reemerge, reformulated in processes of externalization to make ourselves intelligible to others” (Rhetoric 7), or that “written language is a fragile vessel for evanescent cargos of internally perceived meanings” (Theory 72), I argue that writing is more complex than that and never involves anything that could be referred to as externalization or internalization. Objects are both foreclosed to their environments and intimately connected to them.

Because everything is an object and their reality is ontological and not bounded by epistemology, as Harman argues, there is no sufficient reason to separate out humans as the only beings that have perspective, instead, “all objects must come to terms with each other, translating or caricaturing one another’s reality whether humans are in the vicinity or not” (Harman, Guerrilla 227). In other words, the problem of access is not a human condition but a universal one.

Everything is an object and everything is perspectival. Objects, then, never directly access the world; they only ever experience the perceptions and affects (emotions) they themselves produce. This presents a major problem, and as Thomas Kent argues, would seem to imply that “we obviously cannot explain how it is that we
know anything at all about the world outside of our own subjectivity,” (Paralogic Rhetoric, 102), or our own objectivity in this case. Kent, however, notes this from an epistemological perspective based in a Cartesian total separation of mind and world. While I argue against Bazerman or other socio-cognitive theorists like Prior who also argues that “mediated activity involves externalization (speech, writing, the manipulation and construction of objects and devices)... as well as internalization (perception, learning)” (“Sociocultural” 55), I also reject the notion that this foreclosure separates objects from the world.

To explain how this is possible, I turn to Levi R. Bryant’s appropriation of the autopoietic systems theory14 of Niklas Luhmann, who adapts Maturana and Varela’s autopoietic theory to social systems and sentient beings, humans, or “psychic systems” (Luhmann, Social Systems 182). Luhmann argues that objects or systems “maintain themselves by creating and maintaining a difference from their environments” (Social Systems 65). For Bryant, this distinction forecloses systems, which refers to the fact that objects only have direct access to their own perceptions

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14 Maturana and Varela developed their autopoietic systems theory as part of a turn in cybernetics (a trans-disciplinary field focused on the study of regulatory systems) away from attempts to understand the regulation of systems by means of some central managing program. Autopoietic systems are systems like living things that build and rebuild themselves by the construction and acquisition of parts. Writing is an autopoietic object, because in order to continue to exist it must continue to generate texts through reading and writing. As a branch of neo-cybernetics, many of the terms I employ here, following Bryant and Luhmann, are terms common to cybernetics. Through Bryant, OOO, has a decidedly cybernetic feel, just as ecological and complexity systems do through the contributions of other cybernetics figures like Gregory Bateson.
and affects.\textsuperscript{15} Objects are saved from solipsism, however, through interacting with each other as mediators. As Latour argues, objects cannot simply transfer energy or information but always modify or translate it in their own terms (\textit{Reassembling} 39). Perturbations from the object’s environment, then, provoke the object to generate information on the interior of the system. An object’s environment is the aggregate of all the other objects that it can perturb or be perturbed by to provoke the emergence of information. This relation between objects through perturbation and the generation of information interior to systems is how the sensual objects of experience and their qualities emerge.

I am not separated from the world because I cannot access it directly; instead, it is only in relation to the world that I experience anything at all. Objects in my environment evoke my perceptions and affects; it is only because of their actions on me that I generate perceptions. It is because objects reflect some light wavelengths and not others that the system of cones in my eyes produce the information of color; it is because objects in my environment produce sound waves that the tiny hairs in my ears produce the information of sound, etc. While my experience of these objects is only the avatar of such things I produce inside my own system, that production is intimately connected to events in my environment.

In these perceptions, however, I don’t even consciously experience information. Sentient, or self-aware, objects are self-aware because they filter

\textsuperscript{15} Systems or objects, here, should not be limited to seemingly apparent natural boundaries like the human body. By relating to each other, objects enter into relationships that create new systems that redraw boundaries for newly formed objects. When I drive a car, I experience the vibrations of the road under the car’s tires as information on the interior of the man-car object.
information through a second order system (Bryant, *Democracy* 164–165).

Sentient objects, rather than interacting directly with their immediate perceptions and feelings, filter and record these perceptions through memory, which is the process through which perceptions and feelings become *meaningful*. This process of selecting and marking to produce meaning, I argue is *writing*.

Writing, as I note above, is the production of consequential meaning through the selection and recording of information in and through memory. Building on the work of F.C. Bartlett and the more recent memory theories of Daniel L. Schacter, I note how current understandings of memory support these understandings of objects and writing. I also note the connections between this understanding of writing and Derrida’s similar conclusions in “Signature Event Context” and “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and highlight the differences an object-oriented perspective provides.

This understanding not only of the nature of writing but of how objects relate to each other more generally has numerous radical implications for writing. First, it positions writing, as the production of meaning in and through memory, as prior to both communication and rhetoric, requiring radical revisions of these concepts. While it may be counter-intuitive to think of writing as an object on the interior of sentient objects or systems rather than as the external marking of material, this is not entirely new—writing as thought and thought as writing—nor should it be entirely strange since it still entails marking and meaning, though the surface is the memory. As Derrida argues, “Writing supplements perception before perception
even appears to itself [is conscious of itself]. ‘Memory’ or writing is the opening of 
that process of appearance itself” (“Freud and the Scene of Writing 224).

This articulation of writing also alters the ways texts should be understood to 
act on writers and readers, since texts, rather than being in any way “interpreted” 
instead, as objects, perturb those that interact with them, stimulating the generation 
of information and then meaning in sentient objects. As Bryant notes of dialogue, 
interlocutors “belong not to the system of... dialogue, but to the environment” 
(Democracy 150). This means that speakers are not part of communications but can 
only perturb communications from the environment. In other words, as Derrida 
claims, all communication is removed from communicators in the same way writing 
is (“Signature, Event, Context” 93–94), all communication requires a mediating 
object, a text, whether it is audio sounds marking the air, ink on paper, or pixels on a 
screen. Just as texts perturb writers and readers from their environments, writers 
perturb texts; texts are objects in their own right.

Some of the other implications of an object-oriented writing theory include 
the understanding that writers do not own or control their capacity to write. 
Writers, sentient objects, write—at least produce meaning in and through memory 
texts—whenever they are perturbed by objects in their environment in ways that 
are selected as meaningful through and in memory. The emergence of sentient 
objects, then, introduces writing and meaning to the world so that any object that 
can perturb a writer, in a way that is selected as meaningful—unpleasant meanings 
are proof this happens—has the capacity to write through its relationship with that 
writer. If this is true, it leads to the subsequent conclusion that writers cannot not
write. Finally, while this understanding of writing locates it on the interior of sentient objects, writing itself is an object that unifies its parts, making it the unification of all continuing meaning making and all objects participating in that meaning making. Through a reimagining of communication, I demonstrate how writing as the production of meaning through the selection and recording of information in memory relates to the processes of text production that we more commonly associate with writing. This new understanding of writing explains its multimodality, unifying various modes, media, and technologies, including oral, print, gestural, and visual languages as writing-communication technologies employed by writers to provoke needed and anticipated events in their environments. In this way, I articulate an object-oriented account of writing, rhetoric, and communication based in the ontology of individual autonomous objects whose reality and capacity to act and be acted on always exceed their relations. Having done so, however, I must still reconnect this account of writing with writing’s sociality in a way that explains individual experience and the possibility for effective political action.

Object-Oriented Ecologies

In an object-oriented theory of writing, just as in ecological theories, every object in writing is an actant, to use Bruno Latour’s term (*Reassembling* 54–55), every object—texts (sources, drafts, notes, outlines), places, technologies (devices, apps, languages), people (writers, readers, interlocutors, friends), and all other objects from a magic eight ball to a blue coffee mug—participates in writing’s
complex productions. Certainly, writing requires sentient beings like humans to act as writers, but those writers, while they choose their own actions and roles are not in control of the process but participate among a whole complex system of actants, all objects. Just this one move away from seeing human writers as the controlling units of writing drastically changes how we understand writing; we immediately begin to look for and at other actors beyond the control of any central power in the way that modern brain science has abandoned the search for a central processor toward recognizing how thought emerges from the complex interactions of neurons perturbing each other, recognizing that what is really going on is counter-intuitive to the way we experience it; much of it is beyond both our control and even our access.

This discussion of writing-objects like texts leads to questions of how writing unifies these disparate parts, how it can be both a vast and complex object but also the way that sentient objects interact with the world through the production of meaning through memory. This leads to OOO’s mereology, or the relationships among the parts and wholes of objects. The strange mereology of OOO, as Levi R. Bryant explains, means “defending the autonomy of larger-scale objects from the smaller-scale objects out of which they are built and the autonomy of the smaller-scale objects that compose the larger-scale object” (Democracy 31). The relationship of parts and wholes also returns to the role and agency of writers as part(icipant)s of writing. Through this attention to writers, I highlight the important stakes involved in the rejection of subjectivity and show how what is valuable in
subjectivity—agency, identity, activism, resistance, the ability to change systems—is possible not through subjects but the agency of all objects.

As this description indicates, the mereology of objects is also its ecology, larger objects as systems emerging through the interactions of parts. As Hawk argues, as objects relate they reach a “point at which the interaction of a multitude of individual parts begins to act with coherence as if it had a molar purpose or intention driving it or pulling it but is in fact a moment of emergence” (Counter-History 165). Ecologies, then, are objects, as are all the parts interacting within them, as Harman explains, “We never reach some final layer of tiny components that explains everything else, but enter instead into an indefinite regress of parts and wholes. Every object is both a substance and a complex of relations” (Guerrilla Metaphysics, 85). In this intersection between ecological and object-oriented theories however, it is clear that the components of ecologies are individual differentiated and autonomous objects.16 Wholes, new emergent objects, appropriate the actions of parts in their emergence, depending on the continued action of those parts to maintain themselves.

Wholes, in other words, make use of parts in their maintenance of their own existence, taking what they need while ignoring, or perhaps not even being open to perturbations by, the myriad other capacities and qualities of its parts. An example would be the way capitalism appropriates the productivity of laborers with little

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16 Autonomy, here, cannot be the autonomy of the subject, but rather, in a world of objects, autonomy indicates that an object is never determined by other objects, but always acts or is acted on according to its own individual capacities. However much an object is influenced or constrained by other objects, it remains autonomous.
regard or awareness of the whole being of those laborers. Another, related to writing, would be the nature of citation and intertextuality, where texts appropriate certain aspects, sections, and quotes of other texts, borrowing their ideas, words, and authority, while never, for good reason, fully articulating a full reading of the original text—a ridiculous endeavor that would require the full reproduction of every cited work, which would still not exhaust their reality given their capacity to provoke different readings. All wholes appropriate the actions of their parts in this way. The autonomy of those parts, however, threatens the existence of wholes, which is why all objects, as systems, tend to develop negative feedback systems as a means of attempting to provoke parts to continue to participate and to prevent actions that threaten the whole. In writing ecologies, negative feedback emerges as language conventions, genres, ecologies, cultures, ideologies, etc. In the face of such systems, how can parts continue to be autonomous? How can they resist the flow of the system, act politically to change it? The answer, I argue, is in the agency of autonomous objects, their hidden capacity to act that OOO defends and I work to articulate as an alternative to subjectivity. Parts, in an object-oriented theory, are also objects each of which has a reality that exceeds its participation in language, in genres, in ecologies, a reserved capacity to act differently, to participate differently. It is this capacity that threatens the existence of larger objects, since objects only exist by unifying the actions of their parts, so if parts act differently enough, the object is destroyed. As Sara Ahmed argues, by acting against orientations, a part, an object, can become “a disorientation device, making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world” (254). The small acts of individuals
to disrupt or disorient the system can provoke the system to adapt and reorient itself and its parts, to give rise to a changed order.

This agency of objects, however, cannot adhere to a theory of agency similar to that of subjectivity. Subjectivity posits an agent acting from outside—outside because it is theorized as having more agency than other things, who is more capable, at least to some extent or other, of controlling or mastering “objects.” Instead, an object-oriented agency always refers to objects’ capacity and tendency to act. As Hawk argues, “A body’s agency is not the universal aspect of a sovereign subject but a matter of what bodies can do, their capacity to affect other bodies by entering into relations with them” (Counter-History 119). Agency in this sense is a feature of ontology; objects can act and be acted on according the structure of their capacities, able to surprise even the most powerful regime.

Having articulated an object-oriented theory of writing and writing ecologies that radically defends the autonomy of individuals and their capacities to act to change the flows of ecologies, I conclude chapter five by noting a few of the implications of this theory. I first discuss the implications of OOO for materiality and bodies and their place in an object-oriented theory of writing and connect that to other work on embodiment in writing theory. I argue that OOO and its defense of objects reveals that matter operates both as individual objects and as parts of other objects whose realities extend beyond materiality. Bodies, then, can be seen not through a dualistic lens that considers them either “tools” to be used by minds or as

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undifferentiated from conscious selves. I also note that much of what an object-oriented perspective reveals about bodies is also true of technologies.

I then discuss how my object-oriented theory of writing’s implications for identity as an object, noting that contrary to the fragmented identities of postmodernisms, an object-oriented perspective recognizes individual performances of identity as the act of a unified real object with hidden capacities to perform many different identities but also an unknowable and inexhaustible structure of real qualities that makes it what it is and not something else.

I then return to the issue of process and how an object-oriented perspective urges researchers to look at both how writing emerges through the complex relations within writing ecologies and at the actions of all individual objects in those relations. I argue for the need to engage in Ontography in process research, following Bruno Latour and Ian Bogost’s methods of tracing relations within complex systems. Finally, I briefly articulate some implications of my theory for pedagogy, noting that even more than past theories, an object-oriented perspective radically rejects the concept of mastery, arguing that writing instruction, in light of OOO, would need to focus more on helping students analyze the writing ecologies which they do or will participate in and understand how writing works so they can choose what textual currents to position themselves in and how to act as participants in writing. I note that such a view of pedagogy can be found in increasingly popular writing about writing approaches, though an object-oriented perspective might push writing about writing toward more object-oriented, ecological understandings of the concepts writing students are introduced to.
Object-Oriented Inventive Method

To write, as I have attempted to show, is to interact with the world; it is to delve into objects, to be surprised, to recognize the unreachable hidden reality of things and their capacities to act in the world, and to reach for them anyway. In the following pages, I delve into many objects, texts, of course, but I also allow other objects from desk fans to mantis shrimp to write on me, and through my interactions with the writing technology of alphabetic type, a laptop and word processing software on this text, which continues to surprise me as I read it, and I hope surprises readers in productive ways—I’m sure I will be surprised at the meanings it evokes that I cannot anticipate.

In this introductory chapter and those that follow, I try to engage in what Graham Harman has called inventive theory (not to be confused with theories of invention in rhetoric). He argues, “What is important is never critique, but invention and counter-invention” (Guerrilla 238, 240). For Harman, and for me, the point is not to defeat theories by noting their gaps and flaws but to, in so doing, create the space to renovate those theories and build new additions to what is still structurally sound. As I hope this chapter shows, while I must point out the faults of writing theories, I also maintain the important work they do as parts of the theories that emerge here not through my own efforts but through the complex ecology in which I am participating. It is, after all, as Julie Jung notes, through the work of prior theories that the need for further theories is revealed. As she states,
It is precisely because a theory of humanist agency fails to explain what
happens in facilitated communication, for example...that a different way of
describing agency becomes recognizable as both possible and necessary.
Every theoretical explanation thus introduces the conditions for its own
revision. ("Systems Rhetoric")

It is only because of the subject-centricity of the Process Paradigm, then, that
theorists recognize the need for a social and eventually an ecological theory of
writing, and it is only through ecological theories’ failure to theorize writing itself, as
a thing, and to account for individual agency and experience that I could immerse
myself in the present project. I attempt to do justice to the quality of theorizing that
has written me.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} As is the case in any such project, many more texts have written me than I have
room to cite let alone discuss fully. Many of these texts I attempt to at least include
in footnotes, particularly in chapter two as I present my counter-points to writing
theory.
CHAPTER 2: COUNTER-POINTS IN WRITING THEORY

What we conventionally call the writer—the individualized, transcendent agent—cannot actively interpret a writing scene as much as merely participate in the fluid, temporary occurrences between various writing instances.


For the written to be the written, it must continue to ‘act’ and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written ‘in his name.’

~Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 91

What is writing theory? A reviewer of an article on assessment asked me this question in reference to my assertions that educational testing scholars have not made substantial efforts to address writing theory. On the one hand, I feel that this response simply confirmed my point since I infer from this and other comments that the anonymous reviewer is most likely more associated with educational testing than composition. On the other hand, I have to admit that “writing theory” has not
been clearly articulated by rhetoric and composition, as I noted in the introductory chapter.

This chapter, then, will begin an effort to more clearly delineate three important theoretical developments evident in scholarship on writing that writing studies might argue contribute to an emerging body of writing theory. As I noted, I am differentiating writing theory here from both composition theory (theories of the teaching of writing) and rhetorical theory (theories of how rhetors or their utterances or texts affect audiences) as theories about the nature of writing itself. Many theories that do articulate positions about the nature of writing, however, occur within composition and rhetorical theory. Some of the work of this chapter is distilling writing theory from the much larger body of rhetoric and composition scholarship. I argue that over the past hundred years, there have been three major developments in writing theory: the understanding that writing entails processes, the realization of writing’s sociality, and, finally, the move toward ecological and other systems theories of writing that have developed in the 21st Century. In describing these developments, however, I will offer counter-points to how they have traditionally been understood, as I note in chapter one.

Having sketched these counter-points in the history of writing theory, I then argue that recent ecological theories of writing,19 while they have made important and needed progress in understanding writing, have not articulated what writing itself is, its ontology, nor have they accounted for individual experience and agency,

19 For contributions to this move, see Cooper “Being Linked,” “Rhetorical Agency;” Dobrin Postcomposition; Hawk Counter-History, “Reassembling” “Toward,” Jung “Systems Rhetorics;” Rickert Ambient
and thus the efficacy of political action, within the complex dynamic ecologies of writing. I conclude that a theory of writing itself as an object beyond its processes and relationality, as well as the role of individuals in writing ecologies, is necessary to support the work of writing studies. In the remainder of the dissertation, I articulate such a theory.

I cannot, in the space of this chapter, take up even a majority of the scholarship of rhetoric and composition or even a majority of those texts that have theorized aspects of writing itself whether as part or the entirety of their projects, but this can constitute the beginnings of an effort to collect and gather a body of work that can be understood to articulate writing theory separated out from rhetoric and composition’s other interests. I’ve developed the concept of counter-points from counter-history, which I take from Byron Hawk who, following Victor Vitanza and Diane Davis argues that “it is important to engage in revisionary history not only as a self-corrective for exclusion but also to employ ‘sub/versive’ historiography to open the way for other possible categorizations” (Counter-History 259). In other words, the point is not simply to tell histories that give voice to what has been excluded, but to tell histories that create space for radically reorganizing the very topologies that our histories build. As Hawk states, “Sub/versive historiography... emphasizes the openness of history to human re descriptions. It moves beyond the binary designations and teleology of revisionary history to produce multiple counter-histories” (260). In telling these counter-points in the history of writing theory, I fully intend to be sub/versive or turn under the common stories of composition, particularly the story of process, which continues to
dominate writing theory. My first counter-point is that the Process Paradigm, rather than emerging as a paradigm shift or revolution in the 1960s and 70s, has been the underlying theory of writing at least since the emergence of English Departments, and likely far longer.

The Dominance of the Process Paradigm in Writing Theory

It is worth reiterating that, as I note in chapter one, in the Process Paradigm process is not merely designating a phenomenon that entails multiple synchronous and asynchronous operations, or as it is sometimes more formally used, as Richard Fulkerson notes, as part of a title for a formal procedure (“Of Pre- and Post-Process” 98). Process in the Process Paradigm has consistently been conceptualized as the sequential cognitive, material, and/or social acts of a writing-subject, and while the details of those acts have fluctuated significantly, the underlying Process Paradigm has only recently been significantly challenged.

In making these arguments, however, I am contradicting the stories composition tells itself about process. In that story, process emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a correction to so-called current-traditional rhetoric, which, the story tells, taught writing as “product” with an emphasis on grammar and error correction.20 The emergence of process is usually linked with the publication of certain texts: Emig’s The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Donald Murray’s imperatively titled article “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product,” or Peter

20 For examples of the usual story of process see I. Clark; Crowley “Around;” Tobin “How,” “Process”
Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, among others, all appearing in the 1960s or 1970s. Scholars, even some of its defenders,\(^{21}\) have previously pointed to problems in this tale.\(^{22}\) Rather than focus on the construction of current-traditional rhetoric as part of process’s supposed revolution, I will instead attempt to tell a different story, one of consistency as opposed to revolution.

The main reason the counter-point I want to tell disrupts the usual process story is its refusal to accept the distinction between how the process of writing was understood before the 1960s and 70s and how it has been understood since. I’m not denying the differences that Richard Fulkerson (“Of Pre- and Post-Process”) and Lad Tobin (“How”), argue process pedagogies made in the activities of classrooms. The emergence of a field of scholars whose energy was fully focused on improving writing instruction did indeed significantly alter pedagogies of writing for the better. This, however, shouldn’t be attributed to any revolution in how writing scholars *theorized* writing as a process. Instead, process seems to generate a certain magnetic narrative force. It is in this magnetic force that process pedagogy, the process movement, and the underlying process theory become conflated, as I note Raúl Sánchez argues in chapter one (“First a Word” 187). Process has been credited for the pedagogical innovations that developed along with the field of rhetoric and composition, student selection of topics, creative writing style workshops, peer review, de-centering of teacher authority, etc. These pedagogical innovations, however, were based in a long-standing adherence to the Process Paradigm as an

\(^{22}\) See Crowley “Around,” Matsuda, S. Miller *Textual.*
underlying writing theory. While the significant research into writing processes certainly expanded the field's knowledge of them and led to more explanatory process models, these developments did not alter writing theory the ways process pedagogy changed writing classrooms.

In scholarship from as early as 1918, primarily published in the English Journal and later in early issues of CCC, any sense of writing theory, must be inferred by scholars’ discussions of pedagogy, a trend that continues in many cases. From scholars’ advocacy for pedagogies that give more attention to, in Raymond M. Weaver’s terms, “The process by which successful writers have brought their work to its final form,” it is evident that the theory underlying this advocacy is an understanding of writing as the actions of writing subjects, the Process Paradigm. In addition to Weaver’s call in 1919, a number of articles were published beginning in 1918 with similar agenda:

- Harold G. Merriam, in 1918, criticizes the “finished product idea” and advocates teaching students to write as a process of self-expression (419).
- Homer A. Watt, also in 1918, advocates that instruction in writing should attempt to assimilate the “conditions which approach those under which the real writer works” by assigning papers for which “the composition is steadily progressive” (155–61).
- In 1927, Adele Bildersee describes writing as a process in which teachers can only guide or advise students.
- In 1928, Oakley Calvin Johnson urges writing instructors to pay attention to the “complete process” (414).
• H. W. Davis, in 1930, argues that writing instructors should give more attention to revision because “it calls attention to the writing process rather than the finished product” (802).

• John C. McCloskey, in 1937 complained that common methods of writing instruction distort “the actual process of writing” (125).

• After 1940 and especially WWII, writing instruction came to be influenced by General Semantics, the influx of veterans, the development of the interdisciplinary communications course (see Sorensen “The Basic,” “New Methods”), and in 1949 the formation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality, 92–107).

Such a litany of arguments for process-based pedagogies is substantial evidence that an understanding of writing as the process of a writing subject’s inscriptive actions has long been writing scholars’ theory of writing. After CCCC was established the newly formed field increasingly began to call for reform in writing instruction to better correlate to the writing process, leading up to Albert R. Kitzhaber’s question to the conference in 1963; in his call for process research, he asks “Are there concepts underlying the writing process that can be identified and used as the organizing principles for a sequential curriculum in composition?” (“4C” 133). There is also no indication that writing was ever not understood as a process. Only by conflating pedagogy with theory can it be supposed that writing was ever understood as anything else.

In the 1950s, as the field of composition began to grow, scholars increasingly began to approach the reformation of process pedagogy from the perspective of the
traditional rhetorical cannon of invention (Francis, Mills). Influenced by the revival of rhetoric by thinkers like Kenneth Burke (*Rhetoric of Motives*) and Richard Weaver (*The Ethics of Rhetoric*), the 1950s and early 1960s became the coming together of rhetorical invention and the Process Paradigm. This attention to rhetoric, however, did not alter the underlying theory of the Process Paradigm (that writing is the mechanical, cognitive, and/or social actions of a writing-subject). Instead, the rhetorical cannon of invention became meshed with calls in the literature for pedagogical reforms aimed at shifting focus from the end to the beginning of the process.

In his 1953 article “Writing as Process,” Barriss Mills intermixes references to process and familiar rhetorical terms like purpose. He states that “the basic failure in our teaching centers, in my judgment, is our unwillingness or incapacity to think of writing in terms of process” (19). At the same time, He also asserts that “purpose is at the very center of the writing process; everything else is subservient to it” (20). Mills version of the Process Paradigm is a rhetorical one, understanding process as a purpose driven procedure of invention, arrangement, and style. As W. Nelson Francis notes in his 1954 *CCCC* article, rhetoric had seen “a return to respectability” (156). Francis goes on to note that “rhetoric offers a means not only of presenting knowledge but of obtaining it as well” and proposes “a subdivision of the writing process into the three fields of invention, disposition, and style, each with its own body of precepts and style” (157). This focus on invention is also clear in Manuel Bilsky, McCrea Hazlett, Robert E. Streeter, and Richard M. Weaver’s call to teach the *Topoi* as “tools which will assist in the process of creation” (211). This
interest in rhetoric held well into the sixties, when calls for both a new rhetoric (e.g., Gorrell “Very Like a Whale;” Hughes) and a revival of classical rhetoric began to increase.23

This focus on rhetorical invention continued through the 1960s (see Ohmann, Larson “Discovery”), but three developments (the rise of empirical research, the appropriation of psychology, and writing as discovery and expression) during these years played a significant role in a move away from rhetoric toward expressivism and/or cognitive psychology that would come to fruition in the following decade (see Crowley “Around”).

Increased funding opportunities from the availability of public grants came together in the 1960s with increasing calls for research into the writing process. Literature on process until the 1960s had consisted largely of anecdotal accounts and subjective recommendations of individual instructors. The nineteen sixties saw the beginning of a body of both theoretical and empirical research into the teaching of writing (assumed to be a process) driven by questions like Kitzhaber’s (“4C” 133). Kitzhaber’s call was published the same year as Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s meta-analysis of empirical research on writing instruction, the primary conclusion of which was that there had been little quality empirical research. This combination of factors created significant impetus in the field to engage in new empirical research of the writing process and writing instruction. While my attention to the long history of the Process Paradigm in

composition leads me to disagree with Sharon Crowley that “the composing process as practiced by students” as an object of research was discovered around 1971, I do agree that a turn to empirical research significantly altered the field if not its underlying theories of writing (“Around” 195).

The year after the publication of Kitzhaber’s chair’s address and the Braddock Report, Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke published the report of their government sponsored experiment at Michigan State. In it they make three significant moves: first, they base much of their discussion on the educational psychology of Jerome Bruner, second, they describe the process of writing using the analogy of “the archetype of the plant” suggesting on organic process of “continuous change in time as a result of some stimulus,” and third, they “[impose] in turn, the concept of line (writing as a linear act) as a useful way of ‘freezing’ the growth pattern of the plant metaphor into a static yet structured whole which then could be analyzed point by point” (222). This study, and in particular its use of Bruner, serves as the beginning of three separate trends in rhetoric and composition in the 1960s and 70s: a social science approach to research, a focus on organic, creative, discovery that would support expressive approaches to writing instruction (see Berlin, Rhetoric 147–152; Elbow, Writing 15), and a focus on cognitive psychology and the mapping of process activities according to stages of thought.24 These three trends that would later come into conflict—as they did at the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966 (see J. Harris A Teaching Subject)—exist fairly harmoniously in Rohman and Wlecke’s analysis and the psychology of Jerome Bruner. The emergence of these

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24 See Bloom & Bloom; Emig; Jennings; Lauer; Perl “Composing;” Zoellner
trends with Rohman and Wlecke firmly establish process as the focus of writing theory and research, but as this counter-point to the usual story of process shows they are the culmination of calls for reform, based in a long accepted theory, that began decades before.

Both James Berlin (Rhetoric 122–124) and Sharon Crowley (“Around” 195–200) show that Bruner’s cognitive psychology of educational development accommodates both an expressive view of writing processes as various, individual, spontaneous, and organically random and a cognitive or traditional view of writing as a series of strategic writing activities or “stages.” It is no surprise that this same duality also appears in Rohman and Wlecke’s work. This also explains why Janet Emig, following Rohman and Wlecke, is sometimes referred to as a cognitivist (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality, 139), and other times an expressivist (J. Harris A Teaching Subject, 58; Schreiner). It is only later in the 1970s and particularly the 1980s that the projects of expressivists and cognitivists would come into competition. For my counter-history of writing theory, however, the apparent compatibility of these trends in Rohman and Wlecke and, in the next decade, Janet Emig’s work reveals how both of these approaches to the study and teaching of process rely on the common theory of the Process Paradigm. As Crowley argues, “Bruner authorized Rohman and Wlecke to switch the focus of instruction away from texts and onto students” (“Around” 197).

In most scholarship during the supposedly revolutionary time of the early 1970s, the Process Paradigm remained largely unmodified despite a growing disagreement about how to define and approach teaching its stages. While the main
disagreement has been explained as being between expressivists and new rhetoricians, the growing interest in cognitive psychology seems to have held an uneasy truce with scholars still advocating for classical rhetorical approaches to invention. In a 1970 Article, however, Janice Lauer breaks this truce when she critiques rhetoricians for looking to the “dead art of invention” instead of the more promising “study of the art of discovery being made under the label ‘heuristics’” (problem-solving), urging the field to “break out of the ghetto,” of past research methods (“Heuristics” 396). Lauer calls for an increased application of cognitive psychology to the study of the writing process. There is little significant difference, however, between the rhetorical and psychological approaches from a broad perspective of process, though it does mark the beginning of a shift from descriptions of process from a rhetorical perspective of invention toward the integration of rhetoric into a process derived from cognitive psychology.

In Janet Emig’s empirical study *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, which is widely discussed elsewhere (see J. Harris *A Teaching Subject*; Schreiner), however, Emig begins to introduce significant doubts about the traditional and simple division of writing into three linear stages of prewriting, writing, and rewriting; she finds that the composing of her students did not progress smoothly through those stages but was rather a series of starts and stops with frequent

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25 See Fulkerson “Of Pre,” Winterowd “A Philosophy of Composition.”
26 See Lauer, Larson “Problem-Solving,” Zoellner.
28 Given that Lauer has since published a book on invention (*Invention in Rhetoric and Composition*), her views on it have likely changed since this early denunciation.
rereading and revising. In her report, Emig describes the composing process as “one of the most complex processes man [sic] engages in” (44). By noting this complex nature of writing processes and the inadequacies of linear models, Emig sets the stage for critiques of the ability of process to fully explain writing. Whereas Emig’s work is usually noted as one of the originary texts for the emergence of process in the field, in the counter-point to that history I am presenting here, her findings mark the beginning of the realization that process alone is inadequate to explain the complexities of writing.

Other researchers soon followed Emig’s lead and found an increasingly complex and idiosyncratic process. The dissonance of this finding with continued representations of writing as a series of strategic stages of prewriting, writing, and revising cannot be understated. The initial response to this dissonance was to argue that writing was “recursive,” as Sharon Crowley, building on Emig’s work, does, noting that the composing process is “not linear; it moves forward and backward” (”Components” 168). If “process not product” was the mantra of the 1960s and early 70s, the new mantra of the late 70s and early 80s was “recursive not linear.” The opposition between recursive and linear, however, is somewhat of a fabrication—circles, spirals, elaborate patterns, and the mess of lines children often make are still just lines. Recursive is not the same as non-linear. Recursivity by the 1980s, then, would quickly prove to be an inadequate explanation of writing’s complexity as well,

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29 See Crowley “Components;” Pianko; Perl “The Composing Process.”
30 The move toward a recursive understanding of process, it must be admitted, did have a significant impact on pedagogy through a greater attention to revision and multiple drafts.
especially as the Process Paradigm’s role as the dominant theory of writing became increasingly explicit, making it a target of criticism from theorists already searching the unarticulated complexities of writing for new directions of inquiry.

The 1970s, then, particularly towards the end of the decade seem to mark an important point in the history of writing theory, not because of the emerging conflict between expressive and cognitive approaches to teaching process, but because the increased explicit attention to the Process Paradigm as a theory of writing led to increasing critique of its ability to explain writing. After nearly sixty years, the growing field of rhetoric and composition was beginning to question the Process Paradigm’s role as the sole theoretical warrant that had always served as the basis of research and pedagogy—though not the Paradigm itself. What began in the 1970s and set the stage for developments in writing theory in the 1980s was an impetus that would lead to composition’s social turn.

The Recognition of Writing’s Sociality

In her 1978 response to Crowley’s “Components of the Composing Process,” Nancy Sommers critiques Crowley by noting that “nowhere in her article is there a definition of the word process”—something that seems true of most process scholarship (209). Sommers then goes on to note that “the word process exists in such a terminological thicket and has become so much jargon, so maligned and misunderstood, that the more the term is used, the less we seem to understand what is meant by the idea that composing is a process” (209). Sommers’s brief response reveals important early questions about just what process, as a quality of writing,
really is. She goes on to contrast traditional ideas of stages of process with her conception of writing phenomena as “operations of the process” (209). She notes that “stage...connotes a discrete juncture that can be both temporally and qualitatively examined” and asserts that research into revision shows that “one constantly revises” and that revision “is a process that occurs prior to and throughout the writing of a work” (210). Finally, Sommers takes issue with the word recursive and Crowley’s use of it arguing that the distinction between linear and recursive “is ill-founded and that the composing process is neither linear, nor recursive, but must be by its very nature both linear and recursive” (210).

Sommers attempts to address the trouble of writing’s complexity, and, to her credit, she recognizes the problem of recursivity and its supposed distinction from linearity; however, she then only goes on to attempt an amalgamation of the two through a division of process into linear and recursive levels that while more complicated than previous explanations of process are still limited to sequential and recurring operations or activities—all the actions of a writing-subject.

Despite growing problems revealed in scholars’ struggles to explain writing within their conceptions of process, process research continued and even expanded in the 1980s. Some scholars continued to uncomplicatedly employ stage models, but most framed their work in criticisms of stage models and attempts to account for the complexity of writing. By far the most influential work on process in the 1980s is Linda Flower and John R. Hayes “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing.”

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31 See Carey & Fowler; Geller; Huff; Matsuhashi.
32 See Berkenkotter and Murray; Fitzgerald; Flower and Hayes; Flower et al.; Gebhardt; Perl “Understanding;” Sommers “Revision;” Witte.
This is the most intensive application of cognitive psychology to explaining and codifying a writing process, and one that, along with Flower et al.’s later model for revision and Hayes revision of the original model, is still used as the basis for cognitive process research.33

Flower and Hayes’s model was framed as a criticism of stage models of process and as a model that could account for individual and spontaneous or organic processes reported by writers (see Gebhardt). Instead of stages, Flower and Hayes postulate that writers engage in hierarchically structured mental processes that “may occur at any time in the composing process” (276). While the complicated flow-chart model Flower and Hayes construct (see Figure 1) is a more detailed representation of process, it still labels the three boxes central to the largest “Writing Processes” box “Planning,” “Translating,” and “Reviewing,” clear echoes of the more familiar “pre-writing,” “writing,” and “revising.” Because the various cognitive processes are set in separate boxes, the unavoidable implication is that they are separate and distinct strategic writing activities that, however recursive, are still linear. Add to this the criticisms quickly leveled against the model’s failure to account for the social complexities of writing,34 and it is not surprising that despite Flower’s protests (see Flower “Cognition”), the Flower and Hayes model does not create a model that accounts for writing’s complexity. Flower and Hayes’s model is both the climax and dénouement of cognitive process theories, at least

33 See Almargot & Chanquoy; Lavelle & Zuercher; Myhill; Myhill & Jones; Pritchard & Honeycutt; Rijlaarsdam & van den Bergh.
34 See Bartholomae; Berthoff “Is Teaching;” Bizzell “Cognition;” Cooper “Ecology;” Faigley “Competing Theories;” Kleine; Porter; Reither.
within the field more broadly. However complicated this model, it ultimately could not account for writing as anything but the cognitive activities of subjects, making clear that the Process Paradigm could not adequately explain writing.

Figure 1. Flower and Hayes cognitive writing process model ("Cognitive Process"

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In the second half of the 1980s, increased attention to theory by scholars studying rhetoric’s role in knowledge formation through attention to post-structural and postmodern theories (see Berlin, Rhetoric 183–184) put significant pressure on composition and the Process Paradigm to take writing’s sociality and the role of
culture, ideology, and the genres and conventions of discourse communities into account. The term *discourse community*, which became central to the development of this “social view” (Faigley “Competing”) developed, as John Swales notes, from various theoretical sources: Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Kuhn, Fish, Foucault, Rorty, Geertz, and Wittgenstein (468). The second important development in writing theory as it relates to the theorization of writing itself is this social turn.

This theoretical outpouring produced far too much work for me to take up even a small portion of it here—a substantial anthology or history of writing theory remains to be written. It is enough to note that while this work did not significantly alter the underlying theory of writing as the actions of a writing subject, in many ways intensifying the focus on subjectivity, it did firmly establish that those actions were social not merely formal, expressive, or cognitive, and that they derived as much if not more from social influences on the writer as from the writer's skill, thinking, or creative genius.

This advent of a social constructionist perspective in rhetoric and composition worked to move the Process Paradigm away from the individual expressions of a subject toward a social process theory that understood the writer’s actions as correlated through feedback and interaction in social groups often in collaboration and conversation, as Kenneth Bruffee argues for in “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” As Sidney I. Dobrin argues, however, “the result of composition studies’ social turn has been the investment of traditional writing subjects into... systems or networks” (*Postcomposition* 84). These social
theories reified the Process Paradigm in continuing to emphasize the role of the individual writing-subject.

During the later 1980s, some scholarship continued to attempt to account for complexity by looking at individual processes, and major scholarship that began to propose social process models attempted to reconcile expressive and cognitive approaches with social theories of composing. While these early efforts did not reject process itself and even proposed possible social models of process (e.g., Kleine), by 1989 Thomas Kent, influenced by Lyotard’s postmodern theories (the source of his use of “paralogic”) and the language theories of Donald Davidson began to question the possibility of identifying or teaching a writing process (“Beyond System,” “Paralogic Hermeneutics”). While it is unclear whether Kent’s criticisms were widely read and accepted at the time, they do mark the beginnings of a more serious critique of process that would develop in the 1990s.

While the recognition of writing’s sociality in the 1980s is important, far from representing any kind of paradigm shift, or even a “turn,” it more accurately shows the adaptability of the Process Paradigm to changes in theoretical understandings of subjectivity. This adaptability, I will demonstrate, even extends to allowing the Process Paradigm to continue to underlie even “postprocess” theories like Kent’s.

While many theorists began to turn away from process as part of the social turn in the 1990s, some scholars continued to work toward more complex social

35 See M. Harris, Harris & Wachs, Hairston “Different Products,” Jenson & DiTiberio.
theories of process. Linda Flower (Construction) and Sherrie Gradin both attempt to integrate social perspectives into cognitive or expressive accounts of process respectively. Flower describes her work in The Construction of Negotiated Meaning as an attempt to articulate a “social cognitive” theory of writing, while Gradin, in Romancing Rhetorics argues that expressive writing theories have been mischaracterized and that they had always been “social expressivist” positions. She then demonstrates and expands on the social aspects of expressivist approaches to writing. Both Flower and Gradin attempt to address criticisms of the individualism of process raised by social theorists like Bizzell (“Cognition”), and both usefully challenge accepted divisions among process approaches. Neither, however, challenges the Process Paradigm itself, revealing its consistency even as these scholars struggle with writing’s sociality. This is true, however, of postprocess as well.

Thomas Kent’s criticisms of process represent a move by social theorists from criticizing expressive and cognitive perspectives or attempting to integrate them into social process theories to criticizing process itself. One year after Kent published his book Paralogic Rhetoric in 1993—which does not claim to be post-process, John Trimbur wrote his review essay “Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process” that first introduced the term post-process into the literature of the field. Three years later, Sidney I. Dobrin identified Kent’s theories and the theories he bases them on as “postprocess” (Constructing Knowledges, 63–64), and

37 See Bazerman Constructing, “Discursively;” Flower The Construction; Gradin; Prior Writing/Disciplinarity; Russell “Activity Theory and Its Implications.”
by 1999 Kent edited *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, leading many in the field to begin to assert that rhetoric and composition, as a field, was post-process.38

The term *postprocess*, as I argue elsewhere (Whicker), is very vexed and has been used to describe a range of perspectives. I derive four possible understandings of postprocess from the Kent edited *Post-Process Theory*: 1) a critique of process for ignoring the social nature of writing,39 2) a critique of process as a universal theory or formula,40 3) an assertion that research into process has been exhausted and become uninteresting (Petraglia); and 4) a full rejection of process41 (Whicker, 506; also see H. Foster). I also note that these conflicting and confusing understandings of post-process only grow more confounded in later works, though perhaps the most common view is Petraglia’s: as a field we’ve moved on to more interesting pursuits. Of these four conceptualizations of post-process, only Blyler, Dobrin, and Kent’s makes any kind of significant departure from previous constructivist social views of writing that had become dominant in composition since the mid 1980s, in which the first-order systems theory version of the Process Paradigm remained dominant.

Even that departure, however, was not a departure from the Process Paradigm, but only the rejection of any attempt to “codify” process in order to teach it as a system that might guarantee successful communication.

38 See Atkinson; Matsuda; Vandenberg, Hum, & Clary-Lemon.
39 This meaning follows from Trimbur, which Paul Kei Matsuda notes divides social process theories as postprocess from cognitive and expressive approaches (73). See also Clifford and Ervin; DeJoy “I Was a Process-Model Baby;” Ewald; D. Foster)
40 See Couture; Journet; Olson; Pullman; Russell “Activity Theory and Process.”
41 See Blyler; Dobrin “Paralogic;” Kent “Introduction.”
Kent articulates his theory as an externalist position that seeks to overcome the Cartesian Self/World dualism by arguing that writing is a hermeneutic (interpretive) interaction in an external world. The Process Paradigm, he argues, depends on the idea of an internal mind that must transfer private meanings to other minds through some codified, established mechanism or set system.\(^{42}\) Kent argues that

> [a]lthough expressivists, cognitivists, and social constructionists differ in detail about the nature of discourse production, they agree in general that discourse production is an internal matter. They take the epistemological position that knowledge of the world and of other minds is relative to some sort of conceptual scheme, and they presuppose that discourse production can be reduced to a process that represents, duplicates, or models these conceptual schemes" (*Paralogic Rhetoric*, 101).

Kent, here, confronts the problem of composition’s commitments to epistemology, which is the problem of the difference between human experience (mind/thought) and a world beyond that experience. Process, Kent argues, is an attempt to bridge this gap through a codified system of communication since, from this perspective, “we obviously cannot explain how it is that we know anything at all about the world outside of our own subjectivity,” (*Paralogic Rhetoric*, 102). Kent is critiquing not only a Cartesian perspective that argues for a correlation between mind and world through a positivist realism but also social constructionist theories that forward systems of conventions whether generally or in discourse communities, as

\(^{42}\) See *Paralogic Rhetoric*, “Beyond,” “On the Very Idea.”
epistemological systems that attempt to explain reading and writing as rule based, which, Kent asserts, claim to guarantee successful interaction with the outside world.

Kent rejects process by arguing that “discourse production and reception cannot be reduced to discrete processes, systems, or methodologies” (*Paralogic Rhetoric*, 157). Because of the indeterminate and contingent nature of writing no system of set codified steps or conventions can determine successful communication or serve as an explanation for how human thought can correlate with the world. It is because writing does not work through such systems or internalized mental schema that Kent argues that writing “cannot be reduced to a generalizable process” (“Introduction” 5). As he clarifies, even social process models “imagine that writing may be reduced to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, and once these conditions are met, satisfactory communication is more or less assured” (“Preface” xvii).

According to Kent, Writers rely on “interpretation,” which “never ceases” and “constitutes the uncodifiable moves we make when we attempt to align our utterances with the utterances of others” (“Introduction” 2–3). For Kent, writing is “hermeneutic guessing” (“Paralogic Rhetoric” 47–8), in which we constantly make assumptions about “our readers, our situations, our and other people’s motivations, the appropriate genres to employ in specific circumstances, and so forth”
Because these are unstable, so are the hermeneutic strategies writers employ to make guesses.43

Kent articulates a theory of writing in which activity is an interaction among subjects as a "hermeneutic dance that moves to the music of our situatedness, [and] cannot be fully choreographed in any meaningful way, for in this dance, our ability to improvise, to react on the spot to our partners, matters most" ("Introduction" 5). The writer and reader, then, attempt to coordinate their communications about the world through complex feedback and improvised adaptation to one another and the world. Kent’s theory, however, is not a rejection of the Process Paradigm, despite his claims, but a more dynamic social process model. While Kent rejects any codifiable process, a hermeneutic dance is still a process, and it still theorizes writing as the actions of subjects.

Despite this reification of the Process Paradigm, Kent’s theory departs significantly from previous social constructivist theories through its radical rejection of process. It does, then, along with radical theories from scholars like Victor Vitanza,44 Gregory L. Ulmer (Applied Grammatology, Heuretics), Jasper Neel (Plato), D. Diane Davis (Breaking Up), and Susan Jarratt (Rereading), mark the

43 Kent here, is not denying that conventions exist, or that they cannot be used in the process of hermeneutic guessing, he does note that "no one would deny that lots of codifiable shortcuts exist—our knowledge of conventions, our ability to manipulate genres, our facility with words—that help us communicate more efficiently... However, knowing these shortcuts does not mean... that we know a repeatable process that can be employed successfully during every writing situation" ("Introduction" 2).
44 See “From Heuristic,” Negation, “Three Countertheses.”
beginnings in writing theory of a current of thought that will eventually lead to
theories that do actually reject the Process Paradigm.

In noting that Kent’s theories constitute the beginnings of a shift in writing
theory, on the other hand, I am agreeing with Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola
that postprocess “acts as a placeholder for the opening it introduced into
composition theory...that makes something beyond postprocess intellectually
valuable” (2). In other words, while I will argue that Kent and postprocess do not
depart from the Process Paradigm, I do agree that through their explicit critique of
process, they successfully disrupted composition theory enough to move the field to
give more attention to theorizing writing. While, as Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola note,
most reactions to postprocess have entailed efforts to “placate postprocess and
inculcate it into the disciplinary narrative” (14), many scholars have addressed it.

Scholars have placated postprocess largely by downplaying its significance,
rejecting Kent’s strong critique in favor of the more palatable understanding of
postprocess evident in the 1999 collection, or by attempting to reconcile
“postprocess” with the very theoretical positions it rejects, but others, as is evident
from Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola’s Beyond Postprocess, have taken advantage of the
theoretical attention and space postprocess provoked to make further advances in
theorizing writing. It is this attention to theory sparked in part by postprocess and
other theories that gives rise to what I am arguing is the third major development in

45 See Bloom “Great Paradigm;” H. Foster; Fulkerson “Composition,” “Of Pre-;”
McComiskey; S. Miller “Why Composition;”
46 See Brooke & Rickert; Dobrin Postcomposition; Dobrin, Rice & Vastola; Hawk
Counter-History, “Reassembling,” “Toward;” Jensen; Rickert Ambient Rhetoric,
“House of Doing;” Sánchez The Function; Yagelski.
writing theory: the move from a subject-centric to an ecological second-order systems understanding of writing’s sociality or relationality.

The Complexification of Writing Theory

At the turn of the century, writing theory, those theories attempting to explicitly theorize writing itself, seems divided among 1) attempts to reconcile postprocess with process or epistemic rhetoric (H. Foster, McComiskey) in a continuance of a social constructivist Process Paradigm, usually with a committed emphasis on pedagogy, 2) extensions of social process models based in activity theory largely focused on genre and its role in mediated literate action, and 3) a convergence of more radical theories through an oppositional critique of both liberatory pedagogy and postmodern cynicism, and attempts to overcome this binary opposition through critiques and re-articulations of agency and subjectivity that often draw on radical postmodern and poststructural theories. At the same time, this last current and its attempts to confront issues of subjectivity and agency in writing and rhetoric also includes the emergence of theoretical efforts to reject

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47 See Bazerman “Textual,” Theory; Bazerman & Russell Writing Selves; Prior “Sociocultural,” Writing Disciplinarity; Russell “Writing in Multiple;” Shipka Toward.
48 See Arroyo; Levy; Rickert “Hands Up;” Sánchez “Composition’s.”
49 See Bracher; Chaput; Grobman; Herzberg; Hesford; Lazere; Trimbur; Zavarzadeh.
50 See Arroyo; DeGenaro; Fleckenstein “Cybernetics;” Kopelson “Tripping;” Massey; Rickert “Engaging Modernisms.”
51 See D. Davis Breaking Up, Inessential Solidarity; Ulmer Heuretics; Vitanza “Alleatory.”
the Process Paradigm through post-human\textsuperscript{52} and ecological and complexity theories.\textsuperscript{53}

I argue that this last current, with its recent move away from the subject, is the third major development in writing theory. While these theories take up many different schools of thought (posthumanism, complexity theory, second-order systems theory, cybernetics, network theory, ecological theories, cybernetics, etc.) I will refer to them together as ecological theories. While I will devote the majority of my time to this development, I first acknowledge the first two currents to show how they extend and maintain the Process Paradigm.

\textit{Attempts at Reconciliation}

It did not take long at all for theorists to begin to contend with postprocess in the aftermath of the Kent edited \textit{Post-Process Theory}. The very next year, Bruce McComiskey, in \textit{Teaching Composition as a Social Process}, includes a chapter titled “The Post-Process Movement in Composition Studies” (47). McComiskey notes, as I have, that while “\textit{post-process} has gained some currency in composition studies...its meaning remains unclear” (47.). McComiskey uses that confusion, however, in order to, in Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola’s term, “placate” postprocess and appropriate it into an otherwise Process Paradigm pedagogy. McComiskey does note that “each

\textsuperscript{52} See Brooke; Dobrin \textit{Postcomposition}; Hayles \textit{How We Became, Writing Machines}; Muckelbauer & Hawhee; Nealon; Rickert “Engaging Modernisms;” “Hands Up”; Wolfe.

\textsuperscript{53} See Bay; Blakesley & Rickert; Cooper “Being Linked,” “Rhetorical;” Dobrin \textit{Postcomposition}; Dobrin, Rice, & Vastola; Hawk \textit{Counter-History}, “Reassembling,” “Toward;” Rickert \textit{Ambient Rhetoric}, “House of Doing”; Rickert & Blakesley; Rivers & Weber; Syverson.
 idiomatic usage of the ‘post’ [in ‘post-process’] means something different, ranging anywhere from a ‘radical rejection’ to a ‘complex extension’ of what came before,” but he only addresses Kent’s theories—which he mostly rejects (50) and the supposed “complex extension,” he posits without reference to any acknowledged postprocess source (50). McComiskey instead cites Linda Flower’s *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning* to argue that Flower “articulates an aporia between traditional oppositions such as social versus cognitivist approaches to teaching writing” and that “forms both the theoretical and pragmatic foundation of a ‘post-process’ composition studies that extends (rather than rejects) its own history” (49), making Flower’s work, ironically, McComiskey’s basis for a “postprocess” theory. As I note in reference to Flower above, however, her attempt to reconcile cognitive and social process approaches does not challenge the Process Paradigm. McComiskey, in following Flower, attempts the same sort of reconciliation only with postprocess in the place of social constructivism and process reduced to cognitive models.

More recently, Helen Foster makes a similar attempt at reconciliation in her *Networked Process*. Foster presents her work as an attempt to reconcile process and post-process theories by finding a point of stasis between them. Process in her work is very clearly the Process Paradigm since the center of her book and the key to finding stasis between process and postprocess is to articulate what she terms “networked subjectivity.” Foster ultimately presents a very complicated model of a subject (see Figure 2) that is formed in and through social interactions, but that is, despite its complicated network of constitutive forces, still very much a bounded
internal subject for which writing constitutes a set of actions to be taken in order to transmit information to other networked subjectivities. As she states, “Each subject...structures both the setting of the world and the position of others...according to the situation of their unique position in it” (102). Despite its apparent sophistication, Foster’s model is, as Sidney I. Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola argue in their introduction to Beyond Postprocess, “a conciliatory attempt to normalize postprocess within the very composition studies rubric against which it reacts” through a theory of subjectivity “devoid of virtually any recognition of the very network theories that have come to inform postprocess theories, new media theories, and postsubjectivity theories” (14–15).

Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola argue that Foster ignores the main body of network theory, seeks to normalize postprocess theories by dismissing what may be the central arguments of postprocess as radical, and in so doing seeks to protect and maintain dominant process pedagogies against relevant criticisms. The moves Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola critique can all be linked to Foster’s commitment to the Process Paradigm that leads her to focus her work on subjectivity as the starting point of writing even as she turns to the concept of networks.
On the other hand, Foster’s work is also an attempt to account for the influence of the environment in more complex ways than previous articulations of writing’s sociality. She does attempt, though without reference to the theorists Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola consider vital, to articulate a theory of writing as networked. Apart from her focus on subjectivity, she does come to some of the same conclusions that those theories that decenter the subject in networks do. She does argue, “Due to its fundamental dialogic nature, the subject in existence is never
whole and unified, and therefore its coexistence with the environment and others is a necessity” (104). Foster’s is still an internal subject acting on the world from a position of greater agency. However, this subject is co-constitutive with and dependent on an environment. In this way, Foster comes close to the more complex understanding of agency articulated by Marilyn Cooper where agency arises from, not prior to, interactions with an environment as do intentions, purpose, and even the self (“Being Linked,” “Rhetorical Agency”).

The difference between McComiskey and Foster’s attempts to reconcile process and postprocess is indicative of a move toward ecological theories. Even attempts to reify the Process Paradigm in maintaining a privileged subject begin to take up complex theories of networks. While not quite as complicated, the forwarding of Russian cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as a model for writing theory is a similar attempt to go beyond previous social constructivist models of writing’s sociality, one that is somewhat remarkable because of its fairly early roots in composition.

**Activity Theory**

Contemporaneously with and sometimes as a part of what has come to be considered “postprocess,” some important scholars in the field turned to theories of social activity from Lev Vygotsky and his contemporaries (A. N. Leont’ev, Alexander Luria). As Paul Prior notes, such theories are also referred to as sociocultural, sociohistoric, activity theory, or cultural-historical activity theory

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54 See David Russell’s contribution to *Post-Process*: “Activity Theory and Process.”
Prior points out that this school of theory has roots not only in Vygotsky and his colleagues but also in John Dewey, Volosinov and Bakhtin, Alfred Schütz, Pierre Bourdieu, and Karl Marx (“Sociocultural” 56). Prior ties these diverse thinkers together through their commitments to understanding “human activity through close attention to concrete, everyday practices/histories and [attending] to ways that histories enter situations embedded in artifacts,” that “human thought and action are not explicable in terms of abstract universals, not governed from above,” that the “everyday world” is “a rich, historically continuous ground for human action,” and that consciousness should be understood “by focusing on the actual practices of people and attending to how people are socialized into cultural patterns of perception, thought, and action” in social groups (“Sociocultural” 57). Prior also notes that these social groups are often referred to as *activity systems*—though he also argues that sociocultural theory also informs Lave and Wenger’s concept of *communities of practice* (“Sociocultural” 56).

From this brief explanation, it becomes clear how these theories found purchase in rhetoric and composition given their apparent compatibility with other theories of the social turn. In fact, activity systems, in many ways, can be seen as a more complex and dynamic articulation of discourse communities. As the social turn began to give increased attention to the ways different social groups develop different conventions and expectations of writing, writing researchers began to give increased attention to the different expectations for writing of different academic communities and professional organizations giving rise to the writing in the

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55 See Bartholomae; Bizzell “Cognition;” Johns; Swales.
disciplines (WID) movement as well as attention to the particular writing practices of different professions in professional, technical, and business writing (see Bazerman et al., 80–84).

Charles Bazerman, Joseph Little, Lisa Bethel, Teri Chavkin, Danielle Fouquette, and Janet Garufis point to Bazerman’s 1981 article “What Written Knowledge Does” as the “first essay to clearly set out the agenda of investigating the character and role of disciplinary texts” (80). It is indicative that Bazerman, as a key figure in research into the writing practices of different disciplines, also became a key figure in bringing activity theory to the field of composition. As Prior notes, by his 1988 *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article*, Bazerman had turned to activity theory, Alfred Shütz’s articulation of typification (an explanation for how repeated use of language leads to conventions and genres (see Bazerman “Speech Acts,” 316)), as well as the works of Bakhtin and, more particularly, Vygotsky’s “understanding that meditational means (in this case, genres) produce people and culture” (“Sociocultural” 58).

As might be noticeable from Bazerman’s title, attention to disciplinary writing, given the role of typified disciplinary texts, quickly became caught up in theories of genre. Bazerman and other key, though later, figures in both WID and activity theory like David Russell and Paul Prior (*Writing/Disciplinarity*,

56 Noticeably, I do not attempt to take up genre theories here. This is because, in addition to a lack of space, genre theories have adapted to every development of writing theory, indicating the adaptability of genre as a written concept. I do address genre theory in relation to my own object-oriented theory in chapter five.

“Sociocultural”), have also been involved in genre theory, developing an activity theory based approach.\(^{58}\) Carolyn Miller, who launched current genre theory and its understanding of genre as social action, like Bazerman, drew on Alfred Shütz’s ideas of typification in her 1984 articulation of genre (“Genre as Social Action”). While other scholars in current genre theory in rhetoric and composition\(^{59}\) do not always take up activity theory in their work, they do acknowledge and sometime appropriate many of the advances of Bazerman and Russell’s work (see Bawarshi & Reiff).

While I fully acknowledge that these theories, like other first-order systems theories that developed from the field’s social turn, have contributed a great deal to writing studies, particularly genre theory, as theories of writing, activity/sociocultural theories still maintain the Process Paradigm. This reification of writing as the actions of a writing subject, despite clear recognition and acknowledgment of writing’s complex sociality, undermines activity theory approaches’ capacity to explain how non-human elements of activity-systems participate in writing except as tools for human use or embodiments of human history and culture.

Activity theory, as is evident in its diagrams of activity (see Figure 3), still relies on a subject or subjects who, to some extent, still transcend(s) the activity systems in which she or they act. In fact, this privileging of a writing subject is

\(^{58}\) See Bazerman “Life of Genre,” “Systems of Genre;” Bazerman, Bonini, & Figueiredo; Prior “From Speech Genres;” Russell “Rethinking Genre.”

\(^{59}\) See Bawarshi “Ecology of Genre;” Berkenkotter & Huckin; Devitt Writing Genres; Freadman; Freedman.
inherent in the understanding of writing as an “act.” If writing is always first and only an activity, social or otherwise, then the question will always be who is acting. In activity theory, that actor, like Kent’s, may no longer be the romantic figure of Cartesian subjectivity, but it is still a human subject with prior formed intentions or purposes who acts through mediating tools to accomplish objectives.

Figure 3. Activity system model (Russell & Yañez “Big Picture”).

This subject-centricity is evident in Prior’s assertions that

Mediated activity involves externalization (speech, writing, the manipulation and construction of objects and devices) and co-action (with other people, artifacts, and elements of the social-material environment) as well as internalization (perception, learning). Objects come to embody human activity as they register its consequences. Texts are inscribed, tools are made, routes are worn in the land, buildings are constructed, and other species are
domesticated...Human activity makes worlds. ("Sociocultural" 55)

Prior’s description is one of human action in the world, however much that action is action with instead of action on. There is in this account still a sense of human mastery, of control, if only tenuously through dynamic interactions with the environment. The writer, despite the greater complexity of the writing task as described in activity theory, can still hope that through analysis of genres and activity systems she can control the outcomes of textual communications, achieve a provisional mastery.

Marilyn Cooper notes this continued subject-centricity in activity theory when she notes, “Activity theory recognizes a large role for tacit consciousness in writing, but activity theorists...focus on writing as a conscious cognitive process” (“Being Linked” 17). She goes on to quote Bazerman and Russell’s introduction to Writing Selves where they state, “Things human exist in an evanescent world held up by focused consciousness and attention and activity” (1). Whatever role is granted to other things, human subjects and their internal conscious attentions, intentions, and activities are at the heart of activity theory. Writing’s sociality, the world, is just more complex than activity theory or other social theories have allowed. Other scholars, in calling attention to this, have increasingly realized that the inability to account for writing’s complexity is rooted in a continued misapprehension that writing is controlled or constituted by the actions of a writing subject.
Exigencies for a Shift in Theory: Postmodern Theory, Technology, Ecology, and Politics

As I note above and in chapter one, scholars like Victor Vitanza, Gregory L. Ulmer, Jasper Neel, D. Diane Davis, and Susan Jarratt have long been critical of writing theory’s accounts of subjectivity. These theorists fully embrace the indeterminacy of both the subject and writing. They develop theories of writing as playful, and not subject to mastery, which would seem to present a theory of writing that escapes the Process Paradigm. These theorists, like Kent, employ a concept of paralogy taken from postmodern theorists; as Vitanza argues,

a (para) process, paralogy is contrary to such commonly accepted virtues as control and efficiency... For paralogy, the goal is not renovation but innovation; not a stochastic series based on rules that allow us to guess effectively and efficiently but a paradoxical series that invites us to break with the former rules altogether. (‘Three Countertheses’ 165-66)

In paralogy, or a (para) process, then Vitanza goes further than Kent since his critique of guessing “effectively and efficiently” would apply to Kent’s hermeneutic guessing.

In the case of theorists like Vitanza, Ulmer, Davis, and others, we see a move toward something different, something more; writing is not the actions of a writer; it is beyond, in the aporia, in the chora (Ulmer Heuretics). As Davis argues, for these ludic postmodern theorists, "there is no way to write without being written," for "writing is an I-identity buster, an exposure" (Breaking Up 138). This account, then, opens writing theory up to the possibility that writing is more than the activities of a
writer, more than human activity or experience, something else, a thing, an object that could act on us even as we participate in it. While their emphasis is on paralogy rather than the realism I emphasize, this openness to writing beyond our conscious experience greatly informs the theory I will present in the following chapters. Here, however, it is important to note how these theorists allow for further critiques of the Process Paradigm.

The paralogy of these ludic postmodern theorists is also evident, as I discussed above, in Kent’s theories creating a convergence with a somewhat more mainstream, or at least more discussed, critique of process. In this convergence at the beginning of the 21st century, I find the germ of a self-organizing criticality (Bak) or tipping point, and these theories, along with Kent’s do provide a point of departure for thinking differently about writing.

Such theorizing seems to have gained attention and velocity in recent years because of several separate exigencies—the technological, the political, and the ecological. The first of these, the technological, had already been a driving force for theory in composition as scholars rethought writing in relation to computer and then Internet technologies. 60 These efforts address issues from visual rhetoric and literacy 61 and multi-modality 62 to human computer interface (see Self & Self) and design 63 and have generally coalesced under the umbrella of digital literacy or new

60 See Bolter; Lanham; Ohmann; Ulmer Heuristics; Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola.
61 See Bernhardt; George; Hill; Lemke; Stroupe.
62 See Ball; Kress; Lanham; Sirc; Wysocki “awaywithwords;” Yancey.
63 See Trimbur “Delivering,” Trimbur & Press; Wysocki “Sticky Embrace.”
media though some scholars like Jody Shipka (Toward) and Anne Frances Wysocki ("Opening") have argued that multimodal should not be equated with digital.

The coming of the digital age has stimulated a great deal of theory as accounts of writing have to take into consideration writing on computers and on the web. As Vitanza argues rhetoric and composition is engaging in what he calls a “movement toward thirdness... because of the inclusion of computer technology into the field” (“From Heuristic” 189). For Vitanza this thirdness is a realm of more randomness, contingency, play, and complexity—the very things that disrupt attempts to account for writing as the actions of a writer, even in interacting with an environment. There is strong evidence that Dobrin is correct when he argues that “whether cast by the disciplinary identifier rhetoric and composition, composition studies, or writing studies, the study of writing cannot be separated from the study of technology” (“Ecology and Concepts” 195).

Dennis Baron (A Better Pencil) notes and attempts to trace how advances in technology have always disrupted and altered societies, and many other scholars have called attention to the ways our current digital culture radically alters what it means to write, and thus forces even the most dominant institutions (newspapers seem among the most obvious) to adapt and develop. These seemingly radical changes, however, are not entirely new, though the specific technologies certainly are, but rather make more apparent the constant flux and change, the complexity of writing. Texts come to develop and change right on our screens through comments,

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64 See Brooke & Rickert; Dobrin “Ecology;” Harrison; Rice.
updates, remixes, retweets, etc. Collin Brooke and Thomas Rickert highlight the development of crowd sourcing websites, particularly the bookmarking site Delicious, which they use as a model for how current technologies are changing textual currents of research and how information is to be sorted, reviewed, and distributed. One genre or place that they highlight this technology possibly changing is libraries. They assert, “The movement towards Web 2.0 represents a shift from stocked to empty libraries: such sites simply provide ‘shelves’ for users” (172). In other words, crowd-sourcing takes decisions about what to stock in libraries away from one or a few people in charge of deciding what texts to make available and distributes that power to all users and the actions of a complex-dynamic self-organizing system—though this may be somewhat of a techno-utopian exaggeration. I would note that such “crowd sourcing” has long been evident in scholarly citation if we care to look for it since scholars tend to cite the sources their sources cite.

The institution of the library, as we have seen as it has shifted from the management and storing of physical books to the management and storing of texts more broadly in databases is continuing to stretch and change with changes in technology, and could conceivably become increasingly Delicious in the future. Technology, however, is but the first of three exigencies that I see contributing to the move to ecological writing theory and away from the Process Paradigm and subjectivity. The second of these is the increasing urgency of global climate change and the attention it has garnered for issues of ecology.
The global environmental and political issue of climate change and the attention it calls to issues of environment and ecology as well as the interdisciplinary attention it has brought to ecological thought, if not as influential as technology, has had an impact on rhetoric and composition. The most evident role this has played is in the emergence of ecocomposition (see Dobrin & Weisser; Weisser & Dobrin) and eco-rhetoric (see Herndl & Brown; Killingsworth; Killingsworth & Palmer). Through this movement the plight of the environment comes to be seen as an issue that should be addressed as the content of writing classes. As Weisser and Dobrin argue, ecocomposition “places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue with one another in order to both consider the ecological properties of written discourse and the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are discursively affected” (2). The latter of these purposes, however, as Dobrin notes in Postcomposition, became the dominant result of ecocomposition; he argues that ecocomposition did not accomplish the first purpose of considering the ecological nature of writing. He states, “Instead, ecocomposition has been an attempt to reinvigorate subject formation of student subjects... with environmental political positions, positions designed to spark ‘thinking’ about the environmental or ecological ‘crisis’” (124). While Dobrin is correct that ecocomposition has become a critical cultural studies approach to teaching writing in composition, his own work and that of scholars like Cooper, Thomas Rickert, and Byron Hawk attest that ecological issues have influenced theory significantly, if not the field of composition studies. Environmental ecology turns theory continually to questions of the world and all
beings, both humans and non-humans, toward materiality, and toward the ethics of how theory both accounts for and contributes to the material world.

The final of the three exigencies that I see as playing important roles in a turn toward ecological writing theory is the political. Specifically, I am referring to the strong political tendencies of the field towards activism through public engagement, scholarship, and pedagogy in support of the rights and well-being of underprivileged groups in relation to identity categories such as gender,^65 sexuality,^66 race,^67 (dis)ability,^68 and class (see Zebroski “Social Class as Discourse”) as well as other political causes like the environment I just discussed. While I regretfully do not have the space to take up theories related to identity here, particularly those that highlight the relationship between writing and identity, I do want to note the ongoing influence such work has on the field broadly and on attempts to theorize writing specifically. In this case, I want to highlight how the imperative to address identity both in theory and in action, often through pedagogy, became an exigency for an increased attention to issues of subjectivity and agency.

Theory in general, but particularly postmodern theory and its relation to the problem of postmodern cynicism has become the object of significant critique. Scholars, primarily from a Marxist perspective, increasingly criticized theory, often quite stringently, for undermining political action.^69 Catherine Chaput points to

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^65 See Kirsch et al., Alexander “Transgender.”
^67 See M. Jackson, Ratcliffe, Trainor
^68 See Breuggeman, Lewiecki-Wilson, Price.
^69 See Bracher, Chaput, Lazere, Trimbur, Zavarzadeh.
postmodern identity theories that have “finally succeeded in erasing the myth of uncontaminated and pure racial, national, sexual, class, and gender positions” (45), arguing that “in addition to erasing identity, these pedagogies also erase the possibility of political action by abolishing those categories in terms of which political stands are taken” (47). Chaput here is criticizing the postmodern critique of essentialism and the constructed boundaries between genders, races, sexualities, etc., Vitanza’s thirds. Chaput argues that these theories have undermined the ability to make strong claims based in group identities, leading to political inaction.

Mas’ud Zavarzadeh similarly blames postmodern theory for having “rewritten the world in cynicism, in pathos, and ironically but always in the interest of the transnational bourgeoisie” (9). In this way, Zavarzadeh accuses theory of complicity in the oppressions of global capitalism. As Donald Lazere explains although most of the advocates of these theoretical lines consider themselves and their causes as politically liberal or progressive, their insistence on unlimited proliferation of localism and diversity...has had profoundly conservative consequences in obstructing the kind of unified opposition that progressive constituencies need to counteract the right. (258)

Theory, these scholars claim, because it notes the constructedness of identity, has led to a postmodern political stagnation. In addition to destabilizing identity, postmodern and post-structural critique has also presented an understanding of power (Foucault) and society that seemed to make the resistance of political activism an ineffectual part of the institutional regime, a powerlessness that, perhaps, scholars, as employees of the institution of higher learning, had keenly felt.
Regardless of the validity of these arguments against theory, they serve as a stimulus for theorists to give increasing attention to articulating theories of subjectivity or agency that would allow for effective individual and group political and ethical action. Some of these struggles with agency and subjectivity lead to a return to modernism—at least a partial one as Trimbur refers to in the subtitle of his “Agency and the Death of the Author: A Partial Defense of Modernism” (see also Chaput). Jung notes the attractiveness of a modern subjectivity when she argues that those who feel deeply the need for political action "will... tend toward explanations that both notice and value descriptions of agency understood as intentional human action" (“Systems”). Other scholars (Arroyo, Rickert Acts, “Hands Up”) turn to the radical ludic postmodern theories of Ulmer, Vitanza, and D. Davis (Breaking Up) and push them further through readings of Deleuze and Guattari and Slavoj Žižek. In both returns to a limited modernist Marxist subject and increased attention to more radical postmodern subjectivity there is still a commitment to an active centralized subjectivity. On the one hand, the neo-Marxist/modernist subject is one who can be influenced through critical pedagogies to act politically, and, on the other, a ludic post-modern, or in Rickert’s terms “post-oedipal,” subject who cannot, but who perhaps, can be made to confront the possibility of resistance and play. For my purposes, the importance is the increased attention to subjectivity. This attention also provokes increased theorization of concepts related to agency that could serve as possible means to escape the problem of inaction such as materiality,

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70 See Arroyo; Levy; Rickert Acts, “Hands Up;” Trimbur “Agency.”
embodiment,71 and affect.72 In most of this work, as in the ludic postmodern work on agency and subjectivity just discussed, there are substantial attempts to complexify understandings of these concepts. This work, of course, is not focused primarily on theorizing writing itself even though it has important and significant implications for writing theory particularly in writing’s relation to concepts of identity, agency, materiality, bodies, and affect and their roles as parts of writing. These theories are part of those that Sánchez argues turn to “something else” instead of writing as an object of study. But, this in no way detracts from the role they seem to have played in pushing writing theory toward the tipping point that would lead to its ultimate move beyond subjectivity and the Process Paradigm.

Writing’s Ecology and the Decentering of Subjects

Thomas Rickert, prior to his own articulated theory of subjectivity, in a response to John Trimbur’s defense of modernist agency in “Engaging Modernisms, Emerging Posthumanisms, and the Rhetorics of Doing,” gives the first indication of a coming tipping point in the move toward ecological theories. He argues,

The issues that so often arise in postmodern discourses—the corrosive effects of circularity, self-reference, and recursivity on established modernist narratives concerning the possibility of autonomous subjects [or, I would

71 See Arola & Wysocki, Cook, Daniell, Dolmage, Fleckenstein “Bodysigns,” Killingsworth, Prenosil, Selzer & Crowley, Smith, Wysocki “Introduction.”
72 See Albrecht-Crane; Crawford; Edbauer; B. Jackson; Langstraat; Micciche “Emotion,” “The Trouble”; Riedner; Sharp-Hoskins & Robillard; Smith; Trainor.
add, any subjects] planning and controlling the realm of the social—can be reconfigured for posthuman accounts. (681, emphasis added)

In this response, Rickert, rather than positioning himself in the frame of the Žižekian subjectivity he would first forward the following year or from a postmodern position, critiques Trimbur’s partial defense of the modernist subject from the perspective of so called “posthumanism.” Rickert earlier noted that this perspective entailed the concept of emergence that leads to a social wisdom that “cannot be said to arise from any particular individual; instead, it arises from patterns of interactions among many interacting, cooperating, and conflicting individuals” (681). This conception of knowledge making or wisdom and any following action is indicative of an ecological theory, in this case that of a particular strain of “posthumanism.”

Posthumanism, like most post- terms, not only struggles with the problematic implication that it is after or anti humanism but also acts as an umbrella term for various theoretical perspectives that all challenge traditional conceptions of the primacy or centrality of humans in the world. Cary Wolfe describes the emergence of posthumanism, in its modern form, in the mid 1990s in the works of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, Niklas Luhmann and Katherine Hayles but also notes its roots in both Cybernetics (Bateson)—in which Maturana and Varela as well as Luhmann are often situated—and post-structuralism (xii). All of these lines of thought, at least in part, attempted to describe the world, thought, consciousness, and especially systems from the biological to the social without privileging humans as transcendent subjects. Wolfe
himself is among those that began to label such theories as “posthuman,” and Katherine Hayles also intentionally adopted the term in her *How We Became Posthuman* published in 1999.

Other scholars have used the term in reference to theories of the cyborg that trace back to Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” and later *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. This use of the term, however, seems to conflict with the other since it focuses on the extension of humanity through the prosthetics of technology in the cyborg, or the attempt to broaden subjectivity to include previously excluded beings, primarily animals but also robots and perhaps other forms of life. These two strains of posthumanism seem to often overlap and flow into each other in interesting ways, but there is a key tension between them. On the one hand are those looking at extending the privileges or rights traditionally afforded only to humans to other things, which can often present itself as merely a broadening of subjectivity to a select group of other beings based on their similarities or relations to humans and human activity. This strain of posthumanism seems to be more of an extension of prior social theories and their attention to human subjectivity. On the other hand are those who emphasize systems, the roles of all beings that affect those systems and their operations, and how events emerge from those systems. This latter group emerges as the one most relevant to theories of writing. A key point for either group, however, is always to point out that neither of them sees posthumanism as anti-human.

Rickert’s use of posthumanism in his response to Trimbur’s call for action through a partial defense of the modernist subject seems to be the first importation
of posthumanism to composition.73 The very next issue of *JAC* following Rickert’s response, however, is a special issue on posthumanism edited by John Muckelbauer and Debra Hawhee. Both major strains of posthumanism are present in the issue as scholars address topics from the externalization of memory as a return of embodiment (Brooke) to a posthuman Nietzschean understanding of capital (Nealon), from an articulation of a method of analysis based on computer hacking (Gunkel) to posthuman accounts of the self as distributed and uploaded (Doyle) and the rhetorical functions of bodies. This last consideration, it is worth noting, derives from posthumanism’s shift in focus from humans as central subjectivities and minds to bodies whether Cyborg bodies or not; this emphasis on bodies, material, and embodiment contributes to the work in those areas I mention above.

Given posthumanism’s appropriations of the systems theories of Bateson, Maturana and Varela, and Luhmann, as well as Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, posthumanism and its applications in composition and writing studies react usefully to both the technological and ecological exigencies driving the shift toward systems. I generally reject the term, however, as yet another vexed and ultimately unnecessary “post” term. Given the attention to systems and the role of non-humans in those systems, I include posthumanism within ecological thought. As Julie Jung notes, these theories mark “a crucial shift away from trying to control complexity—and the attendant focus on intentional human agents—to trying to understand how complex phenomena happen” (“Systems”). While there are certainly differences

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73 The use of the term Cyborg in rhetoric and composition began much earlier, just as Donna Haraway’s use of that term predates posthumanism (see Johnson-Eilola “Control and the Cyborg”).
among the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, complexity theory, and other network or ecological theories, I think it is more useful to group them together as ecological theories.

Aside from the theories underlying the systems strain of posthumanism, complexity theory has been the major ecological theory appropriated for writing studies. Complexity theory, or complexity science, is an interdisciplinary field linked primarily to the Santa Fe Institute (see Yood); it is an approach to understanding complex systems, those that entail multiple random variables, that argues that the events and activities of such systems cannot be understood by analyzing their parts but only through an understanding of the system as a whole. Complexity theory explains how systematic order emerges within such complex systems without any centralized governance. Instead, actions are the result of all the complex interactions within the system. As Neil Johnson succinctly states, “Complexity science can be seen as the study of phenomena which emerge from a collection of interacting objects” (4).

A key factor for complexity science is what Per Bak terms “self-organized criticality,” or Mark C. Taylor calls “the moment of complexity,” the point at which the random or chaotic interactions of the objects in a system, as they adapt and evolve through feedback, suddenly produce emergent ordered phenomena or new events that cannot be explained through the analysis of individual actions or causal chains. As Bak states, “nature reflects the tendency of large systems with many components to evolve into a poised, ‘critical’ state, way out of balance, where minor disturbances may lead to events... of all sizes” (1). In this model, events within
complex systems occur when chaotic interactions build until they reach a point when phenomena emerge: a tipping point. This theory presents a model of systems as complex, adaptive, and dynamic constantly fluctuating between building chaos (increased randomness) and emergent order (decreased randomness). Rather than systems moving toward some balanced equilibrium; these systems exhibit the appearance of equilibrium through the averaging out of moments of increased and decreased chaos. In reality, systems never achieve equilibrium since they are instead constantly fluctuating between order and chaos. As Bak notes, “The complex state is at the border between predictable periodic behavior and unpredictable chaos” (31). Additionally, as Jung notes, this point of emergence, self-organized criticality, or moment of complexity “is also a bifurcation point, where many possibilities for system formation are possible but only one is chosen, and it is impossible to predict which one it will be” (“Systems”), just one of many equally possible outcomes that occurs because of a million minute contingent details. The fluctuations of the system reflect the constant processes of adaptation and feedback, what Taylor calls “strange loops,” within the system as each object in the system interacts in adaptive ways to its environment and the feedback it receives.

Given the constant flux and unpredictability of the outcomes of systems, as John Holland states, complexity theory reveals that understanding complex phenomena such as writing requires the study of “the process of becoming, rather than the never-reached end points” (qtd in Syverson, 4). This, of course, is not new to a field that has always been chasing after the process of writing. But, this is a very

74 In complexity theory chaos simply means a highly random and contingent state.
different understanding of process. In a way, the turn to ecological theories like complexity theory is not a move away from process, only the Process Paradigm. Complex adaptive systems, after all, describe a process of emergent events, outcomes. Writing ecologies entail a process of emergence and circulation of texts. Ironically then, given their connections to “postprocess,” ecological thought, the turn to writing’s ecology is a development of process even as it is a rejection of the Process Paradigm.

Margaret Syverson’s *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition* seems to be the first substantial application of complexity theory or science to writing theory. While Syverson usefully explains complexity theory and its possible implications for writing studies, her own theory remains focused on human subjectivity within complex adaptive systems, primarily through a focus on distributed cognition and “how the writer interacts dialogically with the text not only through acting upon it but by responding to it and to its potential readers” (6, emphasis added). Syverson’s account seems to remain at the level of a first-order systems theory view despite complexity theory’s own focus on shifting away from the perspective of a central actor at the center of events within the system.

Complexity was again introduced to the field in a 2004 *JAC* special issue responding to Mark C. Taylor’s *The Moment of Complexity*. This special issue, while once again taking up complexity theory, is problematic in that it situates itself in response to one articulation of complexity in education and the humanities from
Taylor, which limits the scope of the work. Some contributions, such as Jennifer Bay’s account of screens and screening do make important contributions to understanding complex adaptive systems and how writers and writing function in them. The most lasting contributions of this special issue, however, beside Taylor’s centrality to the field’s accounts of complexity theory, are the previewing of what would become major applications of complexity theory from both Byron Hawk and Thomas Rickert. Since both of these scholars have published full monographs that develop their theories more fully, I will take them up in that context.

In *A Counter-History of Composition*, Byron Hawk situates his theory in a larger account of composition focused on vitalism as an alternative view of invention and composing, drawing on the works of Ulmer, Vitanza, and Kameen and their accounts of contingent, playful, indeterminate invention methods. The climax of this counter-history, however, is to take up ideas first previewed in his contribution to the *JAC* issue on complexity (“Toward”) in order to articulate a theory of writing that truly attempts to decenter the subject from the process of textual production. He writes,

> human action is actually a part of the feedback loop of complex systems. It not only is a product of these systems but also feeds information and movement back into the system. This posthumanist model sees humans as functioning parts of life, and any theory of action or change must take this larger, more complex situatedness into account. (*Counter-History* 158).

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75 Taylor’s work is likely taken up as an avant-garde and multimodal application of complexity theory in the humanities.
Hawk, here, changes the focus of accounts of writing from subjects in systems to systems in which humans play a part, a part that “cannot be seen as separate from [the] larger material ecology” (Counter-History 165).

In his focus on life and ecology, Hawk, following Syverson, also connects complexity theory and posthumanism with ecological thinking. While it might seem completely natural for complexity theory and ecological thought to merge (as I have grouped them), complexity theory applies itself to all complex adaptive systems from brains to traffic and does not necessarily attempt to account for larger ecological concerns. Ecology, however, is particularly applicable to thinking about writing and rhetoric in terms of complex systems because it focuses attention on the places and objects, organic and inorganic, that populate the complex adaptive systems of writing. Hawk argues that these ecologies or networks take on the role of creativity; in his account of posthumanism, he argues, “A human body does not create by itself. It enters into a situation, and the new form taken by that constellation plays out its own potentiality” (Counter-History 177). By this, Hawk seems to mean that creative events like writing result as the actualization of creative potential of the on-going processes of ecologies. Writers, by entering the ecology, change the “constellation” and therefore change the potential and then the actual events or activities of the ecology, but those events result from the processes of interaction of the ecology as a whole and not the individual writer. As Hawk more recently states in his contribution to Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola’s edited collection Beyond Postprocess, “the subject of writing is the network that inscribes the subject as the subject scribes the network” (“Toward” 75).
Hawk's employment of complexity theory, however, appropriates Taylor's account of the role of humans as nodes in a network. He writes, "The body is essentially a node with multiple screens: language produces new screens and schemata that affect the body's links with the environment and other bodies, allowing us to adapt, to form new relations, connections, and networks" *(Counter-History 190)*. This account of networks with nodes and links implies a stable structure that seems to conflict with the more dynamic emergent interactions of ecologies. Hawk, however, makes significant and important strides in rejecting the Process Paradigm in his assertion that the network or ecology becomes the subject, which is a substantial departure from a traditional human subject; even if it still adheres to subjectivity, it is a very different subjectivity.

Thomas Rickert, another contributor to the *JAC* issue on complexity, also recently published his *Ambient Rhetoric* that more fully develops his complexity and network based theories of rhetoric, primarily through the theories of Martin Heidegger. Rickert extends a complexity understanding of writing beyond what Hawk does in his employment of the metaphor of ambience as a better model for complex adaptive systems than that of the network. As he argues,

Ambience is not so link driven, for it suggests many tactile forms besides connections among already established points or nodes. The link gives us little leeway with the more ephemeral, auratic modalities of everyday life. Indeed, the network is ultimately still invested in binaries (movement and node, line and point), even if such binaries are wrenched by the strange loops
of emergent behavior. The richly osmotic character of ambience includes
choric engagement and interaction beyond the link. (Ambient 122)

Rickert, here, accurately notes the problems inherent in networks that make people
nodes in the network, even if they aren’t the only nodes. As nodes, writers and
readers are in a binary relationship with other parts of the network that are only
connections and information. Rickert’s concept of ambience better explains the fully
integrated, folded, or blended relationships that occur in complex dynamic systems.
Because, like Hawk, Rickert is articulating a theory of rhetoric he also connects his
appropriation of complexity theory with the rhetorical concepts of kairos, which he
equates with the point of emergence or complexity, and the chora, which he takes
from the work of Ulmer, Kristeva, Derrida, and Vitanza and develops as an
alternative to the topoi as both a material and conceptual place for invention that
emerges in dynamic systems as the space where future action is made possible by
“topic specificities, which is to say, whatever is (coming to be) salient” (Ambient
116). Rickert, thus, advances a theory of dynamic, complex, and ambient writing
ecologies where texts emerge through the interactions of the entire ecology rather
than through the actions of an individual subject. As Rickert argues, “Ambience is
the adhesion of embodiment and situation, matter and meaning, with a refusal to
essentialize or fall back into problematic subjectivist, realist, or representationalist
positions” (Ambient 106). In this conception, writing seems to be itself ecological
rather than just a phenomenon that arises within complex adaptive systems. Instead
it is tied up in the immersive interrelations of ecologies at a deeper level, an ambient
medium in and through which things happen.
The other advancement Rickert makes is to give significant attention to the agency of other beings besides humans in his ecologies of ambient rhetoric. Rickert, as I note in chapter one, employs the ideas of Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, and to a lesser extent, Graham Harman to attempt to explain how objects, and not just humans, act in the productions of writing ecologies. Rickert argues “for the importance of things as participants in all aspects of human flourishing but also, perhaps perversely, theorize[s] things as they are beyond all human language and modes of access—or more precisely, as they both come to presence and withdraw from all such relation” (Ambient 193). This attention to objects beyond their relation to language and human experience is, as I will argue, a critical step toward understanding writing. It is one thing to argue that objects organic and inorganic affect human activity and influence what emerges from that human activity in writing ecologies; it is another to attempt to explain how objects, as agents, act in ecologies to contribute to what emerges themselves and not just as adjuncts to human activity. While I argue in chapter one that Rickert does not follow through on the promise of this move, he does set the precedent on which I develop my more radical arguments for an object-oriented theory of writing. In terms of Rickert’s ambient rhetoric, however, I find ambience to be too passive a metaphor to explain the dynamic interactions of ecologies, and Rickert’s focus on rhetoric instead of writing does not fully support the writing theory I am attempting to develop here. For these reasons, I gravitate toward more writing focused ecological theories.

While ecological theories of writing have roots in early work by Richard Coe, Marilyn Cooper (“Ecology”), and Syverson, it is only in the last few years that this
work has moved more fully toward theories that allow for the rejection of the subject-centric Process Paradigm. Marilyn Cooper, building on her early work, has recently articulated a more systems-oriented theory of ecological rhetorical agency. While her account gives a sophisticated account of agency, which is distributed to human and non-human agents alike, as a product of complex writing ecologies rather than as a central producer, she remains focused on human agency and action, through a focus on responsibility, to the neglect of the ecological systems and non-human agents she describes. Cooper’s project is itself an attempt to theorize human action, responsibility, and ethics as a product and part of complex ecologies, so it is expected that this would be the case. She writes, “Rhetors—and audiences—are agents in their actions, and they are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens” (“Rhetorical” 439). Cooper walks a fine line here in her attempt to account for agency as an emergent property of complex systems but to also assign responsibility for individual actions to individual humans. From my perspective, she focuses too much on the desire to assign sole responsibility to human agents, reducing writing, at least in part, to the actions of writers.

My criticisms of Cooper, here, should not be understood as a full rejection of a systems-based accounts of human agency but rather as a critique of how this account reduces writing to human agency, activity, and relations with their environment. Such actions, I argue, reify the Process Paradigm, at least partially, in which writing is human activity with environments, which, as these scholars themselves argue, inhibits our ability to understand writing beyond those activities, which is why writing theories struggle to account for writing’s complexity, and more
particularly its ontology. In my own theorizing, I will return to the question of human agency, and I will build on the works of these scholars when I do, particularly Cooper’s assertion that “agency is an emergent property of embodied individuals” (“Rhetorical Agency” 421). What I am interested in here, however, is a full articulation of what I argue is the third significant development of writing theory: the recognition that writing’s sociality is ecological, or that, as Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola urge in the introduction to Beyond Postprocess, to understand writing, particularly in our digital world, scholars must “focus on theorizing writing qua writing sans subject” (17).

Sidney I. Dobrin has, perhaps, gone further in describing a complex ecological theory of writing than any other scholar so far, and I will build on his account here. Dobrin describes writing as a complex fluid system that achieves “saturation” of social networks, and all relationships within networks and that “fluctuates, moving through the very networks that emerge from within writing” (Postcomposition, 183). In other words, for Dobrin, writing is not produced by networks in the working out of relationships, but networks and their relationships are thoroughly co-constituted by and of texts. It is through texts that the structure of social networks emerge; networks cannot exist prior to the texts that define them beyond pure materiality—which is itself only made meaningful by writing. This is what Dobrin means by saturation: the production of meaning (as texts) by writing is the means by which the qualities and aspects of space and place emerge, the means by which the topography is defined. Without writing there is no network.
Writing saturates the activity of networks in that it constitutes, defines, and articulates them through the creation of meaning, meaning that, while it still emerges through the participation of humans in the system, does not emerge solely because of them nor under their control. Dobrin uses work in ecology, complexity theory, and critical theory to explain a theory of writing as a “more complex complexity theory, one that accounts for writing’s more turbulent characteristics” (Postcomposition, 179). Dobrin articulates a fluid complex system of writing that incorporates writing’s material and social nature into a system of viscous (entailing friction, excess, disruption) flows (movement of texts among the bodies, spaces, and places of writing ecologies) of writing that operates at “the edge of chaos” to produce networks, information, identities, agents, etc. (Postcomposition, 183–186). Flow, and its velocity become essential to this understanding of complex writing ecologies for explaining how texts circulate. Flow is roughly similar to feedback loops (see Taylor) but implies both a non-circularity—the texts to which I am signatory are not necessarily the same texts that (re)turn—as well as a velocity, and, I will add, mass.  

Velocity is the speed with which a particular text might circulate and accumulate consequences or meanings. Along with its velocity, textual flows also entail mass not only through the accumulation of meaning but through the mobilization of bodies, the propagation of subsequent texts, and the appropriation of other textual currents—intertextuality. These flows of texts, and how they

76 Dobrin does not discuss a concept of mass, but, given the relation between mass and velocity, considering how textual currents accumulate mass as more and more similar bodies and texts reinforce them, I think conceptualizing mass is compatible with Dobrin’s project.
converge, conflict, and otherwise interact, constitute a dynamic complex textual production system that gives rise not only to texts but to those things understood through texts like networks.

This does not mean in any way that writing is just a blissfully productive system; it is rather based on a fundamental and always dynamic antagonism between the chaos from which writing emerges, changes, perturbs, and the order that emerges through writing, which more often than not becomes caught up in the powerful textual currents Dobrin refers to as “the will to stability” which is “a conscious retreat from the edge of chaos, away from complexity” (*Postcomposition*, 171). Writing produces order from chaos through emergent self-organized criticality (Bak), the emergence of order in complex systems without any central ordering operation or being. This order leads to our *a posteriori* conceptualization (through writing) of phenomena such as genres, networks, languages, cultures, societies, identities, and so forth. These phenomena, however, rather than standing as stable *a priori* concepts that can be imposed on writing are *a posteriori* products of writing that only exist so long as they continue to be produced.77

Genres, to take one example, are only upheld by continued and constant production of texts that fit within those genres and by the production of texts that regulate (corrections and other negative feedback) and purport to teach (“how to” guides, assignment sheets) those genres. Dobrin, in pointing to the “will to stability”

77 This introduces something of a “chicken and egg” problem since these phenomena, as they emerge, begin to shape writing and the ecology from which they emerged. Unlike the question of whether the chicken or egg came first, however, I argue that these phenomena are always written; writing came first even if it is subsequently transformed by its productions.
notes that the spaces of these flows that arise as a product of writing become self-perpetuating in writing (obtain high velocity and mass) to the point of sometimes limiting writing’s productive powers within some ecologies. Dobrin does not expound on the details here, but I will argue that this accounts for the seeming determinism in some writing ecologies where the will to stability (futile though it always eventually proves) turns textual production towards maintaining prior stability, prohibiting multiple avenues of possibly more fruitful production. This is not to say that stability is inherently bad; systems can only maintain themselves by developing stability; Dobrin’s focus evident in the negative connotations of the “will to stability” is on those systems that are inhibited by a surplus of enforced stability.

In *Postcomposition*, Dobrin discusses several aspects of complex writing ecologies: space/place, agency, technology, and astutely points out how these phenomena saturate or are co-constitutive of each other. He argues that “the results of [writing] are other phenomena like ideologies, politics, subjectivities, agencies, identities, discourses, rhetorics, grammars, and, as Sánchez makes clear, theory itself” (24), which in turn circulate in the ecology to shape further emergent production. I want to extend and or refine this complex ecological theory of writing at the edge of chaos.

Writing ecologies are constituted by a multitude of material, social, and conceptual entities that in reality are not separable from each other. They are so thoroughly saturated into each other that while we can focus on one or another, and we must, we do so at great risk if we fail to note the problems of discussing any one of them in relative isolation. These problems are inherent in the various diagrams
that have been used to represent writing from the rhetorical triangle, to the
Flower and Hayes flow-chart of process, Patricia Bizzell’s Venn diagram, activity
theory models, and even Helen Foster’s very complicated schematic of her
networked process model. In each of these cases, aspects of writing from subjects to
readers to so-called “tools” are represented as separate or at least partially separate
self-contained entities. Even when these diagrams show overlap and indicate that
some aspects of writing are contained in others, we are left with the apparent
assertion that something of some of them are outside or separate from the others.
Part of this, of course, is a feature of models that must simplify and define in order to
make what is largely incomprehensible comprehensible. In this case, however, the
models work to constrain and mislead in ways that outweigh the benefits of their
attempt at clarity.

I have struggled with how to possibly diagram a complex ecological theory of
writing. The closest I could envision would be a flash image, or preferably a
hologram, where circles or spheres representing each aspect mix and saturate one
another with each in turn rising to the surface of the resulting single sphere. Even
this, however, fails to capture the level of saturation and co-constitutive nature of
these concepts. In the end, I prefer to have a single circle in which I list the aspects I
have come up with so far: Material/Bodies, Perception/Affect, Memory/Conception,
Society/Culture/Ideology, Rhetoric, Power/Politics, Languages, Technology, Genres,
and Identities (see Figure 4). These all are aspects of writing which scholars have
been researching, theorizing, and expounding on significantly. Each of these has
been the focus of substantial research that has broadened our understanding of writing.

**Figure 4.** Complex writing ecology model.

A complex ecological perspective provides, not a foundation, not a big Theory, but methods for situting each of these within the ecology of writing in ways that can further our understanding of their co-constitutive and co-productive relationships by undermining the constraining and faulty assumption that writing is the activity of a writing subject. This assumption obfuscates the connection between
insights into all these various concepts and writing, leaving us to see them as things that the writing subject should "keep in mind" or "consider" rather than fully co-constitutive and co-productive parts of writing. In ecologies of writing, as Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola state, "What we conventionally call the writer—the individualized, transcendent agent—cannot actively interpret a writing scene as much as merely participate in the fluid, temporary occurrences between various writing instances" (12). In this assertion, Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola hint towards an emergence of meaning in writing ecologies that does not entail interpretation but is instead consequentially emergent within the dynamics of systems, which has significant implications for my own theory of writing.

Writing the Object: The Ontology of Writing

I find this ecological model of writing compelling, and this project, as I recount in chapter one, began as an effort to articulate a process model to explain the emergence of texts within the flows of textual currents in writing ecologies. In pursuit of that effort, however, I have increasingly confronted a troubling gap in ecological explanations of writing. While such explanations constitute a more accurate description of writing’s productions, circulations, and effects, they do not explain what writing itself is. What is doing the circulating? What is producing texts, genres, places, identities, and what in its nature makes such productions possible? Other factors contribute to this dissatisfaction with systems based theories of writing. In particular, as writing studies scholars increasingly come to agree on the multimodality of writing (see Lutkewitte), as the field recognizes that writing with
images, videos, audio files, bodies, gestures and so forth are all still writing
despite the different affordances of different modes.78 There is a need to understand
what writing is, what in its ontology allows it to work in all its modalities singly or
multiply.

What is writing if we acknowledge that humans aren’t the only beings in the
world that write? As we come to understand more about the sophisticated
communications of honey bees and canines and as sharks begin to tweet to surfers
to let them know what beaches they will be swimming near (Gates), how can we
understand not only writing’s ecological processes, productions, and circulations
but also its being in ways that can account for this diversity? We cannot fully do so
without an understanding of what writing is as an object of study. This requires a
theory of writing as an object, as a thing, as a substance. It is not enough to know
“that writing is there” or was there (Dobrin Postcomposition 76), writing studies
needs to theorize just what was there. This demand, however, is a fairly radical one.
In a time where all emphasis is on becoming and flow, it is difficult to argue for a
theory of being. In a field that is now more than ever focused on processes, I am
advocating for a theory of products, parts, wholes, and substances.

Ironically, as I noted briefly above, it is only through ecological theories, that
writing studies has truly attempted to fulfill the goal of process researchers.
Ecological theories are nothing if not theories of process, of writing’s becoming.
They describe the processes of emergence, circulation, and production of writing. In
fact, by rejecting the Process Paradigm that preempted any real understanding of

78 See Ball “Show;” Self “Movement;” Selfe, Fleischer, & Wright; Yancey “Made.”
the writing process through its obsessive focus on the actions of subjects in that process, ecological theories of writing have come as close to bringing about an age—if we could believe in ages—of process than ever before. As Byron Hawk even notes, “Most process theorists have never fully considered the connections among evolutionary processes, writing, and thinking” (Counter-History 193). Ecological theories of writing, however, do just that.

This is not to argue that these theories do not address beings as well as flux and change. In the following chapters, I will draw out many instances where scholars like Dobrin, Hawk, and particularly Rickert do arrive at moments where they confront being rather than becoming. However, such moments, as I note in the previous chapter, are largely eclipsed by an overwhelming focus on flow, on processes of relationality.

These theorists, in this way, seem to reduce writing to its relations, circulations, productions by not pursuing what writing is beyond these actions. While they go to great lengths to argue that writing is not the actions of a subject; they continue to posit writing as actions, activity, though the activities of networks, ambient rhetoric, or ecologies. They do not give us insight into what writing is as an object of study, a thing. They also do not clearly address the need for theory to answer to critiques that it undermines political activism.

Under such critiques, theory is pressured to allow for effective resistance to dominant ideologies, but has for a long time now found that such resistance is problematic given the socially imbricated nature of life. Systems theories do provide an alternative to the postmodern subject, one that according to Dobrin, “should be
seen not as outside of writing but as an integrated part of writing, of the whole, shifting like the postmodern subject, certainly, but able to flow and redefine as the surrounding environment demands or imposes it” (65). This post-human subject, or at least agent, however, is not a subject of activism, able to enact noticeable changes through its resistance to the ecologies that demand or impose redefinition. Instead, effective local individual or group political action in systems theories can sometimes seem somewhat impossible given the emergent causality of ecologies. For while Rickert talks of political action through attunement to ambient rhetoric, Dobrin discusses writing itself as resistance, as viscous clashes of alternative flows, and Hawk discusses the creation of lines of flight through assemblages, as Jung notes, such an articulation of politics “fails to explain... how asymmetrical relations of power influence” what actions arise from the interactions of ecologies (“Systems”). For Jung, systems theories’ accounts of writing do not allow much room for “working intentionally to contest normative privilege” or account for “institutional barriers” that “cannot be described in terms of generic humans interacting with other kinds of objects” (“Systems”).

Noah Roderick similarly argues that in theories of writing based on complexity “critical categories of race, class and gender are subsumed under the onto-political category of ecology” (10). Roderick and Jung here both see the accounts of resistance and politics in ecological theories of writing as generalizing descriptions of the working out of politics on a large scale that cannot account for individual experience. As I note in the previous chapter, I postulate that these
theorists themselves feel this inadequacy in their various reifications of subjectivity in opposition to their own supposedly “posthuman” positions.

In this case, however, rather than providing a systems-based solution to this problem, ecological theories revert to theories of subjectivity with all the inherent problems that they critique. This is because systems theories, as they have been articulated so far, cannot account for individual experience or the particularities of individual action within writing ecologies. Even though all these theories are attendant to new materialism and the role of bodies, they cannot fully account for those bodies because like writing, bodies must be understood as substances, things, objects. If writing theory cannot account for the ontology of individuals as well as systems, whether we are talking about individual bodies, technologies, texts, or ecologies, then it cannot explain writing. As Cooper argues, “We experience ourselves as causal agents, and any theory of agency [or writing] needs somehow to account for that experience” (Cooper “Rhetorical Agency” 437). But, I argue, it must do so in a way that does not then detract from accounts of systems and the ways individuals participate in and through them.

In order to address both writing’s ontology and, ultimately, an account of non-subjective agency that still allows for effective individual political action that can, in Jung’s terms, go “against the flow” of writing ecologies (“Systems”), I articulate an object-oriented theory of writing. In doing so, I am arguing for an account of writing as a thing, an object, a “product” of the generative processes from which it emerges. Writing, as I hope to show, is not just a process, not just activity. Every process yields a product that cannot be reduced to that process and has
emergent qualities and capacities not evident in either the process of its emergence or its parts whether individually or collectively. As Graham Harman says, “Once a thing is created, it’s there,” and it has capacities to act and be acted on in some ways and not others that are not equivalent either to the process of its creation or its parts (qtd. in Latour, Harman, & Erdélyi). In my ontology of writing then, I am contradicting Robert P. Yagelski, who argues that “the truly transformative power of writing...lies in the experience of writing rather than the text produced as a result of that experience,” and that “it is this experience, which current theory fails to explain” (7). While I do not argue either that contemporary writing theory fully explains the experience of writing or that that experience is not transformative, I do argue that explaining that experience, or at least the activities, of writers as they write has long been the focus of writing theory. I am more sympathetic to Yagelski’s charge that “mainstream writing instruction...ignores much of what is important about an act of writing,” but this fact does not transfer to writing theory, which has excessively focused on explaining the experience of writing, particularly for student writing subjects.

Texts, and writing itself, in writing theory are treated as ancillary to the intentions of writing subjects and the processes of emergence and circulation. Texts, in writing theory, have, as yet, not been allowed to be objects with their own capacities to act. In articulating an object-oriented theory of writing, I am attempting to restore to texts their capacities, agreeing with Derrida that “for the written to be the written, it must continue to ’act’” (“Signature” 91). Writing, and the written, must be understood not just as activities but as things, objects, products.
One of the problems of the process movement is evident in Donald Murray’s famous title “Teach Writing as a Process not Product.” The problem is not in the, by then age old, imperative to teach process but in the irrational negative imperative to not teach writing as a product. How can there be a process without a product?

As Bruno Latour argues about modernism in *We Have Never Been Modern*, process, as the dominant focus of writing theory only fully realized in ecological theories, entails an endeavor to separate out one half of the world, or in this case writing, from the other, when in reality the two are inseparable. The moderns, as Latour notes, “have carefully separated Nature and Society” (*We Have Never* 41). Writing theorists, in their modernism, have carefully separated process and product, the activity of writing from its materiality. This has impoverished both process and texts, which have been reduced to mere form or containers for the intentions of writers. My goal in the following chapters is to show how process and product/text, or process and writing cannot be separated, how we have never been process. I articulate a theory of what writing is as a thing without either reducing it to its processes and relations or to its material form. In doing so, however, I not only radically defend the being and agency of writing and texts but of all individuals, recognizing the agency of all objects, including writers and readers, to act effectively according to their own capacities.
CHAPTER 3: THEORIZING WRITING: THE NEED FOR AN OBJECT-ORIENTED APPROACH

To write is continually to confront the impossibility of control.

~ Robert P. Yagelski, *Writing as a Way of Being*, 81

Renouncing the illusion of a ‘real world’ knowable through experience and reflection, we have enclosed ourselves (and our students, we should not forget) in the prison-house of a culture irreparably sealed off from the world since the codes themselves, in the last remove, are all we can be sure of. If there is a way out, as I want to argue here, it leads away from both Locke and the idea of community toward a less reductive image of social life, one large enough, and loose enough, to make room for words and things and minds together.


Things-in-themselves? But they’re fine, thank you very much...if you missed the galloping freedom of the zebras in the savannah this morning, then so much the worse for you; the zebras will not be sorry that you were not there, and in any case you would have tamed, killed, photographed, or studied them. Things in themselves lack nothing, just as Africa did not lack whites before their arrival.

In the first epigraph above, Robert P. Yagelski asserts that "to write is continually to confront the impossibility of control" (81). In chapter one, I began with a sketch of my own experience of being, in Avital Ronell’s words, “body-snatched, in a trance, haunted... on assignment... ‘called' to writing” (qtd. in Davis “Confessions” 259–260). In the journey that this text has taken me on, and continues to take me on whenever I return to it, I have been written by writing; I have been caught up in currents of thoughts, bodies, texts, technology, identities, and have ridden those currents, finding in the journey a desire to be where I have arrived. To write is indeed to confront the impossibility of control. This account connects me to much of the writing theory I discussed in the previous chapter. Writing theory since the social turn has been directed toward explaining this complexity of writing and the recognition that so much of it is outside the writer’s control. This struggle with complexity and lack of control, as I note in chapter one, is evident in the ludic postmodern theories of Vitanza (“From Heuristic”) and Ulmer (Heuretics), in Byron Hawk’s neo-vitalism (Counter-History), and Thomas Kent’s paralogic rhetoric (Paralogic). It is also this unpredictability that emerges from the interactions of forces beyond the actions of writers that led me, as I discussed in detail in the last chapter, to ecological theories of writing.79

As I argue in chapter two, however, while these theories have helped me to understand the complex, dynamic interactions among texts, writers, readers, places, technologies, objects, activities, and myself that led to the emergence of this text,

79 See Dobrin Postcomposition; Hawk Counter-History; Rickert Ambient.
they have not succeeded in explaining what writing is. Additionally, they do not adequately account for individual experience in their descriptions of process, becoming, and flow. Ecological theories, as they have been articulated so far in writing studies, it seems, have been much more successful at critiquing the subject than they have at finding an alternative to replace it as an explanation of the manner in which we experience the world.

After all, however much I have felt moved by forces beyond my control in writing, however much I have felt myself at the nexus of a network or at the point of emergence in a complex adaptive system, I have still felt these things as a self, and I have still acted, thought, written, revised, struggled, and labored, and I have experienced these things as if I were in control of them. I have, it seems to me, made choices all along the way. I do not think it would be useful to dismiss this sense of individuality of self as a mere delusion that results as an effect of ecological interactions; I also do not think that my experience of my own agency and self disprove valid critiques of subjectivity.

This paradox highlights the puzzle that I need to solve in order to theorize writing. I need to see how writing, as a thing, as an object, somehow allows for both the actions of individuals as they participate in writing and the dynamic emergent circulations, productions, and events of writing ecologies. To do this, I turn to the new realist philosophies of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) based in the works of

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80 As I note in chapter one as well, I generally reference individual thinkers in my accounts of OOO, but I will sometimes refer to OOO as a unified philosophy when I discuss those definitive concepts on which the various individuals who identify with this current of thought seem to agree. While Levi R. Bryant and Graham Harman, for
Graham Harman, Levi R. Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton as well as forerunners to this current of thought like Bruno Latour and drawing on many other realist, materialist, and object or thing oriented thinkers. OOO radically defends individual different and autonomous objects as the basic unit of being, not just as important participants in human affairs but as agents in themselves existing and acting whether humans are around or not. Based in this defense of objects, the central argument of this project is that writing, as I theorize it as an object, allows for both its interactions with individual writers and writing ecologies in a way that does not subsume one within the other nor reify a privileged position for human subjectivity or action.

In arguing against subjectivity with other ecological and posthuman theorists (see Dobrin Postcomposition; Sánchez Function, “First’), however, I am faced with the daunting task of having to build a theory of writing from objects up. Unlike subject-centric writing theory, I cannot simply begin with a human consciousness and proceed to how that consciousness expresses itself through language and writing. Where Charles Bazerman can posit that “literacy sits as an add-on to an already developed cognitive architecture, which it can draw on from the beginning” (Bazerman Theory 22), I have to explain how a “cognitive architecture” or reasonable alternative arises in objects without the assumption of a writing-subject.

instance, disagree about the exact structure of objects, they, and other OOO thinkers, agree in their radical defense of real objects.

81 See Sara Ahmed, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda. Roy Bhaskar, Niklas Luhmann, and Quentin Meillassoux for examples of new materialist, object-oriented, and realist thinkers that are not directly associated with object-oriented philosophies but share many similar views.
Before I can even do that, I have to explain the nature of objects in a way to
demonstrate that they could have the agency to think, write, or otherwise act as
objects and not subjects granted agency by their subjectivity.

Explaining the nature of objects, however, encounters the problem of
explaining just how I could know that nature. How can I theorize writing, or objects,
or writing as an object unless I have some kind of access to those things? Access, of
course, is itself complicated by a rejection of subjectivity as the central point of
writing and the world because to articulate a theory of writing that does not put a
human writing subject at the center of that theory, I have to theorize what writing is
beyond human experience. I have to theorize what is going on beyond the
perspective on my writing that I express above: the unexperienced forces that move
me sometimes seemingly against my will. To do as Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola argue
for, to theorize “writing qua writing sans subject” (17), requires that I not only find
an alternative to the subject but to epistemology, so I am attempting to articulate
writing’s ontology. But, how can I, as a human, theorize anything beyond human
epistemology? This is the problem of access, and it is at this deep philosophical level
that I must begin to articulate an object-oriented theory of writing.

In this chapter, then, I start at this level of access, noting first how other
writing scholars have attempted to address this problem, arguing that these
attempts reduce writing either to the actions of humans and a reified subjectivity or
the flow of some underlying process, singular material, or oneness of being.
Following Graham Harman, I argue that this reductionism is rooted in the reduction
of objects by the epistemological philosophies that writing scholars appropriate. To
address the problem of access without reducing writing in this way, I introduce
the speculative realism of OOO and explain the speculative methods through which
it shows that a world beyond human experience can indeed be theorized. Having
worked through the problem of access, I will argue for a “flat ontology” that
radically defends individual differentiated objects as the basic units of being. In such
an ontology, both writers and writing itself are objects—a fact that is much less
alienating in a world without subjects. Finally, I conclude this chapter by applying
Graham Harman’s explication of the four-fold nature of objects to explain both the
agency of objects and of writing itself. Writing, as an object, exceeds our interactions
with it because it consists of real capacities beyond our access that make it what it is
and give it its agency to act and be acted on, and more particularly, its ability to act
differently in different situations.

Hermeneutics, Epistemology, and the Problem of Access

Raúl Sánchez, in his The Function of Theory in Composition Studies, argues
that “in composition studies most theoretical work subscribes... to the assumption
that writing’s most salient feature is its ability to represent something else,
something that is not itself related fundamentally to writing or language” such as
“knowledge, ideology, and culture” and “how they appear to work through
discourse” (4). Like the posthuman and ecological theories presented in the last
chapter, Sánchez argues that this tendency is rooted in composition’s focus on the

82 Michael Carter reports that Sidney I. Dobrin made a similar argument at the 2002
CCCC in Chicago (xi). Also see Dobrin Postcomposition, 24; Dobrin, Rice, & Vastola
Introduction; Brooke & Rickert 167, for examples of other critiques of hermeneutics.
subject, but he also connects this subject-centricity to what he calls “a paradigm of representation” or the “hermeneutic disposition” (Function, 4). Sánchez argues that “hermeneutics...poses a major obstacle to the study of writing” because it “limits composition theory’s ability to characterize writing as anything more than a technology of representation, a means by which to either transmit or generate” something else (3). Sánchez argues, correctly I think, that any theory that sees writing as a tool for the transmission, representation, or generation of knowledge, culture, ideology, rhetoric, or anything else implies that writing depends on some more primary phenomenon or precondition, privileging those alternatives when they are actually a function of writing.

Theorists have trouble keeping their focus on writing because “we are easily distracted by quasi-theoretical discussions on certain products of writing (such as the ‘concept’ of ‘rhetoric’), but we tend not to address their function as products” (Sánchez, 90). Hermeneutics, this representational paradigm, leads theorists to “sanction a theory of writing as a notation system of thought and culture rather than the production of sentences and statements that come to be identified, retrospectively, as thought and culture” (41). Sánchez, I should note, seems to somewhat elide the ways many such theories do discuss how language constructs culture, ideology, etc., at least to some significant degree—though language or discourse is also “something else” that Sánchez argues distracts theorists from writing. Rhetoric, culture, ideology, identity, etc. emerge as products of writing in complex-dynamic writing ecologies. To theorize writing itself is not to study how
these products operate but to inquire into the nature of writing that allows it to produce them as inherently written.

Like the Process Paradigm and even composition’s pedagogical imperative\textsuperscript{83} that limits theory to the necessarily student-subject oriented classroom, the hermeneutic disposition that Sanchez describes results from a deeper problem: writing theories’ tacit adherence to the primacy of epistemology over ontology.

In his delineation of the representationalist model with what he calls the “discourse of knowledge” (20), Sánchez does recognize the role of epistemology in the hermeneutic disposition. This is most evident in his discussions of ideology, culture, and rhetoric. He notes, “In composition theory, the popularity of one or another form of epistemic rhetoric is the most notable and recent example of our field’s investment in the discourse of knowledge” (20). Sánchez even argues that this adherence to epistemology “has become part of composition studies’ normal discourse, affecting its approaches to its objects of study” (23). Sánchez doesn’t, however, pursue epistemology itself as a deeper cause of theorists’ adherence to hermeneutics, or question placing epistemology as a precursor of ontology. Instead, he presents Derrida’s discussion of writing in “Signature Event Context” as an alternative that reveals the writtenness of human experience (6–9).

Theorizing writing without recourse to a writing subject or some \textit{something else} that writing represents requires that theorists confront the problem of epistemology more directly. Epistemology is that area of philosophy devoted to studying what can be known and how it can be known. It is the philosophy of human

\textsuperscript{83} See Dobrin \textit{Constructing, Postcomposition}; North; Worsham.
access to the world. As I note above, this presents a problem for any attempt to theorize writing beyond subjectivity. How can writing be studied in ways that don’t begin with human activity or experience when all we know is human activity and experience?

The problem with attempting to theorize and study writing qua writing is that writing, in its “thingness,” is a thing, an object, and the past three hundred years or more of philosophies that writing theories have drawn upon have not focused on telling us anything about things or objects but have focused instead on human experience and our knowledge of it. The representationalist paradigm that Sánchez highlights and inveighs against is rooted in these philosophies, which, as Levi R. Bryant points out, make inquiries into objects or things—like writing—into “the question of a particular relation between humans and objects. This, in turn, becomes a question of whether or not our representations map onto reality” (Democracy of Objects, 16, emphasis added). This is true whether reality is the reality of scientific naturalism, Baudrillard’s procession of simulacrum, or the reality of culture, ideology, etc. This commitment to human access suffuses most theories of rhetoric and writing and is a root cause of our obsession with subjectivity and hermeneutics.

These commitments, however, are not simply long unrealized mistakes that are easily corrected. The problem of access, the problem that if we acknowledge a world beyond our experience, we cannot know with any high rate of certainty, or even probability perhaps, if our experiences correlate to that world—at least not high enough probability for most people. We only ever experience the world of human access, so how can we possibly theorize a world beyond that access?
Additionally, the world of human experience is what we are interested in, so what reason is there to look beyond it to a world about which our knowledge is even more uncertain, if we can have any at all, than about the world we live in?

Of course our interest in our world has led to fairly disastrous results for that world. Anthropocentrism has leveled mountains, destroyed animal habitat, and created the looming catastrophe of global climate change. Some of the appeal of posthumanism is that in a world without subjects, the actions of humans against any other beings cannot be justified by an appeal to an assumed human ontological primacy. Humans, without ontological privilege as subjects in comparison to the rest of the world, might have to supply more reason to destroy the planet than the bottom line of big oil, big coal, other such industries, and human needs for power and jobs—which could likely both be supplied through other sources. I am not arguing that human interests cannot ever justify destructive action against other objects; however, a claim to the privilege of the superior agency of subjectivity is insufficient justification. In a world where animals and even mountains are acknowledged to have their own agency, their own right to pursue happiness, humans might feel obligated to deliberate more about their actions and about their interdependence with other agents, particularly the planet itself. Given that interdependence, seeing humans as part of the ecology rather than the masters of the earth provides more insight into the human condition than is possible through assumptions of privileged agency. Human activity is intimately tied up with objects. It is only through theorizing the world of objects that we can, perhaps, gain insight into our own condition.
As I have been attempting to show, it is also only through theorizing a world of objects beyond human access that we can more fully understand writing and its capacities. These reasons to get beyond our own experiences, our own access to the world, however, does not get me past the limits of my own perspective. How can I theorize writing, then? How can I articulate an ontology in which objects can be writers? How can I get beyond the problem of access in order to theorize what writing itself is? Any hope of doing so requires that I overcome the problem of access, so I will first need to look more closely at those who have confronted this problem before.

Overmining, Undermining, of Duomining

In Chapter two, I note that Thomas Kent frames his theories of paralogy in relation to Cartesian dualism. He argues that this dualism creates a situation where “we obviously cannot explain how it is that we know anything at all about the world outside of our own subjectivity,” which is a clear articulation of the problem of access (Paralogic Rhetoric, 102). Kent’s solution to this problem is to argue for an “externalist” epistemology based in Donald Davidson’s language theories, in which writing and the world are experienced directly through human interactions. As he states, “Therefore, internal mental states derive from communicative interaction; communicative interaction does not derive from our internal mental states” (Paralogic 117). In arguing for an externalism in which humans’ symbolic

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84 Kent’s arguments here seem to indicate that he views subjectivity as a result of, or at least a correlate to, communication, which seems to conflict somewhat with his
interactions allow them to “know” the world and the minds of others, Kent is really arguing for a world that is limited to the world of human thought and symbolic interaction—hence, in such an ontology, there is no problem of access.

Graham Harman refers to these sorts of theoretical and rhetorical moves as “overmining” because they “reject all talk of hidden depths beneath the human realm, or at least beneath the immanent realm of relational interactions between all beings” (35). In other words, any theoretical move that implies, through argument or omission, that there is nothing, at least nothing worth theorizing, beyond, or “beneath,” the world of human experience overmines, reducing objects upward to avoid the problem of access. Or, as Harman also explains, such moves make the world “interchangeable with what can be known about [it]” (“Overmining”). In such theories, the world of human experience is what is worth theorizing, and anything that might be inaccessible to humans is neglected, ignored, or dismissed in one way or another. As Harman states, “Maybe everything is treated as phenomenal or sensational; maybe the world is regarded as the product of language, society, or power; maybe events are taken to be more real than objects, or as Wittgenstein puts it: ‘the world is the totality of facts, not of things’” (Bells and Whistles 89). Kent’s move to “externalism” is actually a radical internalism because Kent implies that the entire world is inside human experience; this is not the internal solipsism of individual minds but an internalism of human access to the world.

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account of writing as the hermeneutic dancing of two subjects that I discussed in the previous chapter.
Kent, of course, is not alone among writing theorists in attempting to overcome the problem of access through somehow dismissing the issue. Robert P. Yagelski, like Kent, positions his theory in relation to the Cartesian Self as well and, like Kent, attempts to dismiss it as a problem through appeals to philosophies that reduce the world to the world of human experience. Yagelski, following Barbara Couture, does so through an appeal to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (115–121). The result is to make the world of subjective human experience the world, period. In doing so, writing is reduced upward to the activities of writing subjects. The same is true for other theorists who draw on phenomenology as an answer to dualism (see Couture Toward; D. Davis Inessential). As Harman argues, in phenomenology, “The object is stripped of all independent power and considered only insofar as it flares into human view” (Harman, Guerrilla 16). This phenomenological perspective cannot conceive of objects existing and interacting without human observation to bring them together.  

Thomas Rickert directly addresses the problem of access as the opposition in philosophy between realism and idealism, and openly attempts to dismiss it as a pseudo-problem. In a section titled “Realism or Idealism? No Thanks!,” Rickert argues that “neither the realist nor the idealist position works, for they both force us to take sides precisely where we should no longer want to see sides” (Ambient 194).  

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85 Even scientism, when it asserts to have some kind of privileged access to the world beyond human experience through math and scientific methods, overmines objects. As Harman argues “The love of science (which I share myself) should not be distorted into a love of the direct presence of reality before the mind—which is not at all necessary for the practice of science, but is necessary for the sort of aggressive scientism that glories in knocking others down by adopting a position of self-appointed direct epistemological insight” (Bells and Whistles 33–34).
To “no longer want to see sides,” however, is not to solve the problem of human access, the gap between the world of human perception and the world beyond it, it is simply to dismiss it as a problem. Rickert argues that “the things of the world are already integral to what we mean by human being, making human being a larger, shifting composite of engaged perception, interlocution and activity” (Ambient 199). Rickert, following Heidegger, argues, in other words, that Dasein exists because of the external world, so Dasein, or human experience, already prefigures the world, so there is no gap between the world and human experience. This, however, is circular reasoning because it argues that the problem of human access to the world is not a problem because human experience requires its access to the world. As Harman argues this is a “vain trump card of pretending that we stand beyond both sides of the questions.” (Guerrilla 233). Like Yagelski, Rickert, in his adherence to Heideggerian phenomenology, overmines writing and other objects. For Rickert, objects “[serve] as the latticework of our everyday goings, doings, and sayings” (Ambient 201); humans remain, in other words, if not the only, the most important actors while objects and their actions only amount to the latticework for human activity.

Other thinkers like Derrida or other post-structuralists and postmodernists also overmine objects because, as Levi R. Bryant argues, while they may “dispense with the subject in favor of various impersonal and anonymous social forces like language and structure that exceed the intentions of individuals,” they “still remain in the orbit of an anthropocentric universe insofar as society and culture are human phenomena, and all of being is subordinated to these forces. Being is thereby
reduced to what being is for us” (Democracy 19, emphasis added). Among writing theorists, then, most theories can be understood to overmine writing in this way, even the ludic postmodern theories of Vitanza, Ulmer, and D. Davis (Breaking Up).

Overmining also refers to theoretical moves that, while they reject the centrality of the human experience, still reduce writing and other objects to their relationality. These would include most of the ecological theories I discussed in chapter two. Rickert and Hawk both make this alternative reduction to relationality in many of the moments where they give more attention to objects beyond human experience. Rickert argues that an object like a “bridge is a nexus of relationality that contributes to the making of a place” (Ambient 202), emphasizing the relationality of the bridge in ambient networks. Hawk, as I noted in the first chapter, openly rejects Harman's arguments for the reality of individual real objects, and asserts that “there is no separation. There is only relationality” (Counter-History 178). Such assertions, as Harman argues, seem to imply that “nothing is real unless it has some sort of effect on other things” (Quadruple 12). In other words, things only exist as aggregates of their activities or interactions, even if they are admittedly more than human experience of them. This type of move is evident in the works of scholars like Bruno Latour, who argues that “there is no other way to define an actor but through its action, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created by the character that is the focus of attention” (Pandora’s Hope 122), or Karen Barad, who argues, “Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions;
rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (ix). Latour and Barad provide great insight into how objects relate but overmine in the idea that those relations are constitutive of objects.

Besides overmining, there is an alternative move to escape the problem of access. As I’ve noted, those who reject making being a correlate of thought often reduce the world to an ultimate material, oneness of being, or its processes or flux instead. Harman refers to this opposite move, as might be expected, as “undermining.” Undermining theories or philosophies are those that argue that individual objects are just momentary aggregates of some more basic stuff or momentary pauses in processes—these base materials, all-ones of being, or processes constitute the world beyond human access. These theories seek to focus on this more basic “underlying” reality rather than on individual objects. Materialism is often Harman’s chief opponent here (see “On the Undermining”), but Harman also notes that this extends much further; he states,

Undermining occurs if we say that ‘at bottom, all is one’ and that individual objects are derivative of this deeper primal whole... if we say that the process of individuation matters more than the autonomy of fully formed individuals... when we say that the nature of reality is ‘becoming’ rather than being. (“On the Undermining” 25)

Undermining theories thus include not only scientific naturalism that reduces everything to atoms or sub-atomic particles, or various other materialisms (see Bennett, Grant) but would also include the plane of immanence espoused by Deleuze and Guattari and the Non Philosophy of François Laruelle. Those who
overmine objects often also undermine, which Harman has recently begun
referring to as “duomining” (“Overmining, Undermining, Duomining”).

In writing theory undermining occurs in perspectives from positivist
formalism to ecological and posthuman theories. This includes attempts to reduce
writing to form and language but also attempts to reduce it to organization,
argument, networks, process, or ecologies. The most apparent undermining move is
the rejection of the “product” in the emphasis of the process inherent in the process
movement, culminating in the dynamic processes of ecological theories of writing I
noted in the previous chapter. While Hawk’s reduction of writing to relationality
overmines writing, for instance, his assertion that the world of networks “is all one
system, one continuous flow of life” undermines it (Counter-History 163). Much like
overmining, undermining theories reduce writing to something else—language,
argument, process—rather than acknowledging the reality of writing as an object
that exceeds both its relations and its parts, which while they are still very
important cannot help us fully understand writing.

Writing theorists also undermine by reducing being to an ultimate oneness,
as Yagelski does through an appeal to Zen Buddhism (81–85). Yagelski follows the
Zen philosopher Dogen in asserting “that the distinction between subject and object
are irrelevant because ultimately both are defied by the same oneness (83). Rickert,
in following Heidegger, reiterates Heidegger’s undermining of objects as equipment
in an all-one of non-individuated withdrawal. As Harman states, “For Heidegger, any
distinct entity that might be encountered is already a fragment somehow chipped
away from the world as a whole” (*Tool Being* 228). From Heidegger’s perspective, objects are momentary emissions from the mass of being for-the-sake of *Dasein*.

The tendency to overmine or undermine, as I noted above, is not difficult to understand; it is rooted in the need to overcome the problem of the gap between perception and reality in order to affirm knowledge about the world. Overmining denies that there is a real world beyond perception; undermining makes perception a mere illusion. As Harman argues, “This dualism cannot be escaped with... denunciations of reality, any more than with... insistence upon a perceptionless real world to which the mind adequates itself, and least of all with... pretending that we stand beyond both sides of the questions” (*Guerrilla* 233). In other words, theories that attempt to circumvent the problem of access through overmining, undermining, or duomining cannot successfully overcome the problem of access. The result for writing theory, as I have been arguing, is an inability to theorize writing itself, or to theorize writers without reifying human subjectivity. Also, it is easy to see how these contrary positions provide a basis for binary thinking: mind/body, self/world, subject/object, idealism/realism. As John Muckelbauer points out, the attempt to take a middle position or to see binaries as poles of a continuum “only functions through the repetition of the very dialectical structure it is attempting to overcome” (8). This is evident in phenomenology’s attempt to overcome the problem of access by dismissing it as a problem. As Harman points out, “as much as phenomenology claims to stand somewhere beyond the supposed ‘pseudo-problem’ of realism and idealism, it falls squarely on the idealist side of the idealist dispute” (*Quadruple* 33).
The history of writing theory, then, is a history of undermining and overmining in the face of the problem of human access to the world.

Overmining, and undermining, I need to emphasize, are not wholesale philosophies but philosophical moves related to the unsolved problem of access: that there is a difference or gulf between things and human perception of things that must be overcome if we are to “know” anything about the world beyond our experience. The critique of undermining, overmining, and duomining, is not a rejection of all the philosophies or writing theories that make these moves. Harman derives his own philosophy from phenomenology, first from Heidegger but also from Husserl, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Lingis (Guerrilla Metaphysics), and is, in the end, a phenomenologist; as he states, “I use the term ‘object’ to mark the origins of my thinking in the school of phenomenology” (Bells and Whistles 74). Similarly, Bryant, while he defends objects against reduction to “matter,” is still a materialist, a position he takes frequently on his blog (“Toward a Materialist”). I also both reject the over- and under-mining moves of scholars like Hawk, Dobrin, Cooper, Rickert, and Yagelski as well as philosophers like Latour, Bennett, and others while still appropriating their work in articulating my own object-oriented but still ecological and materialist position. Like Bryant, while I reject the idea that objects are composed of some ultimate “vibrant matter” I still agree with Jane Bennett and other new materialists that all objects have materiality, and, Like Harman, while I critique the overmining of systems and network theories, I am not doing so to reject them, but to revise them from an object-oriented perspective in order to theorize writing more fully and to explain the experience and agency of individual objects.
This discussion of undermining and overmining does not solve the problem of access, however, nor does it help me explain my own experiences in writing this project. How can we theorize objects “without reducing them to our way of saying something about either their tiniest components or their most tangible effects,” especially when, as Harman notes, “human thought generally knows things only by undermining or overmining them” ([*Bells and Whistles* 94])?

How can I theorize an object that could be a writer in lieu of a subject? How can I theorize writing as an object in a way that can explain both its capacities beyond my experience and my experiences as an individual? OOO’s answer is through speculative realism, and in particular, through the universalization of perspective and a flat ontology.

**Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Philosophy**

The movement in philosophy that has worked to confront the problem of access has come to be called *speculative realism*. This name comes from the title of a symposium at Goldsmith’s College in 2007 where Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Graham Harman were all presenting philosophies that through various means reject the tendency in philosophy to reduce the knowable world to the world of human experience (one type of overmining). Meillassoux labels this type of overmining *correlationalism* because it makes being correlate to human thought or experience. These thinkers also, however, reject previous naïve realisms in order to argue for new realist philosophies that affirm postmodern and post-structuralist critiques but reject the conclusion that our inability to access
reality beyond our own experiences directly prevents us from theorizing that reality based on evidences that are accessible—through speculative means.

As Ian Bogost explains, speculation derives from the Latin word for mirror, *speculum*, but “the speculum of speculation is not a thin, flat plate of glass onto which a layer of molten aluminum has been vacuum-sprayed but a funhouse mirror made of hammered metal, whose distortions show us a perversion of a unit’s sensibilities” (31). Speculative realism, in other words, is to see the world beyond our access to it, to use a biblical phrase, “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). The argument of speculative realism, however, is that it is possible to determine, from the image we see in the polished metal of speculation, what the world beyond our experiences, the ontology of things, is most probably like in order for it to produce the images we see. Most speculative realists do not claim to be able to escape human access to the world; they do not forward means of acquiring perspectiveless knowledge of the world beyond human experience. As I noted, speculative realists affirm the critique of certainty. But, they do argue that contingent knowledge of a world beyond human access, the existence of which they radically defend, can be derived from human experience. As Levi R. Bryant argues, following the work of Roy Bhaskar, “The question is no longer, ‘what must the mind be like for X [some event or experience] to be possible?’ nor, ‘what must the social be like for X to be possible?’ but rather, ‘what must the world be like for X to be possible?’” (43). Theorists do not have to have access to the real world (the world that exists with or without our relation or access to it) in order to theorize that reality; they must simply begin by asking what that world must be like in order to
reasonably explain what we do experience. In terms of writing theory, we must ask, "What must writing be like to reasonably explain our experiences with it?"

Speculative Realism thus makes its major tenet the very kind of inquiry into the world beyond human access required to theorize writing as an object, its thingness. Speculative Realism, however, is a fairly loose group of philosophers and philosophies united more by their opposition to correlationism than by similarities. Meillassoux and Brassier both embrace mathematically and scientifically centered ontologies while Grant proposes a new materialism that makes matter primary over actual material things. Beyond these authors, a vast array of other neo-realists could as easily be grouped here. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman’s The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism includes contributions from contemporary theorists as diverse as Alain Badiou, François Laruelle, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Manuel DeLanda in addition to the original four philosophers and the other editors of the collection.

While there is a great deal to be learned from any or all of these thinkers, most do not seem likely to tell us much about the nature of writing as a thing, as an object that exceeds human relations to it. Object-oriented philosophies, on the other hand, provide just such an opening into the ontology of writing. OOO, as I noted above, in addition to rejecting correlationism or overmining and undermining, also radically and positively defends individual autonomous differentiated objects as the basic unit of reality.

I appropriate two initial concepts from this defense in articulating an object-oriented theory of writing: first, the concept of a flat ontology that allows for the
individual agency of all objects without subjects and allows me to explain how writing, like everything else, is an object; and second, Harman’s explanation of the four-fold structure of objects, which explains my account of my experiences with writing above and the creative power of writing through the structure of the being and qualities of all objects. It is through OOO’s defense of objects, and the speculative methods OOO theorists have articulated for theorizing them, that I can begin to theorize writing through these concepts. To do so I first need to explain how OOO deals with the problem of access.

*The Return of Ontology: Escaping Correlationism*

The problem of access has its origins in enlightenment philosophy. Kent and Yagelski both confront the problem of access as the Cartesian dualism of the *Cogito* ("I think therefore I am") or the separation of mind and world or self and world. While all that we’ve discussed is related to this dualism, the more problematic argument for ontology is Descartes dismissal of the evidence of the senses through his radical doubt, which led to the *cogito* and the dualisms of mind/body and mind/world. In the *Meditations* Descartes radicalizes philosophical suspicion of the senses and demonstrates the problem of human access to the world, positing that we experience the world only through the mind. He does this on the basis of radical doubt, doubting whatever he could only because he could, and so arguing that we cannot know that we're not dreaming or at the mercy of an evil deity that makes us think we perceive a world that is not there (58–70). He also, through his meditation on a piece of wax and its alterations, highlights both the difference between any
possible real object and human perceptions of its qualities (67–70). Through these conclusions in his meditations Descartes established the foundations for the problem of access. Enlightenment philosophers like Locke, Hume, and Kant build on these conclusions and ultimately establish that humans have no access to things in-themselves.\(^86\) Kant replaces Descartes’s God with universal categories in the human mind and firmly establishes the problem of access and the overmining response to it and its requisite subject/object dualism that have been largely dominant ever since.

Nearly all philosophies and theories since Kant have reified Kant’s privileging of epistemology over ontology, limiting being to only the world of human access, implying, or explicitly stating, that even if there must be something beyond human experience, there is no reasonable way to think about or theorize it. After Kant, the world of things was converted into the world of human thought.

In object-oriented philosophy, a great deal of the response to Kant is spent arguing about how it could be possible to think about an unthought thing. This kind of problem is fairly esoteric, and I take the various responses to it from speculative realists as convincing. I will note only that I agree with both Harman and Roy Bhaskar who argue that thinking about something, is not the same as thinking a thought about something, so the argument that I cannot think about something that exists beyond thought depends on an equivocation. As Harman explains, “To think of

\(^86\) Kant argues “that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena; that the things which we intuite, are not in themselves the same as our representations . . . and that if we take away the subject... then not only the nature and relations of objects in space and time, but even space and time themselves disappear; and that these, as phenomena, cannot exist in themselves, but only in us” (35, emphasis added).
something is to make it present to the mind, but also to point at its reality insofar as it lies beyond its presence to mind” (*Quadruple* 67). In other words, when I say that I am thinking of a real undiscovered text that no contemporary human has ever read, I am pointing to the real existence of such a text beyond human knowledge. As Harman points out, there is a difference between thinking or knowing “in its details” versus thinking or knowing by having “some sense of what it is” or *that* it is (*Quadruple Object*, 67). Bhaskar comes to a similar conclusion by noting that, in terms of physics, “a law may exist and be known to exist without our knowing the law” (39). He also uses the metaphor of criminal detection where “the detective knows that a crime has been committed and some facts about it but he does not know, or at least cannot yet prove, the identity of the criminal” (39).

Bhaskar argues that this is the basis of scientific inquiry, which Bryant extends to all inquiry. That all our thoughts and knowledge are dependent on our perceptions and minds does not prevent us from thinking and even knowing, in a limited, contingent sense, things beyond our access to them.

Taking a realist position, however, implies that our experiences and activities are only understandable based in ontology, in the being of objects that are beyond our experiences; this inserts unavoidable uncertainty into our knowledge of the world. Overmining and undermining, rather than merely being a rejection of the positivism of naïve realism, are also attempts to avoid the chaos, uncertainty, and complexity of a reality that, in Bhaskar’s words, is “unknown, but at least in part knowable” by providing a foundation and certainty for knowledge by making what we know all that *can* be known (45). OOO argues explicitly that the costs of such a
move are greater than the cost of uncertainty and contingent knowledge.

Fortunately, writing studies and rhetoric has long been comfortable with the contingency of knowledge. Ontologies, then, need to be regulated by the same vigorous intellectual discussions that shape our other academic work.

Object-oriented philosophies do not refute the difference between what we experience and a world beyond that experience, but rather contend that despite that difference, they are still intimately connected. There is no reason to conclude that either the object or human perception of the object are not real either by dismissing human perception as a fiction or dismissing the object in-itself. OOO asserts that the burden of proof regarding the accuracy of human senses is not entirely on one side. Perception, while understood to be phenomena of sentient consciousness, should not be ruled as inadmissible evidence of the nature of objects as such for no reason except that they could possibly be faulty.

I am presenting my experiences of the unexpected alterations and changes of the course of this project along with similar accounts from other writing scholars as evidence that some aspect of writing's being must allow for this creative power. I also submit my experience of myself as an individual writer, in opposition to writing's influence on me, as an argument that a theory of writing must also account for individual writers and texts. It is just such an account that I attempt below. My first step is to present an ontology of objects and to establish the being of objects and to argue that everything, including writing, is an object.
A World of Objects: Universalization of Perspective and Flat Ontology

Where Descartes begins with radical doubt, object-oriented philosophy, then, begins with strategic naïveté (see Bennett, 17; Harman Quadruple, 5). The result, as Graham Harman notes, is that “objects immediately take center stage” (Quadruple 7). Harman, drawing on Husserl and other phenomenologists (Levinas, Lingis, Merleau-Ponty), points out that our perceptions of the world are always made up of objects.

When I gaze out my kitchen window, having the capacity to experience the world visually with only slight nearsightedness, I don’t see green, red, bright, big, small, brown; I see a cardinal pecking at the green grass at the base of an electrical pole. I only experience this object as a cardinal, or even a bird, because of memories of past experiences with cardinals, but even if I had no name for this object, even if it were some alien creature never experienced on earth before, I would still experience it as an object. Humans name things because they are objects; they aren’t objects because humans name them. As Harman argues “sheer perceptual quality never exists without some sort of object-oriented form” (Guerrilla 4). Object-Oriented Ontology demands a reason to doubt that the world beyond my experience is not also composed of objects. Freed from radical doubt, we can ask what the world must be like for our interactions with the world, our experiences, to be possible. Critics might question that I begin my inquiry with what humans perceive when they observe the world when I have spent so much time arguing that we must theorize what the world is like beyond our access to it, but, as Harman states, we start with human observation because “human things are what we know best,
and...often provide a useful starting point to philosophical puzzles that exceed our immediate human experience” (Guerrilla 73). In this case, the starting point to the puzzle of objects is to note, as Harman does that “what we encounter is a world already broken up into chunks” (Guerrilla 24), which leads to the insight that “perception is object oriented, not data oriented. Against all expectations, sensuality is a realm dominated by objects” (Guerrilla 159). Harman emphasizes the fact that when we look at, or otherwise experience, an object, we are not usually confused by the changes that occur as we observe it from different angles, distances, in different lighting conditions, or as animate objects move about—provided that our experience is continuous throughout the changes and movements. If we stop interacting with an object, we may not be sure we are interacting with the same object the next time, but we still encounter an object or multiple objects, as objects and we can experience changeable objects, like Descartes wax, as a single object that can change shape, texture, etc.

When the cardinal I am watching out my kitchen window is chased away by an aggressive blue-jay and flies up to a branch of the lilac bush only to quickly flit across the yard to a tree branch, at no point, given that I watched it the entire time, do I consider that the flying cardinal with its flapping wings and movement is a different bird than the one I had seen on the ground with its wings folded. The cardinal, like Descartes wax, undergoes myriad changes in its qualities as I watch, but always remains the same cardinal. As Harman argues “The object always remains the same despite numerous constant changes in its content” (Quadruple
24). While OOO often appeals to our experience of this as evidence, this claim is about the being of objects themselves beyond any observations of them.

Different bodies will experience objects differently, and given issues of mental and physical diversity, some bodies do not as easily perceive through surface changes to recognize that they are interacting with the same object. Even in mental and bodily diversity, however, people still experience objects that unify various qualities we experience in relation to them. Someone like my grandmother whose vision before her death deteriorated through macular degeneration, could still experience wax as one object as she molded it or melted it over a candle. Not all bodies will experience all objects. Not all bodies will experience changes in objects as the same object, but most bodies experience objects as objects, and most bodies even experience *some* objects as the same despite their changes. These numerous experiences, beyond anecdote, serve as data—the plural of anecdote—supporting the recognition that the basic unit of being is objects, and there does not seem to be a sufficient reason to doubt this.

The way we encounter these objects in the world is not limited to the purely material world either—I do argue that all objects have some materiality, as I’ll discuss below. When we conceptualize objects through our imaginations, we similarly deal with unified objects. As I am writing this text, despite my changing experiences of it from day to day, or even from moment to moment as I revise, and despite its existence both on my laptop's hard drive, a thumb drive, and on various printed pages, I still encounter it, conceptualize it, as the same text; this is inherent in the problematic concept of a “draft.” Similarly, despite my changing experiences
with Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and the different readings and viewings of it that produce different meanings for me each time, not to mention all the different experiences of everyone else who reads it or sees it performed, I still experience it as an individual text that unifies all these readings and performances. As with the cardinal, it is not the title *Twelfth Night* that unifies these disparate parts but the fact that all these different parts are experienced as a thing, an object, as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, even movie adaptations like the 2006 film *She’s the Man*, which is significantly different from other performances or from the numerous printed texts. Neither can this phenomena be reduced to a mental category or mental unification of disparate objects since there is no single mind that can be doing such unification since it occurs regardless of how many minds, including Shakespeare’s, die.

While this does show that the *object* that is the play depends on some level of social consensus, once such a consensus emerges and as long as it is maintained, the memories in the minds of readers serve as parts of an object. As I note at the end of the previous chapter, quoting Harman, “Once a thing is created, it’s there” (qtd. in Latour, Harman, & Erdélyi). As long as people continue to read, see, and otherwise experience *Twelfth Night*, as long as it is materially embodied in millions of texts, DVD’s, hard-drives, and the neuron’s of human brains, it exists beyond human access as an object; it’s a thing. Even if I call it something else (like *She’s the Man* or its own alternative title *What You Will*), even if everyone started calling it something else, or even if someone proves that Shakespeare didn’t write it, it will still exist as a thing, with a real being that should not be dismissed because it emerged through
human imagination and activity. This is also true of objects like genres, languages, and writing.

We encounter objects through our senses, affects (feelings), thoughts, and imaginations; we live in a world of objects, so what reason do we have to doubt that the world is composed of anything else? The answer to this question, of course, is that we do notice all those changing perceptions we have of objects. This is the problem that led to correlationism, the fact that humans have no direct access to things-in-themselves but only to the ephemeral perceptions we have of things—even in the case of Twelfth Night or my own writing, I only experience my perceptions of them when they are also beyond those perceptions. Perceptions that are already divided up and connected to objects but that also in their very alterations point to the fact that they are not the things-in-themselves.

000 philosophers’ answers to this problem are the exact opposite of Kant’s. Rather than restrict the universe to the limited realm of human access to the world and so limit this problem of access to the transcendent human subject alone, they argue that the gap between things-in-themselves and what other objects encounter is inherent in being itself. All objects, not just humans, encounter the world only through their own access to it, and so only ever encounter a caricature, or limited perspectival experience, of objects. Objects themselves always exceed all relations to other objects, are always more than they appear to be. Writing, in particular, as I illustrate through my own experiences with this project, is always more than our understandings of or experience with it; it is frequently surprising us, taking us places we never “intended.” Writing and all objects exist as hidden reservoirs of
reality and capacity always lying in wait to surprise us with their hidden capacities. This is the key insight Harman draws from Heidegger’s famous tool analysis.

Heidegger’s analysis of tools as present-at-hand and ready-to-hand is among his most well-known and repeated concepts. In *Being and Time* Heidegger notes that when we engage with objects like hammers, we are generally not aware of them as we go about the business of pounding nails. The hammer only confronts us when it breaks, or breaks us, when it surprises us and thwarts our interactions with nails. Heidegger describes the hammer when it is working, as we anticipate, as being ready-to-hand and broken objects, which disappoint us, as present-at-hand. For Heidegger, this phenomenon is limited to the relationship between human *Dasein* and its tools. Harman, however, makes this tool-analysis the key to the ingenious reinterpretation of Heidegger that is the basis of object-oriented philosophy—a reinterpretation Heidegger would never have endorsed.

In *Tool-Being* Harman notes that this account of tools and broken tools is not an account of two different kinds of objects but of the two different aspects of all objects: the object in relation (tool/ready-to-hand) and the object beyond all relation (broken tool/present-at-hand). This reading goes against the common idea that what the tool analysis reveals is that only when tools break do we become aware of our relationship to them or our dependence on them. When the cursor on my screen suddenly becomes a colorful spinning wheel, indicating that Microsoft Word™ is about to crash, I am not suddenly made aware that I need my computer to write this; I am suddenly confronted with the horrific realization that my computer
and its software do things that I can’t foresee or experience—not having any
access to the operations making my typing possible—including crash and lose the
physical record of the typing I’ve done since the last time I saved the file.

What confronts me, Harman demonstrates, is the object’s “withdrawal.”
Withdrawal is the central characteristic of being for Heidegger through which he
argues against the idea of presence, noting that being always exceeds what is
present, is marked by an absence. When the hammer breaks, we are confronted by
the alien object we barely know and the fact that its existence, its being, forever
withdraws from us. What a hammer is, Harman tells us can never be exhausted by
any list of its features, parts, capacities, uses, or any relation to any other objects; it
is always more. For Heidegger, as I have noted, tools and broken tools withdraw
from human Dasein, who alone can see the world “as” it is (the as-structure) and
for-the-sake-of whom things emerge from the mass of equipment and being.
Harman argues “Heidegger makes an important mistake by locating one of his
pivotal ontological features (the as-structure) in certain kinds of objects at the
expense of others. For him, only one kind of entity transcends, nihilates, or rises
above the world to see it ‘as’ what it is, and that entity is human Dasein” (Guerrilla
243). It is in rejecting Heidegger’s privileging of human Dasein as the sole location

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87 Withdrawal is somewhat of a difficult concept to understand since it is
particularly abstract. How does the computer “withdraw” from me as I am typing on
it? It is helpful, perhaps, to think of the withdrawal of objects beyond our experience
of them as a horizon line, the more we try to “know” any object completely through
physical contact or thought, the more it moves away from us because in what we
cannot experience lies its capacity to be more, do more, act differently.
for his as-structure and the only object things appear for that Harman develops
the roots of object-oriented philosophy.

Harman argues that Heidegger has no convincing reason to limit the as-
structure to human Dasein, nor to assume that only humans encounter a world of
limited perceptual access in relations and the rest of the universe relates directly in
the withdrawal of being. Harman argues,

The celebrated distinction between the ‘in-order-to’ of inanimate tools and
the ‘for-the-sake-of’ of human Dasein does not achieve what Heidegger wants
it to achieve. It is meant to demarcate two distinct kinds of entities (human
and nonhuman), and actually ends up defining two modes of every entity.
Against all expectations, it will turn out that the structure known as the ‘for-
the-sake-of’ occurs even on the level of soulless matter. (Tool Being 32)

It is with this move, that Harman universalizes the gap between perception and the
withdrawn reality of objects.

From this perspective, “inanimate collisions must be treated in exactly the
same way as human perceptions” (Quadruple 46, see also Bryant Democracy 93). In
other words, to use one of Harman’s favorite examples, when fire encounters cotton,
it only encounters it as a dry flammable fuel, not as a fibrous natural material that
can be twisted into threads and woven into fabric, not as a carrier of seeds, not as a
producer of scents, not as the enabler of clothing that “breathes,” or anything else in
a long list that can never completely exhaust the reality of cotton. The fire
encounters the cotton as an impoverished token caricature, never encountering the
cotton-in-itself. As Harman puts it, “Fire burning cotton or rocks smashing windows oversimplify their victims too” (*Bells and Whistles* 61).

Free from overmining, Harman has no problem arguing that “there is, in fact, a cotton-in-itself that withdraws from fire no less than from human awareness” (*Quadruple* 137). This fact is also true whether objects encounter each other when humans are around to see it or not. Harman argues strongly that “all objects must come to terms with each other, translating or caricaturing one another’s reality whether humans are in the vicinity or not” (*Guerrilla* 227). This universality of the schism between how objects encounter each other in relation and the real withdrawn reality of objects is the first and central tenet of object-oriented philosophy. No relation between objects exhausts any object; all objects only experience the world from their own limited perspective.

This move is what makes Harman’s ontology both object-oriented and ontologically realist where Heidegger’s is not. Rickert, in his overmining of objects and writing, dismisses this as “an overly philosophical move” that is “opposed to a fundamental rhetoricity or affectability” (*Ambient* 23). But it is this move that is necessary to theorize a world of objects, to theorize writing, in a way that is not centered on human activity. This reinterpretation of Heidegger explains the contingency of all knowledge and interaction as a function of being, as all objects withdraw, not into a holistic being of equipment, but into their own hidden reality that is different from and exceeds what any other object experiences. Not only does this explain writing’s capacity to act on us in surprising ways, to pull us into the play and creation of its aleatory capacities as Vitanza has long theorized (“From
Heuristic”) but it also allows for our individual experiences of and with writing as we only interact with our limited perspective of it and its objects as we encounter them, unable to see the hidden reality beyond us. We gravitate toward the Process Paradigm because we cannot see the vast reality of writing and texts that exceed our activities and experiences with them. OOO allows for such explanations through its radical commitment that everything, even inorganic matter, is an object that only experiences its own perspective of the world.

Even writing, as an object, only encounters writers as pale shadows of the whole beings that it can never mobilize. No matter how many personal stories I tell, how much voice I put into my style, or how much my struggles to explain this complex theory comes through in this text, writing cannot fully “express” all that I am. As much as writing can be an outlet for creativity, expression, and the formation of identity, it also frustrates, and fails because it too can only encounter the world through its own perspective. This account, like most here, problematically personifies writing, but persons, as the only objects whose perspective we have access to, provide the most illustrative way to talk about what Ian Bogost refers to as “alien phenomenology” or the experience of being a thing.

This universalization of perspective is also a refusal of the existence of any privileged or transcendent object, any subject, especially that most privileged object the human. This rejection of any concept of subjectivity beyond a purely grammatical function—which has no ontological weight outside of overmining philosophies of language—is essential for any attempt to theorize real objects like writing. As Bryant argues, “Humans, far from constituting a category called ‘subject’
that is opposed to ‘object,’ are themselves one type of object among many” (Democracy 249). This insistence, however, doesn’t deny that humans may be unique and may caricature the world in unique ways, but it does deny that this uniqueness elevates human perception to some sort of ontologically privileged position designated by the term subject. Instead, humans are just one unique object among all others. As Harman notes, “The fact that humans seem to have more cognitive power than shale or cantaloupe does not justify grounding this difference in a basic ontological dualism” (Guerrilla 83). Ontologically, there are only objects that differ from each other in myriad ways.

Object-oriented ontology articulates a world that exists beyond all our relations to it. Such a world, I argue, is essential for our efforts to understand writing as a thing, and even to understand ourselves. I fully agree with Harman’s assertion, following Tristan Garcia, that “while a philosophy of things is capable of doing justice to minds as special cases of things, the reverse is not true” (Bells and Whistles 137). If we start with objects as they are without us, we can still do justice to the objects we are. If we start with ourselves and the objects with which we interact, we fail even in our attempts to understand ourselves. The world is full of objects acting and being acted on according to their individual real capacities, which exceed all their relations.

Objects, then, become agents in the world. As Latour argues, “In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action,’ things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Reassembling 72). Objects thus appear for what they truly are, real
forces in the world that act and contend with each other. As Jane Bennet has stated, objects “have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power” (18). This recognition of the object-oriented nature of the world is essential for finally understanding how various objects come to play such pivotal roles as actors in the interplay of writing.

This perspective not only allows us important insight into the nature of writing as an object but also forces us to recognize writers as one type of object among many that writing mobilizes, objects that occupy important and unique but not privileged roles in writing’s continued complex productions. Without a subject, objects are all busy being themselves and affecting the world around them in a myriad of ways whether the object in question is a writer, the cardinal in my backyard, or a distant comet moving through space.

From an object-oriented perspective, as Bryant notes, “objects of all sorts and at all scales are on equal ontological footing, such that subjects, groups, fictions, technologies, institutions, etc., are every bit as real as quarks, planets, trees, and tardigrades” (Democracy 32). This inclusiveness leads Bryant to argue that object-oriented philosophy describes a flat ontology, a term Manuel DeLanda uses in his reworking of the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze (Intensive Science). A flat ontology is one without hierarchy and without exclusion, one in which, as Bryant notes, “To be is a simple binary, insofar as something either is or it is not. If something makes a
difference then it is, full stop” (“The Ontic Principle” 268). Ian Bogost has helpfully summed up this type of ontology when he notes, “In short, all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally” (11). In this way, everything is an object, and while objects differ from each other in the ways that they exist, they all still equally exist. Objects, including nations, streetlamps, dinosaur bones, black holes, hobbits, Harry Potter, Hogwarts, political organizations, activist groups, and bottle caps all really exist even if in different ways. Bogost has suggested that the term flat ontology might even be too broad a metaphor and proposes that “instead of the plane of flat ontology” we should refer to “the point of tiny ontology” (21). He humorously suggests, “The embroiderable shorthand for tiny ontology might read simply, is” (22) arguing that “anything is thing enough to party” (22–24). There is no limit to what is an object, as Bryant notes “objects can be discontinuous across time and can be vastly spread out across space. A conversation, for example, can cease and be resumed at a later point” (Democracy 242). It is in this way that writing, like everything else, is an object.

Writing the Object

As Harman explains, “An object is any unified entity” (Bells and Whistles 60). As such, anything that emerges as something that is “irreducible to its component

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88 This seems to indicate that the existence of objects as different objects is a matter of relations, so there could never be only one object because that would mean there is nothing at all. The existence of an object creates a difference between what the object is and is not, so to have one object is already to have two. This relationship does not define or exhaust the being of the object, however, because if it did, there would then still be only one object, difference. For there to be two objects, they cannot be only their relationship but must always exceed that relationship, be more.
pieces or to its effects on the surrounding environment” is an object, even if it is extended across space and time (Harman, *Bells and Whistles* 39). Writing is a vast object that unifies the textual production of meaning and all the objects involved in that production: texts, writers, readers, technologies, languages, etc. Each of these things, including writers and readers, is also an object, but, as Harman says, since “the term ‘objects’ is not opposed to ‘subjects’...it is not such a bad fate to be an object” (*Bells and Whistles* 38–39). All objects have agency according to their real capacities to act and be acted on, and all objects, I argue in the next chapter, can involve themselves in writing. Additionally, all texts—both those produced by writers and those produced as “readings” by readers, regardless of their supposed permanence, quality, accuracy, or any other criteria by which texts are judged are included as fully recognized writing objects.

This insistence that all things are objects is a difficult concept, particularly in relation to both the argument that even fictions like Harry Potter or the Jabberwocky are also objects in the same sense that rocks are and in terms of understanding how writing can be an object. In terms of the first, that fictions are also objects, the contention is not that these are objects in the same way as rocks, or even that they have the same real powers, only that they exist, and in existing are objects with an ontological structure like every other object. I even follow Bryant in arguing that even fictions have materiality as objects. As Bryant explains,

> If *everything* is material, then *fictions*, which obviously make up the furniture of the world we live in, have to have material being as well. What do I mean by that? Do I mean that there is a *living being* named Harry Potter that eats
and drinks, breaths air... and casts magical spells? No! I mean that

“Harry Potter” has to be inscribed in brains or on pieces of paper or on video clips. I mean that there has to be some material medium for this fiction to be present in the world. (“A Quick Remark”)

Everything is an object, and everything even has materiality as an object, in that everything, including fictions, unify disparate and distributed parts into a core being that exceeds and is different from those parts and its relations.

In the same way that Harry Potter is an object that unifies ink, books, brains, posters, pictures, movies, etc. into an object, despite being a fiction, writing unifies texts, books, tree pulp, animal skins, ancient clay tablets of Sumerian cuneiform, texts, tweets, Facebook updates, writers, technology, graphic novels, languages, etc., etc., etc. into the object “writing.” We, in fact, experience this in the way that we can point to any particular written object whether the Declaration of Independence or the building directory that tells visitors which floor the English department is on and factually declare each is writing. What I am doing is writing; the books on my shelf are full of writing. An object-oriented approach radically defends this from reduction to pure labeling in language and from assertions that because something emerges through human social interaction it is somehow less real than rocks or stars. OOO is radically inclusive. As Harman argues, “we are rarely bothered if a rock is called an object despite containing billions of different atoms, but more bothered if someone speaks of the European Union as an object despite the great variation of its components. But there are no grounds for this bias” (Quadruple 116).
This inclusiveness aligns OOO as it applies to writing with Vitanza’s arguments for inclusiveness when he says he wants “everything that has been excluded, now reincluded” (*Negation*). Perhaps even more than third sophistic rhetoric, OOO is radically inclusive, everything is, and everything is an object. This inclusiveness is connected, however, not with a recognition of how language or writing determines what a writer writes by moving her to particular subject positions, nor with the play of signifier in culture, ideology, or language giving rise to a need to play with signifiers, but with an argument that all individuals, all objects, exist, and that they all encounter each other through the limitations of their own experiences, never fully encountering, or understanding, the objects with which they relate. The object-oriented theory of writing I articulate, then, also works toward inclusion, creation, play, and an expansive understanding of what writing, as an agent, can do as we participate in the actions that emerge from its withdrawn reality. It also works toward inclusion of all the objects of writing in our explanations of writing from texts and technology to writers and entire writing ecologies.

Up to this point, however, I have only been able to scratch the surface of the nature of objects, only beginning to explain my experiences of being body-snatched or transported by writing in this project. It is in Harman’s articulation of the four-fold nature of objects that I can really begin to make sense of my experiences from an object-oriented perspective. Through Harman’s appropriation of Heidegger’s tool-analysis and the concept of “withdrawal,” I have noted that objects are more than their relations, but, as I’ve also discussed as evidence for objects, objects do
relate through perspective. To explain how objects can both exceed and engage in their relational actions, Harman articulates a four-fold structure of all objects.

The Four-Fold Structure of Writing and Other Objects

As I've noted, objects, even those we think we know best, can surprise us, be different, act differently, or be acted on differently because they are never fully exhausted by their present relations and behaviors. Changes in situations can lead to startling behaviors by seemingly predictable objects. This is evident when we send emails, texts, tweets, or other messages only to find that they act in unanticipated ways when others read them. What we believe is a simple straightforward request appears to the receiver as an impertinent demand. Our common sense understanding of this situation, of course, is to attribute this to subjectivity and assert either that the reader “misunderstood” or “misinterpreted” the message or that it was poorly conceived, the writer “miswrote” or wrote poorly—if the writer has more cultural capital than the reader, it is worth noting, the reader “misread,” and if the reverse is true, the writer “miswrote.” An object-oriented writing theory attributes such miscommunications to the inner capacities of texts and writing itself. Writing can act differently, and we will never exhaust this capacity to do so in different circumstances because writing’s reality, its core, is what we can never fully experience but only glimpse through our limited interactions with it. This is not to deny that our experiences of texts are altered and transformed through our relations with other objects. As the issue of cultural capital I mention shows, our experiences of texts become inflected with the experiences we
have of others in relation to them, and the experiences of those others with the
text. What an object-oriented approach shows, however, is that all these experiences
emerge from the capacities of objects to act on us in different ways from their
withdrawn realities.

This “withdrawn” object is what Harman refers to as the “real” object. This
object is not the one that we, or any other objects, encounter directly. It is, however,
the substance of every object that other objects, including people, can only know
limitedly through the dark glass of their own perspectives. It is this core of writing
that gives rise to its unpredictability, its capacity to surprise us, “to write an
intuition,” as Gregory Ulmer argues for (Heuretics 37), or to write with a focus on
“radical inclusion” as Victor Vitanza advocates (“From Heuristics,” 186). It is also
this aspect of writing that affirms, as Sánchez states, “Surely, no one believes that
one day we will have theorized, described, and otherwise understood the (f)act of
writing in its fullest complexities” (“First, a Word” 183). We will always have deeper
and deeper aspects of writing to theorize as we chase in wonder after writing’s
hidden core. Writing, like all objects, has no limit in the types of texts, genres,
identities, cultures, ideologies and other qualities it can produce given a limitless
number of different situations.

Harman often seems to push this concept of withdrawal and the real object too
far, creating a duality between reality, hidden real objects, and objects in experience,
sensual objects, that he admits he views as unreal (Bells and Whistles 77). As
Harman himself notes, this radical conception of withdrawal and the need it creates
for vicarious or “indirect relation is the strangest aspect of [his] philosophy, the one
[others] are most willing to abandon even when they agree with other aspects”
(Bells and Whistles 175). It is also the aspect I too find unnecessary and will
abandon. I indicate this by enclosing the real of real object in quotations.
When I interact with writing, however, I don’t directly experience its productive creativity. Instead, I encounter the keyboard under my fingers, the pixilated type that appears on the screen, the distracting icons and other objects, the flickering lamp, the piles of books, the texts I have read and underlined, the facilitating and limiting languages, modes, and technologies, the text and its rhetoric and anticipations that are emerging, multimodality, the people with whom I converse whether in person or through their texts, and the meanings I experience as I write, or perhaps read. I experience these objects not just as emerging creative writing but also as seemingly stable, rule-based activities, and recognizable unified writing-objects like genres. While much of writing can be understood through the concept of the withdrawn object, there is much more to writing, and much more to objects. How do I get from the fairly abstract idea of the withdrawn reality of writing and writing objects to where the ink or pixels meet the brain? How can I get back to texts like this one to rhetoric and communication, to genres, cultures, societies, ideologies, ecologies? How can I do so and still radically defend writing and everything else as an object? The first step is to go beyond the withdrawn object to focus on what makes writing writing.

Writing’s Essence: Agency and Difference

The abstract nature of the theorization of the withdrawn being of objects that exceed relations or human access to them leads Terence Blake to argue that Harman engages in “the reduction of the abundance of the world to an abstract hidden realm of untouchable, unknowable, yet intelligible, “objects” (20 Theses). Blake mistakes
OOO’s description of the ontology of all objects with the positing of an actual abstract singular object. This is only possible because Blake ignores all discussions, in this case in Harman’s works, of the real qualities that differentiate substances. Blake’s argument is the equivalent of claiming that the general description of human bodies is an attempt to replace actual individual bodies with some generic abstraction. As Bryant argues, “Ontology does not tell us what objects exist, but that objects exist” (Democracy, 53). To say that all objects exist and have the same ontological structure is not to say that this structure itself is what does exist. What rescues OOO from a monist abstraction is the explication of all objects’ structures of essential or, in Harman’s terms “real,” qualities that explain both difference, or even difference, and also agency as inherent, not in language or culture, but in being, in ontology. The structure of capacities or qualities that the withdrawn object unifies in its being constitutes the essence of objects.

The radical defense of all different individual objects requires a revival and defense of essence. This, however, is entirely different from essentialism. As Harman argues, criticisms of essence are directed “against the permanence of essence, and against the knowability of these permanent essences: as if statements could be made about timeless essential properties of Arabs, women, homosexuals, criminal skull types in phrenology, and so forth” (Bells and Whistles, 26–27). Essentialism is a problem because it asserts that timeless universal permanent truths can be directly and definitively known about objects or people, or, even more egregiously, groups of people, which object-oriented philosophies fully reject. Instead, for OOO “essence’ simply means that any object has real properties that are not exhausted by their
current appearance in the mind or their current impact on other entities more generally” (Harman Bells and Whistles, 27). In this sense, essence is only an assertion that all objects have real properties that make them what they are, which belong to unique individual objects and cannot be generalized to groups on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. Essences are not directly knowable, nor are they permanent and unchanging. Harman argues, however, that these essential qualities can be known, at least partially or speculatively, by means of theory. “Real” qualities “can only be known through categorical intuition: the work of the intellect and not of the senses. Such intuition points at those vital and never-visible traits that differ from the purely sensual character of the object” (Quadruple 101). An individual object’s essence, then, is exactly what theory seeks after as it attempts to understand the qualities and capacities that make an object what it is rather than something else.

In chapter two, I discussed three major developments in writing theory that describe what theorists have asserted are real structuring qualities of writing: that it is a process, that it is social, and that it is ecological. My own project is to add to these that it is also object-oriented—the implications of which I am beginning to work out here. Writing we will also recognize, as Derrida asserts, “creates meaning by enregistering it, by entrusting it to an engraving, a groove, a relief, to a surface” (Writing and Difference 12). Indicating, as I will more thoroughly explore in the following chapter, that writing always involves physical marks and that it is meaningful. In fact, I argue, writing is the production, or producer, of meaning. Each of these qualities distinguishes what objects are or are not part of writing. Above, I
noted that writing unifies all the objects and activities involved in the ongoing, vast, textual production of meaning, and that we can recognize how writing is an object that unifies its parts because we experience everything from the activity I am currently engaging in to the clay tablets of Sumeria as writing. It is writing’s nature as a process that allows it to mobilize and unify synchronous, asynchronous, and even polysynchronous activities as writing. It is writing’s sociality that gives it the capacity to mobilize writers and readers in their ecologies to engage in those activities, and it is writing’s ecological nature that allows for its mobilization of other non-human and inorganic objects from texts to technologies. All of these always involve meaning and markings, though, I argue, those physical markings can be sound waves and gestures as well as the wedge-shaped chisel marks of cuneiform, or even neurons in brains. It can also be computer code, which is meaningful to those who can read it and which computers can translate into other media and modes. These essential qualities distinguish writing from the whole universe of activities and objects that aren’t writing.

These qualities, and all those that remain beyond the reach of current theory, are what constitute writing’s capacities, its agency to act and be acted on, or with, and what differentiate writing from other objects. As Harman argues, “the pairing of real objects with real qualities is what allows real objects to differ from one another rather than being empty unified substrata with no definite character” (Quadruple 50). From an object-oriented perspective, difference is an aspect of being. Every object has a structure of capacities that make it what it is and determine its agency, how it can act and be acted on, which, Bryant notes, also coincides with difference
since “all objects are defined by their affects or their capacity to act and to be
acted upon” (“The Ontic Principle” 274).\textsuperscript{90} These qualities and capacities, however,
“can only ever be inferred from [their] local manifestations in the world” (Bryant,
\textit{Democracy} 88). Theory attempts to discern these essential qualities through limited,
perspectival, and sensual interactions with objects.

Like the concept of withdrawal, then, the idea of the structuring qualities or
capacities of writing is a difficult one, particularly because they remain abstract, and
must remain so because we can never experience them directly, only infer them
from our sensual experiences. Watching a male cardinal out my window, I
experience it as red not because it \textit{is} red but because the real qualities of the
feathers are such that they act to absorb all the colors I have the capacity to see
except red, which, paradoxically, is why I see red. As Bryant argues, “we must not
say that an object \textit{has} its [sensual] qualities or that qualities \textit{inhere} in an object, nor
above all that objects \textit{are} their qualities, but rather... we must say that qualities are
something an object \textit{does}” (\textit{Democracy}, 69). My experience of red is an action on the
part of the cardinal made possible by it’s real qualities or capacities in relation to
light and my vision. These qualities or capacities determine the cardinal’s, or in this
case the feathers’ \textit{agency} to act in the world. In relation to light and to my visual
capacity, the cardinals’ feathers have the capacity to \textit{red} in several different shades
from nearly black in dim light to bright red in full sun but they do not, as far as I
know, have the capacity to blue or green. So, while objects have the capacity to act

\textsuperscript{90} Bryant is using \textit{affects} to refer to the capacity of objects to act and be acted on
here; their capacity to affect or be affected.
differently through changes in situations, their structuring capacities or qualities do limit those actions. In reading a text, I will not experience just any reading but one of a range of possible readings determined by the texts capacities in relation to my own.

This is evident whenever I ask students to read very difficult texts like Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context,” which I assigned to a “Writing about Culture and Society” course I taught this last fall. As is true whenever students read such difficult texts, my students came to class with a wide range of “readings.” Even those who seemed to understand Derrida the least, however, and who seemed to have arrived at readings that would be outliers, did still fall within a range that I could relate back to the capacities of the text. In relation to my students the text could generate a range of meanings, but not others. That range of meanings, however, could certainly change depending on the meaning making capacities of different students, or if I had assigned the text in a different course, or if I had situated it in a different order of readings. While an object’s capacities do disallow a range of actions, this does not prevent that object from always exceeding its relations. As Manuel DeLanda explains,

Capacities are potentially infinite in number because they depend not only on the power of an entity to affect but also on that of innumerable other entities to be affected by it... If we imagined... a sharp obsidian stone existing before life, we could ascribe to it [the] capacity to cut, a capacity it occasionally exercised on softer rocks that fell on it. But when living creatures large enough to be pierced by the stone appeared on this planet the stone suddenly
acquired the capacity to kill. This implies that without changing any of its properties the possibility space associated with the capacities of stone became larger. (391)

As DeLanda explains here, objects act through both the structure of their real qualities and the capacities they allow and the relations that objects enter into. This brings us to the great paradox of object-oriented philosophy: objects both withdraw from relations, yet objects relate all the time.

*Getting Sensual with Texts: Writing as We Experience It*

While the concept of object’s essence, or in Harman’s terms, their real qualities, remains abstract, it does bring us back to the familiar territory of writing as humans, and perhaps other sentient objects, experience it. Writing’s reality and qualities beyond my direct experience act to make the experience I am having as I type on my laptop and watch print text appear on the screen and as I engage with the ideas of writing theory, the material reality of writing, reader comments, and object-oriented concepts and bring these together. As I write, I interact with my laptop, Microsoft word, piles of books, printed articles, digital .pdf articles, the small desktop fan that is compensating for my building’s antiquated air conditioning system, the desk itself, bookshelves full of other books that have not been pulled down since the last time I cleaned up my work space, memories of texts and quotes, documents of typed up quotes, printed and digital copies of texts with reader feedback on them as well as my own, outlines, notes, etc. I experience all these objects as what Harman terms sensual objects (*Guerrilla*).
When I interact with them, however, I experience different readings of texts as I reread them; I question my use of particular quotes as I reread my own text, getting a different meaning from them than the one that prompted me to choose them before. What seemed like an efficient organization before now strikes me as disjointed, and an entire page of what had seemed vital explication now seems redundant and unnecessary. Many times such readings occur because of feedback from readers, who translate their own experiences into my texts as marginal comments and highlights, which alter my experience of “my” texts even further. Similarly, I have trouble finding books since their position in the pile makes them look different from the familiar spine I am looking for. In other words, I encounter objects, even in my sensual experiences, through shifting, changing qualities that these objects unify.

Just like objects in their withdrawn reality, sensual objects have qualities, that they unify and that give them difference, and structure, in the sensual realm objects affect each other through their qualities. This is the realm of interaction, of relation, as objects actualize the capacities of their real qualities. It is essential to note, however, that objects may produce an infinite number of sensual qualities given an infinite set of possible circumstances. As Harman notes, “The same object can manifest itself in countless ways” (Guerrilla, 26). Objects always exceed their relations, which in turn always allows for the ability of objects to enter into new and different relations and so manifest different sensual qualities that are unified in a sensual object that we may or may not recognize as the same object we encountered before.
Above, I use the example of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* to highlight how we have various changing experiences from attending different performances, watching different movie adaptations, reading the play at different times, and we often have very different experiences and responses to the play, but we also still experience it as that text. Objects unify their parts both in their reality that exceeds relations and in their interactions as each object experiences a limited perspectival relation with other objects. As Harman explains, “These [sensual] relations are the very carpentry of things, the joints and glue that hold the universe together” (*Guerrilla*, 20). Because sensual qualities are what we do in fact experience when we encounter other objects, and because we always encounter them as actions on the part of sensual objects, sensual objects must be the means through which objects relate. As I noted previously, Harman allows that the real qualities of objects, which he sometimes calls its notes—the elements that make up the structure of its style, can be inferred from the sensual objects we encounter. He explains, “Like radiation seeping from the core of a black hole, notes escape to some degree the ‘event horizon’ of an object and offer tantalizing hints as to what lies at its core” (*Guerrilla*, 185).91 This extension of notes, the actualization of an object’s capacities or affordances, into the object’s environment allow it to somehow interact with the notes of other objects in order to generate the sensual objects and qualities of experience.

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91 Harman uses *notes* here as a poetic way to refer to an object’s particular different qualities. He also often uses the word *style* in the same way.
From Harman’s analysis of objects then, objects have four major parts: the withdrawn “real” object, its real qualities, the sensual object, and its sensual qualities (see Figure 5). Harman divides objects over two axes or tensions in being. The first is the split between the hidden real objects and the objects encountered in relations that I introduce above, and the second is the division between the object and its own qualities. These tensions together are what Harman refers to as the quadruple object \((\text{Quadruple})\). The activity of the world happens as objects bump into each other in various ways and actualize their capacities in sensual qualities that are unified by the sensual objects that they experience through these qualities. The actualization of my capacities in typing on the keyboard and looking at the computer screen connect with my computer’s actualizations of its capacities to physically resist the pressure of my fingers, create the electrical stimuli that set in motion a string of electrical and mathematical events leading to the production of alphabetic type on the screen that interacts, in turn, with my visual capacities. Through these actualizations of our capacities in our sensual qualities, the computer and I experience each other as objects, though these objects of our experience are limited perspectival glimpses of objects that can be and do much more.
In this interaction with my computer in the production of this text, “the process of actualization is a creative process within substances that requires work” (Bryant Democracy, 118). This realization is helpful in understanding how objects are active agents, especially those that we so often consider as passive tools for, or receptors of, human action like computers. In Latour’s words, “there is hardly any doubt that kettles ‘boil’ water, knives ‘cut’ meat, baskets ‘hold’ provisions, hammers ‘hit’ nails on the head, rails ‘keep’ kids from falling, locks ‘close’ rooms against uninvited visitors, soap ‘takes’ the dirt away, schedules ‘list’ class sessions, price tags ‘help’ people calculating, and so on” (Reassembling 71). Objects actively
participate in the emergence of the sensual qualities and objects of our experience. It is through this ontology of objects, this explanation of the agency of objects to act that I find a possible alternative to a subject as the individual who writes. Rather than subjects, writers are objects actualizing their capacities in relation to writing, which in turn actualizes its capacities in mobilizing, writers to write. This, however, is only the beginning of a theory of writers and writing. I have only established that I have a possible writer, I have not yet explained how objects can and do write beyond the level of an abstract engagement with writing, nor have I articulated just what writing itself is beyond its abstract nature as an object with some familiar essential qualities.

Writing, as an extremely powerful and complex object, has the capacity to, and does, actualize a vast multitude of sensual qualities. It can produce regular sensual objects and qualities like common genres, normative and other identities, apparently stable ecologies, networks, or communities within seemingly stable entanglements of objects, and yet it can also explode in wild and unexpected ways, such as when my students interact with Derrida’s writing, when that off-hand tweet by a public figure stirs national attention, when an author skillfully employs a genre in order to highlight its discriminatory features as Victor Villanueva does in “On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism.” The four-fold nature of objects thus explains important reasons why common features of writing emerge and function as they do. This helps me to explain the local particularity of my experiences in relation to writing’s creative capacities. It does not, however, explain clearly how writing actualizes its essential qualities to produce the sensual qualities and writing objects
I experience. This, now, becomes the question that I need to pursue: how are the sensual qualities and objects of writing, the texts, processes, rhetoric, genres, communications, cultures, ideologies, identities, etc. actualized by writing? How does it act in the world? How and why do I have the interactions with writing that I have? These of course, lead back to the still mostly unanswered question that is driving this project: What is writing? What is this particular, vast, object? Where or what does it come from?

In the following chapter I articulate a theory of writing building on the understanding of writing’s structure as an object that I have developed here that answers these questions.
CHAPTER 4: WRITING THE OBJECT: TOWARDS AN OBJECT-ORIENTED WRITING THEORY

There is a tyranny in associating meanings only with communication—as if there cannot be meanings in the absence of communication.


[W]e do not simply use writing as a system extrinsic to our being to pass on our ideas and cultural practices. It is a system we are involved in, that we create in our living and that re-creates us in an ongoing way.

~Marilyn M. Cooper, “Being Linked to the Matrix: Biology, Technology, and Writing,” 25

At least since Rohman and Wlecke’s empirical study of writing processes and their use of Jerome Bruner’s developmental psychology, cognition has been part of the study of writing. Even ecological theorists like Thomas Rickert draw on theories of distributed cognition like those of Andy Clark (*Ambient* 91–94). Writing has also been intimately linked to thought, at least since Stephen Witte’s influential work on pre-text in 1987, in which he argues “that the writer’s pre-text, or mental construction of ‘text’ prior to transcription, is such an important composing phenomenon that theoretical and empirical research in writing must deal with it expressly” (397). Writing theory often, thus, begins theorizing writing by theorizing cognition (see Flower & Hayes). Any theory, however, that rejects the concept of subjectivity, to overcome a mind/world dualism, is forced to rearticulate the
relationship between the seeming internal consciousness that we experience and the seemingly external physical world. Thomas Kent, as I quote him in the previous chapter, argues, “internal mental states derive from communicative interaction” (*Paralogic* 117). As I argue in that chapter, this move, however, only brings the world into the realm of human cognition, human experience.

In this project, I am attempting to articulate an object-oriented *realist* theory of writing that very much defends the existence of a world beyond human access through experience. By defending such a world while at the same time rejecting subjectivity as an ontological concept, I am left facing the problem of how to both avoid a mind/world dualism while maintaining that objects all have hidden realities and capacities beyond their perceptive experiences, even of themselves. Fortunately, and also problematically, the theory of writing I have articulated so far does not include the theorization of anything that could be understood as an internal mind; this is fortunate because I, to this point, have escaped any mind/world dualisms, but it is problematic because, without “minds,” unlike other writing theories, I have to explain how objects could ever come to write. In other words, to develop an object-oriented theory of writing, I have to articulate an object-oriented explanation of consciousness. That task, then, is the purpose of this chapter. Surprisingly, however, I find that the task of explaining consciousness and theorizing writing are one and the same; writing is the production of meaning through the selective recording of information in memory, and it is through the function of writing that objects become conscious. From this recognition of the role of writing in consciousness, I can then articulate a theory of communicative
interaction that maintains an intimate connection between the operations on
the interior of objects and the actualizations of their agency on their exteriors.

Because the theory I am explaining here departs from the familiar territory
of subjectivity, many of the concepts involved, as was the case in the last chapter,
can seem alien. To help alleviate this problem to a certain extent, in addition to the
familiar examples I draw on, I also contrast my theory with Charles Bazerman’s
recent articulation of his own writing theory in *A Theory of Literate Action*. This text
is Bazerman’s attempt to draw together his work in activity theory or socio-cultural
writing theories. I choose Bazerman because his text is a very recent attempt to
articulate a theory of writing, because literate action, activity theory, or socio-
cultural writing theory is, perhaps, as Paul Prior asserts, the “dominant paradigm for
writing research today” (“Sociocultural,” 55), and because its dominance and its
reification of subjectivity make it a familiar foil against which I can position my
theory as I articulate it.

While there are points of contrast between Bazerman’s articulation of his
typeory and all that I have argued up to this point, as well as much of what I will
argue in the next chapter, I will focus on the questions that I am trying to answer in
relation to the understanding of writing as an object I have articulated: What is
writing? Where does it come from, or how does come to be? And, how does it act in
the world?

As I noted in the previous chapter, and in line with what I argue above,
Bazerman begins with a discussion of human consciousness from which he
concludes that “literacy sits as an add-on to an already developed cognitive
architecture, which it can draw on from the beginning” (Bazerman *Theory* 22).

Bazerman draws on philosophers like Adam Smith and Karl Marx as the foundation of his theory of consciousness (*Theory* 9–13), but then adapts this account through Vygotsky’s socio-cognitive activity theory and other social theories. While Bazerman carefully attempts to problematize the relationship between conscious minds and writing, or other language use, the existence of human consciousness is taken as a given. From this given, Bazerman turns to language and Vygotsky’s “interest in cognitive tools that extended or externalized our thought, allowing us to carry on symbolic activity outside of ourselves” (*Theory* 31). Again, while Bazerman adds nuance to the relation between consciousness and language, in his theory language is still the externalization of interior thoughts that are prior to and different from language.92 Language is the structuralist system of signs proposed by Saussure, though Bazerman argues it is the everyday use of language in *parole* not the formal system of *Langue* that mediates human activity (*Theory* 19).

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92 In earlier drafts of this chapter, a reader strongly questioned whether Bazerman and other activity theory scholars could really hold to this account of language, but it is the only conclusion I can come to based on their prevalent discussions of internalization and externalization and the positing of a consciousness that precedes language, even though it is transformed by it. In Bazerman’s account, this consciousness internalizes social language conventions through its interactions, which transforms thoughts that are then externalized. No matter the complexity, this still amounts to a theory in which thoughts exist prior to language, and language allows for their externalization. This is, I think, evident in the quotes I cite in chapter one from both Bazerman who writes, “Our internal thoughts... reemerge, reformulated in processes of externalization to make ourselves intelligible to others” (*Rhetoric* 7), and Paul Prior, who argues that “mediated activity involves externalization (speech, writing, the manipulation and construction of objects and devices)... as well as internalization (perception, learning)” (“Sociocultural” 55).
From this perspective, following Vygotsky, Bazerman states, “Writing creates a second order representation. That is, written words are symbols of spoken words” (Theory 34). Writing, from this perspective, emerges as a supplement to speech, allowing speech to be transmitted over space and time; writing’s being, then, is tied up in spoken language. Bazerman does elaborate on the affordances of writing that are different from speech, but his descriptions rest on the idea that writing is recorded language.

Bazerman does not neglect the sociality of writing. He asserts that the actions of subjects through speech and writing are achieved through “the particular symbolic systems and activities one participates in and internalizes in shaping the kinds of tasks one can carry out and in the organization of one’s mind in relation to tools and tasks” (Theory 33, emphasis added). These systems can then be used for “making available a cognitive meeting ground in shared representations” between minds in pursuit of individual or group purposes (Theory 9, emphasis added). From this positioning of language use, and literate action as a second order symbolic system in the durable recording of language, Bazerman articulates a sophisticated theory describing how writing, particularly in the embodied forms of genres, are important mediating tools for human social activity, a topic I will return to fully in chapter five. In this chapter, however, I will focus on his underlying articulation of writing itself rather than its sociality.

Given my own adherence to ecological theories with their roots in more radical accounts of society and human agency, I find several problems with Bazerman’s theory that inform the object-oriented account of writing I am
forwarding here. The first problem is in Bazerman’s account of objects. If objects have any significance at all, it is only through their human determined roles in human activity; they are either tools or furniture for human use. This elides the much more active role objects, both organic and inorganic nonhumans, have in human activity, not to mention the rest of the world of activity beyond human experience. This relation to objects, however, is inescapable from a subject- or human-centric theory. If humans are the actors that matter, or matter most, then everything else matters only as it impacts human pursuits. As Ian Bogost argues, “We’ve been living in a tiny prison of our own devising, one in which all that concerns us are the fleshy beings that are our kindred and the stuffs with which we stuff ourselves” (3). As is evident in Bogost’s invocation of a prison, and as I argued in the previous chapter, this viewpoint doesn’t just lead to misunderstandings of non-human objects, it fundamentally inhibits our ability to understand writing and the objects that we ourselves are.

Given this, my own account of writing has to begin with objects, even inorganic objects. To understand what writing is, where it comes from, and how it acts, I need to delve more deeply into how all objects act. In the previous chapter, I described object’s agency as the capacities of their withdrawn real qualities that are actualized as sensual qualities and objects, or what Levi R. Bryant calls “local manifestations” (Democracy 31). This description, however, does not clearly indicate how object’s capacities to act are actualized. Explaining the processes of actualization, however, is both complex and counter-intuitive because humans experience the world through their conscious experiences. Conscious experience,
however, emerges late in the interactions of objects, and, I argue, after, or rather because of, the emergence of writing in objects. As I imply above, attempting to explain the preconscious world to conscious humans presents a rather daunting task.

Object-Oriented Ontology thinker Levi R. Bryant attempts to articulate just how objects interact with their environment as systems by turning to the autopoietic systems theory\(^\text{93}\) of Niklas Luhmann, who adapts Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela’s autopoietic theory to social systems and humans or “psychic systems” (Luhmann, *Social Systems* 182). Autopoietic systems are systems like living things that build and rebuild themselves through the construction and acquisition of parts. Writing is an autopoietic object, because in order to continue to exist it must continue to generate texts through reading and writing. As Bryant notes, Luhmann “ontologizes autopoietic systems, treating them as real entities, whereas Maturana and Varela advocate a radical constructionism that treats autopoietic systems as constructed by an observer” (*Democracy*, 137). While Luhmann still largely maintains a constructivist perspective himself, and “everywhere focuses on epistemological issues, he requires the existence of systems in order to launch these epistemological inquiries. These systems are characterized

\(^{93}\) Maturana and Varela developed their autopoietic systems theory as part of a turn in cybernetics (a trans-disciplinary field focused on the study of regulatory systems) away from attempts to understand the regulation of systems by means of some central managing program. As a branch of neo-cybernetics, many of the terms I employ here, following Bryant and Luhmann, are terms common to cybernetics. Through Bryant, OOO, has a decidedly cybernetic feel, just as ecological and complexity systems do through the contributions of other cybernetics figures like Gregory Bateson.
by unity, autonomy, and endurance, which are precisely the marks of substance” (Democracy, 139). Bryant uses Luhmann’s system theory to theorize the inner details of objects. In making this move, Bryant connects objects and the actualizations of their agency with systems theory and operations of systems. In doing so, Bryant discusses systems as synonymous with objects; systems are objects and objects are systems.

Bryant’s appropriation of Luhmann’s rather complex systems theory introduces some esoteric terminology that needs to be defined, beginning with autopoiesis. Maturana and Varela took Autopoiesis from Greek with the auto of self combined with poiesis, meaning creation or production. Autopoietic systems, then, are systems that produce themselves or maintain themselves by the active recruitment and or creation of their parts. Maturana and Varela contrast this with allopoiesis, which they use for systems that do not re/produce themselves.94 Maturana and Varela’s roots in cybernetics also introduces somewhat non-standard uses of terms like information, which, rather than being data, is more closely related to energy or activity. When I type the keys of my keyboard, the contact creates information in the computer, but the information is not the appearance of the letters on the screen but the initial electronic signal that ultimately stimulates the computer to produce the type I see on the screen. In my own system, information is the initial firing of nerve cells when I type or the initial impact of light waves on the

94 Allopoiesis beyond systems theory means the creation of something other than the self, but rocks, in autopoietic systems theory, are not allopoietic because they create something other than themselves but because they don’t create themselves.
cone cells in my eyes. Data and especially meaning are much more than information, as I will discuss below.

Bryant uses the term *perturbations* for the initial contact that stimulates the production of *information*. *Perturbation* results when one object is able to act on another object. When perturbations can occur, Bryant, following Luhmann, refers to objects being *selectively open*, meaning that they can experience sensual interactions from their respective perspectives. Because, however, objects only experience the information they themselves produce directly, according to Luhmann, they are *foreclosed* to their environment despite being selectively open to perturbations. Foreclosure refers to the barrier of epistemology through which all objects experience each other. When information is produced, in Bryant’s account, it then evokes *system states*, which are the actualization of the object’s capacities to act, or in other words the object’s actions. Other terms that may seem to have non-standard meanings in autopoietic systems theory are *system* and *environment*. *System* as I noted, is taken as synonymous with objects or units and applies to the chemical structure of rocks and windows as well as to international business conglomerates or writing. *Environment* in Bryant’s appropriation of Luhmann is also used in a way that deviates slightly from standard usage, but I will explain this deviation fully as I explain the theory.

Bryant uses Luhmann’s theories to articulate the following characteristics of objects and how they act:

- Systems or objects exist in that they establish distinctions between themselves and their environments.
• Objects, as systems, determine both their own boundaries and their own environment.

• Objects relate through a process of perturbations on the exterior of objects that stimulate objects to produce information on the interior that stimulates actions.

• Objects only experience information directly, not perturbations; they are foreclosed to their environments.

In Figure 6, I’ve constructed a model of this process of activity and relation that I hope will help me explain it more clearly.

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95 Systems or objects, here, should not be limited to seemingly apparent natural boundaries like the human body. By relating to each other, objects enter into relationships that create new systems that redraw boundaries for newly formed objects. When I drive a car, I experience the vibrations of the road under the car’s tires as information on the interior of the man-car object. As Manuel DeLanda explains, “The terms ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ should not be confused with spatial terms like ‘internal’ and ‘external’: organs like the kidney, the heart, or the liver, may be internal to the body but they interact with each other though their own external surfaces or membranes” (386).

96 As I discuss in chapter one, foreclosure refers both to the fact that every object is perspectival and that all objects, as Latour argues, are mediators that “transform, translate, distort, and modify” whatever acts on them into their own terms (Reassembling 39). In terms of objects, as I explain more fully below, they only experience the information they produce because of stimuli from their environment. The stimuli don’t transfer.
Luhmann argues that systems “maintain themselves by creating and maintaining a difference from their environments” (Social Systems 65). Luhmann’s reference to maintenance here is an essential part of autopoiesis, the way that certain systems constitute their own parts, or actively build and rebuild themselves. Objects or systems, both autopoietic and allopoietic, then, determine their own boundaries by what they do or do not integrate as a part of the system. A rock has the boundaries it has, which change as it deteriorates, but it cannot reproduce itself, nor does it need to. Writing is an autopoietic object or system because it depends on the continued production of texts, identities, cultures, histories, ideologies, identities, etc. Writing is only writing as new writers, readers, technologies, objects, places, texts, etc. are recruited and mobilized to continue writing’s self (re)production. Genres only exist as they continue to structure new texts, and the
activities of other writing objects. It should not be a surprise that writing is autopoietic given that it mobilizes living objects as some of its essential parts and all living objects are autopoietic.

Both types of systems, however, draw a distinction between the system and its environment. As Bryant notes, “this distinction is not a distinction between two entities in their own right, but is rather a distinction that arises form one side of the distinction. In short, it is the system itself that ‘draws’ the distinction between system and environment” (Democracy 146). The environment of objects is composed of all the objects that the system can act on or that can act on it because of its capacities or “real” qualities. In other words, the object constitutes its own environment through its capacities for acting and being acted on, through determining its own boundaries and determining its environment. As Bryant explains,

The environment is not a container lying there present at hand, awaiting the system to adapt to it. Rather, there are as many environments as there are systems, and the environment is nothing more than other systems that in turn ‘draw’ their own system/environment distinctions” (Democracy, 146).

In other words, as I established in the previous chapter, each object simply lives in its own world aware only of its own interior and the concept of the environment that interior presents to itself—the gap between perception and reality. An object’s environment is the group of objects that it can perceive because it can act on them and they on it.
Returning to the observation of cardinals and my perception of red that I introduced in the previous chapter, the cardinals are in my environment and can act on my capacity to see red. I generate the perception of red because cones in my eyes can be affected by red light, but there are likely other wavelengths of light being reflected by numerous objects that are not in my environment because my eyes do not have the capacity to perceive them. The mantis shrimp, however, has four times as many spectral receptor types (12) as I do (3) and so could include in its environment four times as many wavelengths of light and hence colors. There may be objects that I cannot see because my limited vision keeps me from distinguishing them from their surrounding objects and therefore are not in my drawn environment but which are in the environment of a mantis shrimp because its greater ability to be perturbed by light wavelengths allows it to see colors and the objects reflecting them. Similarly, Bryant highlights the fact that neutrinos can pass through most objects without perceiving them or being perceived at all, so neutrinos are not included in most objects’ environments (*Democracy* 154). Objects exist and act whether we, or other objects, can perturb them or be perturbed by them or not. Those we can perturb or be perturbed by constitute our environment and establish the boundaries of our systems. Much of the world, then, is entirely inaccessible to individual objects. Systems are humming along blissfully unaware of everything that they cannot perceive. As Bryant argues, following Luhmann, objects “can only see what they can see and cannot see what they cannot see. Most importantly, they cannot see that they cannot see this” (222). This account could also refer to any other means of interacting with an environment rather than just
vision. I could as easily discuss the hearing capacities of bats as the vision of mantis shrimp. *Seeing*, here, operates as a synecdoche for all kinds of perception. This is why all objects are perspectival, not just humans—though each object likely does it in its own way.

For Bryant then, following Luhmann, the way objects “draw” their boundaries and establish their environment forecloses systems to those environments, or, in other words, this determines what the system can experience directly and what it can only experience indirectly. In order for objects to relate, the actions of one object must somehow evoke perception on the interior of another’s systems. Following Latour’s concept of translation among objects as mediators (*Reassembling* 39), perturbations from the object’s environment provoke the object to generate information. Objects can only experience the information it produces in response to perturbations. The production of this information subsequently selects system-states, or stimulates an action on the part of the object, which in turn perturbs and generates information in other objects. In this way, while we only experience information we ourselves produce, that information is produced through the entire connected process of perturbation, information, and response. I cannot experience the world beyond my experience, but I do not exist somehow separated from it either. I am caught up in relations with objects that perturb me, producing information, which motivates me to perturb other objects in turn. A good illustration is the experience of reflex; when a doctor hits my knee with a rubber mallet, my leg moves involuntarily. In a way, the hammer makes my leg move. This, however, is only true in a sense of *mediated* causation because the hammer itself
does not move my leg; instead the force of the hammer (the perturbation) 
provokes the bundle of nerves in my knee to fire (the information), which in turn 
signal muscles in my leg to contract (the selected system state) actualizing its real 
qualities or capacities in the local manifestation of its action.

This account of objects, however, takes us rather far afield from writing. It is 
much simpler, not to mention less alienating, to begin, as Bazerman does, with a 
conscious subject who then writes and is formed and transformed in writing and 
other social activities. Instead, I am beginning with a counter-intuitive exploration 
of the interactions of rocks hitting windows and hammers hitting knees. Even 
possibly less alien discussions of cardinals and mantis shrimp are far from the topics 
expected in a text on writing. This exploration, however, is necessary since, in a 
world of objects, I have to understand how all objects relate to each other in order to 
ascertain where and when writing comes into this picture and how an object could 
become a conscious writer.

At this point, I have only explained how objects act on each other to produce 
the raw information of perception and affect. How can I get from here to a world 
with writing in it? The answer comes when I turn my attention to sentient objects 
like myself.

As a self-aware sentient object, I don’t consciously experience information. A 
key concept for both Luhmann and Bryant is that, in systems that are aware of the 
distinction between themselves and their environment, this awareness is made 
possible by reproducing the system/environment distinction in the interior of the 
system. Sentient, or self-aware, systems or objects, then, are self-aware because they
filter information through a second distinction (Bryant, *Democracy* 164–165). This second distinction, as awareness, allows sentient objects to draw further distinctions, to notice further differences, but it also indicates that rather than experiencing information directly, sentient objects filter information selectively through this second distinction, selecting some information while discarding the rest (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7](image)

*Figure 7. Interaction of sentient objects with their environments*

This selection of information and its recording in memory produces, not information, which the system already produces, but *meaning*. This is the means by which sentient beings can separate the information provoked from some perturbations such as words from all the other information produced in the system by other sounds. As Bryant argues, “In the case of autopoietic machines...it is always possible for perturbations to which a system is open to nonetheless produce no
event of information such that the perturbation is coded merely as background noise” (Democracy, 154). Some information is selected as important or meaningful and other information is not, allowing objects to act more efficiently. As Bryant illuminates, this filtering can suppress the selection of system-states by information screened or filtered out as meaningless.

As I sit here typing, objects bombard me. Now typing at home, I can hear my children talking to each other, the sound of running water from the bathroom, the low hum of the air-conditioner. I feel the edge of my laptop pressing into my wrists, the hard metal chair I am sitting in, the feel of the carpet beneath my feet. Typically, however, little of this enters my conscious awareness, especially as I focus on typing. When my children’s talking, however, suddenly becomes angry shouting, those noises, previously filtered out as meaningless, now force themselves into my consciousness. In this example, of course, I am only able to note things that are striking me as more meaningful than other information already screened as meaningful from among the innumerable bits of information my system produces, the vast majority of which I simply can’t consciously experience at all, like the creation of vitamin D when sunlight strikes the melanin in my skin. I can only focus on things my system is already filtering as meaningful. This process is both pre-conscious and involuntary, which is evident in the fact that I can’t voluntarily screen out information I don’t like such as pain or grief. The process of screening and

\[97\] This does not mean that I am not still perturbed by information, which still generates subsequent system-states in the other objects that are my parts which in turn act to perturb me with information that is selected as meaningful. Ambient music and interactions operate in this way (see Rickert Ambient).
recording information in my memory leaves my consciousness on the other side of my memory, experiencing only meaning—the meaning unconsciously filtered through and recorded in my memories—and not information directly.

In other words, Objects that are aware of the distinction between themselves and their environment write, and thus produce meaning and can make observations about themselves and their environments, operations of meaning rather than simply perturbations and information. This re-entry of the distinction between self and environment, awareness, sentience, is the emergence of writing. As I noted in the previous chapter, some of the essential qualities of writing in addition to being a process, social, and ecological, are that writing requires marks and meaning. As Michael Carter notes, “What makes writing writing is that it leaves...marks. Even with all the technological changes that have brought us from bark to computer screens, writing is still conceptually bound up in the scars left on the face of bark or stone. Writing is those marks and the acts of marking” (102). Where I, it might seem radically, depart from Carter is in arguing that the development of marks is not from bark to computer screens but from the first memory to computer screens and including the ephemeral marking of the air by sound waves in sonorous texts and all other such marks. Another essential quality of writing evident here is writing’s selectiveness. Writing is always a selective process that records only part of a broader set of possibilities. The word selection itself comes from the Latin lego, legere to read, pick, or choose. The selective and meaning producing recording of information in memory, the marking of brains, of neurons, is the first writing.
The re-entry of a distinction into the interior of the system of an object is only possible through memory. It is through memory that information is selected and it is in memory that this experienced information is recorded. Memories are *texts*. Awareness, sentience, is writing. *Writing is the production of meaning through the selection and recording of information in and through memory.* Sentient objects, rather than dealing directly with information, deal instead with meaning produced through writing. Writing is thought, thought is writing. Rather than proceeding from thought to language to writing, we begin with writing and proceed to more writing through communicative writing technologies like spoken, written, gestural, visual, and all other kinds of languages.

In this understanding of the emergence and place of writing in ontology, in the interactions of objects, I am partially agreeing with Marilyn Cooper’s definition of a human as the animal that writes (“Being Linked” 29). Partially because I argue that *all sentient* beings write since writing is the precondition of sentience, and I would contend that many animals, if not all, write. I would not even limit the possibility of other living and non-living systems also writing. At some point, perhaps very soon, computers might achieve sentience through an ability to write, if they haven’t already to some degree. I am also partly in accordance with D. Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert in their assertions that rhetoric, rather than being a symbolic function of language and subjective symbolic action is instead a preconscious affectability.

As Davis argues, “An encapsulated interiority would have no need to desire to write; writing, no matter what it says, testifies to exposedness, to vulnerability—
to responsivity;” there is “a rhetorical imperative, an obligation to respond that is the condition for symbolic exchange” (Inessential Solidarity 9). In other words, Davis argues, “Rhetoric is first philosophy” because rhetoric as responsivity or affectability, the ability to be affected, precedes language, which for Davis is symbolic. In this case my agreement is partial because this affectability is not rhetorical in all objects only sentient ones, and it is an ontological function of writing rather than rhetoric even in sentient objects. Rhetoric, as I discuss below, follows from this affectability rather than being it.

I am not dismissing rhetoric as an essential part of interaction needing its own theorization and study, including study of its role in writing. In theorizing what writing is, I am not claiming to theorize all of writing exhaustively; I am only able to sketch out some very basic implications for rhetoric here. Rhetoric, just as writing, continues to require extensive inquiry and study in its own right. Object-oriented theories, after all, radically defend the indefinite nature of all objects, and as I note above, the nature of objects entails the fact that their full withdrawn reality always escapes our theorizing. As Harman notes, this has been an “abiding problem since Socrates—the fact that an object must be defined, but that no specific definition or set of qualities is ever quite enough” (Guerrilla 176). Theorizing writing also depends on theorizing rhetoric since rhetoric, as I show below, is intimately involved in writing. The fact that I argue that writing is different from and, given the theory I’m articulating, prior to rhetoric should in no way be taken as a diminishing of the importance of rhetoric or its study.
Instead, what an object-oriented theory of writing does is allow us to intuit some of writing’s real qualities and the nature of writing’s being beyond rhetoric in the emergence of those qualities. In this case, the real qualities of writing, the qualities that make it what it is and not something else are marks that originate from selective screening or filtering processes and the meaning that results from marking. Such a selective marking in memory emerges with sentience when an object’s system-states begin to be selected by meaning rather than just information.

In contrast to Bazerman’s theory of literate action, then, an object-oriented theory argues that writing is the facilitator of consciousness and thought. This also means that where Bazerman posits speech as externalized thought and writing as recorded speech, in object-oriented writing theory, thought, speech, and external writing are all equally modes of writing though they employ the affordances of different modalities and technologies or languages. The reification of the idea that thought and speech and writing are hierarchically related in such a way is somewhat surprising given the ways that our digital world is blurring the lines among modes. In a presentation that includes the oral reading of a written speech, a

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98 The further I go in theorizing writing, of course, the more my descriptions of objects begin to sound more and more like subjects, especially as I’ve now turned to sentient objects. Sentience, however, while it is a unique means of experiencing the world, and indeed a powerful one, does not make a sentient object more of an agent than other objects. All objects have agency in their capacities to act and be acted on, and the fact that some are more powerful than others does not grant them an ontological or epistemological superiority. In fact, while experiencing the world through meaning increases efficiency, it can also make sentient objects blind to important events in their environment that they mistakenly select out as meaningless.
video, multiple images including a comic strip, alphabetic presentation slides,
gestures, facial expressions, music, etc. is this speech or writing, etc., etc.?

In accounts of the supposed primacy of speech, I always find it somewhat
interesting that facial expression, gesture, and physical and temporal immediacy are
invoked as qualities of speech rather than alternative modes employed in speech or
as contingent circumstances in accounts of orality considering that people have
been speaking through phones for over a hundred years. The only one of these
supposed qualities of speech that remains when speaking over the phone is
temporal immediacy, though even in that there is a delay. Do the visually disabled
also have a speech disability if they cannot see gestures and facial expressions? Even
longer than people have talked on phones, humans have been able to record speech.
Is an Mp3 speech or writing? Multimodality is a problem for any theory that
maintains the myth of the oral and literate divide. When we recognize that memory,
the brain, is the first marked writing surface, that thought is writing and writing is
thought, and that various modes are all different writing technologies for creating
texts, the multimodality of writing can be explained.

In addition to rejecting what amounts to modal bias that sees one mode as
determinate of another or more important than another, an object-oriented theory
of writing also rejects “the formation of deep interiority” (Bazerman, Theory 26)
from a prior consciousness and through social interactions. Objects have interiors,
but this interior is not the interiority of conscious minds but of ontology emerging
prior to consciousness, and it is not particularly deep but is intimately connected to
its environment through its relations despite its inability to directly perceive that environment. Mind is not independent of the world but emerges in it.

Marks, Screens, and Memory

The arguments I am making are based in what might seem to be fairly radical claims about the nature of both memory and thought. I am not, however, the first person to make them. In “Signature Event Context,” Jaques Derrida argues that all modes of communication and even thought and experience are writing and, in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” that memory is written. In his chapter on Freud’s attempt to explain memory by the analogy of a two-layered pad that allows the top layer to be erased while the underlying layer retains important memories, Derrida argues, “Memory, thus, is not a psychical property among others; it is the very essence of the psyche” (Writing and Difference 201). In this way he notes that memory is an essential part of all cognition. He then concludes that memory operates by writing, that the break between the immediate experience and the traces left on the memory of the mind Freud describes is the selective breaking and creation of different that constitutes writing—the filtering and recording of information to produce meaning. He concludes, “Writing supplements perception before perception even appears to itself [is conscious of itself]. ‘Memory’ or writing is the opening of that process of appearance itself. The ‘perceived’ may be read only in the past, beneath perception and after it” (Writing and Difference 224). Writing is what allows for consciousness of information through marks and caesura in memory. Derrida furthers this in “Signature Event Context,” arguing “that the
recognizable traits of the classical and narrowly defined concept of writing are... valid... for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience, that is, the experience of Being” (“Signature” 92). Derrida thus concludes, as I do, that thought is writing and it is through writing that sentient beings experience the world. Since he does not allow for any being outside of human access to the world, however, he doesn’t fully articulate how writing could come to so constitute human consciousness, a gap that I have attempted to fill through Object-Oriented Ontology.

The concept of memory and all thought as written is also evident in current conceptions of memory. Daniel L. Schacter argues that “our memory systems encode information selectively and efficiently” (Seven Sins 11), affirming the selectivity of memory and the marks. Schacter further notes that current brain science has shown that the human brain does not attempt to copy experiences (4); he states that “we do not store judgment-free snapshots of our past experiences but rather hold on to the meaning, sense, and emotions these experiences provided us.” (Searching 5). We further, rather than storing these elements in a single location instead store different aspects of any given memory in different parts of the brain, which means that any act of re-membering is also writing.

F. C. Bartlett develops an idea of mental schemata as self-organized structures of memories that adapt and change with every experience and act of remembering or imagining, evolving masses of the remaining written marks of our past experiences—memory texts. These “schemata modify the impressions produced by incoming sensory impulses in such a way that the final sensations of position or of locality rise into consciousness charged with a relation to something
that has gone before” (Bartlett, 200). Hence, the actions of our memories provide the means by which information is selected, recorded, and made meaningful in consciousness. In sentient objects, the awareness of the distinction between self and environment and the generation of information and selection of system-states allows, through the markings in memory, objects to generate *screens* or filters through which all subsequent information passes as the object interacts with the world. As Byron Hawk explains, following Mark C. Taylor, “A screen is something that divides...it protects or conceals or screens out material, while at the same time allowing certain outside elements through. It divides and links” (“Toward” 841). In terms of writing-memory, the screen is a sticky web through which current information passes. I emphasize this stickiness because selected information is retained, caught, and thus added to the physical mark of the screen in memory, in the brain. This is very evident in our experiences of confirmation bias, the tendency we all have to pick up on information in experience that confirms what we already believe while contradictory information is screened out, or perhaps not even perceived. This effect of memory texts as selective screens to which new information sticks based on its similarity helps explain the ability to continue to cast doubt on the fact of human caused climate change and other such highly charged political issues.

The stickiness of memory texts also calls attention to the fact that the information that sticks is that information that has some connection to past experiences as Barlett notes above when he states that each incoming sensory impulse appears in consciousness “with a relation to something that has gone
before” (200). Meaning results from information that evokes memory texts of information that was found to be meaningful in an object’s past experiences, to which the new information adheres, marking the memory text and generating new meaning. In the production of meaning through writing, an object is only able to select information as meaningful to which it already has some similar or connected past experience. Beyond issues like confirmation bias, this also explains how people with different experiences will remember the same event differently, read the same text differently, and so forth. Each can only generate meaning by filtering current information through past experiences, so the ability to generate certain meanings depends on having had certain past experiences. This is not a new idea, since it is evident in concepts like the Rashomon effect, Valerie Alia’s concept for contradictory accounts of an experience based in the movie Rashomon that features contradictory accounts of a rape and murder (Media Ethics). What is new is the articulation of the basis for this phenomenon in the ontology of sentient objects rather than an assumed subjectivity.

Memory as writing, or writing-memory, also provides insights into how sentient objects can create information not just from perturbations from the environment but also from the interior operations of the system. Levi Bryant notes that “autopoietic machines can both be actualized in a particular way through information and can actualize themselves in particular ways through ongoing operations internal to their being” (Democracy, 163). Bryant allows then that sentient objects can act through information generated on the interior of a sentient object’s system even in the absence of perturbations and the production of
information they stimulate. I argue that this occurs specifically by means of writing-memory. As I have already shown, re-membering is “a way of making use of...combinations of stimuli, though the observer knows well that they are not now present to any of his special senses, and also that they were at one time so present” (Bartlett, 14). Bartlett distinguishes between perceiving (written immediate sensation in consciousness rather than raw sensory perception), remembering, and imaging or imagining, which recombines memory texts to create new texts that do not directly correspond to any actual experience. This operation of imagination that draws connections between memory texts and current experience on the interior of sentient objects is invention, or discovery and creativity, which we usually associate with the processes of writing. Bartlett explains that “imaging consists essentially in the utilisation of experiences which are no longer fully presented to perceptual sensory organs, and such utilisation is a part of all remembering processes” (34). Imagination, Bartlett argues, plays a role in every act of remembering. He even goes further to contend that it is part of all cognitive activity; he states that

a great amount of what goes under the name of perception is, in the wide sense of the term, recall. Some scene is presented for observation, and a little of it is actually perceived. But the observer reports much more than this. He fills up the gaps of his perception by the aid of what he has experienced before in similar situations, or... by describing what he takes to be ‘fit,’ or suitable, to such a situation. (14)

Experience itself is written as new memory texts emerge through the interaction of present experiences—including, problematically, suggestions from others—and
past memories. It is imagination that allows objects not only to write in response to perturbations from the environment but to *invent* information for memory-writing in current experience through operations on the interior of the system and not just because of perturbations from the environment. This imaginative, inventional memory-writing, *thinking*, is the source for further, more sophisticated interactions with writing; it is also what makes an object *sapient* instead of only sentient. While system states, or actions, in most sentient objects occur because of perturbations from the environment, information produced imaginatively allows sapient objects to act more complexly.

The conceptualization of memory as first writing, is perhaps, not particularly radical. Memory has long been understood as an important part of writing; it features in the cognitive models of Flower and Hayes, and Marilyn Cooper ("Rhetorical Agency") discusses the role it plays in agency in an ecological perspective of writing. In following Derrida to postulate memory as writing (writing-memory) I may be pushing the role of memory farther than most, but there is still a precedent.

What might seem more radical in the claim that writing is the selective recording of information in memory to produce meaning, however, is that, unlike even Derrida, I argue that writing precedes even language, rhetoric, and communication. Writing-memory emerges prior to any development of language and occurs entirely on the interior of objects. Meaning occurs without communication, and in this way rejects the tyranny Kevin J. Porter asserts, in the first epigraph, inheres in the idea that meaning always involves communication.
Writing beyond Language and Communication: Consequential Meaning

At this point in my development of an object-oriented theory of writing, I have found nothing that involves, give rise to, or requires language. Even further, I have found nothing that involves representation, anything resembling a message, nor communication. Objects, even sentient and sapient ones, only experience the information and meaning they generate on the interior of their systems—though that information and meaning is intimately connected to the environment through the chain of perturbation-information-meaning. Even memory does not create a representation or copy of any information but instead creates marks that can be used to (re)produce information and thus meaning that can be imaginatively recombined through recall or imagination. All of this happens in the interior of objects, at no point does one object re-present another; each interaction, whether similar perturbations, re-membering, or imagining instead produces something new—though this new meaning often includes the sense of history created by the accumulation of memory texts. As Harman states, “There is no absolute gap between objects and images, but only ubiquitous gaps between one object and the next. Images are merely sensual objects, and sensual objects lie always and only on the interior of real ones” (Guerrilla 243). Representation requires a subject, a transcendent object-observing object (subject) that has excess ontological agency to apprehend the world in some originary way that can then be “represented.”

Perception, rather than being a process through which subjects represent objects in images is the ubiquitous result of the interactions of objects; there are no
subjects. Instead, Harman explains, “To perceive is not to represent, but rather to live within the interior plasma of an object” (*Guerrilla* 190). An object-oriented theory of writing truly escapes the representational paradigm. This is not to say that there are no problematic meanings that are both fallacious and harmful to particular groups; it is to say that those meanings aren’t representations. This conclusion, after all, is part of what cultural theorists argue regarding such meanings, that they do not represent but instead stereotype, lie, distort. There are, that is to say, disputed meanings. The fact that Native Americans, for instance, use tribal names to refer to themselves instead of “Indian” is an indication that they reject the meaning that term evokes in them because it conflicts with their reality as individuals and groups. Whether a meaning is true or not, it does not re-present anything.

Object-oriented writing theories, of course, are not alone in attempting to move beyond representation as I detailed in my discussion of Raúl Sánchez’s work in chapter three (see also Brooke & Rickert). To truly succeed in escaping representation, I have to break with Derrida, who consistently argues that it is impossible to escape the sign. He states concerning any attempt to escape the circle of signifiers and signifieds that this is “precisely what cannot be done. For the signification ‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, as signifier different from its signified” (*Writing and Difference* 281). Derrida, with his view of written language as the basis of being itself, while he seems at many turns to want to reject signification, always reifies it, allowing only for the play of signifiers as the ground of change and diﬀérânce. In an object-oriented theory of writing, difference is not in language but
in being, in objects, in the essential qualities that make them what they are and not something else—different from each other, and writing emerges not through signifiers and signifieds but through the interactions of objects with their environments.

The object-oriented theory of writing I articulate here is even more in contrast with Bazerman’s theory of literate action. Where Bazerman argues that language is the externalization of prior thought (Theory 31) and writing is recorded speech, positing a system by which the original “thought” is represented by language or recorded in texts, an object-oriented theory agrees with Marilyn Cooper that “we do not simply use writing as a system extrinsic to our being to pass on our ideas and cultural practices. It is a system we are involved in, that we create in our living and that re-creates us in an ongoing way” (“Being Linked” 25). Through an object-oriented perspective we can finally stop upholding, as Sánchez argues we do, “the steadfast and persistent belief in a consequential difference between words and things” (Function 4). Words, instead, are things, and whatever else they do, they do not re-present anything.

Meaning Consequentialism and Languages as Writing Technologies

Kevin J. Porter in his Meaning, Language, and Time arrives at similar conclusions, not through a theory of writing but through a theory of meaning and language. He argues that meaning is consequential in that it emerges as a result of writing and does not pre-exist individual writing events. He asserts, “we do not experience our emotions, beliefs, pains, etc., as representations of something else:
The physical sensation of grief is not a representation of sadness, but is sadness apprehended immediately; a belief is not a representation of a conviction located elsewhere, but is that conviction” (Meaning, Language, and Time 109). This account supports the object-oriented explanation of the generation of information and meaning within object’s systems and not as a “representation” of something that exists somewhere else.99

Other scholars have long since argued for an understanding of writing as the production of meaning. Anne E. Berthoff in her disputes with the cognitive movement advocated for a view of writing “as interpretation and the making of meaning” (309). Similarly Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola assert that writing is a “symbolic system of inscriptive meaning making” (5). These definitions, however, both reify a representational paradigm in the use of words like “interpretation” and “symbolic” and do not provide any explanation of what meaning is and how writing produces it. Object-oriented theories both explain how meaning emerges on the interior of sentient objects and the nature of meaning.

As I have described, meaning emerges as a consequence of the selective screening and recording of information in memory. Writing yields meaning because it selects certain information as important and screens out other information as unimportant; this granting of importance is the emergence of meaning. In this way, I entirely agree with Porter’s account of meaning as consequential. Porter argues extensively against what he terms “meaning apriorism...the assumption that the

99 This is, of course, meaning only for individual objects; issues of “common” or “shared” meaning are still beyond the theory I have articulated so far.
meaning of an utterance or text (or any sign) is to be found always in some sense prior to that utterance or text or to any interpretation of that utterance or text” (43). This apriorism is inherent to any representational theory of writing or language because some original meaning must be re-presented at least to some extent; such priority of meaning requires some kind of connection to some still extant previous meaning. Instead, Porter asserts that “the meaning of a sign is its consequences,” or, in other words, meaning is produced and evoked not referenced and represented. Primarily this is the consequential meaning produced in each sentient object by its own writing or consciousness. Rather than having meaning by virtue of some connection with a stable entity in Plato’s heaven (the reductio ad absurdum of meaning apriorism), or in language, culture, society, or discourse communities, meaning is a consequence of the continued screening and recording of information as well as the use of the markings of memory to create further meaning. This is not to say that much of this process doesn’t involve interactions with others; it does, but I can only experience my perspectival meanings; I cannot internalize meaning from somewhere else. My interactions with others certainly affect and shape the meanings I produce, but I produce them in and through my own memory texts.

This understanding of meaning has a number of important implications, but the most important is that it dramatically challenges accepted thinking about meaning having its roots in the history of a text, or, to use Bakhtin’s term, utterance, in society or community. Bakhtin, in his concept of heteroglossia, argues that an utterance or a word’s meaning derives from its history, from how others have used
it (*The Dialogic*, 294). Though Bakhtin was interested in how, in the interaction of dialogisms, this history is inflected and changed, his account of this history implies that it exists prior to any particular dialogic interaction or outside of the memories of anyone involved in that interaction. In other words, my use of a word is inflected with a history of its use whether my interlocutors and I have any knowledge of those past uses or not. This is meaning apriorism; meaning is always prior to writing; it exists to be discovered in or through the text, to be interpreted through its representation—Henry James’s “Figure in the Carpet.” In meaning apriorism, polysemia (the different meanings of words) is grounded in the accumulated meaning of previous uses of those words that exists in a community. In rejecting this view, however, neither Porter nor I are denying that past uses affect the meanings words or utterances can evoke; words have histories, but only those histories that continue to be produced in sentient objects. In other words, my use of terms is only inflected with the history of their past uses if I or anyone who reads this (re)produces those past meanings in the immediate experience of the encounter. This is a small, yet important distinction.

In an object-oriented theory of writing, difference is in the different being of objects, their essential qualities, and their ability to generate different meanings, even from the same perturbations, as consequences of the filtering of information that is writing. Meaning is consequential. As Porter explains, rather than existing in some ever accumulating nowhere of meaning, meaning is continually being produced and reproduced as a consequence. If word’s have history, it is not because that history is lying around somewhere waiting for us to use a particular word, that
history must be constantly reproduced as the continued consequential meanings of those words—hence the incredible effort to maintain the “correct” meanings of words despite the ways those meanings continue to change as they evoke different meanings in different objects. As Porter states, “Meaning is ineffable, not because it is transcendent, but because its ceaseless propagation into a manifold of concrete consequences necessarily outpaces any attempt to contain or quantify it” (Meaning, Language, and Time 54). In other words, meaning continually propagates as it is added to the memory screens of writing objects, altering those screens but also altering the meaning through the object’s previous memory texts. Each encounter with a particular word or text evokes particular memory texts to which it sticks due to its similarity, and it is this same similarity, and the continued evocation of those memory texts that allows an object to retain them. Memory texts that aren’t regularly evoked in continued meaning are often eventually forgotten.

For Porter, the Meaning (capital M) of a text is the entire set of consequences the text is evoking at a given point in time: all the meaning produced by all the memory-writing (or other writing) in the world in response to that text. Meaning, in other words, is also an object, like writing, a very vast and dynamic one, which emerges from the processes of writing. Like all other objects, no one ever experiences Meaning, only the parts of it they themselves produce. In this sense it is easy to see how some of the ways other people have understood a text will fade while new meanings emerge, until someone “redisCOVERS” a previous reading through another text, the meaning constantly shifting with the consequences it evokes. In other words, Meaning, like Writing, is an autopoietic object that must
continually maintain itself. Meaning unifies all continued meanings that are produced through writing in all sentient objects. The Meaning of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, as a text I’ve referred to before, is all of the ongoing production of meaning as people attend, read, remember, quote, and otherwise engage with that text—even the Manga Shakespeare graphic novel version my son is currently enjoying. In each object, the meaning (lowercase m) is the object’s conscious experience of the text that results as a consequence of an interaction with it. As these meanings occur and shift, with some meanings no longer being produced and other new meanings emerging, especially through imaginative connections with other experiences and texts, Meaning changes over time.

Meaning consequentialism refutes the very idea of a “correct” or “original” meaning. Meaning is instead a consequence of an object’s engagement with writing, with the screening and marking down of information in and through memory-writing. Meaning is the changes that occur to the screen of memory as new information combines with past markings to constantly generate new meanings. To a certain extent, this meaning is involuntarily produced; it just happens. Further meaning is importantly created as those involuntary reactions are connected to other memory texts by the imagination. As Porter argues, this indicates that there are no “incorrect” or “bad” readings. A text perturbs an object in a way that generates information that is screened through the object’s memory-text to produce meaning. Any concept of a correct meaning is rooted not in some original or intended meanings but in a constant power struggle and negotiation to construct a consensus or to enforce particular meanings and to marginalize others. When any
such effort to create the illusion of a common or correct meaning is successful, it is only through considerable and constant effort.

As I noted in the previous chapter in reference to writing’s withdrawn reality, its ability to surprise us, we often send out texts anticipating particular reactions only to find that they can produce very different meanings in relation to different readers. The usual response to this is for the writer to either claim she has been misread, or for the reader to assert that the writer miswrote. Both assertions efface the text’s real capacities to evoke different meanings and also depend on the concept of an originary and privileged intended meaning. Meaning, as consequential, however, is neither dependent on an original meaning nor is it, strictly speaking, ever “intentional.” Intentionality depends on a prior existing mind or subject that can determine her own actions from some privileged position. Objects certainly require certain events in their environment and through this desire act to create such events by acting on other objects in anticipation that such actions might elicit desired events, but these desires and anticipations arise in the dynamic interactions themselves and are never had in a way that I would agree constitutes an intention. I agree with Cooper that “writing is not just autonomous social action but always an interaction with other beings and objects in our surroundings, an ongoing process of stimulus and response that we habitually misconceive as autonomous planned action” (“Being Linked” 20). Action is anticipatory rather than intentional.

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100 Julie Jung asserts, following Sara Ahmed that in systems like ecologies, intention can be conceived as “an ideologically inflected embodied tendency to act”
An object-oriented writing theory and its support for meaning consequentialism also calls into question the separation of reading and writing.

Since meaning is consequential, and since writing is the production of meaning through the selection and recording of information, reading is not an act of finding meaning in a text, something writing studies has long abandoned anyway (see Haas and Flower), but is instead writing. Reading-writing is writing that originates from an the environment. Writing-writing is writing that emerges on the interior of sentient objects through the creative work of imagination which generates new information and meaning by making new connections between memory-writing texts. In this way, through an object-oriented understanding of writing, in Joe Marshal Hardin’s words, “Reading will finally be revealed as writing” (73). Writing is screening and marking that produces consequential meaning whether that screening and marking involves an already extant text perturbing us from the environment or only the re-membering of various experiences in relation to current ones in an imaginative creation of new meaning and new memory texts. In terms of the production of texts exterior to an object, which I will discuss more extensively below, the construction of a text through writing-writing immediately begins to involve reading-writing simultaneously as emergent texts begin to perturb and alter the imaginative writing interior to the writer. In other words, as I, acting on the meaning of my imaginative writing, type on my computer and perturb the system of (“Systems”), but, as with the concept of the subject, I do not think it is useful or necessary to attempt to reclaim intention in this way. To me, and I would think most people given common dictionary definitions, intention evokes meaning of prior planning or thought by an ontologically privileged subject.
English alphabetic type, a text emerges which in turn perturbs me in ways that create meanings that alter the memory texts interior to my conscious system. I do not think there is a significant enough distinction between reading and writing to justify separating them as two different phenomena rather than two articulations of the same one: writing. In truth, the construction of memory texts from experience I first described, since it emerges from material perturbations, would be reading-writing more than writing-writing—which I will refer to only as reading and writing going forward but with the understanding that reading is also writing. In either case, meaning is produced consequentially.

Other thinkers have approached the position of meaning consequentialism. Despite the fact that Derrida consistently insists that there is no escaping signs, he states, “To write...is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription” (Writing and Difference 10, see also 11, 211). F.C. Bartlett also seems to arrive at a consequentialist understanding of meaning when he asserts, “In relatively simple cases, the meaning of part of a situation will be found in the reactions, material and affects [emotions, feelings] that most immediately follow them. This chronological mode of the determination of meaning is probably never completely outgrown” (235). In writing studies, Kristie S. Fleckenstein argues, “Meaning exists because of and through the multileveled interweaving of materiality... and... any systemic way

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101 The texts I read, however, are part of the text as an object that unifies its parts. I do not “write” Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man in the same way that Ellison did. I can only participate in this text in the writing of my reading, which itself (re)produces the meaning of Ellison’s role as the author.
of parsing material potential into organized pattern” (“Bodysigns” 771).

Meaning does, at least at first, emerge materially as perturbations stimulate objects to produce information, which sentient objects then filter through memory-texts producing meaning. Fleckenstein’s invocation of materiality is important, here, not only because it helps call attention to how an object-oriented writing theory defends the materiality of writing but also because it calls attention once again to the involuntary nature of writing, at least memory-writing evoked by actions on the exterior of systems.

An object can’t determine when or whether it is perturbed by objects in its environment. The object does not control the process through which perturbations become information that is then filtered through the screen of memory-writing texts to be marked down and made meaningful. As Jane Bennet notes, “What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them” (17). I would allow for a wider variety of sentient and thus writing beings than just humans, but the overall sentiment is accurate: writing happens by means of sentient beings but not, at least not solely, because of them, nor certainly through their control or mastery of writing.

Writing (meaning production) emerges with sentient objects that write, but writing is not then under the sole influence of those writing objects since what is written is as much a product of the actions of objects in the environment as the sentient object itself. As I engage in continuing my own existence, “objects eternally flaunt their otherness in my face, as they emit blinding colors, nourish me, or wound me with poisonous spikes” (Harman Guerrilla, 31). Texts, memory-writing or
otherwise, as I noted, act on me in similar fashion; the meaning that results is
not something I can determine or control but is an immediate result of being
perturbed by the text in the ways allowed for by my capacities or real qualities.
Porter calls these immediate consequences of our encounters with texts
“immediations,” which he distinguishes from the “mediations” that are the result of
subsequent internal imaginative work that takes immediations and further filters
them through other memory texts to produce new information and new meanings.
He states, “These immediations of the text cannot be resisted, in the sense that, for
example, I cannot force myself to see something in the text that I do not see in the
text, or, conversely, not to see something in the text that I actually see” (*Meaning,
Language, and Time*, 113). Just as with initial material actions, textual perturbations
act on objects that are capable of reading so that the object will produce meanings
from those perturbations and their resulting information.

The object cannot choose not to produce the meanings it produces nor
choose to produce other meanings. As Porter explains, “the irresistibility of
immediations—as well as the fact that I might not like what I read—indicates that
my reading of a text is not a product of my will imposed on a text, that I do not see
only what I expected or wanted to see prior to my act of reading” (*Meaning,
Language, and Time*, 117–118). On the other hand, the meanings produced do not
reside in the text but are produced in the reader, whose essential capacities
determine what meanings are produced even if the reader can’t consciously
determine them. In this way, meaning is determined neither by the object nor the
environment but emerges as something in-itself, a new object within the relationship between object and environment. ¹⁰²

Writing mobilizes both the writing capacities of sentient objects and the material perturbations of their environments in its ongoing production of meaning. Most texts we have traditionally considered to be writing, unlike the cardinal that imposes itself on my vision, however, involve more than just the material perturbations of ink marks or gestures on my eyes, sound waves on my ears, tactile contact on my skin, or any other material perturbation that might be involved. These texts involve languages and communication, which I still have not accounted for. Despite the necessary discussion of texts and words needed to explain meaning consequentialism, writing so far occurs only on the interior of objects; there is yet no explanation of communication. For an object-oriented theory of writing, in fact, given that objects only have direct access to their own private emerging meaning, community, language, and communication must be explained rather than assumed. How can we get from meanings generated on the interior of objects to anything resembling communication? Since writing and meaning both exist without language, what is language and why does it develop?

¹⁰² An initial reader raised the issue of when meaning would have changed so much as to become a new object. As I note in chapter three, objects can act differently, can change up until the point when their essential qualities or capacities have changed so much that they substantially can no longer do what they previously could and can do significant things they previously couldn’t, at which point they would have emerged as a new object. Because this is a matter of the object’s real being and essential qualities, it is something that other objects could not experience. Fleeting and dynamic objects like Meaning could change in this way quite frequently, but because the text itself that unifies its parts, including its Meaning, does not change, when a Meaning becomes a different object is rarely evident.
Object-Oriented Language and Communication

Writing, as I have shown, is a broader category than communication. Memory-writing is not communication. The objects that act on me do not communicate, do not present information or meaning “in common;” they only perturb me when I am open to them, imposing themselves on me. Communication is not just an effort to evoke meaning but rather “common” meaning. As Derrida explains in “Signature, Event, Context,” communication is traditionally considered the vehiculation or transfer of meaning (82–90, see also Muckelbauer 17). While most accounts of communication have abandoned any outright adherence to such a conception of communication, any sense of communication based on representation and interpretation still reifies the concept that communication is transferring something from one person to the next. Based in meaning apriorism, most conceptions of communication imply that the writer’s meaning is somehow (re)presented to the reader, or that the reader is somehow made or invited to (re)produce the writer’s meaning. Given the perspectival nature of all objects and the nature of meaning as consequential, however, such an idea of communication is not possible. There is no transfer of meaning. Communication, in this sense, is impossible. So what then is communication? How can withdrawn meaning-making objects communicate? How is common meaning possible? The fact that writing mobilizes both the meaning making capacity of sentient objects and the material actions of the objects that perturb them seems to indicate that connection is
possible through perturbation, but how can objects go beyond this limited contact? The answer is once again in the nature of objects, at least the sentient ones.

Because sentient beings interact with the world through writing, they are not only aware of the distinction between themselves and their environment but they also may become aware of the making of that distinction, aware that they write or think, which allows them to then make other distinctions. As Bryant explains, “One of the crucial features of autopoietic systems is that they have the ability to develop new distinctions, thereby enhancing their capacity to be irritated or perturbed by other objects” (*Democracy*, 173). It is because of this awareness of distinctions and ability to make further distinctions that objects become not only sentient but sapient, aware of their efforts to perturb their environments, aware that the failure to create necessary events in that environment could threaten the object’s existence, and aware that they can use further distinctions and actions made through imagination to increase their capacities to act and be acted on. It is this development that gives rise to technologies: ways of perturbing the environment systematically to create new objects in order to perturb the environment or be perturbed by it more extensively than was previously possible. As Harman explains, “we continue to increase our bodily organs with the external proxy of mechanical and electrical devices, and the day may come when these proxies are no longer external” (*Guerrilla*, 247).

Technology emerges through the ongoing interactions of objects and their environments as they act to create more effective and efficient means for acting and being acted on. Marilyn Cooper argues that “words and tools enable us to play
around with 'stuff' and create new patterns, and then to use those new patterns to create others in levels of increasing complexity” (“Being Linked” 26). The stuff that objects play around with, of course, are the objects in its environment, and Cooper accurately describes how this perturbing of the environment makes connections, new objects, which then allow further connections and more complex new objects. It is important to note the connection Cooper makes between words and tools. I want to push this comparison further and argue that language should be understood as a technology and also as an object in its own right. Languages are communication-writing technologies that emerge as sapient objects attempt to perturb other sentient and sapient objects in their environment. Objects, needing particular events to occur to maintain and maximize their existence discover through experience that other sentient objects can be provoked into acting in ways that produce desired events. Babies find that cries can lead parents or other larger sentient objects to produce food and other events they desire.103

Cooper seems to arrive at a similar insight when she argues that “writing is as much a biological as a cultural practice: the practices that are writing emerge as people respond to others and to their world; they are not the product of minds

103 Their initial cries may simply be responses to discomfort but they quickly develop memory texts that allow them to act on their environments imaginatively in response to desire not necessarily related to events in their environment. This might seem to bring us to back to intentional acts, but it is still the information and meaning the baby is producing through dynamic interactions with its environment that provokes its current actions. Planning does occur, but planning is a present action in response to current environmental conditions that, while it becomes part of memory texts and can thus be reproduced later, does not determine the later actions it imaginatively considers, which is why plans are rarely executed as planned. Activity, meaning, is always an interaction with the current environment.
somehow separated from bodies nor of innate technical or linguistic abilities” (“Being Linked” 18). The communication-writing Cooper focuses on here and language do indeed emerge as the means for objects to more effectively and expansively interact with their environments. As Cooper further notes, “Neither language nor technology is foreign to our nature; tools and words are us, not things we create and use” (“Being Linked” 18). Language, as a technology, emerges as sentient objects increasingly find their continuance over time dependent on their ability to perturb other sentient objects to produce events in the environment. Dogs, for instance, needing to eat to survive, scavenge for food in packs. In this economy, there is a competition for scarce resources. A strong dog, needing to eat, acts to secure a portion of anything found or killed. Often, however, it must act on other dogs to protect its share. Through its own capacities, it can fight for its share directly, but this is often unproductive and dangerous. Finding that barking and body posturing succeeds in scaring off enough dogs for it to secure a portion of food, however, the dog repeatedly acts in this way to get food while avoiding a fight. Over time, this in-the-moment kind of interaction becomes the fairly sophisticated language of canines that even people can learn to use—the next time the dog looks like it is coming for the food, just lean toward the food, which is Dog for “mine.”

Without the technology of a language, objects are limited in their ability to perturb other objects. They can, as with the dog, physically perturb them through various means; I can touch, grab, hit, rub, or hold objects. Given that I have a fairly advanced voice box, I can even perturb other objects sonically. To go beyond these simple and straightforward means of perturbing my environment, I need
technologies: weapons, tools, and languages. Writing that emerges on the exterior of objects like spoken or written texts emerge as a means of expanding capacities to act on sentient objects, even to act on oneself.

Colin Gifford Brooke notes that the “externalization of memory has become an accepted and even integral part of our society” (786). Brooke discusses the role of externalized writing as an extension of memory. From an object-oriented perspective, this is a way of expanding our ability to produce memory texts by using communication-writing technologies like printed languages to perturb ourselves in ways that stimulate us to produce certain memory texts, so that we can both remember more and expend less effort on remembering, increasing the efficiency of our memory-writing. It is notable that the vast majority of the most ancient print texts we have from Egypt and Sumer are lists of property and the like. Texts that evoke memory texts—memories of just who owns everything much like the dog’s lean. Writing as an extension of memory presents an important first step in understanding how objects can ever come to communicate when they exist in their own worlds, interacting only with self-generated caricatures of the objects around them.

As an aid to my own memory, I could make up whatever system I wanted; many of us do in the cryptic way we take notes. Such a system, however, would only ever be able to perturb me to produce associated memory texts by stimulating me to generate information that would select it. Other objects, while they may “see” the marks of my system would not produce any substantial amount of meaning because of them. For objects to communicate with each other, they have to somehow create
a “shared” system of mutual perturbation to somehow attempt to create
meaning in other sentient objects that will provoke it to produce the anticipated
reaction. This, of course, is moving toward familiar territory for writing studies. The
systems that objects have to communicate with, languages, emerge as the mediating
object between sentient objects that need to perturb each other in order to create
events in their environment that cannot be created through more direct means. This
might seem to invoke the classic rhetorical triangle: one object (a writer) with a
purpose for writing to another object (a reader) about the world. There are,
however, several important differences that an object oriented perspective
introduces.

From a traditional rhetorical perspective, and even from the view of
contemporary rhetorics like Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric*, communication
and the rhetoric through which it affects readers are more expansive than writing.
From an object-oriented perspective, however, that relationship is reversed; it is
writing that precedes and makes possible communication and rhetoric.\(^\text{104}\) I have
already shown how and why writing is broader than communication. From such a
perspective, however, communication simply cannot be the sharing or vechication
of meaning. Meaning is consequential; it is not transferred from one object to
another but is always written in the perspectival memory-texts of individual objects.
This, as Porter extensively argues, makes our understanding of language
problematic as well (*Meaning*). Language cannot be a shared technology that allows

\(^{104}\) Regardless of the modality of exterior languages, memory texts are written with
the brain itself as a marked surface. Even the “oral tradition” depended on inscribed
memories.
one object to create the same meaning in another object. In the same way, rhetoric cannot be a means of making a reader “get” or understand the meaning of a writer.

From an object-oriented perspective, rather than an attempt to transfer pre-existent meaning between objects, or as Bazerman argues “potentially making available a cognitive meeting ground in shared representations” (Theory 9), communication involves a writer attempting to provoke a reader to generate meanings that will lead the reader to take certain actions; hence an object-oriented non-representational rhetorical triangle. There is no need to create an exact, or even particularly similar meaning in the reader so long as the consequential meaning that emerges yields the anticipated results. Communication, in this sense, is not the sharing or transfer of meaning but the coordination of meaning to achieve anticipated results. Communication as we have traditionally thought of it, doesn’t occur. We do not “share” meanings or have them in common.

Language, however, seems to require that we “share” the meanings evoked by the physical marks—sonorous, visual, printed, gestural, etc.—that compose the language. This idea of language, however, depends on the idea that meaning exists prior to the writing activities that actually produce it. Meaning, however, is always a

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105 In this way, an object-oriented theory seems to connect with pragmatism, which makes sense considering that OOO and pragmatism, or Henry James’s radical empiricism in which it is based along with the works of John Dewey, also have some points of comparison. Graham Harman addresses the similarities and differences in Bells and Whistles (40–59).

106 Anticipated based on past experiences recorded in memory texts, which the sentient object imaginatively connects to its reading of a current experience.
consequence of writing. As Porter states, “dictionaries and grammars are part of efforts to imagine and enforce standardized languages, but the meaning of those imagined languages are not inscribed within dictionaries or even determined by them” (Meaning, Language, and Time 139). These supposed repositories of language are actually part of an ongoing effort to maintain the language and create a sense of commonality—languages are also autopoietic.

When I use any word or combination of words, they simply do not evoke in me the same meaning that they evoke in any reader or listener. The amazing thing about language is that through the constant effort to create and maintain the technologies of languages, I somehow manage to provoke readers to create meanings that lead to the events that I anticipate despite a lack of shared meanings. In other words, we simply don’t need common meanings; we just need the means to evoke meanings that select the anticipated system-states. We don’t understand words in exactly the same way, but we must understand them similarly enough that we don’t even notice, or at least aren’t usually bothered by the discrepancies—though sometimes we are in spectacular ways. As Porter explains, we are satisfied that we have communed if the consequences of an utterance for us appear to be acceptably congruent with—not necessarily identical to—the consequences of that utterance for our interlocutors (i.e., that the

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107 In the production of memory texts those texts do shape future meanings, this process, however, is particular to each writer or reader, the meanings I produce are only shaped by the memory texts of my own past experiences that I re-member as a consequence of a current writing experience.

108 The continuing effort to make this possible is a product of writing ecologies, which I will discuss fully in the next chapter.
consequences are *close enough*). The fact that people may believe they are exchanging identical meanings does not entail that they must be exchanging identical meanings, no more than a person’s mistaking one twin for another entails that both twins must be the same person. (*Meaning, Language, and Time*, 206–207)

Language, then, as we have long understood it, doesn’t exist. Language, instead, is an object that mobilizes ongoing communicative interactions to maintain itself. Language is dependent on the dynamic actual use, as well as the active attempts to create the *semblance* of commonality of usage, for its continuance. As Porter argues, “To keep discourses relatively stable (i.e., to keep people relatively synchronized through discourse) requires a massive, sustained effort carried out by educational institutions, media outlets, political institutions, religious institutions, etc.” (*Meaning, Language, and Time*, 56). Yet, despite all this effort, common meaning, a common language, doesn’t result. Bazerman’s meeting grounds are not in “shared representations” but in the shared *spaces* themselves, like genres, which are central to Bazerman’s theory, where writers can act on writing technologies like languages to participate in the emergence of texts that can act on readers. I agree with Bazerman that texts can create meeting grounds, but for me the meeting ground may be one meaningful place while for you it may be a very different place, which neither of us will even realize unless unanticipated events occur or anticipated ones fail to occur.

This articulation of writing also changes what texts are, since texts, rather than being in any way “interpreted” instead perturb those that interact with them
stimulating the generation of information and then meaning in sentient objects.

As Bryant even notes of dialogue, interlocutors “belong not to the system of... dialogue, but to the environment” (Democracy 150). This means that speakers are not part of communications but can only act on communication systems from the environment. In other words, as Derrida claims (“Signature, Event, Context”), all communication is removed from communicators in the same way writing is, communication requires a mediating object, a text, whether it is sonorous sounds marking the air, ink on paper, or pixels on a screen. As Bryant argues, following Luhmann, “It is not persons that communicate, but rather communications that communicate” (Democracy, 149). In other words, a writer cannot directly perturb a reader. Instead, the writer perturbs communication-writing-objects or systems, languages, in its environment. More simply, I can act on languages to generate texts by my gestures, sounds, marking of surfaces, or construction of images, but it is that language, those texts, and not me,109 that provokes writing and the generation of meaning in those who see, hear, or read the texts. As Bryant further explains “dialogue is not a communication between two systems...but rather is a system in its

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109 This is not to say that I am not “responsible for” my participation in the creation of the text. Actually, given that I reject “intention” as a means of attempting to escape the unanticipated meanings texts evoke, I am responsible for those meanings in spite of my failure to anticipate them. This is simply the insistence that meaning in readers comes from their interactions with texts; any sense of me as the author that emerges is produced by the reader because of the provocations of the text. I am not there. As Derrida argues, “For the written to be the written, it must continue to ‘act’ and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written ‘in his name’” (“Signature” 91).
own right” (*Democracy*, 150). Any communication I make is itself an object that unifies my perturbations of communication-writing systems, the communication-writing system itself, and the perturbations of any and all reading-writing-objects or readers. When I perturb a language system, I am perturbing something in my environment, I am stimulating that system, that object, to generate information that selects a system-state, giving rise to an event: a text.

While Bryant refers to dialogue and Porter follows Bakhtin in referring to utterances, though he also discusses texts, an object-oriented perspective, as I have shown, reveals the essentially written character of all communication-writing technologies. Whether I perturb American Sign Language with gestures, spoken English by my sonorous marking of the air, or written English through the physical marking of a surface with type, I am engaging in a process of selection, marking, and meaning production (at least as I communicate-write it or whenever anyone reads the text that emerges). I am writing. Each of these different objects, like all objects, are individuals with their own capacities and affordances for textual production. Each is a different writing technology, but they are all writing technologies. These technologies, in response to my perturbations, produce texts, events that perturb objects in their environment that are open to such perturbations. Texts, while they are part of language systems, are also objects in their own right, however briefly they may exist, and like all objects are marked by withdrawn real being and real qualities that may produce a certain set of local sensual manifestations—consequential meanings—united by the sensual object that other objects encounter.
Texts, as objects, unify\textsuperscript{110} not only their own physicality but also their ongoing consequences, their Meaning.

In this way, texts, as objects, as Johndan Johnson-Eilola describes, are “in motion, gathering other texts around them, responding to their environments in ways both simple and complex, making connections that their authors or readers are participants in, rather than simple agents of—intertextuality with teeth” (37). Johnson-Eilola, here, presents, as I have, language-texts as technology and theorizes the growing agency of texts in our digital world; he notes how we might soon see the day when “autonomous texts slip human control and eventually turn on their masters. We are already partway there: databases, computer forms, video games, and many other things we regard provisionally as texts have already begun to gain agency” (37). An object-oriented understanding of texts, however, indicates that they have always had agency, acting on other objects according to their capacities and allowing other objects to act on them according to their affordances. Digital texts, in their complexity, are only the most recent development in the changing capacities of texts. That being said, however, Johnson-Eilola’s account highlights how, in the digital world, texts are going beyond the agency of just any objects; instead, they are beginning to write, and writing, as I argue, is the operation of sentience. It is not inconceivable that texts are beginning to evolve to the point

\textsuperscript{110} Unity, here, is the unity of an object that emerges as one thing rather than an aggregate of parts and not as coherence or cohesion. This is evident in the way a nation unifies its people, land, institutions and so forth into one object; the United States of America is a nation despite its usual lake of coherence among its parts.
where they write themselves, where they could be sentient objects,\textsuperscript{111} though
that begins to sound somewhat techno-utopic or dystopic, depending on your
perspective.

Once a text emerges from the perturbations of a communication-writing
system, for communication to occur, that text must encounter and act on another
object open to perturbations from that text and the system (language) from which it
emerged in such a way that it stimulates the production of information, and
meaning (consequences) in the perturbed object (see Figure 8). In order for texts to
do this, among their real qualities must be the means to evoke meaning, to produce
further texts, whether memory-writing or further communication-writing texts. The
capacity of texts to propagate, to stimulate sentient objects to produce information
and meaning, is the text’s \textit{rhetoric}.

The understanding of rhetoric this implies departs from the concept of
rhetoric as prior to writing as promoted by scholars like Rickert or Davis, and
instead conceptualizes rhetoric as an essential quality, a capacity, of texts: those
texts’ abilities to evoke further texts, to act on sentient and sapient objects.

\textsuperscript{111} Sentience here is not the sentience of science fiction’s humanoid robots but the
ability to generate meaning through selection and inscription in and through
memory. It is awareness of the distinction between its own system and its
environment.
Figure 8. Object-Oriented Communication
This understanding of rhetoric is not particularly radical; it is very congruent with the ways that John Muckelbauer describes persuasive rhetoric in *The Future of Invention*; he states, “Traditional rhetoric is not principally an art of communicative understanding and meaning (even if that meaning is structurally indeterminate), but an art of provoking responses and effects” (19). In this conception, rhetoric is also the means of producing effects in a reader. In my object-oriented theory of rhetoric I argue that meaning, if not understanding, is an effect of the rhetoric of a text in its evoking of information and meaning production in the reader.  

Muckelbauer also critiques the idea of rhetoric as a transfer of meaning or an attempt to create common understanding and instead argues, “Understanding (or its opposite) is simply not the principal goal of persuasion’s reproductive movement. Instead, rhetoric reproduces the proposition through a kind of differential repetition, transforming that proposition into an array of responses and effects” (18). I am arguing that this capacity to stimulate effects and responses, to propagate through provoking the generation of more texts needs to be restored to texts, to objects, to the *products* of writing processes. Even memory-texts on the interior of my system act through rhetoric to provoke imaginative creation through invention. This is not to argue for a return of new criticism but to note that texts are also agents and rhetoric is a capacity of texts not rhetors.  

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112 Given the limited space here, I cannot fully flesh out the implications of the writing theory I am articulating for rhetorical theory, such a fully developed rhetorical theory will require its own project.

113 As I argued above, this is not an attempt to diminish the study of rhetoric but to create space for the study of writing. Arguing that rhetoric is a capacity of texts in no
explanation of communication, rhetoric is pivotal; it is the capacity of texts to connect writer and reader, which it has always been understood to be. What has changed is that I have articulated an ontology of writing that shows how objects and writing, as the epistemology of sentient objects, are not always communicative or rhetorical but rather that communication and rhetoric, are always written. This ontology, however, is significantly incomplete. Communication and rhetoric are essential for me to progress any further.

While I have answered the questions regarding what writing is, how it emerges in a world of objects, and how it works to communicate, and I have articulated an alternative to the subject in an object-consciousness, I have not yet addressed writing’s sociality. How does this account of writing connect back to the ecology of writing? In chapter two, I argued that writing theory has gone through three major developments beginning with the early recognition that writing is a process and culminating in the recognition that writing’s sociality is ecological. In my own theory, I have only provided an alternative path to arrive at only the first of these. I have not accounted for writing’s sociality. Yes, like classical rhetoric, I have somewhat accounted for the experiences of individual readers, but what of communities? Ecologies? What about conventions, genres, ideologies, cultures? How can I connect my ontology back to those important aspects of writing?

way lessens its importance since all communication occurs through the mediations of texts. The same is true for the study of communication. My arguments that all communication is written in no way detracts from the need to study and explain communication, it just changes the way we study and conceive writing.
While I argue that cognition is written instead of that writing is cognitive, without shared experiences, language, or meaning, how can we understand the way writing seems to circulate socially in identifiable writing ecologies (or communities, activity systems, or networks)? This is the question that will direct the following chapter. I argue there that, just like with language, the answer requires a reversal of our usual understandings of sociality. As Porter explains, “A community is a consequence of successful communication, not its prerequisite” *(Meaning, Language, and Time*, 205). Writing ecologies, then, like language, are objects produced by, rather than producing, the writing that circulates and connects them and they exist only as long as they can mobilize writing to maintain their existence. Writing, texts, and rhetoric operate as the glue that holds writing ecologies and networks together. This, however, is the same realization I presented in chapter three; it is the argument Sidney Dobrin makes when he asserts that writing saturates networks *(Postcomposition*, 183). In my efforts to demonstrate how we come to that point from the object-oriented theory I have articulated here, however, I argue that an object-oriented account of ecologies explains not only the dynamism of ecologies but also the role of individuals in ecologies and the reciprocal relationship between larger objects like genres, cultures, ideologies that comes to shape objects and their texts through their own emergent agency. In theorizing the relationships of objects to ecologies, of smaller objects to larger ones, of parts to wholes, I also confront the problem of effective, ethical, individual political action within writing ecologies, the second gap I identified in chapter two.
A turn toward explaining sociality, explaining productions of writing like identities, genres, ideologies, etc. also returns me to the account of my own writing with which I began in the previous chapter. My focus in the beginning of that chapter was on noting how I have been acted on by writing. How I have been pushed and pulled toward the theories I articulate there and here. Here at the end of this chapter, it is easier to see how the books I read provoked meanings, how the conferences I attended altered my course, in short, how writing’s many parts acted to push me toward the emergence of this text. There is another part of that account, however. As much as I recognize writing’s creative power, its withdrawn reality and structuring essential qualities in its ability to take me where I did not know I wanted to go, I also experience writing as seemingly stable: familiar forms, genres, languages, that seem to me to follow rules, patterns, systematic operations. Writing is both dynamic and strangely stable, and an ontology of writing, an object-oriented theory for writing must account for both writings ecological sociality and dynamism as well as its apparent stability.
CHAPTER 5: OBJECT-ORIENTED ECOLOGIES AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY:

THE STRANGE MEREOLOGY OF OBJECTS

Emergence refers to that moment of complexity when the interaction of parts or system components generates unexpected global properties not present in any of the local parts.

~Byron Hawk, “Toward a Rhetoric of Network (Media) Culture,” 837

The small holds the big. Or rather the big could at any moment drown again in the small from which it emerged and to which it will return.

~Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social, 243

Communications within the system perpetually generate surprising results as they pass through the mediators in the form of the persons participating.

~Levi R. Bryant The Democracy of Objects, 185

That writing is social has come to be one of the most widely accepted concepts in writing studies. Rhetoric and the rhetorical triangle already establish, through an attention to audience, that writing is social within individual rhetorical situations at least to the extent of connecting rhetors with an audience; what theorists generally mean when they argue that writing is social, however, goes beyond an attention to an audience to look at how that audience’s reception of texts is based in broader social systems of beliefs, values, and conventions. Even further,
the writer’s identity, desires, and purposes for writing also emerge from such social systems and their cultures and ideologies. Writing, it turns out, is a means of mediating social relationships and interactions and is stimulated as much, if not more, by social exigency as by individual desires. In recognition of this, writing theorists have developed different explanations of writing’s sociality and its different articulations among social groups including discourses or discourse communities, activity systems, and ecologies.

In chapter two, I noted that both discourse communities and activity systems maintain a subject-centric understanding of writing that limits their ability to adequately explain its complexity. In contrast, ecological theories of writing recognize that writing’s sociality goes beyond just the interactions of humans to include a whole ecology of material and conceptual actors and activities that interact in writing through an emergent causality in which writers play an important part but which they cannot control and may not influence more than other important factors. In ecological theories, action and agency emerge in complex systems. In chapters three and four, however, I note that the move toward ecological or systems theories, in its critique of the subject, struggles to account for the experiences of individuals as they write without reifying the subjectivity that such

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115 See Bazerman “Textual,” A Theory; Bazerman & Russell Writing Selves; Prior “Sociocultural,” Writing Disciplinarity; Russell “Writing in Multiple;” Shipka Toward.

theories attempt to reject. A theory of writing, however, needs to account for the experiences of writers and their agency. As Marilyn Cooper argues, "We experience ourselves as causal agents, and any theory of agency needs somehow to account for that experience" ("Rhetorical Agency" 437). In the previous two chapters of this project, as I have articulated an ontology of writing, I have also attempted to account for an alternative writer to the writing-subject.

Having developed an object-oriented account of consciousness in sentient objects and writing's ontology as the production of meaning through selective marking first in and through memory, producing consciousness, and then in processes of textual production and communication, I now have to find a way to connect this theory of writing and writers to writing's ecological sociality. Additionally, I have to do so in a way that, true to an object-oriented perspective, radically defends the individuality, autonomy, and agency of objects, which I've shown results from the structure of their essential qualities or capacities. In this defense of writers and other objects, I will also return to the issue of effective individual political action that I raise in chapter two.

To develop this theory of writing’s ecology and the role of individuals in it, I turn to Object-Oriented Ontology’s concept of objects’ strange mereology. As Levi R. Bryant explains, “Mereology is the branch of mathematics, ontology, and logic that studies the relationship between parts and wholes” (Democracy, 214). Since, from an object-oriented perspective, everything is an object, the mereology of objects is one in which both parts and wholes are individual autonomous objects. Whole
systems like writing ecologies arise through the interactions of their parts and can only maintain themselves through their parts’ continued participation from which the larger objects or systems derive their being. It is in the intricacies of such a relationship that conventions, genres, hegemony, and ideology arise to maintain social systems, but it is also in such a system that objects, writers, activists, have the agency to act to change the social systems through their participation in it. I do not mean to present this as theory hope; this is neither a denial of the incredible difficulty of social resistance nor an argument that with an object-oriented theory activism can be more effective. Activism gets along quite all right without a theory to support it. My project is rather to account for the individual experience of agency and political action within writing ecologies as a corrective to theory.

Reassembling Writing’s Sociality

While objects, as I argue, do not share meaning, they do interact with each other through the process of perturbations that provoke systems to create information, which sentient objects filter through and write in memory texts, in the neurons of the brain. In my object-oriented account of communication (see Figure 9), languages, as writing technologies, are communication systems that writers perturb to create texts, which in turn perturb both the writer through reading the emerging text and then readers, each of whom creates memory texts in response to the perturbations of the text’s rhetoric.
These writing technologies, languages, arise through repeated interactions among sentient objects that lead objects to develop standardized means of perturbing each other. In “Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems,” Charles Bazerman explains, “If we find a certain kind of utterance or text seems to work well in a situation and be understood in a certain way, when we see another similar situation we are likely to say or write something similar” (316). Bazerman, following Carolyn Miller (“Genre”), appropriates Alfred Shütz’s concept of typification to refer to this process. In this way genres emerge through interactivity and typifications that lead to development of languages, genres, cultures and societies.

These typifications through regular interactions are also the process through which social groups emerge. As Bruno Latour argues in Reassembling the Social, networks, societies, or cultures do not already exist “behind the actor’s back” they are “manufactured at specific places and institutions” (175). In other words, like other autopoietic objects, like writing, social groups, societies, exist by constituting
and (re)constituting their parts. Social groups only exist as their parts continue to make connections; networks only exist as continued interaction maintains connections. Since humans interact with the world through writing, networks, cultures, and societies with humans, or other sentient objects, in them are produced through writing. It is in this way that Dobrin is correct in arguing that writing saturates networks (*Postcomposition* 183). Writing is the connecting structure that produces typified conventions, genres, cultures, ideologies, and societies. These productions are then reified as they continue to be (re)produced.

In the last chapter, I used the example of the emergence of a fairly sophisticated canine body language. In that account, I glossed over the fact that such a situation, a dog needing to guard its share of the food, only arises when there are other sentient objects in the environment. Language emerges from and in social interaction. Even the most primary actions of objects occur through perturbations with the environment. Objects precede their sociality, and objects still exist even when they are in no relations, but they only act to actualize their capacities in relation to other objects in their environment. Agency may be the capacities of objects to act, but action requires relations.

This account of writing then raises the question of how typified social relations emerge from repeated interactions and how this relates to ecological accounts of writing that privilege the emergent events and flows of systems over the actions of individuals. The answer is fairly straightforward, however, given the
congruence between ecological accounts of emergence and OOO’s account of the strange mereology of objects.

Wholes: Objects as Totalities

As I discussed in chapter three, objects, like ecologies, nations, solar systems, writing, writers, or texts, are what unify their parts, even if those parts are spatially and temporally distributed, material or conceptual, so every object “is simultaneously a totality and a community” (Bryant, Democracy 108). As Harman explains,

No object is only substantial or only relational. A chariot or wild dog is an inexhaustible mystery for all of the relations that make use of it, but each of these objects is also a relational system made up of countless parts in its own right. Any object can be considered simultaneously under both aspects.

(Guerrilla 227)

As a unified object, each object is a singular substance with a particular structure of essential capacities or qualities that allow the object to act and be acted on. I have focused on Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night as an example of this phenomenon. This play is an object in that it unifies all its parts, every performance, viewing, reading, printed edition, memory, citation, literary analysis, etc. It can only do this because people perform, watch, read, write criticism, etc., but it emerges as an object because it is not just an aggregate of these events but something more that unifies
them, that can be reiterated so disparately, in graphic novels and Hollywood movies by other titles. *Twelfth Night* has achieved a unity, it has become a thing, an object.

Another way to think about this is as the difference between an idiosyncratic dance move by an individual dancer and a named dance move or dance craze that is the same move or dance no matter who does it. When a move like “the jerk” or a dance like the “Macarena” become *things*, objects, they have emergent qualities that are different from the qualities of their parts either individually or collectively. They become objects that unify their parts. As Harman explains,

> When two objects enter into genuine relation... they create something that has not existed before, and which is truly *one*. When the sun and the moon join in a lunar eclipse, this eclipse has an identity and a depth that belongs to neither of its parts, and which is also irreducible to all of its current effects on other entities, or to the knowledge we may have of it. (*Guerrilla* 85)

Each object, thus, is an autonomous individual that always exceeds both its relations and a list of its parts; it is always something different, a black hole hiding surprising powers to act and be acted on.

This unification of parts is evident in an object-oriented understanding of identity. Whatever identity I present, whether as a scholar, member of a religious

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117 A black hole is a frequent metaphor used by OOO thinkers to refer to objects because like all objects, we can only see the effects of the black hole’s gravitational pull not the black hole itself. We can only access object’s effects on us in the production of our perceptions and meaning, we can’t access their hidden reality beyond our access.
group, father, European board game enthusiast, husband, fantasy-fiction escapist, arm-chair grammarian, home school teacher, or any of the other “faces” I show in different ecologies, I experience them all as my unified, singular, unique, and authentic identity—even though I am aware of the differences in these parts, individual objects, of my identity. This, of course, is not what everyone experiences, and most or all of us have likely felt this unification begin to break down when conflicts arise among the different parts of our identities—many much more painfully and significantly than others. Like all autopoietic objects, identities must be maintained over time through the reconstitution of their parts. Those parts, those presentations of certain particular manifestation of identity, those sensual qualities in Harman’s terms, must be continually maintained and unified.

Identity is neither fragmented nor entirely cohesive, but is an autopoietic object that emerges through our writings—memory texts and communication texts, both those we participate in as writers and those we participate in as readers—unifying all the parts of itself. My identity is the unification of the performances of identity I give in every text I continue to participate in—the memory and imaginative texts I generate like daydreams, inner monologues and dialogues, stray thoughts, and dreams included—whether as writer or reader of my own texts and others.’ An object-oriented view is a radical defense of identity. Harman connects identity directly to the refutation of holism inherent in an object-oriented philosophy; he notes that the principle of identity “says simply that a thing is what it is, that it has some real internal constitution not generated by its interactions with
anything else” (254). Many objects, however, also have the capacity to dissemble, to perform fictional identities.

As students often demonstrate, they may mimic ideas that they do not actually believe in an attempt to satisfy a perceived requirement of their teacher. The difference between an “authentic” identity and an assumed one is that in one case, the object acts to perform an identity they do not believe in or feel is authentic. Both identities are actualizations of an object’s capacities to act, in one the object knowingly dissembles, in others it does not. The key here is self-awareness, but this is not an all or nothing proposition. Someone may knowingly dissemble to a certain degree while also performing other aspects of their identity that they would say are authentic. Identity, like other objects, also has the capacity to change so that a performed identity that an object does not believe or feel is authentic at first may come to feel authentic later; whether dissembling or not, those identity performances are parts of the object’s identity. Such performances of identity by sentient objects are enacted through writing.

As I discuss above, writers, as sapient objects, from the meaning produced in their own interactions with the world, find that they need to act on other people to evoke particular events or actions in order to maintain or expand their existence, so they develop communication writing systems and technologies (languages) through typification in repeated similar situations. Sapient writers, it is worth noting, because they become aware of their writing, can, through imagination, even act to
develop means (alphabetic texts) to communicate over greater distances and to allow for more long term planning and actions.118

Through these continued regular interactions among sentient and sapient objects and the other objects that act on them, writers, readers, and societies emerge with their component parts of languages, genres, cultures, and ideologies. These objects, and the whole ecology that unifies them, are also objects, wholes of which individual texts, writers, situations, meanings, etc. are their parts. As wholes, they emerge with qualities that are different from those of their parts. Writing, as a whole, has the capacity to mobilize writers, to provoke sentient and sapient objects like humans to write, to maintain writing’s existence. It is this capacity that I identified in chapter three as one of writing’s essential qualities or capacities, its creative power, a power that moves people to write, or to paraphrase Hawk, inscribes them as they inscribe it (“Reassembling” 75). In my own account of writing this project, it is this emergent capacity of writing that has so often diverted me from the project I thought I was writing toward the path I have followed to get here. In writing I am an object among many, written as I write.

When we realize that we are one object among many, and that all objects act and are acted on, we can finally come to see how we are not outside a world of

118 Canines, for instance only communicate in close contact with each other or through markings that can only be “read” if another canine happens to find them. It requires drawing complex connections between experiences of time and distance to devise technologies for more distant communication through time and space. Even the simple concept of the messenger requires imagining that another object could “repeat” a communication in a way that would evoke meanings similar to those that would be evoked by the person sending the messenger.
objects, freely layering our representations on them but caught up in an awesome world of objects of every size, shape, and kind, busily engaged in being themselves, acting on each other, being themselves and maintaining themselves over time in the case of autopoietic objects. Every object that perturbs my vision, or my touch, or any of my senses, every rock, tree, flower, car, house, airplane, raindrop, pizza slice, acts on me, writes on and through me. We can see how writers are not the sole owners of their ability to write just by paying attention to how much of our memory texts are composed of things we’d rather they weren’t. That perceptions and feelings can impose themselves on us through our selective recordings of information in and through memory, through our writing, proves that we are written on as much as any other object; we are all mobilized as writing’s parts.

It is writing as a unified whole object and the complex capacities it unifies that has led writing scholars toward ecological writing theories, and it is this aspect of writing as an object that such theories attempt to explain. Writing, as Dobrin says, like all objects, “supersedes its parts” (Dobrin, Postcomposition 140). An object-

119 It is worth clarifying that not all objects mobilized by writing are autopoietic; they do not all have to reconstitute their parts. A pencil or piece of paper does not, and cannot, replace parts. However, these objects are only writing objects when mobilized by writing, and writing, texts, and writers are all autopoietic, relying on perishable sentient beings to maintain them. In a way, an object-oriented view is a confirmation of Shakespeare’s assertion in sonnet 18 that it is as long as sentient beings “can breathe, or eyes can see” that “So long live” his poem, though it has maintained Shakespeare as an object more than the anonymous addressee. All writing-objects, as writing objects are autopoietic; they must continue to produce meanings to exist.
oriented theory of writing, thus, through the part-whole relationship does not neglect systems in its radical defense of objects.

This account of the formation of whole objects reconnects my theory with ecological writing theories since the whole emerges from the dynamic complex interactions of parts within the system. As Hawk notes, “Emergence refers to that moment of complexity when the interaction of parts or system components generates unexpected global properties not present in any of the local parts” (“Toward” 837). Just as with writing as a whole, then, it is through an understanding of the mereology of objects that I can connect the interactions of objects to writing ecologies and explain the emergence of texts.

In our interacting with the world, with other objects, both sentient and not, with communication technologies that have emerged from this interaction, the world fills with texts, texts that saturate and become part of all our interactions with the world. To invoke Dobrin’s hydro-dynamic metaphor of writing ecologies, textual currents allow for the emergence of textually defined places/spaces, societies/cultures, networks, ideologies, hegemony, genres, and identities from the interactions of material bodies, information—perception and affect—and consequential meaning, memory, and technology (including languages). In this way parts interact ecologically to form wholes, which interact to form larger wholes. As Harman argues, objects “generate a model of the world featuring countless strata of reality: objects wrapped in objects sealed in objects frozen in objects, extending above, below, and within the theater of human consciousness” (Guerrilla 23).
Everything is an object, and objects interact ecologically to participate in larger objects. For sentient and sapient objects who interact with the world through writing, these ecological formations of objects are made possible through writing, from memory texts to interactions with communication technologies in the emergence of communication texts to the circulating textual currents of writing ecologies.

While this account of objects connects an object-oriented theory with writing’s ecology, it does not address the problem that such explanations pose for explaining the experiences of individuals. Typified objects like languages, genres, ecologies, cultures, ideologies, etc., after all, do not just emerge as a positive means of interacting more efficiently; in their reification, they also act to constrain action, to in Sarah Ahmed’s words, become “tendencies” which “are not originary but are effects of the repetition of the ‘tending toward’” (247). Because of such aspects of ecologies, I face the same difficulty that all ecological theories do; how can I maintain the autonomy of individuals in relation to systems? The first step in answering that question is to better understand the problem.

Regimes of Attraction: Genres, Culture, and Ideology as Negative Feedback

Every object or system that emerges from its parts must maintain itself over time. For autopoietic objects, that means developing ways to ensure the continued participation of parts. As Bryant notes this means that systems “must develop negative feedback mechanisms to maintain its own structural order” (219).
Typified systems, then, develop as regulatory systems that seek to maintain what Bryant calls the “regimes of attraction,” or the regular systems of relations that create an object, system, or ecology’s structural order from the actions of its parts. Regimes of attraction are “networks of fairly stable exo-relations among objects that tend to produce stable and repetitive [interactions] among the objects within the regime of attraction,” (Democracy, 169). In other words, typified relations among objects tend to lead to regular actions, as is apparent in the emergence of languages, genres, cultures, and ideologies. It is through such systems, like drainage ditches that develop as rainwater flows down hills in the same place, that environments constrain the actions of objects. As Bryant argues,

> It is one thing, following Aristotle, to defend the autonomy and independence of substance. It is quite another to argue that this autonomy and independence of substance entails that when substances enter into exo-relations with other objects they nonetheless remain completely unconstrained. (Democracy, 196)

Any relationship, then, constrains the possible actions of the objects in the relationship through its typification. As Bryant explains, regimes of attraction create “constraints on what [actions] are possible” (Democracy, 205).

Typification, then, is both a way of interacting more efficiently and effectively, but also a means of regulation that constrains interaction. Regimes of attraction also connect to Dobrin’s concept of the will to stability, or the tendency of systems to attempt to prevent change (Postcomposition 171). It is important to point
out, however, that this stabilizing or typifying tendency is not entirely negative; it is a part of all sociality. In writing studies, regimes of attraction are a writing ecology’s genres. Genre theory scholars have long argued that genre, far from being only categories or forms of texts, are typified social actions.120

What we take to be stable forms, genre theorists have found, are really unifying descriptions of similar texts produced for similar social situations. From an object-oriented perspective, then, genres as regimes of attraction are objects that unify typified textual productions that occur as relatively stable textual sites within writing ecologies. In this sense, genres, like everything else, are best understood as objects, objects that unify every actual text that becomes a part(icipant) in that genre, sustaining the genre’s continued existence. Genres exist as the unification of the qualities of all these texts.

As regimes of attraction, genres participate as regulative forces that act to maintain the seemingly stable sets of relations that they embody. Genre plays a role in writing ecologies’ attempts to enlist parts in acting to sustain the whole or to deter them from acting differently than anticipated or resisting their roles as parts. Genre, then, acts as a tool of enlistment and/or enforcement, not only a unified description of texts but also a prescription for further texts upheld by constant ongoing activity to shape them as (re)productions of seemingly stable genres. Such ongoing activity is evident in the proliferation of how-to guides, classroom instruction, submission requirements for journals, and all other operations that turn

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what is a description of texts that do emerge into prescriptions of the forms of
texts that should emerge in writing ecologies.

These genres should not be limited to alphabetic print texts either. Since
sentient objects, humans and others, interact with the world through meaning
produced by writing, all of their social relations emerge through such typifications.
Interactions like doctor’s office visits are themselves genres that may involve many
other genres like the patient medical history form (PMHF) that Anis Bawarshi
analyzes as a key genre in the genre ecology of the doctor visit (“Ecology”). Such
typified forms of interaction emerge, as I note above, as a means of more efficient
communication and in this case physical interaction as well, but they also entail
typification of social relationships, identities, and hierarchies that emerge with and
in them. The genre of the doctor’s visit, after all, is based in a patient submitting to
be treated by the doctor cementing in a text a hierarchical relationship. As Bawarshi
notes, through genres, social relationships become “such a part of what seems to be
‘natural’ or common sensible that we no longer consider the ideologies that sanction
and enable our actions” (“Ecology” 76). Genres, then, also connect back to identities,
in their typifications, or to use Ahmed’s term, tendencies, genres like the PMHF
typify certain identities. The PMHF, like all objects, only interacts with its parts,
patients, doctors, and nurses limitedly through its own perspective. Patients aren’t
complex whole human beings but only sufferers of disease or physical symptoms. In
participating in these genres, in these social relationships, in these identities, those
identity performances become part of identity, they shape us even as we sustain them.

More than just a tool to use, genres affect writers in their capacities to act both enabling and constraining them, affecting the emergence of new texts and affecting the identity of the writers participating in ecologies. The paradox of genre has always been this dual function as a description and also as a prescription for future texts constructed by expectations, instructions and rules. As Bawarshi notes, genres “maintain the situational conditions within and against which individuals invent and define themselves as participants” in writing ecologies (Genre, 106). In these interactions as Amy J. Devitt argues, “people construct genre through situation and situation through genre; their relationship is reciprocal and dynamic” (Writing Genres, 21). This same reciprocity describes the ways that all objects interact with other objects in their environment, with regimes of attraction emerging in situations of relatively, and often deceptively, stable environments. It is important not to forget, however, that such stability is only maintained by extensive and constant activity. Genres and other regimes of attraction or tendencies are also objects and only exist as writers and readers continue to participate in maintaining them. From genres, which themselves emerge from more basic typified objects like languages, regimes of attraction extend to genre sets, genre systems (Bazerman “Speech Acts”), and genre ecologies (Bawarshi “Ecology”); in this way genres, and regimes of attraction, extend to all typified systems of interaction in social groups.
While it would be a mistake not to recognize the important positive role regimes of attraction like genres play in writing ecologies, it would also be a mistake not to recognize the political role they play in the active normalization and resultant discrimination and marginalization of difference in larger objects, systems, or ecologies. It is this aspect of genres and other typified systems of objects that calls individual autonomy and effective political action into question.

Genres in this way are part of negative feedback mechanisms. As Byron Hawk notes, “Negative feedback turns the balance toward equilibrium, which shuts down the movement of the system. Positive feedback interrupts equilibrium by increasing both speed and heterogeneity” (“Toward” 837–838). Objects, then, receive positive feedback that leads them to act in ways that produce changes such as entering relationships and thus becoming parts of some larger wholes, and they receive negative feedback that operates to prevent actions that threaten the continuance of larger objects of which they are vital parts.121

As I am writing this document within the constraints of the genre of a humanities doctoral dissertation, I have received negative feedback from the typified form of the genre as well as from the feedback of readers whose comments

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121 Feedback, in the sense that it either promotes change or stability is either positive or negative; this does not coordinate with positive or negative valuation, which can be seen by the fact that feedback we would consider positive in value would be negative in that it would affirm current relations where negatively valued feedback would attempt to provoke change, much feedback might be value neutral. This becomes complicated in terms of the relationship between an emerging text and a genre in that feedback that provokes change in the emerging text to conform to the genre is part of the genre’s negative feedback actions, and feedback that is negative in the emerging text in that it promotes stability might be positive in relation to the genre if that feature breaks with genre conventions.
sometimes enforce those formal conventions, which include not only the text but also the enactment of an exam and formal defense for a committee who will determine if the dissertation passes. This is evident in the number of chapters in the text. While I might have preferred to divide this project into even twice as many chapters, the conventions of the genre, as I have (re)produced them, constrain me to five or six. The conventions of the genre at other times, of course, help me to write at all, such as when a model first chapter and reader feedback became a means of overcoming writer’s block as I tried to introduce the project. Negative feedback can be either enabling or inhibiting, depending on circumstances, in either case, however, negative feedback operates to maintain the current structure of the system or object, the dissertation genre, which often entails preventing or eliding actions, relations, or identities that threaten that structure.

Objects act, according to their capacities, to ensure that parts behave as the system requires to maintain itself. This aspect of the mereology of objects returns us to very familiar ground for writing studies: the workings of power, ideology, hegemony, and the role of writing, as discourse, in the efforts of larger scale objects like groups, cultures, nations, societies, economic systems, and other organizations to maintain themselves over time by seeking to ensure that their parts continue to contribute to the system as expected, as normalized or standardized parts. As Harman explains, the real conflict in the world is between objects and their parts that “pull apart the thing’s single unified note [structure of essential qualities] into numerous notes” (Guerrilla 228). Under threat from the autonomy and individuality
of their parts, objects develop means of preventing or at least extenuating the actions of those parts that it considers dangerous to its survival (see Bryant, *Democracy* 219).

Like societies themselves, negative feedback mechanisms emerge from writing as communication-objects are employed in continual and labor-intensive textual currents, in the textual flows of writing ecologies, to act on sentient objects in order to influence their behaviors so that they won't threaten the system of the larger object. It is this role in negative feedback mechanism that leads to Foucauldian discourse and Gramscian hegemony, both of which address the role of writing in power struggles. Hegemony, after all, is the efforts—usually through writing since all meaning production is writing—that a system employs, explicitly or tacitly, to negotiate with, bribe, control, or deceive members of society in order to convince them, consciously or unconsciously, that the current ideology is the correct ideology, and that it is in their best interest to accept their material conditions and role (Gramsci, *Selections* 161). Typified, embodied negative feedback systems like conventions, traditions, genres, and ideologies are key in this process since, as Bazerman notes,

> When we spend a long time engaged in any practice it is easy to forget that things could be otherwise. Even if in some moods we know that alternative practices, projects, and relevancies are possible, an impassioned commitment to a community or project may foster intolerance of alternative
domains of meaning that can be evoked by other approaches to writing.

(Theory 74).

It is only when we feel a real conflict with typified social interaction that we clearly see that they are a system’s negative feedback mechanisms.

The tendency to attempt to stabilize current order is a quality of all autopoietic objects. Genres, genre sets and genre systems embody these negative feedback systems and the stability they introduce. Julie Jung, in her critique of systems theories, invokes Ahmed’s concept of orientations as an explanation of “the conditions by which certain interactions become possible... how dominant ideology prevents... some bodies from being included in assemblages where that dominance might be challenged” (“Systems”). Systems maintain themselves by attempting to normalize the behaviors of the parts that supply the actions from which the system constitutes itself, so some actions and some bodies are suppressed, disallowed, or perhaps are not even “seen” by the system. In reference to the building of systems or social groups from repetition, Ahmed argues, “The work of repetition is not neutral work; it orients the body in some ways rather than others” (247). As the example of the PMHF shows, genres and other objects orient the world in particular ways that enable certain bodies and restrict others. Ahmed explains, “The world takes shape by presuming certain bodies as given. If spaces extend bodies, then we could say that spaces extend the bodies that ‘tend’ to inhabit them. So, for instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space of writing” (250). Objects, both the parts of a system and
the system itself, emerge with particular orientations that the system works to maintain both by normalizing and orienting objects and spaces and by enforcing such orientations when necessary. Genres, genre systems, culture, ideology, are all systems’ biases.

It is the operation of these biases that can often seem deterministic, particularly in ecological accounts of writing that attribute causality to the emergent actions of the system as a whole, in which individuals seem subsumed. It is this seeming determinism that Jung critiques for not sufficiently allowing for effective individual political action. An object-oriented perspective, however, in its radical defense of the autonomy of all objects as individuals, even in relation to the wholes in which they participate, fills this gap. As I argue in chapter four, the account of objects I’ve articulated provides for a writer, a writing-object that can explain autonomous individual action even within the constraints of negative feedback systems.

The Autonomy of Parts: Objects as Communities

Texts, writers, technologies, spaces, places, societies, cultures, networks, ideologies, hegemonies, genres, and identities are all objects in their own right with hidden powers to act and be acted on in different ways, never exhausted by their participation in writing or any other relationship. These objects are also the parts that writing mobilizes to maintain itself over time since, as an autopoietic object, it only continues to exist as it can continue to generate new products as its parts. In
biological organisms, this maintenance is the reproduction of cells; in social clubs or secret societies it is the induction of new members as old ones leave or die off. In writing, it is the mobilization of new writers (if all sentient objects die there will be no writing) to produce texts—memory, imaginative, communicative, etc.—through reading and writing.

In societies maintenance involves not only enlisting new members but enlisting them in maintaining hierarchical social order. Just like in any interaction between objects, however, wholes and parts only encounter each other through their sensual perspectives, never able to access each other’s full being, which means that neither societies nor writing, despite the power of typification and reification, can determine, control, or entirely constrain the autonomous actions of the parts that maintain it.

Parts, as Harman argues, “have an independent reality from which the object siphons away only a small portion of reality that is relevant to it” (Guerrilla 177). Objects, thus, to use a term from Latour, mobilize the actions of parts by siphoning them away to structure their essential real qualities. Wholes, no less than parts, caricature the objects in their environments, and parts are in the environment drawn by wholes (see Bryant, Democracy 151–152). While wholes emerge from the actions of parts, those parts themselves, as I showed in the previous chapter regarding writers, are in the environment of the wholes they participate in, able to perturb it and be perturbed by it but without access to the interior of the whole system. Wholes interact similarly with parts, able to perturb them, able to mobilize
their participation, but unable to directly access them. In fact, from the perspective of a part, the whole may seem like its part.

We can see this in the ways we interact with our own bodies and the ways our bodies in turn interact with their various parts. I never experience my brain directly. My consciousness does not include any access to the actual firing of neurons or the flow of blood and hormones. This is true of all my parts, from the hands that type the keys on my computer to the eyes that see the words appear on the screen. I experience only an infinitesimal part of the being of my body as a whole or any of its parts. As Bryant states

Minds are operationally closed with respect to brains. Minds relate to themselves through thought alone, whereas brains relate to one another through electro-chemical reactions alone. Neither of these systems knows anything of the other. (Democracy 150)

My body, and its parts, are in the environment of my consciousness. That consciousness, however, uses a multitude of the actions of my body, which in turn uses the actions of its parts, to constitute itself, to maintain itself over time, and in doing so, I exist as an independent object irreducible to the qualities of my parts that I nevertheless utilize and depend on for my continued existence. My parts, similarly, never experience my consciousness, and are likely not even open to my existence in the environments they draw. As Bryant notes, “each object is a crowd, containing within itself a plurality of other autonomous objects that very likely ‘know’ nothing of the object of which they are parts” (Democracy 272). Parts and wholes interact
only with their own caricatures of each other, open only to particular actions and events (see Harman, *Guerrilla* 172).

My brain, for example, is aware only of the flow of blood, the firing of neurons, the emission and reception of hormones and its extended tentacles of nerves by means of which it can act on its environment to maintain its existence over time. My heart is completely unaware that when it, because of a sudden drop in blood pressure after I’ve donated blood, restricts blood flow to my extremities in order to preserve itself, it restricts blood flow to a rather essential extremity, my brain, which, because of restricted blood, shuts down the activities through which I maintain my consciousness—triggering the nervous system’s own connections and signals to deprive the brain of oxygen.

These parts, as individual autonomous objects, are busily going about maintaining themselves by interacting with the environments they are open to. In doing so, however, they produce sensual qualities and other objects that can be used by other parts in doing the same, and the arrangements of these elements lead to the real qualities of the larger object that I am. As Harman notes, this is true of every object, “every essence is a kind of machine: a swarming composite when viewed from below, but a sleek nonrelational unity when viewed from above. Viewed from one side, it is an assembly of diverse components; viewed from the other, it is a simple ‘black box’ whose internal seismic turmoil need not concern us in the least” (*Tool Being* 254–255). Because the universe is nothing but objects within objects,
object-oriented theories, thus, allow for explanations of how they autonomously operate as objects in themselves while participating as parts in larger objects.

Any text, as it emerges from its parts and maintains itself by provoking textual propagation in readers, also emits meanings that other texts, like this one, appropriate in constituting themselves, giving rise to intertextuality. Writing, thus, emerges as the object that appropriates all such actions as parts. Writing ecologies emerge as the actions of texts form textual currents of genres and ideologies that mobilize other objects, writers, readers, technologies, organic and in-organic non-humans, spaces, and places into systems. In doing so, however, they only ever mobilize some of their parts’ actions as those parts act autonomously in pursuit of their own being. Other textual flows may mobilize other actions of the same parts. Parts, as I’ve consistently noted, however, are much more than the actions that are mobilized by the larger wholes they participate in.

In my pursuit of my own being, I mobilize and am mobilized by social, economic, and political systems as well as places, objects, typified activities (genres), to constitute myself—American, Mormon, academic, father, theorist, pedagogue, board-game enthusiast, avid book collector—and act from the capacities of my qualities. In doing so, I produce actions that other objects in turn appropriate from me: productivity, texts, and consumer activity. My relationship to U.S. society, in this way, is, often, mutually beneficial. I do not often even notice the negative feedback constraints of the relationship until the pursuit of my being conflicts somehow with
the maintenance of the large wholes I participate in. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue regarding capitalism,

Only if the worker resists the extraction of his or her surplus-value by the capitalist does the relation become antagonistic...the antagonism is not intrinsic...but rather...is established between the relation of production and something external to it—for instance, the fact that below a certain level of wages the worker cannot live in a decent way. (164)

It is when my individual actions conflict with the demands of negative feedback systems that political conflict arises. It is in these situations, when an identity is effaced or disallowed, when difference is elided, that parts, in seeking to be what or who they are, begin to act in ways that threaten the larger systems in which they participate. In the radical defense of the capacity of objects to act differently, parts, like myself as a member of US society, can act against the negative feedback of the system, can resist, even if my resistance is still swept up in the emergent causality of the system as a whole; it is a difference that makes a difference, potentially even threatening the whole system.

If my heart shuts off the oxygen to my brain for too long, I'll die. This is also true for all objects; they can all be destroyed if their parts stop producing the elements wholes use to maintain themselves. As I quoted Bryant stating above, “In enlisting other objects to produce them, larger scale objects must contend with the tendencies of other objects to move in other directions and act on behalf of other aims” (Democracy 219). Autopoietic objects like societies and writing are dynamic,
requiring constant continued reconstitution and maintenance over time. It is in this fact of an object’s dependence on and even vulnerability to parts that allows for the simultaneous independence of parts as objects.

Given this fact that parts can pose a threat to the whole, the relationship between parts and wholes is an ongoing dynamic negotiation between individual autonomous objects, a power struggle, and not one that the larger object always wins. In my account of writing this project, while I have been pushed and pulled by writing, including feedback texts from colleagues and the agendas of OOO philosophers, I have also at times resisted such pulling, refusing to follow, choosing another course. Writing has written me, moved me, but I have not been a passive tool swept along in the current, at least not all the time. While I participate in OOO, I resist some of its more radical positions. I borrow from new materialists like Jane Bennett and Sarah Ahmed but reject some of their underlying assumptions as the undermining of objects. I am caught up deeply in the flow of ecological writing theories, but I act to alter that flow through an object-oriented perspective.

Writing, as a whole, then, also contends with its parts, and those parts, in their actions both (re)produce writing and alter it. Writing, as an autopoietic object, must mobilize all its disparate parts in its continued productions. Writing is not the unification of all meaning production that has ever happened but the unification of meaning production that continues to happen; it relies on its ability to engage writers, technologies, texts, etc. in continued acts of writing. Those parts, however, as objects themselves, in their interactions of writing not only supply writing with
its being, but influence the particulars of that being; their choices affect what meanings are produced, sometimes in ways that contribute to significant changes in the whole system of writing. It is my decision to read *Twelfth Night*, an artist’s decision to turn it into a graphic novel, a screen-writer’s decision to base a movie on it, etc. that shapes what the play is. The individual part has significant capacity to act in ways not in the interest of the whole that depends on it. As Latour states well, “The small holds the big. Or rather the big could at any moment drown again in the small from which it emerged and to which it will return” (*Reassembling* 243).

Objects thus maintain their autonomy as they interact with larger objects, often seeing the whole as a part of their own systems—I have no doubt that my body considers me as a tool to obtain its ends, and so might my computer, this project, and writing itself. Texts, like this one, after all, do things that writers could never anticipate and certainly cannot control beyond their own constrained actions and choices—provoking readers to produce unanticipated meanings and subsequent actions, provoking unanticipated meanings in the writer who reads as she writes.

It is in this recognition of the autonomy of parts as objects that I find an explanation for individual experience and effective political action within writing ecologies. Participating in larger objects, as I’ve worked to argue, does not erase individual objects’ autonomy. Objects can act in ways within regimes of attraction that change relationships and their constraints. Objects interact in ongoing adjustments to each other’s actions. There is an ongoing reciprocity or feedback
system of constant interaction as objects attempt to anticipate the actions of other objects, including their own parts, and adjust accordingly. As Bryant states,

While the regimes of attraction we find ourselves enmeshed in might constrain us in a number of ways, through our movement and action we have the ability to act on these regimes of attraction, construct our environments, and therefore modify the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are not simply acted upon by regimes of attraction, but act on them as well.

*(Democracy, 208)*

Regimes of attraction or orientations, like genre, are themselves dynamic objects that mobilize current actions to constitute their parts and so change as those actions change. Like all objects, genres only siphon off some of their constituent texts’ manifest qualities to form their own essential capacities. Each text is more than its role as a part or example of a genre, always exceeding and doing more than merely contributing to the genre, and in doing so, can act in ways that change the genre, even if only incrementally, through changes in its parts, giving rise to genre’s dynamism.

Except in rare occasions, these changes tend to be subtle shifts even though they still require great effort. This is not an argument that I could completely alter or revolutionize the genre of the dissertation by dividing mine into ten chapters with an introduction, but such a move—if I could get away with it—would change the genre just like an outlier in a set of numbers being averaged, if included, raises the average. The amount of power any particular object acquires through its
position in the current order, of course, affects the extent to which its actions can alter the system.

In the model of writing ecologies I articulated in chapter two, following Dobrin (*Postcomposition*), regimes of attraction are the negative feedback loops, the will to stability, at work within ecologies. Ecologies also include positive feedback as textual currents and the bodies they mobilize act in ways that are different from dominant currents—the texts, bodies, genres, ideologies, etc. that maintain the current order in the ecology. This conflict is the source of “viscosity” in writing ecologies. As Dobrin notes, in hydrodynamics, “Viscosity is...a measure of resistance” (*Dobrin Postcomposition* 184); it is the friction that occurs between flows moving in different directions—the conflict between parts and wholes, or between different parts. Writing ecologies are always locations of struggle between those textual currents that work to maintain the current stability of the system and those that offer alternatives that work to change and adapt the system to the needs of parts and changing circumstances. As Dobrin explains, “Order is imposed through power, and though one body orders a space to a particular end, *that order is not necessarily recognized or obeyed by all who enter that space*” (*Dobrin Postcomposition* 40, emphasis added). In other words, while the dominant textual currents of objects—bodies, texts, genres, technologies cultures, ideology—order a space in particular ways that have emerged through the interactions of objects in that space, others who enter that space can act in ways that disrupt that order,
which requires adjustments to such resistance. Ecologies maintain their stability or change only through substantial effort.

No matter how powerful textual currents are, they are never monolithic nor completely stable themselves. There are always alternative currents of texts, bodies, cultures, ideologies, genres, and other objects that have been and continue to be maintained. Such alternatives intersect, disrupt, contradict, and otherwise both change the course of powerful currents and produce still further off-shoots, or, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term, lines of flight (*Thousand 3–4*). Not even the most totalitarian society has ever constituted a writing ecology without numerous alternative textual currents. As textual currents are maintained, they also constantly change as new meanings replace those that gave rise to them.

As I describe in the previous chapter, texts, like this one that I am participating in, do not reproduce copies of themselves but must perturb readers who then produce further texts by screening the information they generate in response to those perturbations through memory texts. Readers then record the information that sticks to the screen, changing those texts, the screen, the reader, and the textual currents that depend on the ongoing propagation of texts through rhetoric for their maintenance. Writing, thus, allows for a significant amount of variation to occur as new objects are recruited to maintain textual currents. First, the current, perhaps slowly and subtly shifts; second, in many instances, rhetorical propagation, because of the individual capacities of objects, produces surprising results that lead to the emergence of further alternative textual currents, and, third,
alternative currents attempt to mobilize the same objects leading to radical intersections and subsequently volatile divergences of both the original currents and new ones that form from the impact. In Cooper’s words, “Order is always a provisional and temporary achievement, because agents are always doing things that make a difference” (“Rhetorical Agency” 425). Objects always remain agents, acting and being acted on according to their different capacities, and capable of acting in surprising ways despite the seeming stability of a system.

Even in extremely constrained situations, objects, bodies, can act to change the orientations of the spaces of systems. As Ahmed argues, by acting against orientations, the act of a body can become “a disorientation device, making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world” (254). The small acts of individuals to disrupt or disorient the system provokes the system to adapt and reorient itself and its parts, to give rise to a changed order.

Such an act of disruption or disorientation is evident in Joshua D. Prenosil’s account of the civil rights era sit-ins. Prenosil argues, “The extreme disjunction caused by the black bodies in a prohibited space...changed the range of inarticulate possibilities for the total network of the lunch counter. In a true irony of rhetoric, the silent bodily protest of the A&T students clamored into the silent possibilities that set the grounds for racist productions of every form” (295). Objects, bodies, that acted from their inner capacities to disrupt the regimes of attraction of segregation, stimulated a system of racial relations in the United States to begin to reorient its regimes of attraction, to develop new lunch counter genres.
By allowing for a non-subjective agency, by recognizing all objects as actors, object-oriented theories have space for such individual and local acts. This is not to say that such acts are not emergent within systems. The lunch counter sit-ins were part of a larger civil rights movement, but it is an ecology and a movement that emerges from the actions of individual parts that act in resistance to negative feedback systems, the orientations, of other larger wholes in which they participate. Recognition of the agency of objects, their capacities to act, helps to materialize and localize the accounts of writing ecologies. As I note above, it is the autonomy of objects and their actions that generate alternative textual currents that clash with the powerful currents of dominant discourse, and could gain enough volume and velocity to eventually change the course of the system. This is not a new concept; it has been part of post-structural and postmodern discourse; it is the idea behind Foucault's tracing of the genealogy of discourses of knowledge and regimes of power and of Gramsci's public intellectual. The object-oriented account I have given here also reaffirms Foucault's articulation of counter-discourses as a means of social change.

If culture emerges from the actions of its parts as those parts act differently, the culture changes. Change, then, is a matter of producing alternative textual currents that gain enough mass and velocity to substantially alter the culture that is maintained by the ongoing interactions of its parts. Change becomes less about overthrowing dominant culture and more about building a coalition, mobilizing objects, gathering bodies, producing more and more texts, and so changing the
ecology. An object-oriented world, thus, reconnects such a sense of the agency of objects and their capacity to disrupt social institutions to ecological systems theories.

An object-oriented perspective radically defends the autonomy of individual objects to act differently, to resist, even if severely constrained—as with hammers that break. To die, as Tibetan monks and other self-immolators tragically do, is an act of resistance that reveals an object’s agency and inexhaustible being, which even the most powerful system cannot fully appropriate. As Harman argues in reference to the overthrow of the Mubarak Regime in Egypt, “There was something dignified and worthy that was held in reserve, something not adequately expressed under the Mubarak regime, and that is why a political upsurge was possible” (*Bells and Whistles* 225). An object-oriented perspective radically defends the dignified and worthy reserved being and agency of all objects, which is what gives rise to the ultimate events of complex ecological systems.

My project here, as I note above, is not an effort to supply social activists with the ability to act; they engage quite effectively without the need for a theory to justify or enable them. My project, rather, is to articulate an ontology of writing that explains not just the emergent actions of writing ecologies, but the agency of individual objects, writing itself, but also writers and all other objects. This concept allows for an understanding of society and its struggles that does not rely on the ontological privileging of some objects over others. As I promised from the beginning, the radical rejection of subjectivity, rather than leading to a loss of
empowerment, actually proves to be no great loss at all. What is lost is the idea that some objects in the world are more ontologically real or have more agency than others because of the particular ways those objects perceive or act in the world. Object-oriented theories preserve agency, preserve difference, preserve identity, but without the ontological or epistemological hierarchy of subjectivity.

An object-oriented theory of writing also radically posits the writtenness of human social interaction, since, as I demonstrate in chapter four, writing is how sentient objects encounter the world. Given that writing is the particular epistemological operation of sentient and sapient beings like humans, I conclude that writing, as writing studies has long asserted, saturates the formation of identity, social groups, culture, ideology both producing them and mobilizing them in its self-maintenance. As such, understanding how writing produces and is articulated in such concepts is an important part of writing studies. This conclusion is among the many implications of the theory I have articulated here.

**Implications**

While an object-oriented approach to writing has many implications for writing studies, given limited space, I can only briefly begin to point to some of the salient implications and opportunities for further theory and research that might be pursued from an object-oriented perspective.
One implication of an object-oriented theory of writing is the important attention it calls to material and bodies. I make some references to both material objects and bodies above, and in previous chapters, but I will draw some fuller implications here. Material objects including bodies frequently act on us in ways that should reveal their hidden agency. Tools break. Objects surprise us, disrupt our neat and orderly accounts of them. In Bruno Latour’s words objects “are given a chance to object to what is said about them” (Reassembling 124–125). Or, as Graham Harman puts it, an object is “a real force throwing its weight around in the world and demanding to be taken seriously” (Guerrilla 17). Material objects, from an object-oriented perspective, are integral parts of the milieu of the world in which writing operates. The concrete matter of objects is a primary source of perturbations that objects are selectively open to, provoking the production of information and affect, which only then can be screened through and recorded in memory to produce meaning, written. Matter then, as an essential part of all objects

is part of an object’s ability to act and be acted on in the world. As I note above and in the last chapter, the writing ability of sentient objects is not the sole province of those objects; any object that can perturb us, can, in effect, write through us. Objects do this all the time. Objects are always bumping us, jostling us, acting on us, and writing on us as surely as we have ever written on them.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, even supposed immaterial objects like Harry Potter, unicorns, or hobbits cannot exist without the matter of posters, DVDs, figurines, toys, hard drives, the neurons of human brains, and so forth that they enlist and mobilize as their parts.
This experience of being written on by matter, or by texts, or any part of objects that perturb us, while it is our whole selves that is affected, like the relation of parts to wholes, also calls attention to our bodies. Our bodies, after all, from an object-oriented perspective, are also objects in our environment that can provoke us to create meaning. Our own bodies, we might say, are the objects that act on, write on, us the most, the part we mobilize for our own essential matter but which we experience only selectively like other objects we interact with. In an object-oriented theory of writing bodies are granted their own full autonomous and individual reality apart from our relationship to them or our written conceptions of them. They, however, mobilize our actions as their parts as much as we mobilize theirs as ours; this is not a split between mind and body, but a recognition that our bodies are neither tools we use nor are exhausted by our conscious being.

In “Appeals to the Body in Eco-Rhetoric and Techno-Rhetoric,” M. Jimmie Killingsworth also argues for an eco-rhetoric view of bodies as not just embodied but as more closely connected than the word embodiment entails. Through an account of the deterioration of his own health through his pursuits of techno-rhetoric, Killingsworth argues against a view of the body as a technology, which he indicates is implied in techno-rhetoric’s posthuman arguments about the expansion of self through technology. In reference to his account of having suffered herniated discs in his back, he argues, “My body had become this uncooperative thing, this other that resisted my technological ambitions” (81). In this account of the body as a “thing,” that Killingsworth is critiquing, both bodies and technologies are conceived
as tools, in a conventional sense, something without agency or meaning waiting to become meaningful through human use. As Killingsworth explains, “The problem of thus identifying the body with machines is that we may come to think of the body...as something we use. Becoming users of the body, rather than a body itself, we are prone to overuse or even abuse the body” (83). Bodies, in this light, are helpless victims, the objects of subjects who use them. Killingsworth recognizes the problems in this account, which motivated his turn from techno- to eco-rhetoric.

From an object-oriented perspective, bodies like everything else are objects with a hidden reality and capacity to act and be acted on that exceeds our dependence on them while at the same time remaining essential to our being—literally given that our essential qualities are appropriated from our parts, including bodies. Above, I discuss how bodies or their parts can and often do act on us. Such actions can even extend to heart attacks and other organ failures, allergic reactions, cancers, drowsiness, illness, hunger. The resistance to his technological ambitions Killingsworth experienced from his body were the actions of an ailing body attempting to act on him in order to produce events in its environment more conducive to its continuance and progress over time. It was not a dumb tool that refused to bend to his will but an interaction with an active, autonomous object.

Bodies are not only, as Anne Francis Wysocki states, “our primary media” (“Introduction” 4), but are more fully understood as our most essential part. They are wondrous objects, full of mystery, so little known or experienced despite our proximity to and dependence on them. Even our most advanced knowledge of
bodies is so much guesswork and wandering in the dark as bodies continue to
surprise us and elude our attempts to exhaust their reality. Bodies are also wholes,
however, composed of their own parts, microcosms of other objects acting on their
environments. As Jane Bennet notes, “In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not
enough to say that we are ‘embodied.’ We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many
different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes” (112–113).

An object-oriented writing theory, thus, acknowledges bodies as actors,
acting in writing, writing for themselves as they act on us. An object-oriented
approach also radically defends the value of different bodies. Because of its flat
ontology, object-oriented theory rejects any attempt to make any object the
standard for any other. In the case of bodies, this means that no body is considered
in relation to other bodies but only for itself, its own unique capacities to act and be
acted on. In this way, an object-oriented theory supports greater discussion of
bodies and their roles in writing, and can support (dis)ability studies efforts in
writing studies to resist the marginalization of different bodies. As Jay Dolmage has
argued, “normalcy is used to control bodies; our normate culture continuously
reinscribes the centrality, naturality, neutrality, and unquestionability of the
normate position; our culture also marks out and marginalizes those bodies and
minds that do not conform” (110). Dolmage, here, points out the tendencies of
society to assume all bodies have similar capacities. An object-oriented perspective,
contrary to this, defends the agency and different capacities of all bodies.
In defending the agency of bodies beyond our experiences with them, beyond our writing on them, an object-oriented perspective directly contradicts Judith Butler’s famous conclusion that bodies are always interpellated into the symbolic (Bodies that Matter). Butler consistently argues from a perspective that indicates that matter is never separable from language or language from matter though one cannot be reduced into the other. In some ways this hints at the withdrawn inexhaustible reality of objects but always circumvents such moves with an unrelenting commitment to ideas of language as the determiner of the symbolic world we live in. An object-oriented perspective casts significant doubt on this account of matter and bodies. First, since ontology precedes epistemology and language, the being of matter and bodies frequently escape and disrupt the limits of language. A real world of material objects go about acting in the world with or without language. Beyond that, even human experience of matter and bodies can escape language from an object-oriented perspective since sentient objects also precede and experience the world without languages. Language, as I fully articulate in chapter four, is a writing-technology that emerges only when sentient objects need to perturb other sentient objects in complex ways.

More directly, however, an object-oriented perspective of bodies reverses Butler’s account. For Butler, bodies are always interpellated in our conceptions of them; from an object-oriented perspective, they are always breaking out. Bodies, as objects, act and are acted on according to their inexhaustible and indefinite hidden real capacities; they are always defying our attempts to make them conform to our
caricatures of them. In Gender Trouble, Butler presents drag as her example of 
the performativity of gender, but in reality it is the revelation of drag by the actions 
of the body that show this performativity, not drag itself. Drag, after all, is a 
performance of gender that maintains or reifies it. It is when the body reveals the 
drag, when drag is apparent, that those textual currents are disrupted and gender as 
a performance is, literally, exposed. This is also the point at which violence often 
occurs as a material means of negative feedback. Try as we might, we cannot force 

bodies to behave and conform to our limited conceptualizations of them; they are always acting out, doing different things, employing their agency in ways that disrupt our attempts to explain them.\(^{123}\) An object-oriented perspective is thus, a radical defense of bodies that nevertheless allows for the attempts of other objects to write on them.

An object-oriented writing theory, then, corrects writing studies tendency 
not to account for bodies. As Dolmage argues,

As a discipline, broadly speaking, we in composition and rhetoric have not 
acknowledged that we have a body, bodies; we cannot admit that our 
prevailing metaphors and tropes should be read across the body, or that our 
work has material, corporeal bases, effects, and affects. (110)

\(^{123}\) Butler's project, however, is an attempt to call attention to the performativity of gender and its implications, which I am not questioning. I am only defending the body as an agent, an object that acts to disrupt our accounts of it. As I note in chapter three, this is not a defense of any identifiable essentialism that would attribute gender to bodies rather than performance; bodies have the capacity to perform multiple genders.
Object-oriented perspectives call attention to all bodies not only as the corporeality of other objects but also as objects themselves that always exceed their current relationships, that act, and that write through their actions on us. In this way an object-oriented view pushes the role of bodies beyond being “the ultimate screening device” as Jennifer Bay refers to them when she postulates that “perhaps our minds and brains are not only filtering information, but our bodies are as well” (935). Bodies do more than filter information, they shape it, disrupt it, they write on us as much as we write on them. While their capacities to sense, to filter information, determine the perceptions and affect from which we can produce meaning; they also generate their own information as Killingsworth experienced in a negative way. The information the body supplies through its own interior relations, messages of hunger, desire, exhaustion, the overproduction or underproduction of chemicals, affects our ability to write, to create meaning. Bodies aren’t just filtering, they are acting, they are writing by appropriating our written consciousness in pursuit of their own ends. This is true for all bodies and all objects not just our bodies but also the bodies of texts, animals, plants, and technology.

Technology and Tools as Objects

As more and more people have gained at least some access to digital technologies, work on the relationships between writing and technology has exploded. This attention is much needed since our interactions with new media have glaringly exposed that, as Dobrin argues, “the study of writing cannot be
separated from the study of technology” (“Ecology and Concepts” 195). An object-oriented theory of writing, by acknowledging the agency of all objects, argues for an understanding of technology as objects that emerge in the milieu of ecological interactions among objects. As Marilyn Cooper argues, “tools seem to have arisen out of physical and kinetic coordinations between agents and their environments—they result from actions of shaping rather than being instruments designed for shaping” (“Being Linked” 22). In other words, Cooper is arguing that the idea of a technology does not come from inspiration but from in-the-moment interactions with objects—there is no space for non-interactive inspiration because we are always acting on or being acted on by objects.

A chimpanzee does not first conceive that a stick would make a good “tool” to use for getting ants to leave their hill, but needing to eat in order to continue to exist and knowing food to be available from the anthill, the chimp forms a relationship with a nearby stick to become a stick-enhanced-chimp whose capacity to act on the anthill is now different from and greater than either the chimp’s or the stick’s. Tools and technology are objects in their own right with hidden capacities to act and be acted on, capacities that always allow, as scholars in computers and composition have known for decades, for new, further, and different activities since those capacities are never exhausted by present relationships. In its radical defense of the capacities of objects like technologies to act and be acted on differently, an object-oriented view can push the notion of technological affordances beyond the typical set of possibilities.
In our interactions with them, however, we join with technologies on the interior of a larger object. When I drive a car, I am a car-enhanced human, or, to be fair, a human-enhanced car who feels the road beneath the tires and acts in ways that neither I nor the car can act outside of this relationship. From an object-oriented perspective, when we interact with technology, the result is not explainable as “use.” Instead, our interactions work to change both the technology and us. A new object emerges from this interaction of parts with different capacities than any part has on its own. In this relationship technology acts on us as surely as we act on it, as Michael Wesch’s video about web 2.0 “The Machine is Us/ing US” illustrates. Technology and tools, as objects are always acting, and can always act differently given different environments. As Brooke and Rickert point out, “It is crucial, therefore, that we begin to come to terms with that activity, to recognize our information technologies as robust themselves, shaping us as we shape them” (176). An object-oriented perspective does just that. It also goes further in fully acknowledging the individuality and reality of tools and technology, a reality that confronts us, as Heidegger points out, when tools break, and as Harman adds, we are confronted with the realization that neither our use nor our conceptualization of tools ever exhausts their reality or their agency. As with all our interactions with objects, as we write them and they us, we engage in complex processes of interaction, forming larger objects, producing new objects through our actions. In the object-oriented but also ecological account of writing here, there are certainly implications for writing study’s interest in writing processes.
Process(es) and Products

The dynamic model of writing’s ecology I discuss in chapter two, as I have argued repeatedly, suggests an ecological understanding of the processes through which texts emerge. An object-oriented writing theory, however, has further implications for process worth mentioning here.

An object-oriented model of process begins to reassemble the complexities of writing as individual texts emerge and to focus on the actions of the numerous objects involved like sources, drafts, feedback, discussions, memory, genres, technologies, places, and textual currents in addition to writers and readers. An object-oriented account of process, which is also an ecological account of process, calls attention then to more of the roles and relationships that contribute to the emergence of any text, to the actions of individual objects whether they be sentient and sapient objects or material ones like the computer I am writing this on. In doing this, it is not simply to discuss the effect objects have on writers as they write but to recognize the actions of objects besides writers and readers. Those formerly excluded objects would also include other people whose participation in an ecology might be peripheral but still essential. While my children, for instance, are not collaborators, readers of this work, or members of the writing studies ecology, I have mentioned their activities in the previous chapters—reading a graphic novel version of Twelfth Night, conversing in the background while I type. They have participated in the production of this text in the ways they have acted on me. The
same is true for the objects that have entered these pages as illustrations and examples from my desk fan to the cardinals who live in my back yard. Some, of course, acted on me indirectly, like the mantis shrimp that I first heard about through a pin my wife saw on Pinterest.

This complex dynamic process, then, calls for thick description of all the objects acting in the production of texts, but a thick description more along the lines of Bruno Latour’s actor network theory (ANT) that works to trace the connections between mediators in ecologies. As Latour argues, “we are now interested in mediators making other mediators do things. ‘Making do’ is not the same thing as ‘causing’ or ‘doing’: there exists at the heart of it a duplication, a dislocation, a translation that modifies at once the whole argument” (Reassembling 217). In other words, the goal is to trace the connections of objects acting on each other to make each other produce desired events through perturbations, information, and actions among individual objects, adding the steps of writing and meaning for sentient and sapient actors. As I have attempted to show here, recognizing the nature of this relationality that defends the autonomy of objects modifies arguments about autonomy and free will since “making do” is not causal or merely an extension of the initial action but an active response.

Writing studies, of course, is no stranger to thick description, but a majority of that description has centered only on writers. An object-oriented perspective asks us to write an ontography rather than a case study. As Ian Bogost explains an ontography is “a name for a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the
repleteness of units (objects) and their interobjectivity... ontography involves
the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification” (38).
The goal of such thick description following Latour is to trace the relationships,
leaving attempts to explain and draw value conclusions for another time. The goal is
to describe what objects *are* doing, not why they are doing it or what they should or
could be doing differently. Such a commitment to delay explanation might allow us
to find connections that would be invisible to us if we apply an explanatory lens, like
subjectivity, too soon. This pushes us toward a very different understanding of
process research. Jung, however, rightly points out that such a complete avoidance
of perspective is impossible; she writes, “when we decouple description from
explanation...we fail to consider how an explanation...makes a description not only
noticeable but worth noticing” (“Systems”). As Jung highlights, we cannot escape our
perspective. An object-oriented theory reveals how the very ontology of objects
makes it impossible to do so. Our theories of course operate in our memories to
screen information as relevant, bringing some things to our notice and not others.
However, imaginatively, we can at least not further constrict our view with further
distinctions and try, as best we can, to notice more, to hold off judgment. At the
same time, we have to acknowledge the theories of explanation that are likely
framing our description. In this case, an object-oriented view frames mine. The goal
is to multiply the objects acting in ecologies, to note processes, actors, and products.

An object-oriented perspective, in this sense, brings processes and products
back together as objects, their interactions, and their emergence. As I noted at the
end of chapter two, one of the unfortunate developments of the process movement was the construction of a dichotomy between process and product. Donald Murray didn’t just argue that writing teachers should teach process but that they also should not teach “product” (“Teach”). Of course, he was specifically referring to the fictional figure of monolithic current-traditional rhetoric and its focus on grammar, but the result has been a hesitance to give significant attention to products as more than parts of the process. While the field has long recognized this problem, products still tend to be neglected as end results of processes.

As objects, however, products emerge from the processes with their own agency. They harbor hidden capacities to act and be acted upon in different circumstances, and their actions, in turn, affect the emergence of other objects in which they participate as parts. One application of this is to consider the ways drafts, rather than being merely earlier moments in the process of a text, are texts in themselves; their capacities to act and be acted on affect the emergence of the texts they participate in as drafts. This has been very viscerally made clear to me as I have written this project and responded to feedback. In many cases, I have agonized over chapters that resisted my attempts to make them different. Texts emerge with a unity, an order, and like with all objects their organization of parts works to maintain that order. Typically, our struggles to alter texts are attributed to our emotional attachment to them. While that may be a factor as well, an object-oriented perspective pushes us to realize that texts themselves, as objects, act on us to maintain themselves as they are. Every time I would read some chapters, the
current organization would operate on me, inhibiting my ability to see how it could be different. Often, it was only through particularly blunt feedback that I could generate the energy to alter a chapter. Even in such cases, I often had to literally break the chapter apart to see it differently. This is also true of smaller objects such as paragraphs, sentences, and even words; as objects they seek to maintain themselves and resist my efforts to use them differently, words like withdrawal and unify became points of struggle as they provoked different meanings in readers than I anticipated.

An object-oriented process, then, has significant implications for revision. Revision, in the very word ignores the capacities of texts, making the text merely a matter of a writer’s “vision.” Because texts have capacities and act on us to maintain themselves as they are, however, an object-oriented perspective suggests a different understanding of how we participate in texts, how we perturb communication systems. The main implication is that writers are unlikely to work to alter texts unless perturbed by some disjunction, inconsistency, feedback, that moves them to act against the text’s current system. Like writing, revision is a form of resistance; perhaps adaptation is a better term. A further implication, however, given the ecological nature of writing, is that our understanding of the process of drafting and revision needs to expand to account for more of the texts that contribute to the processes of writing.

An object-oriented perspective on products as objects thus also asks us to reconsider what a draft is. Perhaps the term draft, should be seen as misleading,
effacing how texts operate in many ways as each others’ parts whether as a rhetorically weak and uncirculated part that participates as the beginnings of more powerful texts or as effective texts that propagate themselves as parts of numerous other texts and textual currents. Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Webber note the influence of “mundane texts like newsletters, internal memos, proposals, strategy documents” as well as “spaces, such as buses and diners” on the emergence of the more powerful and oft cited “texts” of the civil rights movement (196). Texts are objects that act and are acted on, exerting their own influence in the processes of writing, acting on writers as much as writers act on them. A confluence of texts might lead up to the production of what we think of as a “draft,” and a draft, while it may be a text that adapts and becomes a “finished” text, may just as easily be discarded as the exigency for an entirely different text. This is the case with the series of presentation papers I wrote to be preliminary drafts of this argument but whose ideas I’ve discarded completely by this point.

In recognizing all objects in the processes of writing as actors influencing the emergence of texts through their own capacities and not simply through a writer’s use of or interaction with them, writing studies is confronted by objects, by a chaotic sea or sky filled with turbulent objects bumping, striking, holding, and otherwise relating to each other. This cannot help but change how we theorize, study, and research writing. The ontography should become a primary tool in empirical research of writing, describing the writing scene in all its complexity, providing
thick descriptions of writing’s productions that can be used in subsequent work to revise and extend our understandings of writing.

In this project, my efforts have been to work toward these new possibilities for the study of writing as an object. I have purposefully steered away from issues of pedagogy. Because pedagogy is more about students learning to participate in writing than writing itself, attention to pedagogy tends to set limits on theory that would make the kind of theorizing I am attempting difficult.

Writing theory, however, cannot help but have implications for writing pedagogy. The concepts of writing that instructors seek to introduce students to must derive from writing theory and writing research. The intellectual work to develop pedagogies based in writing theory is its own rigorous project; it is not truly sensible to expect a work of writing theory to come prepackaged for pedagogy. The conclusion of the final chapter of a work like this one, provides insufficient space and focus for me to articulate an “object-oriented writing pedagogy,” though I have all intentions to work toward such a project. In the limited space remaining, however, I would be remiss if I did not at least begin to sketch out some of the implications of the object-oriented writing theory I have articulated here for the writing classroom.

Object-Oriented Writing Theory and the Writing Classroom

The first implication of object-oriented writing theories for pedagogy is a radical rejection of the concept of mastery. Writing studies has been questioning the
possibility of mastering writing for some time now.\textsuperscript{124} An object-oriented perspective pushes this acknowledgement of writing’s unmasterability even further. After all, once we acknowledge that every object involved in writing processes is its own individual agent able to act and be acted on according to its hidden real capacities, it is inconceivable that any one of those actors could ever “master” the others. An object-oriented understanding is based first and foremost in an understanding of every object as a real being that is never exhausted by its current relations, and so can act in ways that surprise us and disrupt any illusions of control or mastery.

As the way sentient beings interact with the world, writing is as unmasterable, creative, and surprising as life itself, and this has important implications for the classroom. As Marilyn Cooper argues, “Understanding skill as an interactive achievement of organisms and their environments ... emphasizes the importance of playing around with stuff (pieces of wire or grass, string, words, cell phones, computer programs) in any kind of production or invention” (“Being Linked” 24). In this way, an object-oriented approach would, like process pedagogy, imply the need for a focus on making, trying, attempting, experimenting, collaborating, not just with writers and readers but with all objects in writing ecologies, a focus on participating with writing as a creative endeavor. This creative endeavor, however, is one not focused on mastering the steps of a reductive subject-centric account of process but on being part of the object-oriented process,

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\textsuperscript{124} See Dejoy \textit{Process This}, Kent Preface, S.L. Meyer, Petraglia \textit{Reconceiving}.
\end{flushright}
immersed in the textual, technological, and geographical currents of writing ecologies.

In classrooms, those ecologies include the troublesome objects of syllabi, assignment sheets, and peer and instructor responses. Anis Bawarshi has described how these objects operate in genre sets, influencing the texts that emerge in the classroom (“Sites of Invention”). An object-oriented view would go even further in noting these objects participation in negative feedback in the classroom as well as their participation in the processes of writing. In ontographies of classrooms, we may just find that assignment sheets, participating in emerging student texts, have as much, if not more, influence on the texts that emerge as student writers. I postulate that a great deal of supposedly “bad” student writing can be linked to “bad” assignment sheets, responses, and syllabi as much as to a lack of writing skill on the part of students. Such assignments may be setting students up to produce bad drafts. An ontography of assignment sheets and their relations with other objects in classrooms could reveal their agency in ways case studies of writers might not. An object-oriented pedagogy would push instructors to give more attention to all the objects operating in their classrooms and how the texts that emerge do so through the interactions of those various objects.125

With this attention to all the objects circulating in the writing ecologies of classrooms, instructors would also have to account for the ways that different objects act differently to influence the emergence of different texts, and these

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125 This is not to say this does not already occur, but perspectives that focus on subjects tend to downplay the agency of other objects.
differences lead to different writing ecologies with different regimes of attraction. This, of course, is hardly new; as I note above and in chapter two attention has been given to the influence of “discourse communities” for over three decades now, and writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID) programs arose because of this attention to difference among various communities of writers. These programs also influenced theories of activity systems, as I have noted. What an object-oriented approach does is to refocus attention more substantially on broader ecologies and relations among all objects in which and through which regimes of attraction and differences among ecologies emerge.

In other words, an object-oriented approach would more straightforwardly imply that learning to write requires learning to analyze writing ecologies since writing, as I have argued, is a matter of participating in writing’s productions within ecologies. Writing is a matter of interacting with ecology specific objects, textual currents, genres, and other parts of an ecology’s regimes of attraction and resistances to them, and the ability of writers to participate in writing in ways that maximize their own efficacy. Involvement in the emergence of those texts writers participate in depends on their ability to analyze the ecology in order to position themselves to take advantage of the ecology’s currents, capacities, and other interrelating objects either to contribute and/or to resist them. An object-oriented writing class then would focus not only on immersing students in opportunities to

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interact with writing but also on helping them learn to analyze writing ecologies. Additionally, since participating in writing cannot occur outside writing ecologies, and analysis of writing ecologies is a product and activity of writing studies, such a classroom would be a writing about writing classroom.\textsuperscript{127}

Given writing’s unmasterability, aside from exposure to situated opportunities to participate in writing, perhaps the most useful pedagogical principle an object-oriented classroom would support is to teach about writing, about writing as an object, the objects that are its parts, and their interactions and circulations in writing ecologies. Students’ efforts to study writing itself, its productions within ecologies, and the processes of their own and other objects’ participations in it should bring students toward the threshold concepts (Meyer & Land) of writing that will help them participate more effectively in writing to both maximize their own successes and recognize their ability to participate in ecologies in ways that might change those ecologies for the better.

An object-oriented approach to writing about writing pedagogies has significant implications for writing ecologies, writing identities, and genres. The first of these is focused on helping students understand how writing differs among different groups of writers. In \textit{Writing about Writing}, Wardle and Downs include texts focused on presenting writing communities as discourse communities

\textsuperscript{127} See Bird; Carter; Charlton; DeJoy \textit{Process This}; Dew; Downs “Teaching,” “Writing-about-Writing;” Downs & Wardle; Russell “Activity Theory;” Wardle “Mutt Genres;” “Understanding;” Wardle & Downs.
(Swales) and then also present activity theory as a means to analyze communities as activity systems (Bazerman “Speech Acts;” Kain & Wardle; Wardle “Identity”).

An object-oriented perspective as I’ve articulated here implies there is a need to develop more complex models of the object-oriented writing ecologies and to present them to students in order to more accurately describe writing and writing processes. As I describe above in my discussion of the implications of my theory for our understanding of process, the theory I’ve articulated here calls attention to the ecological nature of writing and all the various actors that contribute to the emergence of any text. An object-oriented pedagogy would need models of this process that more fully account for the actions of objects including all the various roles people and non-human actors play in ecologies. An approach to ecological analysis might engage in ontographical exercises to trace all the people, technologies, texts, genres, identities, and other objects involved in textual production in a given ecology. This sketch should, in accordance with my main arguments in this chapter, also inquire into the feedback systems or regimes of attraction within ecologies, perhaps focusing on their embodiment in genres.

One significant implication of this chapter should be to call into doubt any possibility of pedagogy working to determine the politics, for good or ill, of students. As independent, autonomous objects, student will not be converted by liberatory pedagogies against their will. Pedagogy does not supply teachers either with a means of necessarily saving the world or imposing their own questionable political
agenda on it. It does present an opportunity to introduce students to new and
different experiences that will affect their developing memory texts and identities
and how all genres allow and constrain identities and social relationships, often
through genres. An object-oriented approach to genre awareness would focus on
helping students see genre as the dynamic object it is and how it is defined not just
by its typified features but by its agency, those things it can do within particular
ecologies and the identities and bodies that it mobilizes, constrains, or effaces.

An object-oriented perspective would also question any understanding of
identity that does not recognize all object’s capacities to perform many different
identities in different circumstances and that those different identities are not
deviations from an object’s (or person’s) essential identity but are products of that
inexhaustible and indefinable real capacity. Identity, as we experience it in writing,
is something that emerges as real objects act within writing ecologies, not pre-
existing subjectivities brought to writing by transcendent subjects who put their
thoughts on paper.

Students will, however, come to classrooms with understandings about
themselves and writing that conflict with these object-oriented accounts. As has
long been the case, a major challenge for writing instruction has been contending
with the memory texts students bring into the class, among which are likely texts
based in their experiences with writing that suggest they are romantic subjects and
that writing is putting thoughts down on paper. A major focus of an object oriented
writing class would be introducing students to writing’s ecological sociality and a
different way of understanding identity. This indicates that we need pedagogies and models that introduce these concepts to students in ways that maintain their complexity while helping students understand what they mean for the students’ own interactions as part(icipant)s of writing.

Conclusions

As my attempt to sketch out a few implications of object-oriented writing theory for research and pedagogy in writing studies indicates, there is much work that can be done from this perspective. Further nuances to theorize more directly, empirical work to conduct, and pedagogies to develop. I believe, however, that this theoretical work takes an important step in laying the groundwork for a truly capacious and engaging theory of what writing is. What it is beyond our experiences with it, and what that ontology indicates for writing’s complex productions and circulations in writing ecologies.

I conclude with a desire to call attention to how this theory, in its attention to objects, is a theory of fascination, of enchantment, of an inexhaustible need to dig ever deeper into the nature of writing, searching for all its hidden real qualities, hypnotized by its volcanic creative capacities. This, I think, is what it is to be a writing theorist, ever searching for the real object of writing, ever disappointed, ever dissatisfied, but ever accumulating knowledge as we dig away.

In my efforts, I hope that I have done justice to the work of others, attempting to build on their triumphs at the same time that I point out flaws and gaps in need of
attention. I have attempted to engage in what Graham Harman calls “inventive thinking,” which rather than “punishing gaffes and discrepancies” is instead seeking to be “able to be surprised” (Guerrilla Metaphysics 239). Inventive theory is always looking to build on the work of others, as Harman explains, rather than seeking just to expose the wizard behind the curtain “the work of the thinker should be to find the counter-wizard” (241). We criticize, sometimes harshly, not to tear down, cast aspersions, or make accusations, but to make room for renovations, developments, rereadings, remixings. Harman consistently argues that Heidegger should be remembered as the greatest thinker of the twentieth century despite Harman’s criticisms of Heidegger. In this work, I have had the privilege of being written on by the work of many great scholars who have amassed the knowledge of writing needed for me to even conceive of this undertaking. I hope that I have both done it justice, and built something new and worthwhile as well.


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