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# Politics And Pedagogy: Recuperating Rhetoric And Composition's Native Ethical Tradition

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**POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY: RECUPERATING RHETORIC AND  
COMPOSITION'S NATIVE ETHICAL TRADITION**

by

**DEREK RISSE**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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2016

MAJOR: ENGLISH (Rhetoric and  
Composition)

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father for their unending support and love.

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## CHAPTER 1: THE ETHICAL TURN IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

[...] a system of ethics is not *applied* to life. Our ethics are not something exterior we bring in and deploy but rather a set of comportments that emerge from life as it is lived, from what we do, say, and make. Thus, these ethics emerge already in the background chorography of relations that give meaning and direction to how we dwell with things and each other in the world. So we are now well poised to ask what dwelling is.

-Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*

The end of the use of methods of rhetoric as a practical art of elucidation would be realized, not in results obtained, but in making unmistakably clear possible lines of action and their respective consequences.

-James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*

Over the past decade, scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have shown renewed interest in the topic of ethics. Spurred by the wake of cultural studies and a deep-seated concern for the legacies of humanism, we are witnessing what Ellen Barton (2008) has described as an ethical “turn” in the discipline,<sup>1</sup> the implications of which remain largely unexamined. Though, for her purposes, Barton locates the ethical turn in feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly the work of figures like Gesa Kirsch, Patricia Sullivan, Joy Ritchie, Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings (1992; 1995; 1982; 1984), this turn has broader theoretical and pedagogical coordinates.<sup>2</sup> We might point, for instance, to conversations around the related topics of agency and alterity (D. Davis; J. Muckelbauer; D. Hawhee), ethos and rhetorical attunement (T. Rickert; E. Doxtader; A. Liu), and ecological and networked models of writing practice (S. Dobrin; M. Newcomb;

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<sup>1</sup> For other uses of the term, see Dana Harrington’s review essay “The Ethical Turn in English Studies” (2009), and Elizabeth A. Flynn’s *Feminism Beyond Modernism* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> The connection between the ethical turn in Rhetoric and Composition and a feminist “ethics of care”

<sup>2</sup> The connection between the ethical turn in Rhetoric and Composition and a feminist “ethics of care” deserves further consideration. As Barton shows us, feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s precipitated the ethical turn in the discipline. It is also worth revisiting Gesa Kirsch and Peter Mortensen’s *Ethical Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* (1996), from which Barton borrows the concept of an ethical “turn.”

M. Cooper), to name a few critical conception points for contemporary ethical inquiry. Broadly conceived, this emerging body of scholarship represents a simultaneous enfolding and unfolding of rhetoric, which, borrowing from Deleuze, offers ethics as a potential “line of flight” or radical “deterritorialization” of rhetoric, the stakes of which have dramatic implications for the way that we conceptualize ethics in practice. In this sense, the ethical turn represents not so much a theoretical retooling of disciplinary ethics, but an evacuation or displacement of disciplinary models for rhetoric and ethics.

Though it would be difficult to offer any one set of coordinates for tracking this turn—the ethical turn represents not one unified movement, but rather is comprised of myriad intersecting trajectories—this growing body of scholarship can be characterized by its shared concern for the legacies of humanism in the discipline. Diane Davis, an important contributor to this turn, has argued that our commitments to humanism and related practices of rhetorical interpretation and identification have effectively occluded the “Other,” thus resulting in diminished opportunities for a critical ethical program in Rhetoric and Composition. In a move that is characteristic of the ethical turn, Davis turns instead to extra-disciplinary referents in continental philosophy, citing the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida in her argument for new models of community premised not in the notion of rhetorical solidarity, but rather “finitude,” “singularity,” and “difference” (*Inessential Solidarity* 4-9). Although Davis draws from tropes and concepts that are familiar to the discipline, she also suggests that the posthuman imperative challenges prevailing disciplinary frameworks for ethics (*Breaking Up* 210-230). Davis argues that there is much import to thinking ethics beyond

the bounded formulations of Rhetoric and Composition, calling scholars, in a telling turn of phrase, to “crank up the noise” (“Addicted to Love” 696).

Davis’ call to crank up the noise has a growing reception in Rhetoric and Composition; this sentiment has been echoed, for instance, in Sid Dobrin’s efforts to push Composition scholarship to “the edge of chaos” (2011) and Randy Gray Kristensen and Ryan M. Claycomb’s pitch for “anti-disciplinary” approaches to writing pedagogy (2010). We have grown increasingly suspicious of the discipline’s agent and logocentric vision of ethics this past decade, and Davis’ appeals to possibilities for enriching rhetoric outside the discipline offers the promise of a possible departure point. The ethical turn takes specific exception with the practice of rhetorical hermeneutics, which, Cornelia Wells argues, leaves us always open to the possibility of “mischarge” and “backfire”: “If the energy to ‘code’ and ‘decode’ messages is always open to mischarge and mis(and back)fire or otherwise miss the mark, why are we talking or rhetoricizing or (anti)philosophizing or profess(ionaliz)ing in the first place?” (“Toward a Pragmatics” 293). Seizing on the broader strokes of this argument, Thomas Rickert (after Ulmer) has offered a “postpedagogy” (2007) and Sid Dobrin, who has at this point largely abandoned the ecological (ecomposition) premise of his earlier work, has challenged theorists to think of possibilities “postcomposition” (2010).

Although this work has contributed valuable insights to the field, particularly as it modifies our understanding of topics like agency, ethos, and place, it seems worth considering what the ethical turn risks missing in its call for a period *post*-composition. For her part, Barton sees critical value in ethics’ disciplinary inflection, noting that our

“critical perspective on language as interactional and rhetorical” translates well in broader institutional contexts:

In my experience, the investigation of real language is both fascinating and convincing to interdisciplinary audiences, and since qualitative research is increasingly gaining ever more traction in all kinds of research, including biomedical research, I think we should exploit this reception to make our theoretical contributions through our empirical methods. (“Further Contributions” 625)

Building on Barton’s premise, I argue that there is much to be gained by turning back to Rhetoric and Composition’s native ethical tradition, particularly its concern for the pedagogical implications of ethical inquiry. Though the ethical turn offers a critical lens for reevaluating disciplinary frameworks for rhetoric and ethics, effectively “loosening,” as John Muckelbauer puts it, the “stranglehold that communicative rationality still maintains on rhetoric’s sense of the civic imaginary” (“Domesticating Animal Theory” 99), the search for new possibilities for ethical scholarship should not risk our neglecting resources extant in the discipline.

I make efforts in the chapters that follow to recuperate this tradition via a critical rereading of the often-implicit treatment of ethics in Composition pedagogy roughly contiguous with the rise of critical theory in the 1980s and 1990s. In this sense, I deploy a different kind of ethical turn, pushing on tensions that inhere in contemporary ethics with the aim of revitalizing the discipline’s native ethical tradition. Though there are many potential reference points for which to recuperate this tradition, these two decades represent an important culminating point for disciplinary ethics and a vital moment for practitioners interested in revitalizing this tradition. Returning to the critical pedagogy moment specifically and emphasizing the rich thinking around the question of ethics in Composition will, it is hoped, provide fuller and more disciplinary-specific resources for

the ethical dilemmas raised by the ethical turn. Contemporary ethical inquiry has led to a fracturing and factionalization of the discipline, particularly at the level of how we conceptualize our roles and responsibilities as theorists and practitioners, the suggestion being that we must choose between agency or alterity, knowledge or phenomenology, certainty or contingency, theory or practice. It is this suggestion of choice that creates real challenges for conceptualizing ethics in practice, particularly in the writing classroom, leading us to ask whether a stable and sustainable disciplinary model for ethics is possible.

As a response, this dissertation works to reclaim Rhetoric and Composition's commitments to the practical implications of theory, which offers a much-needed corrective to the densely theoretical frameworks of contemporary ethics. As we will see, the push to deessentialize subjectivity perpetuates a problematic disjunct between theory and practice. In its most dramatic inflection, the turn offers ethics as a kind of impasse or limit line, beyond which possibilities for action seem improbable if not impossible. Speaking to these tensions, Nate Kreuter alerts us to specific challenges for the writing classroom:

Essentially, the discipline of rhetoric and composition is left at an impasse, on the one hand responsible for educating students to write effectively and ethically in a culture that will demand clarity from them, but at the same time recognizing as a discipline that the ideology of clarity entails tremendous rhetorical and ethical liabilities of its own. Teaching students to resist the 'ideology of clarity' risks marginalizing the discipline as irrelevant within a broader culture that almost unequivocally demands 'clarity' from rhetors. But teaching students to write clearly might effectively put the discipline into the position of reifying the very ideology of clarity that so many within the discipline have convincingly critiqued. ("The Ethics of Clarity" 5)

I share Kreuter's concern for the challenges that inhere in this impasse and agree that these challenges should renew, not absolve, our commitment to thinking ethics in

practice. In pursuit of ethical resources extant in the discipline, and with an eye to the difficulty of conceptualizing ethics in practice, this dissertation poses three critical questions: How has the contemporary ethical turn newly augmented our conception of ethics? What has been lost in ethics' displacement of rhetoric? And, what value is there in revitalizing the discipline's native ethical tradition, particularly its commitments to the practical implications of ethical theory? These questions, I hope, will be generative, producing new programs for ethics in the writing classroom.

In the chapters that follow, I focus primarily on three trajectories characteristic of the ethical turn in Rhetoric and Composition, around the topics of alterity and agency, ethos and place, and networked and ecological models of classroom practice. Borrowing from Byron Hawk, the three body chapters of this dissertation might be characterized as “counter-histories” of Rhetoric and Composition's native ethical tradition. As Hawk explains, a counter-history has political significance, helping us excavate that which remains otherwise “excluded” from accepted histories (*A Counter-History* 259). If this methodology is promising, Hawk continues, it is not only because counter-histories open opportunities to reclaim that which has been omitted or remains undiscovered, but because this methodological framework creates new possibilities for scholarship. This, Hawk explains, is the “subversive” potential of a counter-history: “[...] it is important to engage in revisionist history not only as a self-corrective for exclusion but also to employ ‘sub/versive’ historiography to open the way for other possible categorizations” (259).

As a revisionist framework, the methodology of counter-history owes much to the ancient concept of *dissoi logoi*, the practice (as Hawk describes it) of emphasizing the “weaker” argument over the “stronger,” thus opening a space for a purposeful disruption

of dominant historical narratives (*A Counter-History* 10). A counter-history is also a kind of historical antagonism which seeks to leverage seemingly weaker arguments as a necessary corrective to “stronger” (read “dominant”) historical readings: “Once a way of thinking becomes so ingrained that no one bothers to question it, the most effective way to make it show up is to attempt the opposite argument that no one would even consider investigating” (10). Given the increasing prevalence of arguments against Composition, a sentiment captured in calls for a period “post” composition (see David Smit’s *The End of Composition*, Sid Dobrin’s concept of *Postcomposition*, and Gregory Ulmer’s “postpedagogy”), I seek to leverage the methodology of the counter-history for its recuperative and corrective function. Blending Hawk’s approach with a Foucauldian emphasis on genealogy, I work recursively in the chapters that follow, focusing on recent theories before revisiting scholarship of the past few decades. I propose this dialectical framework not as a critical indictment of contemporary ethics, but rather to show that there are important congruities that remain to be excavated in this relation. To this end, each of the following body chapters focuses on identifying potential missed connections between two critical figures, one representative of the ethical turn and the other the native ethical tradition. Building from within shared premises, I explore linkages between theoretical and praxis-based approaches to ethical inquiry.

I draw heavily from Hawk’s suggestion in the afterword to *Counter-History* that counter-histories are particularly valuable, “when there are no models *for action* in the present culture” (260; my emphasis). If contemporary ethical inquiry seems resistant to praxis, it is useful to consider what new paths or opportunities a counter-history might open “for action.” Counter-histories, Hawk reminds us, have the capacity to induce

rupture, opening spaces that seem otherwise foreclosed. This is not simply a call for a return to Rhetoric and Composition's origins in the classroom, nor is it intended as a polemic against contemporary ethics. Rather, I aim to deploy a counter-history of disciplinary ethics in the interest of considering how these connections might newly pigment contemporary ethics. Or, as Hawk puts it: "The answer to the problem is to produce counter-categorizations that incorporate the initial category in order to both move beyond it and to address a present-day historical problem or practice" (272).

If we have generally dismissed critical pedagogy for its associations with cultural studies and for the brand of politics it promotes, this project attempts a restaging or "recategorization" of these concerns by way of ethics. In this sense, critical pedagogy represents one, though not the only, site for recuperating the native tradition; feminist rhetorics, as Barton reminds us, represent another. In the chapters that follow I ask how this body of scholarship might be read differently through an "ethical" as opposed to a strictly "political" lens.<sup>3</sup> The challenge here is not to empty critical pedagogy of its political content, but to shift the frame and consider where critical pedagogy's political commitments espouse a (potentially greater) concern for ethics. Or, putting the problem a bit differently, I am interested in looking for ethical currents that are overcoded "politics" in the critical pedagogy moment, while, at the same time, considering the political and practical possibilities that inhere in contemporary ethics. Like Henry Giroux, I remain committed to the notion that the "political" can be made "pedagogical," and see this connection as important component of my research. As Giroux notes, "[t]he search for a new politics and a new critical language that crosses the critical theory/postmodern divide

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<sup>3</sup> Similar projects have been attempted by Jo-Anne Dillabough (2002), Martha Rabikowska (2009), and Joshua F. Hoops (2011).

must reinvigorate the relationship between democracy, ethics, and political agency by expanding both the meaning of the pedagogical as a political practice while at the same time making the political more pedagogical” (“Critical Pedagogy” 33). Modifying Giroux, we might ask after ethical practices that inhere in pedagogy, and where these connections might help us reimagine the challenges posed by the divide. Though this dissertation keys in on the critical pedagogy movement as one important, and highly controversial, site for recuperating the discipline’s native ethical tradition, I explore others throughout the dissertation, for instance in my examination of ecological models for writing practice in Chapter 4. The point here is not to suggest that we *need* critical pedagogy any more than we need any other specific movement in Rhetoric and Composition, but rather to argue for renewed attention (and revised approaches) to the discipline’s native ethical tradition.

While there are many books that acknowledge ethics as one part of the discipline’s historical landscape (Pemberton; Enos; Porter; Ratcliffe & Rickly), few have focused on ethics as an explicit framework for periodizing this body of scholarship. Methodologically, I build from James Porter’s work in the late 1990s, particularly the second chapter of *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing* (1998), where he argues for the value of recuperating ethics not merely for its heuristic import, but, borrowing from Foucault, as an “archaeological” tool to reexamine enduring disciplinary premises. In a passage that is reminiscent of Burke’s rhetoric of “motives,” Porter explains the broader political and institutional stakes of this “ethical axis”:

The ethical axis pertains in crucial ways to questions about the writer’s relationship with various audiences and about the loci of authority for rhetorical acts, and provides rhetoric with a means of discussing motives—the reasons people communicate in the first place, the driving force of rhetorical activity. (25)

Though, as we will see, there is much to take issue with in Porter's formulation of ethics, particularly as concerns the model of deliberative agency Porter describes in this passage, he makes a persuasive case for recuperating rhetoric's ethical commitments, reminding us of the necessity of thinking rhetoric and ethics not as categorically distinct, but rather mutually informative, concepts. Porter also emphasizes the practical implications of ethical theory, offering the composition classroom as a key synecdoche for revisiting this connection. Showing remarkable foresight, Porter notes that this topic warrants a book all its own; a book that, at least with reference for Porter's body of work, remains unwritten: "To do justice to the theoretical aspects of this discussion, this chapter should probably be a book—and perhaps one day it will be" (24). For my purposes, I'm hopeful that this dissertation offers a potential first step towards an extended treatment of ethics in the field. Borrowing from Porter, I am also hopeful that my emphasis on rethinking ethics through scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s will help ground the often-lofty theoretical language of ethics in classroom practice, thus producing new resources for practitioners in the field.

Shifting the frame from politics to ethics has the benefit not only of attuning us to other currents at work in critical pedagogy scholarship, but, applied as a framework to scholarship more generally in the field, alerting us to a potential alternative taxonomy for understanding our history as practitioners in the field. What I hope to show is that shifting the lens to an ethical framework gives new character to discussions in the field, augmenting our sense of what it means to teach writing. Taking Davis at her suggestion that we "crank up the noise," the chapters that follow ask after the related disciplinary

and ethical challenges that inhere in this charge: What does a history of ethics in Rhetoric and Composition look like? How might the “noise” be coded differently?

It is difficult to be anything but selective in turning back to this tradition, but I make efforts to recover scholarship that represents a wide range of possibilities for ethical programs in Rhetoric and Composition. As a matter of strategy, my research begins with figures that are well established, namely James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell and Marilyn Cooper, before exploring other connections. These scholars are perfect candidates for a counter-history of ethics exactly because they are not typically (or at least primarily) identified as ethicists. Though this connection will require some excavation, I argue that Berlin, Bizzell and Cooper *are* concerned with ethics, and, relevant to my purposes, that rereading these figures with an eye to their rich engagement of ethics will open new possibilities for a critical ethical program in Rhetoric and Composition.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

Building from a dialectical framework, Chapter 2, “Rhetoric’s Other(s): Alterity and Ethics in Davis and Berlin,” offers the first of three taxonomies of the ethical turn, focusing in particular on the topics of radical alterity and rhetorical agency. I give specific attention in this chapter to the influence of Immanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in Davis’ work. Davis has been a vocal critic of Rhetoric and Composition’s native ethical tradition, arguing that we have tended to overemphasize the autonomy of individual actors, thus missing ethics’ preconscious and presymbolic coordinates. For Davis, our experience of ethics is conditioned by a precognitive affectability that preexists language; ethics derives, she explains, not from a decision to be “ethical” but, rather, through our experience of or encounter with radical alterity. In the first section of

Chapter 2, I work to unpack this conceptual framework, focusing in particular on Davis' notion of "inessential solidarity," which is premised in the understanding that community is experienced not through identification but rather an "call to respond" to act that we experience in the company of others (*Inessential Solidarity* 115). In an effort to capture the broader strokes of this trajectory, I explicate connections between Davis' theory of affectability and the work of scholars like Debra Hawhee, Cornelia Wells, and John Muckelbauer.

Thereafter, I make efforts to explore the theoretical challenges inveighed by Davis' refiguration of ethics and ask after disciplinary tensions that inhere in her ethical program. Though Davis is right to suggest that more attention should be given to rhetoric's affective and precognitive dimensions, I am also interested in accounting for how these impulses eventually get picked up and framed by individual agents. More directly, I am interested in examining how this precognitive "surplus" is enacted by agents in community and civic contexts (69). The will to act (ethically) may be informed by a precognitive impulse that is largely outside of individual control, but, in the end, ethical action is a result of conscious and, one hopes, deliberative thought.

In the second section of Chapter 2, I offer Berlin's *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996) as a starting place for thinking about what composition scholarship, as inflected by the rise of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, might offer in terms of a critical pedagogical program for ethics. The form of textual analysis that Berlin promotes, modeled on the work of figures like Mina Shaughnessy, John Trimbur, and Andrea Lunsford, offers useful insights, particularly in its concern for marginalized groups and the rhetorical difficulties that inhere in community. Berlin's concept of "lived" cultures

and his related emphases on citizenship and ethnographic practice provide valuable resources for ethics, challenging us to think about how ethics is enacted in context (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 182). At the end of this section, I revisit Berlin's platform for ideology critique (83-85), which, I argue, has tended to be written off for its associations with a now largely defunct version of Marxist ideology critique. Berlin sees broader applications for ideology critique, beyond the Marxist inflection, using the concept as a heuristic to examine ethical difficulties that inhere in rhetorical exchange. I argue that there are important congruities that can be drawn between Davis and Berlin's respective positions and conclude the chapter by offering a rereading of Berlin that gives explicit attention to Berlin's concern for critical topics like otherness and alterity.

In Chapter 3, "Ethos and Ambience: Recovering Rhetoric and Composition's Native Ethical Tradition," I turn to the topics of ethos and rhetorical attunement, focusing my analysis on Thomas Rickert's theory of rhetorical "ambience" (2013). Like Davis, Rickert argues that disciplinary frameworks for ethics have tended to overlook the influence of nonrational and affective factors on human conduct. And yet, Rickert's work builds from different referents, particularly in his appropriation of a Heideggerian (as opposed to a Levinasian) framework for rhetoric. To this end, I focus on unpacking "ambience," a term he uses to capture emergent and constitutive dimensions of rhetorical experience, exploring connections with an emerging body of scholarship around the topic of rhetorical attunement. Like the first chapter, my interest is in unpacking linkages between Rickert's framework of ambience and the work of other scholars that I argue are representative of this turn (Heard; Ratcliffe). Though Rickert's theory of rhetorical ambience is reminiscent of ecological frameworks in composition studies, he often resists

these associations, largely avoiding pedagogical implications. An important focus of this chapter will be unpacking these missed connections.

In this chapter, I also give attention to Rickert's earlier monograph *Acts of Enjoyment* (2007), and its critique of social-epistemic and cultural studies-based pedagogies that, Rickert argues, operate on a tacit assumption of "false consciousness." His critique of cultural studies builds mainly from two critical contentions: First, he notes, cultural studies largely ignores how people are complicit with the forces—ideology, practices, politics, etc.—that contribute to social problems and injustices. Second, he argues that cultural studies promotes the illusion that student perspectives are conscious formulations that can be easily addressed and modified (5). In this regard, Rickert shares Davis' concern for the ethical difficulties that attend decision-making events. He argues that decisions are made not "in a vacuum," but rather under the influence of greater "socio-symbolic assignments" (*Acts of Enjoyment* 19). Still, Rickert cautions against an ethical program that gives everything over to the "lure of immanence and contingency," which serves as another potential point of differentiation between his and Davis' ethical programs.

For Rickert, cultural studies tends to gloss over the "ongoing" and "compositional" nature of experience, thus missing opportunities to consider how the subject is constituted and reconstituted, moment-to-moment. Here, Rickert distinguishes between a Zizekian and Derridean framework for agency/subjectivity: "From Zizek's perspective, the social is better understood in terms of a fundamental antagonism that prevents any closure, rather than as a Derridean (see Davis) field of signifiers whose incompleteness stems from the signifier's free play in the absence of any organizing,

totalizing center” (45). Although Rickert shares key critical affinities with Davis, their respective theories differ markedly as a product of their philosophical affinities.

In the second half of Chapter 3, I revisit the work of Patricia Bizzell as a potential corollary to Rickert’s related interests in ethos, ambience, and rhetorical attunement. More specifically, I focus on Bizzell’s writings on issues of ethos, a key area of focus in much of her scholarship. This pairing—Rickert and Bizzell—offers an opportunity to consider how our understanding of ethos has mutated over the past thirty years, particularly as inflected by the emerging ethical turn in Rhetoric and Composition. This pairing is also purposeful because of tensions that inhere in Rickert’s characterization of Bizzell’s work. Here, I offer a counter-history of Bizzell’s work in an effort to reclaim her concern for how we cultivate ethos as instructors. Bizzell offers useful resources for a program of rhetorical attunement in the writing classroom, alerting us to real difficulties at play in our interactions with students. This discussion links up nicely with Rickert’s interest in ethos’ kairotic character, and can be productively reframed for present purposes. In a deliberate move towards praxis-based approaches to the topic, I conclude this chapter by offering three ethical programs for the writing classroom; these programs reflect a hybridized approach that reflects both Rickert’s and Bizzell’s approaches.

In Chapter 4, I conclude my inventory of ethical trajectories in Rhetoric and Composition by comparing the work of Sid Dobrin and Marilyn Cooper. The first part of Chapter 4 focuses on Sid Dobrin’s *Postcomposition* (2010), which proposes the need for writing theories that, “evolve free from the limits imposed by the tradition of composition studies research” (159). In *Postcomposition*, Dobrin builds from systems theory, arguing that we are best served by thinking about the agent not as a self-contained entity, but as a

“system.” For Dobrin, this means giving attention to how constructions like “culture” and the “social” have “dominated composition theory approaches and denied the contingencies of writing theory’s potential” (152-153). Though his work shares some clear affinities with Rickert’s notion of rhetorical ambience, particularly in his attention to the contingencies of rhetorical encounter, Dobrin seems to see limited value in concepts like ethos or subjectivity:

[...] the pervasiveness of the writing network/system and the condition of the posthuman are bound with a mediated subject formation to the extent that conditions of subjectivity are of *no* importance beyond an understanding of the surrounding mechanisms that form the collective, mediated subjectivity (Dobrin 154).

Dobrin remains hopeful that pushing against the fields’ “historically imposed prohibition on theory” will lead us out of this blind spot, thus revealing an “ethical imperative” beyond composition studies (3).

A key task of Chapter 4 will be unpacking Dobrin’s model for the study of writing, which he describes as a “writing-without-students position” (15). Dobrin argues that the field of Composition Studies has largely abandoned the study of writing and he attributes this oversight to the field’s “bureaucratic trajectory.” Dobrin makes considerable efforts in *Postcomposition* to differentiate his model of writing from the work of other practitioners in the field, staging a disciplinary injunction that is in some ways more dramatic than those staged by Davis or Rickert. Dobrin’s pursuit of a more complete theory of writing finds him further and further away from the classroom and students.

As a response to Dobrin’s critique, the second half of this chapter stages a return to ecological frameworks for writing, focusing in particular on the work of Marilyn

Cooper. Cooper's work is instructive because, in a parallel to Rickert and Dobrin, she is interested in a model of rhetorical agency that better conceptualizes our situatedness and better addresses conditions of material emergence. That said, Cooper's ecological model gives distinct attention to issues of agency, and shows a special concern for how the agent navigates ecological conditions. Here, I unpack Cooper's interest in a theory of ethics that is at once "emergent" and "enacted," key terms in her analysis. Cooper nicely balances the tensions that inhere in the ethical turn, offering a model of ethical attunement that accounts for the material difficulties of rhetorical interaction. More specifically, I work to excavate Cooper's "neurophenomenological" account of rhetorical agency, which offers a potential starting point for reimagining critical ethical programs available in Rhetoric and Composition. For Cooper, neurophenomenological approaches offer us a framework for conceptualizing our situatedness in the world, an experience she describes as living "in the world" ("Rhetorical Agency as Emergent" 421). Towards the end of the chapter, I revisit Dobrin's concern for the bureaucratic trajectory in Composition Studies, and argue that Cooper's model of rhetorical agency gives us useful resources for interrogating disciplinary and institutional challenges.

Building from the larger argument of the dissertation—that useful resources remain to be recuperated in the discipline's native ethical tradition—Chapter 5 offers a compendium of ethical resources for the teaching of writing. Chapter 5 is divided into three sections that correlate directly to the three topic areas of Chapters Two through Four: agency and alterity, ethos and ambience, and ecology and writing. I work to identify and categorize teaching strategies, assignments, and other related classroom activities existing in the literature, focusing on approaches that reflect an explicit ethical

focus. Second, I make efforts not only to reproduce and describe these ethical programs, but to develop a series of new programs that reflect the joint concerns of the scholars I pair in the previous three chapters.

## CHAPTER 2 - RHETORIC'S OTHER: ALTERITY AND ETHICS IN DAVIS AND BERLIN

Recent theorists of ethics in Rhetoric and Composition have been largely critical of the discipline's native ethical tradition, arguing that it insufficiently captures the precognitive, pre-symbolic, affective, and ontological dimensions of agency that precede deliberative meaning-making. Turning to extra-disciplinary referents in continental philosophy—notably, Immanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy—Diane Davis, Debra Hawhee, and Cornelia Wells, amongst others, have argued for a new “ethico-rhetorical” vocabulary that will move us, in their terms, beyond rhetorical studies’ classically “atomistic” and “hermeneutical” preoccupations (*Inessential Solidarity* 12).<sup>4</sup> If disciplinary approaches have tended to focus too narrowly on speakers and messages, these scholars question what might be gained by turning our attention to other largely imperceptible and not-easily-classifiable factors that precede meaning-making. For Davis, Hawhee, and Wells in particular, the charge to revitalize ethics requires not only that we be more attentive to these pre-symbolic dimensions of communication, but that we consider how our understanding of agency is augmented by our experience of radical alterity. Although there is much that remains to be unpacked here, it may be sufficient to note that this growing body of scholarship raises concerns about the viability of Rhetoric and Composition's native ethical tradition, particularly as these critiques challenge notions of rhetorical agency prevalent in the discipline.

This chapter seeks to interrogate these concerns in their varying character and scope in order to consider the broader stakes of this emerging ethical impasse in Rhetoric and Composition. Below, I examine scholarship on ethics of the past decade, focusing in

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<sup>4</sup> Language borrowed from Diane Davis’ “‘Addicted to Love’; Or, Toward an Inessential Solidarity” (1999) and Debra Hawhee’s “Toward a Bestial Rhetoric” (2011).

particular on Davis' theories regarding the affectability of the subject, before turning back to the discipline's native tradition. To this end, it seems worth alluding provisionally to two key characteristics that I argue are representative not only of Davis' position, but of contemporary approaches to ethics more broadly: First, Davis, like her contemporaries, argues for a version of rhetorical agency that better attends to the excesses—the “surplus of alterity”—that precede symbolic identification, and thus also individual decision and action (*Inessential Solidarity* 37). Related to this point, Davis actively pushes against models of agency that she argues overemphasize the autonomy and agential power of individual actors. Second, on the level of strategy, recent critics of the discipline's ethical tradition work actively to leverage ethics for its disruptive potential. Perhaps the most vocal critic of this tradition, Davis has gone as far as arguing for a “foreign policy” in rhetorical studies (85), a sentiment echoed in varying form by Hawhee and Wells. Increasingly, these theorists lean on extra-disciplinary referents to “crank up,” borrowing Davis' phrasing, what they argue rhetorical approaches to ethics tend to “tune out,” the precognitive and pre-symbolic origins of ethics (“Addicted to Love” 650). This move is signaled by their shared troping of the manifesto-like tagline “toward”: Davis seeks to move us toward “inessential solidarity” (1999; 2010); Hawhee toward “bestial rhetorics” (2011); Wells toward a “fragmentics” (2003).

Taking these appeals seriously, it seems worth considering what the move “toward” other places for ethical inquiry tells us about the place we are departing from. Seizing on the opportunity to reexamine and, perhaps even, reimagine the discipline's native ethical tradition, we might ask what remains in the discipline for a theory of ethics today. Here, I hope to play meaningfully on an interesting, although perhaps purposeful,

slippage in Debra Hawhee's framing of the challenges simultaneously "to" and "for" rhetorical studies in her 2011 article "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric." If Hawhee is often deeply suspicious of the possibilities for ethical inquiry extant in rhetorical studies, thus framing her critique of the discipline as a challenge "to" rhetorical studies, she also seems reticent to let the disciplinary venture fade completely from view. We see this elsewhere in the article when she modifies her description of the challenges "to" rhetorical studies to suggest that these might be considered challenges "for" the field, thus also hinting at possible new frontiers for rhetorical studies moving forward. In favor of this latter and more generative reading, I ask what value there might be in moving back "toward" Rhetoric and Composition's native ethical tradition. So as to avoid misinterpretation, my purpose in pairing these theoretical approaches is not to suggest that this tradition somehow promises more than contemporary approaches, even if I am persuaded that there is still much to be gained from revisiting scholarship around the "social turn" of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, I argue, combining elements of these two traditions might yield different and better results than these traditions produce independently.

More specifically, in the latter half of this chapter, I make an argument for recuperating the work of James Berlin, an important contributor to the discipline's native ethical tradition. While Berlin is better known for his affiliations with cultural studies and for his theories regarding the political, ideological, and civic dimensions of classroom practice, he also has much to say about the challenge of ethics, particularly as ethics inheres in interactions between instructors and students. In this sense, I argue, much can be gained from rereading Berlin with an eye to his interest in ethics. More directly, I work to recuperate Berlin's mid to late-career writings on the theoretical and pedagogical

possibilities of social-epistemic rhetoric. Though there are clearly many angles to work here, I will focus mainly on three related features of (and missed opportunities for) Berlin's social-epistemic program: his commitment to politicizing aesthetics, which we see most directly in his interest in the distinction between rhetoric and poetic approaches to textual analysis (1987; 1996); his emphasis on the political and ideological dimensions of language (1988; 1991; 1993; 1994); and, perhaps most importantly, his determination to put theory to work in the writing classroom (1982; 1996).

More generally, I turn to Berlin at the end of this first chapter because of his interest in questions of disciplinarity. In this sense, this chapter is devoted, as Berlin notes in the introduction to *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996), to exploring the "political uses of English as a discipline" (xxi). Perhaps owing to his Marxist leanings, Berlin invokes the term "worker" as he invites readers to "assert rhetoric's character and unique contribution" (xvii). We may look on other "workers" as "fellow travelers," Berlin concedes, but, he reminds readers, there is practical import to determining rhetoric's "unique" character.<sup>5</sup> As I hope we will see, workers in rhetorical studies offer unique insights on ethics. At the end of this chapter, I explicate these connections, focusing explicitly on pedagogical applications, a key domain of inquiry for practitioners of Rhetoric and Composition. Paraphrasing Berlin, two questions seem pertinent: what work has been done (on ethics)? What work remains?

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<sup>5</sup> The tenor of Berlin's appeals to fellow "travelers" and "workers" is not insignificant. Elsewhere, Berlin distinguishes between "specialists" and teachers of writing, noting that he writes for the latter of the two groups. In *Rhetoric and Reality* (1987), he explains that this distinction has practical and political implications: "I have not, however, written the results of my research exclusively for specialists, and especially not for the kind of specialist who makes *endless distinctions* without considering their significance for the lives of those who must observe them" (18; my emphasis).

One more note on methodology: In organizing this and subsequent chapters, I make efforts to counterpose figures that may seem, at least initially, to represent conflicting (perhaps even irreconcilable) positions. Taking the challenge of alterity seriously—a challenge that Davis addresses in her own account of agency and ethics—I set up this pairing not to leverage difference with the aim of critique, but rather, borrowing from Jeffrey T. Nealon, in the interest of locating “intersections” between seemingly oppositional figures (*Alterity Politics* 17). From this perspective, I argue there is a productive tension to be excavated in the differend between Davis and Berlin. Put another way, we might ask: What does Davis tell us about Berlin? Berlin about Davis? And, how might Berlin’s work enhance our understanding of ethical possibilities for Rhetoric and Composition? As I hope to show, Berlin’s concern for the practical implications (and limitations) of agency usefully complicates Davis’ interest in the rhetorical dimensions of alterity, particularly as manifests in her focus on the affectability of the subject.

### **Inessential Ethics: Diane Davis’ “Inessential Solidarity”**

In a body of work spanning roughly a decade, beginning with her 1999 article “‘Addicted to Love’; Or, Toward an Inessential Solidarity” and culminating in her recent monograph *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* (2010), Diane Davis has called for a theory of ethics that, as the title of these works suggests, deessentializes agency. To this end, Davis challenges rhetoricians to reexamine rhetoric’s “relation with relationality itself,” or, to put the issue somewhat more cogently, Davis questions how the concept of rhetorical agency is complicated by the theoretical challenges of singularity (*Inessential Solidarity* 3); broadly stated, the relation between the “one” (the individual)

and the “many” (the *socius*). Similar to Kenneth Burke, Davis writes at length about rhetoric’s commitments to the topic of “belonging,” a key focus of *Inessential Solidarity* (*IS*). In the beginning pages of *IS*, she explicates Burke’s premise that belonging (i.e. to a family, nation, ethnic group) is determined not so much by a shared “essence”—a genetic fabric that is inherited by members of a select group—but rather by a “symbolic” connection that gets retroactively coded as “essence” (1-2). Where Davis departs from Burke is in her insistence that Burke’s distinction, between community-as-essence and community-as-symbol, doesn’t go quite far enough. The task for rhetoricians post-Burke, she contends, is to consider how agency is *already* precoded and thus pre-determined by an “affectability” that precedes even symbolic identification (2; 19).<sup>6</sup>

Davis’ basic argument, that rhetorical studies move beyond (or before) the symbolic in an effort to grapple with the raw “exposedness” of the agent is premised in her understanding, informed by her readings of Immanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, that the “one” is already a “many.” Like other scholars of rhetoric who have written this past decade about the pre-symbolic dimensions of rhetorical agency (D. Hawhee; C. Wells), related challenges of subjectivity (B. Vivian), and Levinasian ethics in particular (B. Rollins), Davis argues that rhetorical studies’ focus on individual actors risks overlooking the broader social and contextual conditions that prefigure decoding practices and other secondary or latent responses. Davis tends toward polemics in her criticism of rhetorical studies’ agent: “An obscene amount of political, ethical, and scholarly energy has been invested in the ‘individual,’ that indivisible atom, absolutely

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<sup>6</sup> For a useful corollary, see Bradford Vivian’s critique of the Cartesian subject, “The Threshold of the Self” (2000). In sharp contrast to the subject position of Western philosophy, which emphasizes an intrinsic “essence” or “being” that informs the subject’s identity, Vivian tries to reconceptualize subjectivity along the lines of Deleuze’s notion of “becoming.”

detached and for-itself which is situated at the origin” (4). If rhetorical studies has tended to figure the agent as an origin point, leaving the social dynamic of agency for later, Davis questions what might be gained by flipping this organizational schema on its head, thus characterizing rhetorical agency and ethics as latent effects (or perhaps even affects) of socialization.

Davis’ worldview is deeply informed by her commitments to a Levinasian ethical system that sees our exposure to radical alterity as constitutive of ethics. For Davis, following Levinas, ethics is not deliberative, fashioned in the mind of an individual agent, but rather, as Brooke Rollins has argued, a “mode of response to the interruptive call of the other” (544). If contemporary scholars of ethics gravitate toward a Levinasian ethical system, this is largely because Levinas gets us away from (the perceived limitations of) rhetorical studies’ focus on individual agents. These recent critiques have focused on rhetorical hermeneutics, which Davis dismissively terms a “sender-receiver” theory of communication (*IS* 16). If rhetoricians have tended to focus on developing interpretive practices to decode communicative events (what was “said”), Davis questions what might be gained by turning our attention from the act of decoding to the event itself (“the saying”).<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of this maneuver, she admits, is that any attempt to reduce the saying renders it “said.” In her terms, this would involve “attempting to trope that which no figure can contain, to mediate a trace of the immediate, to attend to the unthematizable by necessarily and simultaneously thematizing it” (16). How can we, Davis asks, describe a rhetorical event that prefigures and thus exceeds signification? What do we risk even in our efforts to name that which resists interpretation? Ultimately, she seems to conclude,

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<sup>7</sup> See Davis’ response to Steven Mailloux in *Breaking Up (at) Totality* (2000) and her related exchanges with John Muckelbauer in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 38.3 (2005), 40.2 (2007).

we are bound by a troubling paradox: In our efforts to thematize that which is, in some sense, unthematizable, we end up with an incomplete facsimile; the more we push to decode, the less decipherable the copy becomes.

Although Davis self-identifies as a rhetorician in much of her work, this relationship often seems tenuous. We see this tension in her repeated criticisms of Burke. For Davis, Burke's work is problematic because, she notes early in *IS*, he "avoids the real implications of identification"; implications, she argues, that he "silently sheers off" (26). For Davis, Burke plays to problematic and contradictory distinctions. In some places, she notes, Burke describes identity as an "effect" of identification, thus aligning the impulse to act with the audience; elsewhere, he argues that identification is the "achievement of an already discernable (biological) 'identity'" (22). What troubles Davis is not so much that these two positions are incompatible, but that when Burke is forced to make a decision, he tends to side with the more problematic (for her) of the two: the "originary divisiveness" of the agent. In much of her work, Burke stands in as a kind of theoretical synecdoche for disciplinary approaches to agency and ethics more generally. As she extrapolates, we see that her target is not so much Burke, but a broader disciplinary emphasis on the constitutive roles of identification and agency: "Who is this 'individual,' this human being *per se* who precedes predication and so predates the processes of identification? Who is *there*, there *already*, to experience alienation, to desire sociality?" Who, we might ask another way, is this "rhetorical" agent?

If Davis is suspicious of Burke's motives early in *Inessential Solidarity*, her contentions with Burke come to focus more directly on Rhetoric and Composition's native ethical tradition. We see this in Chapter 3 of *IS*, for instance, where Davis first

introduces the notion of a “foreign policy” in *Rhetoric and Composition* (85). If rhetoric is “complicitous in attempting to keep the ‘other’ from closing in by representing the community to itself as a unified body” (“an essence-in-common”), Davis argues, we must break what she describes elsewhere as Rhetoric’s “addictive cycle” toward “essence” (“Toward an Inessential Solidarity” 635-636). In this charge, Davis seems to have growing support. That is, the underlying antagonisms that drive Davis’ work—namely her call for a foreign policy in rhetorical studies—are representative of more widespread suspicions present in recent scholarship on the topic.

In keeping with the theme of alterity in Davis’ work, similar criticisms have been made, for instance, by Debra Hawhee, who, as I mentioned in the introduction, also tropes the move “toward” other places for rhetorical studies. In “Toward a Bestial Rhetoric,” Hawhee recounts George Kennedy’s visit to the University of Tennessee in 1993, while she was still a master’s student. During his talk, Kennedy argued for a turn to instances of rhetorical exchange that inhere in animal calls (for example, the “hoot” of an owl at night).<sup>8</sup> Hawhee notes that, at the time, this talk generated a “slight panic” in the audience, namely about the troubling direction Kennedy seemed to be heading: “Was our distinguished leader, translator of the Sage himself, going off some deep end and taking the discipline with him?” Nearly twenty years later, Hawhee recounts her realization that Kennedy’s “fleeting dalliance with animality” issued three challenges for rhetorical studies that are of enduring import:

[...] first, it shifts attention from ‘wordy’ language to language rendered with calls, tones, facial expressions, and bodies. Second, it posits rhetoric as energetic intensity, a movement, or an urge to move others (1992, 2-3). And finally, the

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<sup>8</sup> This talk seems to be based on Kennedy’s “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric,” published the previous year in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. It is also worth noting that Kennedy returns to this topic at some length in his monograph *Comparative Rhetoric* (1997).

speaker or author takes a back seat to the audience. Or better said, the speaker is kicked to the curb. (82)

Here, we get a sense of how Hawhee's vision for rhetorical studies overlaps with Davis' push for a version of belonging rooted not in symbolic identification, but in "inessential" solidarity. Hawhee argues, as does Davis, that rhetorical studies is burdened by its focus on language ("wordy language"), which she juxtaposes with Kennedy's interest in "rhetorical energy" or the "urge to move others." In her description of the third "challenge" for rhetorical studies, Hawhee notes that revitalizing Kennedy's rhetorical and ethical mission would involve turning our focus from the speaker to the audience, dramatically redrawing the coordinates of rhetorical studies.

Perhaps owing to its theoretical affinities with Levinas, Kennedy's work has become something of a secondary locus for contemporary scholars of ethics. Cornelia Wells also references Kennedy's article, arguing that rhetorical studies has much to learn from "non-linguistic semiotic places [that] are also our rhetorical home(s)" ("Toward a Pragmatics" 291). Wells, like Hawhee, offers that Kennedy's article is illustrative of this approach, not only because it draws our attention to contextual exigencies, but because it helps us to see that "words are not the only rhetoric" (292). Although Wells' take on "exigence" seems fairly conservative at first, she is also equally dismissive of Rhetoric's hermeneutical disposition. Exigence, she argues, disrupts our capacity to code and decode the meaning of communicative events, at least with any degree of precision: "for Kennedy a rhetorical event *begins* as the originator's perceived need or 'exigence,' the event may proceed or 'end' otherwise, being ultimately less a matter of the rhetor's *intention* than of the receiver's cognition, for 'the meaning' is the interpretation given to the communication by another animal" (293). Here, Wells explains the difficulty of an

objective experience that refuses to register or, in her terms, “play out” verbally: “Words will never work in the job of corresponding to ‘objective’ being. Words and signifiers, being rhetorical, will always *play* if never fully play out.” Although there are some subtle and some more dramatic differences between their positions, Wells, like Davis and Hawhee, suggests that this tension—between what we might provisionally describe as “what is” and “what was”—creates serious challenges for rhetorical frameworks of agency, particularly those predicated on hermeneutics. Ultimately, she ends in much the same place as Davis and Hawhee: “If then the energy required to ‘code’ and ‘decode’ messages is always open to mischarge or mis(and back)fire or otherwise miss the mark, why are we talking or rhetoricizing or (anti)philosophizing or profess(ionaliz)ing in the first place?”

Stepping back for a moment, we might begin to question what reading Wells, Hawhee and Davis together reveals about contemporary efforts to revitalize ethics in Rhetoric and Composition, particularly those approaches that play up rhetoric’s non-hermeneutical dimensions: First, it seems worth nothing that Davis et al.’s criticisms of rhetorical hermeneutics seem well intentioned. They argue, persuasively, that our focus on individual agents and practices of interpretation risks us missing the complexity of agency and ethics. In response, they seek to develop an alternative theory of rhetorical agency that recognizes agency as inhering not, or at least not primarily, in the volitional capacities of the individual, but rather, in the radical contingencies of context. That is, contemporary theories of ethics have tended “toward” other places where we might, I imagine Davis et al. hope, better locate, identify, and thus attune ourselves to ethics. Second, in these related works, ethics is conceptualized as a “call to respond” that

precedes symbolic identification, issuing forth from the Other: Davis refers often to the “call of the Other” and Hawhee the “rhetorical energy” of the audience. In the postscript to *IS*, aptly titled “P.S. on Humanism,” Davis notes, borrowing from Geoffrey Bennington, that her aim is to capture how “‘absolutely singular configurations’ become ‘events.’” Here, similar to Levinas, Davis expresses concern that rhetorical and humanist orientations overlook some humans for others, and, perhaps more problematically, humans for other Others (e.g. animals).

Third, and most relevant to the project at hand, contemporary accounts of ethics seek not only to theorize the disruptive potential of ethics, but to bring this potential to bear on rhetorical studies writ large. Put another way, recent scholarship has emphasized the “radical” and transformative potential of ethics. In an earlier article, “Toward an Inessential Solidarity” (1999), Davis notes that this radical potential might inhere in something like Victor Vitanza’s third sophistic rhetoric:<sup>9</sup>

Operating as counter-(tr)opiate to squeeze, third sophistic rhetorics would meet the desire for collective action with rigorous *hesitation*, the craving for reasonable exchange with a celebration of what remains *unspeakable*, and the hope for communion with an affinity for *radical dispersion*. *Interrupting and countering, reopening and deterritorializing*, these rhetorics [of love] would *crank up precisely what any figuration must tune out—the communication of community*. (650)

To clarify, we might say the impasse of contemporary ethical inquiry is a direct product of the disruptions it seeks to engender. This means, then, acknowledging at least two impasses: On one hand, the ethical impasse describes an experience of ethics in context, one that Davis et al. seek to distill for us. As agents, we are confronted by alterity, thus causing disruption. Davis et al. argue that this experience of disruption is constitutive of

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<sup>9</sup> Davis also takes this topic up at length in *Breaking Up (at) Totality* (2000). See in particular the first chapter, “Preambulatory Emissions.”

ethics; we feel prompted to respond as a result of this disruption, to attend to alterity. On the other hand, the ethical impasse represents a kind of political gesture, as captured in Vitanza's work; we are encouraged to meet action with "hesitation." This political gesture is different from say the politics of the critical pedagogy movement, but it remains a conscious and deliberate response, motivated by an interest in change. The real difficulty of navigating this impasse, which brings us to a third impasse, is determining how the political distillation of ethics in Rhetoric and Composition seeks to intervene on our experience of radical alterity; how does Vitanza's, or for that matter Davis', position actualize this impasse? How does the impasse as a kind of natural condition of contextual engagement get leveraged as a political challenge? Where does disruption become agency?

Taking Davis' appeals seriously, it seems worth considering what the move toward other places for ethical inquiry tells us, as I noted in the introduction, about the place we are departing from. In some ways, recent scholarship sets up an antagonism between ethics and rhetoric that is difficult to reconcile. Though Davis and others define ethics using familiar rhetorical devices, invoking concepts that have a long lineage in rhetorical theory (e.g. agency, audience, exigence), they ultimately also bring rhetoric to a kind of impasse. This impasse owes much, again, to its affiliations with Levinas, who, as Arnett et al. nicely summarize in a relatively recent article, "The Rhetorical Turn to Otherness" (2007), was himself deeply suspicious of rhetoric:

[Levinas] was hostile to rhetoric; he considered it a 'telling' discipline disrespectful of Otherness. Second, Levinas abandoned the philosophy of *humanism* as simply not human enough. Life begins for self and Other before we are here. What makes us human is what we meet and what we find ourselves situated within; we are responders to, not controllers of, life. Levinas rejected

rhetoric and humanism as phenomenologically inaccurate portrayals of human life.<sup>10</sup>

What I mean to suggest, and I am sure that Davis and the other scholars I discuss above would agree, is that contemporary efforts to theorize ethics create considerable roadblocks for practitioners of rhetoric, leading to an impasse that Eric Detweiller has described fittingly as “(h)alterity.”<sup>11</sup> Unable to act without assimilating the Other, or to practice without assuming a kind of agential fixity, it can seem that we are left with few conceivable options for rhetorical practice today.

For his part, Jeffrey Nealon describes this challenge as a problem facing Levinasian ethics more broadly. Levinas, he argues, leaves us in an “odd position”: “there are no preexisting ethical grammars by which I might respond adequately to the other, and yet I must respond nevertheless” (*Alterity Politics* 35). Though Nealon is clearly persuaded by parts of Levinas’ theory of ethics, particularly his efforts to tangle with the presymbolic excesses of “finitude” that call us to respond, Nealon is also ultimately committed to balancing this perspective by focusing on the performative dimensions of ethics and subjectivity. In an effort to work through this “odd position,” I turn in the following section to James Berlin, who, I argue, persuasively engages the practical implications of ethics from a distinctly rhetorical (and disciplinary) perspective, opening possibilities to think the challenge of ethics and alterity anew.

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<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Davis has acknowledged Levinas’ hostility toward rhetoric. See “Addressing Alterity: Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Nonappropriative Relation” (2005), bottom of page 193.

<sup>11</sup> See “An Encounter With Pedagogical (H)alterity” (2014). It is worth noting that Detweiller, like Davis, seems persuaded by the productively disruptive possibilities of this impasse.

### James Berlin's Social-Epistemic Rhetoric, Twenty Years Later

In what follows, I work to recuperate James Berlin's mid to late-career meditations on social-epistemic rhetoric as a first step in revitalizing rhetorical studies' native ethical tradition. I begin with Berlin (the first of three key figures I discuss in this dissertation) because he occupies a productively ambivalent place in histories of the field. On one hand, Berlin is often credited for his rich periodizations of Composition studies (Enos; Flynn; Stewart),<sup>12</sup> his reclaiming of rhetoric's civic and political dimensions (Miller; Trimbur; Gorzelsky), and his efforts to move composition pedagogy beyond the current-traditional paradigm (Lockhart). On the other hand, Berlin, like other theorists of the "social turn" in Composition, is often also criticized for his overly optimistic belief in the power of critical pedagogy to reform student subjectivity (Sanchez; Miller; Trimbur; Quandahl). More directly, Berlin's critics have questioned the efficacy of his social-epistemic program, its focus on politicizing the classroom, and his interest in student-ideology formation.<sup>13</sup> It is worth considering these critiques briefly before moving on.

Writing shortly after Berlin's death, Susan Miller identifies similar challenges for Berlin's social-epistemic program. In his effort to bring politics to bear on the classroom, Miller expresses concern that Berlin simply reinforces the same problematic hierarchies and power dynamics that he seeks to absolve. Miller points us directly to Berlin's late

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that some scholars have been critical of Berlin's methods. Julie Kearney, for instance, calls into question Berlin's overview of WWII era communications programs (*Rhetoric Review* 28.2). Similarly, Robin Varnum argues that Berlin simply "shrugs off" the early decades of the twentieth century on his way to defining his social epistemic program (1992). More notably, Victor Vitanza has argued that Berlin relies too handily on secondary sources, as in the case of his readings of Therborn in place of Marx, and other secondary sources in place of Kant. As a counter-critique, which I take up more substantively below, it is worth noting that Berlin's appropriation of Therborn as a secondary source is purposeful.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce McComiskey summarizes these concerns nicely in "Ideology and Critique in Composition Studies" (2002), noting that Berlin is widely criticized for his seemingly unreflective appropriation of Marxist-ideology critique as a tool for social change. Although McComiskey goes on to argue that such criticisms ignore the complexity of Berlin's writing on the topic, McComiskey nicely summarizes Composition's emerging position against Berlin and the now defunct "social turn" in Composition Studies.

career work, particularly *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996), summarizing his position before offering her own critique: “Jim reasons here that when we teach differentially valued interpretations, we must focus both on letting students in on how institutions form subjects who always doubt themselves, and on choosing the content of courses in light of tremendous social responsibility” (497-498). Although Miller concedes that this is an admirable premise, she expresses some reservations about the pedagogical implications of this enterprise. Notably, Miller argues that practitioners of social-epistemic rhetoric run the risk of assuming and thereby reinforcing problematic power dynamics. She continues: “It is not necessarily positive that the teacherly subject position needed to accomplish this social work must simulate parents and thereby infantilize students.” More generally, Miller argues that approaches like Berlin’s perpetuate patriarchal power dynamics, often to the detriment of students.

This critique stuck with Berlin for much of his career. Ellen Quandahl raises the same central objection in response to Berlin’s oft-referenced essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” (1988). Like Miller, Quandahl seems to agree with the general aim(s) of Berlin’s social-epistemic program, but contends that he inadequately addresses how the ideologies he seeks to engender are modified or otherwise subverted by larger institutional, departmental and programmatic pressures (344). Quandahl points out that Berlin is characteristically uncritical in his use of descriptors like “libertory,” “freedom,” and “empowering” to describe possibilities for the writing classroom. For Quandahl, as for other scholars, Berlin plays to a troubling paradox: “It is disturbing that Berlin, who reiterates that what seems valuable and inevitable is imbricated in power relations, sees social-epistemic rhetoric as *inevitably* democratizing or safer from

appropriation than any other discourse.” Here, as in Miller’s commentary, Quandahl suggests that Berlin is unwilling to address the broader political implications of his interest in student-ideology critique.

In the spirit of thoroughness, it seems useful to mention one additional commentary on Berlin’s work that nicely captures the tenor of Berlin’s reception in the field. Of the many scholars that have commented on Berlin’s work posthumously, John Trimbur most succinctly characterizes the institutional challenges facing Berlin’s social-epistemic program and his emphasis on the value of training students to be citizens.

Trimbur warns:

As the radical force of citizenship is institutionalized [...] it calls up its opposite—the alien, women, children, the criminal, the unpropertied, the illiterate, the insane, the lumpen, the undocumented. Since the allegiance of the citizen is to the people and the nation, loyalty begins and ends with the geography of national borders, enforcing the difference between naturalized citizens and illegal immigrants. Citizenship, in other words, is perpetually in danger of a First Worldist orientation, where the key question is *territorial* and the defense of *national integrity*. (“Berlin’s Citizen” 502; my emphasis)

Trimbur credits Berlin with helping compositionists explore the connection between work and citizenship—Berlin, he notes, alerts us, importantly, to the “world of work”—but warns that Berlin’s interest in citizenship often borders on nationalism and, as the title of Trimbur’s article suggests, “Berlin’s Citizen and First World Rhetoric,” a “first world”-ist orientation. The aim of getting students to be better citizens is suspect, Trimbur argues, because it risks producing new borders as it works to ameliorate others. If Miller and Quandahl alert us to the challenges that face our efforts to politicize the classroom, Trimbur turns our attention to the end product; what do we risk in reproducing mechanisms that not only perpetuate pre-existing boundaries or borders, but inscribe new borders all together?

To summarize, these secondary readings nicely capture the position emerging against Berlin in Composition studies as early as the late 1980s. Though it seems there is wide agreement that Berlin has offered important insights regarding the political potential of the classroom, Berlin is often also characterized (and dismissed) as uncritical, even naive, in his appeals to ideological and civic possibilities for students. Although Miller, Quandahl, and Trimbur represent relatively early responses to Berlin's work, writing just before and shortly after his death, our feelings toward Berlin have changed relatively little in the past twenty years. With few exceptions, secondary readings of Berlin's work have fixated on Berlin's tact as a political reformist. In this sense, as Bruce McComiskey has argued (2007), Berlin has effectively been pigeonholed by many readers. McComiskey reminds us that we need to read Berlin more carefully, raising two objections that are highly relevant: First, he argues that, in Berlin's work, ideology represents more than "false consciousness." Responding directly to Raul Sanchez's earlier exposition of Berlin's ideological platform,<sup>14</sup> McComiskey notes that despite his social-epistemic leanings, Berlin gives careful consideration to competing ideological platforms in Composition studies: "[Berlin] does not use social-epistemic rhetoric as an arhetorical base-camp from which to critique the false ideologies of cognitivism and expressivism" (169). He continues: "while one cannot deny that Berlin does slip into representations of ideology as false consciousness from time to time, there are *other places* in Berlin where he intentionally avoids this view" (my emphasis). Second, even when Berlin emphasizes the need to critique dominant ideologies, he is careful not to exclude alternative ideological assumptions. Here, McComiskey argues that we more

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<sup>14</sup> See "Composition's Ideology Apparatus: A Critique" (2001).

carefully attend the complexity of Berlin's writings on ideology, while also emphasizing, in a telling turn of phrase, that "critique is not the whole story [for Berlin]."

To be fair, Miller, Trimbur and others are not off base in their collective concern that Berlin's vision for ideology critique runs many risks in its implicit idealism. Throughout *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, for instance, Berlin appeals to a problematic democratic ideal, arguing that the task for instructors is to engage students in practices that might help to condition a critical citizenry. Berlin, following Henry Giroux, sees this as the "special province" of English, a field defined by its commitments, at least as far as Berlin is concerned, to interrogating the political, cultural, and institutional challenges of social life. In sharp contrast to literary approaches, which he often characterizes as promoting "disinterested" reading and an aesthetic ideal, Berlin argues that we should work to have students engage more meaningfully with texts in a capacity that will not only open them to their political experiences, but give them tools to critique power. If our engagement with politics has tended to be defined by spectacular displays that have obscured the connection between the realms of "truth" and "action," what we might define as the "aestheticization of politics," Berlin questions what might be gained by instilling in students a sense of how rhetoric can empower them. In pursuit of this rhetorical and democratic ideal—what I refer to here as the "politicization of aesthetics"—Berlin is characteristically sentimental, romantic, and nationalistic. We see this idealism in Berlin's appeals to democracy and the democratic classroom, a topic that Donna Strickland takes up handily in her critique "Worrying Democracy" (1999); his suggestion, in the description of an example class curricula, that students study the American Revolution (see Chapter 7 in *R, P, & C*, pages 140-156); and, in his appeals to

the transformative potential of poetry, particularly with reference to the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth (155).

Berlin, I argue, is aware of these potential pitfalls. Responding to the charge that his ideological program overemphasizes the agency of individual actors, Berlin argues that we can premise ideological platforms in individual interpretive acts without discounting the varying influence and power of these interpretive acts or ignoring the broader social circumstances that condition our responses: “While truth *is* interpretive, it does not derive from any single individual. Truth is sanctioned and validated by a discourse community” (“James Berlin Responds” 85; my emphasis). Here, as in other places, Berlin seems willing to acknowledge that the language he uses to describe social-epistemic rhetoric runs the risk of essentializing ideology. In this sense, Berlin demonstrates that he is keenly aware of the challenges for social-epistemic rhetoric moving forward.

In the spirit of reading Berlin more generously and granting, as McComiskey notes, that there are “other places” that remain to be excavated in Berlin’s extensive catalogue, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a careful rereading of Berlin’s mid to late-career writings on social epistemic rhetoric. Although I will take up the issue of ideology directly in various places below—ideology is unavoidable in Berlin’s work—Berlin’s ideological interests and affiliations are perhaps less relevant here than his more implicit (and I argue, guiding) interest in ethics. Toward other places and a fuller picture of Berlin’s contributions to a discourse of ethics in the discipline, I work to excavate some largely neglected passages in Berlin’s writings on social-epistemic rhetoric. Building on the analysis that I’ve offered above, I will continue to focus on three related

points: Berlin's push to politicize aesthetics; his interest in the political, ideological, and civic dimensions of language; and, finally, his efforts to put theory to practice in the writing classroom.

### **Aesthetics, Ideology, and Ethics in Berlin**

I begin my more careful analysis of several related passages in Berlin's work much the same way that Berlin begins both of his latter monographs (*Rhetoric and Reality*; *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*), by taking up his interest in politicizing aesthetics and his related concern for the relationship between rhetoric and poetic approaches to textual analysis in English studies. Berlin's interest in the distinction between rhetoric and poetic approaches provides a useful heuristic for tracking contemporary critiques of the discipline's native ethical tradition. Although Berlin was clearly writing under different professional circumstances and about very specific periods in the history of English studies, Berlin's rhetoric/poetic dialectic provides a useful roadmap by which we can track the discipline's shifting ethical landscape from the late-1980s to the present. Berlin himself seems keenly aware of the prescriptive capacity of this pairing, alluding in various places to the challenges that lie ahead for rhetoric. We see this, for instance, in his insistence that practitioners of rhetoric be more attentive to the way that our "loyalties" shape canon formation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Methodologically, I borrow here from Berlin's *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*. In Chapter 6, Berlin explains that a central motivating force for the latter half of the book is marrying Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy with his concern for the theoretical challenges of postmodernism. Although he shares Freire's preoccupation with teaching reading and writing, Berlin acknowledges that much will have to be "emended" in Freire to cohere with postmodernism. Similarly, we might say that I seek to emend Berlin along the coordinates of contemporary ethical inquiry. What might be gained from reading Berlin across Davis' post-hermeneutic ethical framework?

If poetic approaches tend, as Berlin reminds us, to promote disinterested reading practices and an *aesthetic* ideal that perpetuates social inequity, Berlin emphasizes that our “loyalty” as rhetoricians should be to practical applications. Speaking to what teachers must do, Berlin keys in on reading and writing practices specifically: “[our] most demanding, engaging, and creative acts, then, are the encouraging of complex reading and writing strategies and practices.” He continues:

As we have seen, students must learn the signifying practices of text production—academic discourse, political discourse, poetic discourse, scientific discourse, media discourse—as well as the signifying practices of text reception. And both must be considered in their historical and ideological context. Writing or reading the academic essay, for example, is not an innocent act (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 120)

In terms of practical application, Berlin emphasizes that rhetorical approaches ground politics in reading and writing practices.

On one level, Berlin’s insistence that rhetoric is already always political, grounded as it is in reading and writing practices that are also highly political, is fairly intuitive. In contrast to poetic approaches, particularly those prevalent in Literary studies, Berlin emphasizes that rhetoric concern itself not only with the politics of texts, but with giving students opportunities to respond politically. But, reading Berlin’s rhetoric/poetic dialectic against the disciplinary backdrop of a broader concern for the challenge of ethics, we get a different picture of the challenges that inhere in ethics’ newly rhetorical, and increasingly poetic, coordinates. Where Berlin gets interesting today is not so much in his insistence that the classroom be politicized, or even his advocating for a particular ideological position/approach. Rather, Berlin is interesting because he calls us to consider the province of rhetoric as it relates to the challenge of ethics. Although Berlin is clearly concerned for how politics takes place or gets picked up in the classroom, he is more

primarily concerned, I argue, with the way we conceptualize responsibility. For Berlin, epistemic rhetoric provides not just a set of tools for politicizing the classroom, but a kind of taxonomy by which we can track the will to politicize and its implicit ethical impulse. Here, I argue not so much for the purity of Berlin's teaching program, for instance at Purdue—which he admits has substantial shortcomings—but rather for the urgency with which he takes up the competing political and ethical paradigms offered by poetic and rhetorical approaches.

Strangely enough, secondary readings often miss Berlin's primary concern for rhetoric. Some, like Raul Sanchez, have even gone as far as arguing that Berlin's position, couched as it is in ideology critique, is "arhetorical" (see "Composition's Ideology Apparatus"). Though many have written about Berlin's interest in ideology, particularly in response to his 1988 *College English* article "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," we've tended to overlook the other constituent part in this pairing: rhetoric. In his efforts to define the relation between rhetoric and ideology, Berlin outlines the economic, social, and political stakes of rhetorical practice. For Berlin, rhetoric is defined by its "discursive structure," meaning that rhetoric is specifically concerned, as he notes later, with "language practices" (477-478). Heavily influenced by Goran Therborn's Marxist position on ideology, Berlin insists that ideology, married with rhetoric, provides a "language to define the subject (the self), other subjects, the material world, and the relation of all of these to each other" (479). If secondary accounts of Berlin's work have tended to focus on the political dimensions of Berlin's ideological disposition, it seems useful to consider how reframing his argument reshapes the stakes of the debate. Namely, I am interested, as I note elsewhere, in rereading Berlin's concern

for “ideology” as a concern for “discourse” or language (per the title of this section), and, correspondingly, shifting the emphasis from political *practice* to the *process* of interpellation that Berlin describes later in this passage. As a counter-example to Davis’ ethical system, this emphasis on process might give us a clearer sense of how to respond to the challenges raised by contemporary ethics, particularly as inflected by Levinas.

In a relatively short passage on the third page of this same article—one of the standout passages of Berlin’s extensive catalogue of publications—Berlin unpacks Therborn’s position, explaining that he uses ideology to address three related questions: “What exists? What is good? What is possible?” The first, epistemological point seems easy enough. Berlin quotes from Therborn, who argues that ideology helps us to determine, “who we are, what the world is, what nature, society, men and women are like. In this way we acquire a sense of identity, becoming conscious of what is real and true; the visibility of the world is thereby structured by the distribution of spotlights, shadows, and darkness.” If this perspective on (and purpose for) ideology is familiar, it is in part because this is how Berlin’s social-epistemic pedagogical program has been characterized (and criticized) by readers. That is, Berlin’s critics contend he places problematic emphasis on ideological critique as a tool for transformation. As we saw above, critics tend to focus on this first component of Berlin’s ideological position without considering the broader scope of Berlin’s argument as concerns the topic of ethics.

Turning back to this same passage, we might point to Berlin’s comments just after the Therborn quote, where Berlin’s interest in the intersection of rhetoric and ideology gets really interesting. Here, Berlin talks about ideology as less of a political position (or

the act of discovering that position) than a rhetorical disposition. Marrying Therborn and Althusser, Berlin imagines ideology as a process of interpellation: “Ideology thus interpellates the subject in a manner that determines what is real and what is illusory, and, most important, what is experienced and what remains outside the field of phenomenological experience, regardless of its actual material existence” (479). As a phenomenology, Berlin insists that ideology is a process that calls the subject, and this is where we begin to see potential intersections between Berlin and Davis’ ethical systems. So as not to let the ethical charge of this statement slip from the reader’s attention, he makes the connection more explicit: “Ideology also provides the subject with standards for making ethical and aesthetic decisions.” Again, quoting from Therborn, Berlin goes on to explain ethics and aesthetics briefly as, “what is good, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites.” Here, we see the tension of Berlin’s position, committed as he is to pairing seemingly disparate concepts: ideology and ethics; ethics and aesthetics.

This short passage offers critical insights relating to Berlin’s so-called platform of “ideology critique.” Sure, Berlin ultimately seems to land back on the problem of power, noting that interpellation decides “who has power and [determines] what power can be expected to achieve,” but, as McComiskey has argued, there’s more to Berlin’s interest in ideology than we have credited. If Berlin’s appropriation of ideology from Marxist circles seems heavy-handed, this may in part be because we’ve largely failed to consider the broader applications that Berlin sees for this term. Again, it seems useful to track this other current in Berlin’s work (or what Davis might call an “Other” current); his interest not only in ethics, but his efforts to tie ideology, discourse, ethics, and a concern for

process together. Returning to Berlin's definition of rhetoric, he explains that the special province of rhetoric, its "unique character," involves taking up this linguistic and "dialectical" dimension of politics and ethics. As he explains:

Ideology also, as we have seen, always includes conceptions of how power should—again, in the nature of things—be distributed in society. Power here means political force but covers as well *social forces in everyday contacts*. Power is an intrinsic part of ideology, defined and reinforced by it, determining, once again, who can act and what can be accomplished. These power relationships, furthermore, are inscribed in the discursive practices of daily experience—in the ways we use language and are used (interpellated) by it in ordinary parlance. (479; my emphasis)

Although Berlin is primarily concerned for how ideology structures the way we experience power, building on the passage before, he also seems to recognize other functions for ideology critique. Ideology is also, he notes, a "social force" in everyday life; in our "contacts." In this sense, ideology is not so much a fixed construct, fashioned in the mind of an individual, but a constitutive pulling of the subject.

Even if Berlin is somewhat ambiguous about this social force and its connection to politics, ethics, and discourse, his take on language, borrowing from Althusser, reminds us of the radical import of a rhetorical theory of ethics, particularly as it both resonates with and is counterposed to Davis' theory of affectability. More specifically, it seems useful to consider how Davis' Levinasian ethical system lines up with the Berlinian-Althusserian model. In some ways, these approaches seem not to be very different. Both identify a social coordinate or impetus for ethics outside of the individual. Both approaches are concerned for the way that ethics *happens*, in context, as a product of (radical) contingency. For Davis, ethics emanates forth as a "call to respond." For Berlin, ethics is, like rhetoric, dialectical. Strangely enough though, if Berlin's position seems more progressive or radical than that of Davis, it might be because Berlin gives us

some useful coordinates by which to track ethics as it happens. Although it may be true that ethics emanates from radical alterity in ways that are largely difficult to tie down with any degree of determinacy, I am persuaded by Berlin's argument that rhetoric offers useful concepts for tracking how the signal plays out.

### **Into the Classroom: Teaching (to) Ethical Dispositions?**

As I read Berlin, I can't help being persuaded by his earnest efforts to make sense of difficult circumstances. In this sense, Berlin the pragmatist provides welcome relief in the face of the various impasses contemporary ethics has brought us to. Though this move may seem patently unfair to Davis (and other contemporary scholars of ethics), particularly when we consider that her work is not concerned, at least not directly, with classroom practice, I am interested in using the classroom as a kind of testing ground for Berlin's ethical system. Berlin alerts us usefully to the intersections between, and related limitations of, ideology and ontology, offering insights that I believe contemporary theorists (and practitioners) of ethics will find interesting. In contrast to Davis' emphasis on ethics' ontological origins, a position that is in some sense transhistorical, Berlin remains committed to a version of historical materialism that might have import today. More specifically, Berlin sees rhetoric as providing tools for identifying—with the aim of intervening on—social, institutional and political forces that act on individuals and groups; forces that vary with time and context. Although I will take up the pedagogical implications of the discipline's native ethical tradition, and Berlin's work in particular, more directly in the next chapter, it seems worth alluding provisionally to two key moments in Berlin's writings on social-epistemic rhetoric that have continuing import for a pedagogy of ethics today: Though Berlin lays out his educational program in great

detail at the end of *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, I would actually like to turn back to an earlier chapter (“Postmodernism in the Academy”), where he responds directly to the challenges wrought by the “postmodern turn.” Berlin notes the need for “provisional” and “contingent” metanarratives that help us not only to make sense of past events, but challenges we will encounter in the future. Here, Berlin extols the benefits of historical materialism:

While history may be marked by no inherent plan or progression, it is the product of complex interactions of disparate groups, social institutions, ideologies, technological conditions, and modes of production. To abandon the attempt to make sense of these forces in the unfolding of history is to risk being victimized by them (78).

Building on the work of Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, and Frederic Jameson, Berlin explains that these narratives operate as “cognitive maps” that (a) allow us to make sense of how we are imbricated in larger social groups and (b) provide a language and tools for acting in response to forces that are largely beyond our control. Yet, Berlin carefully notes, these cognitive maps are not prescriptive. Rather, our cognitive maps function as heuristics concerned with invention, focused on producing connections “while never determining in advance exactly what those connections will be” (79). In this sense, Berlin actually helps us to conceptualize the agential experience of ethics without, as some of his critics have argued, slipping into a vision of agency that is prescriptive or all-encompassing.

Our task as instructors, Berlin goes on to explain in more detail in the next chapter, is to attend to this process of naming and trying to make sense of experience. Where many critics of Berlin’s position seem to get hung up—not without reason—are those moments where Berlin falls into the familiar rhythm of naming that experience

himself. More primary to Berlin's work and to his understanding of classroom pedagogy though, is the sense that this practice of naming should not only be a focus of the classroom, but should be foregrounded. Davis may be right that the Other can never truly be assimilated without being corrupted, but, Berlin reminds us, we are always already assimilating anyways; further, Berlin shows us, we are constantly being assimilated ourselves, pulled and interpellated by forces largely outside of our control. If the challenge, oversimplifying, is to name or be named, Berlin argues that we must alert students to the distinctly rhetorical and ethical stakes of this process of interpellation.

Here, Berlin himself harbors suspicions about rhetoric, pointing us to the challenge of audience that inheres in discourse:

[...] social-epistemic rhetoric is in accord with this perspective, pointing out that rhetoric was invented *not because people wanted to express themselves more accurately and clearly, but because they wanted to make their positions prevail in the conflicts of politics*. In other words, persuasion in the play for power is at the center of this rhetoric, and studying the operation of signifying practices within their economic and political frames is the work it undertakes. (*R, P, and C* 89; my emphasis)

Interestingly, from this perspective, we can read Berlin's insistence on questions of audience not so much as a concern for how an individual rhetor communicates his or herself effectively, which is typically how Berlin is read, but rather, as a concern for the challenge of ethics that inheres in contextual exigencies: What would it mean to consider the audience an Other? The Other an audience? Here, Berlin finds Burke purposeful in ways that Davis does not. Referencing Burke's "terministic screen," Berlin tries to account for our interactions with (an)other that perceives us in a way that we cannot fully predict, anticipate or understand. I quote from this passage at some length because it seems particularly relevant:

[Language] comes between the perceiver and the perceived in a way that shapes the interpretation. All language use is thus inherently interpretive. All texts involve invention, the process of meaning formation. Note, however, that this structuring of experience is never undertaken by a unified, coherent, and sovereign subject who can transcend language. No single person is in control of language. Language is a social construction that shapes us as much as we shape it. In other words, language is a product of social relations and so is ineluctably involved in power and politics. (92)

What we begin to get a sense of is how language, for Berlin, occupies a space of Otherness. This is a profound insight, and one that it seems Davis in some ways shares. Or, as Davis puts the problem in the introduction to *Inessential Solidarity* (qua Jean-Luc Nancy), writing can function as a “saying” that interrupts language’s “awesome powers of representation,” thus effectively “shattering” community even as we touch its potentiality.

Though it is difficult to conceive of a pedagogical approach that adequately captures (or sufficiently prepares students for) alterity, I would like to point briefly to a second moment in Berlin’s work that is highly instructive given our purpose(s). In search of a pedagogy that shows concern for the related vicissitudes of ethics, alterity, and agency, we might look to Chapter 7 (“Into the Classroom”) of *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, where Berlin points up the value of student analysis in the writing classroom. In keeping with his ideological platform, discussed at length above, Berlin asks students to analyze two films, a process that involves identifying binary oppositions that each film works to resolve through its narrative structure. As a classroom activity, this approach has been a familiar feature of disciplinary practice. Most basically, as Berlin notes, textual analysis seeks to engage students in a practice of decoding that might reveal to them an underlying structure (or “code”) by which the text functions. If we stop at this premise, as many have, Berlin could be read as trying to incite a kind of politics in

students; to engage students in practices that will reveal to them the forces that restrict, suppress, or otherwise wield influence on them, in the hopes that they can react and potentially even effect change. Perhaps this is part of Berlin's muster, but, as he also makes clear, this is not the real difficulty of analysis. As Berlin explains in a particularly perceptive moment, students experience little difficulty trying to unearth these binaries; that is, Berlin notes, students are already well prepared to analyze and understand, at least with some degree of certitude, how culture intervenes on them. Rather, Berlin argues, analysis is interesting (and works best) when students, "discover that these binaries [that they have identified] are unstable and frequently contradictory" (135).

Explaining the purpose of this ideologically-oriented analysis in more detail a page later, Berlin continues:

The ideological reading of the narrative strategies of the two films, then, is designed to make students suspicious of easy resolutions of complex social, economic, and political problems. Texts should be understood in terms of what they omit as well as what they include, and they should be situated within their historical context. In a broader sense, motivating students to become critical readers and writers of film and television is meant to equip them to make more intelligent decisions in their public and private experience, particularly since they are encouraged to see the inescapable relation of the personal and the political. (137)

What we see emerging here, via Berlin's interest in the student's repeated encounter with analysis (and with a text), a kind of agential experiential phenomenon, is his concern not so much for engendering *a* political disposition, but rather, for a kind of *dispositional emergence* that occurs as students read and write. This disposition, I argue, is ethically attuned. Berlin notes that analysis provides opportunities for students to learn to be more "intelligent," and, though we can assume him to mean intelligence in the most direct of senses, perhaps there is also an opportunity to read this intelligence as an awareness or

receptiveness; a reading which is backed up by the final line: “they are encouraged *to see* the inescapable relation of the personal and the political”; the collapsing, or “convergence,” as Berlin calls it elsewhere, of the self (the individual), the social, and language.

Pulling back from the classroom, Berlin’s notion of convergence provides a useful framework for revisiting and reimagining many of the seeming theoretical impasses that this chapter works to explicate. In the most direct sense, the term convergence denotes a meeting place, intersection or contact zone, whereby competing forces come to meet. In the field of Biology, the term convergence is also often used to describe the tendency of unrelated organisms to evolve similar characteristics under similar environmental conditions. Building on these related meanings, this chapter offers several meeting places (or *topos*) around which we can track two seemingly competing tendencies in disciplinary scholarship around ethics. Though it may seem, at least initially, that the versions of ethics offered by Berlin and Davis are radically incompatible, I argue that there is much to be gained by considering the convergence of these “native” and extra-disciplinary trajectories. From a methodological standpoint, this chapter seeks not to celebrate or disparage either approach, but rather, to emphasize potential connections or inroads. That is, much can be gained from thinking Berlin and Davis together. Davis usefully complicates our understanding of agency, challenging rhetoricians to consider ethics’ nonhermeneutical dimensions and origins, thus also opening opportunities to consider ethics’ intersections with emerging research, for example, in affect theory. For his part, Berlin pulls us back to the contingencies of the classroom, reminding us always of the difficulties that students encounter as they struggle with the implicit ethical challenges

and dissonances that attend language acquisition and use. If this pairing is cautiously political, it is because, I argue, the call to other places for ethical inquiry risks prematurely abandoning Rhetoric and Composition's native ethical tradition; a tradition, I've argued here, that still has much to offer practitioners of rhetoric and ethics. In search of ethical resources, I maintain that there is still much to be gained by looking close to "home."

### **CHAPTER 3: AMBIENT ETHOS: ETHOS, WRITING, AND PLACE IN RICKERT AND BIZZELL**

Building on tensions I explicate in Chapter 2, I work here to unpack a different, but equally important, trajectory in contemporary scholarship on ethics in Rhetoric and Composition. If previously the question was “how do we understand the Other?” this chapter asks, “how do we understand ourselves?” As in the previous chapter, I organize my analysis around a key concept, ethos, which I use to trace out intersections in theory and practice. I work recursively, drawing on the concept as a lens to reexamine, with the aim of revitalizing, resources extant in the discipline. More specifically, I take up Thomas Rickert’s discussions of ethos in two important texts, *Acts of Enjoyment* (2007) and *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013), before revisiting scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s and Patricia Bizzell’s foundational work on ethos and issues of authority in writing pedagogy. Rickert provides useful inroads around which to mobilize disciplinary ethics today, particularly in his attention to emergent conditions that underwrite our experience of “place.” As we will see, Rickert gives specific attention to how the material affordances of place precipitate emergence, a process that is highly conditional and context-specific.

I work in the first section below to track how Rickert’s theory of ethics resonates with, even as it diverges from, the work of Diane Davis and other contemporary theorists of ethics. Although Rickert and Davis draw from similar influences, their respective approaches play at different pitches or registers. I maintain that these variations, however subtle, are significant. There is much to be gained from considering how a concept like ethos augments our understanding of ethics, and differently than theoretical approaches that focus more primarily on exigencies wrought by radical alterity. In an effort to identify the broader strokes of this second trajectory in ethics, this section also explores

intersections between Rickert's "ambience" and the work of figures like Krista Ratcliffe, Byron Hawk, and Matthew Heard.

In the spirit of the larger argument of this dissertation, I devote much of the second part of this chapter to recuperating overlooked resources in the discipline. More specifically, I work to recover Bizzell's work on ethos with an eye to moments where she takes up ethical challenges directly. I argue that Bizzell's interest in the pedagogical challenges wrought by ethos usefully intersects with Rickert's focus on ambience. Provisionally, this chapter makes three arguments: 1) From a methodological standpoint, this pairing—Rickert and Bizzell—offers a lens for examining how our conception of "ethos" has changed over the past thirty years. As I hope to show, there is much at stake in the mutable character of ethos, particularly when we consider the varied theoretical and pedagogical approaches this rich concept engenders. 2) Related to the first point, this chapter also seeks to leverage Rickert's interest in the "emergent" character of ethos to offer new approaches for the teaching of writing. As a rejoinder to Rickert, Bizzell draws us back to the stakes of ethical inquiry as a pedagogical sensibility, productively complicating our understanding of what it means to practice ethics. 3) Finally, Bizzell gives specific attention to issues of authority, reminding us of the instructor's position as an intermediary, "gatekeeper," and/or arm of institutional power. Bizzell is directly preoccupied with the difficulties of navigating institutional authority, asking after alternative possibilities for conferring ethos as instructors. Here, Bizzell opens opportunities to reconsider political constraints and possibilities that inhere in the writing classroom.

As with the first chapter, I pair Bizzell and Rickert not to suggest that contemporary approaches have missed the mark, but rather to argue that there is much to be gained from exploring these overlapping and intersecting trajectories. Pulling Bizzell and Rickert together is by no means an easy task—in some ways, Bizzell’s political pretensions seem incompatible with Rickert’s notion of rhetorical ambience—but the premise is an important one. Rickert acknowledges this seeming incompatibility in *Acts of Enjoyment*, noting that the “critical” disposition of Bizzell’s approach—he also cites James Berlin and Alan W. France—precludes any possibility of productively reframing cultural studies for present purposes (55). Though much remains to be unpacked in Rickert’s critique, and his generally dismissive tact with regard for cultural studies more generally (13), I argue that Bizzell and Rickert’s positions are perhaps less incompatible than one might expect. This chapter works to recuperate Bizzell’s interest in ethos as a catalyst for teasing out potential intersections between critical pedagogy and contemporary ethics. Key to making sense of this connection is understanding how ethos, and thus ethics, is determined by place, a common focus for both Bizzell and Rickert. This chapter gives special attention to the way that place informs, distributes, and otherwise influences ethos, and concludes by keying in on potential strategies for conceptualizing ethos and ethics in the writing classroom.

### **Rhetorical Ambience**

To get at Rickert’s interest in ethos, we must first attend to his concern for subjectivity. I begin this inquiry by focusing on the latter and more challenging of his two monographs, *Ambient Rhetoric (AR)*. Here, Rickert expresses dissatisfaction with “subjectivist” frameworks that place undue emphasis on individual actors. If we take

instances of the mention of the term “subjectivity” in *AR* (totaling 19, not including footnotes), we get a useful cross-section of Rickert’s building preoccupation with disciplinary notions of subjectivity and his push for rhetorical frameworks that might, borrowing the title of the second chapter of *AR*, help us (re)imagine ethics “in the wild.” Rickert variously refers to our focus on subjectivity as needing to be “revised” (page 4), as a “problem” or “problematic” (83; 83), as a position that we must move “beyond” or “abandon” (83; 85), and, perhaps most tellingly, as a “stain” on the discipline. Borrowing from John Muckelbauer, Debra Hawhee, and other sources, Rickert argues that we might instead think of subjectivity as “dispersed” (77; 82; 91; 91-92), “postmodern” (82; 83), and, in a seeming nod to systems theory, “nodular” (120). If discussions of subjectivity have been symptomatically one-sided and human-oriented, Rickert questions what might be gained by instead thinking of subjectivity as an emergent feature of our collective experience, brought on by our attunement to a larger environment.

Rickert’s tactics grow increasingly antagonistic in the transition between *Acts of Enjoyment* and *AR*. If, in *Acts of Enjoyment*, Rickert is primarily suspicious of the efficacy of teaching (to) student consciousness, reminding us of the practical limitations (not to mention the political and ethical problems) associated with teaching to subjectivity (11-15; 18-19; 44-46; 119; 181-184), this concern takes on new gravity in *AR*. This transformation owes much to the thematic emphasis of *AR*, where Rickert turns our attention to the ontological and material affordances that shape ethos. Here, Rickert offers a theory of rhetoric that deemphasizes agency<sup>16</sup> as it turns its ear to environmental

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<sup>16</sup> In *Acts of Enjoyment*, Rickert argues for a conception of agency that “does not fall back into humanist notions of an autonomous self” (73). It is worth noting that Rickert gives substantial attention to classroom issues in his earlier work. Here, for instance, he modifies agency as a conceptual framework for thinking about how students (and instructors) might become more adaptable in practice.

cues. We see this in a relatively early passage in the book, where Rickert discusses the challenge of subjectivity that inheres in disciplinary notions of agency: “kairos is therefore a concept integral for understanding subjectivity not as something individual, strictly speaking, but rather as something fundamentally *dispersed* and connected to various aspects of the *external environment*” (77; my emphasis). As this passage continues, we get a clearer sense of the distinction Rickert makes in the turn to an “external environment” situated outside the subject:

[...] it furthers my argument that thought and invention are in the end ill served by casting them solely as subjective pursuits. Rather, concepts such as that of the chora and kairos are sufficiently rich to help prepare new forms of disclosure that bring out their ontologically ambient dimensions, meaning, among other things, the dissolution of the subject-object relationship grounding the great share of thinking about kairos. (77)

For Rickert, ambience gives material weight to rhetoric’s sensory dimensions. To develop a suitable theory of (and for) rhetoric, Rickert argues that we must examine the “material” from which rhetoric emanates. Returning to *Acts of Enjoyment*, we see the roots of Rickert’s interest in ambience in his insistence that acts emerge through what he describes as the “muckiness of social complexity” (*Acts of Enjoyment* 32). We are, as Rickert reminds us in another passage, “decentered” subjects, “fissured,” to use another of his terms, by the “disjunction of the subject in discourse”; the subject, he argues, is constructed not only by discourse, but affective phenomena that, “preclude the possibility of simple, direct communication, which in turn impacts our understandings of truth and persuasion” (37). Rickert’s critique speaks to his materialist disposition and his interest in the material affordances that shape our experience of place. Sure, he acknowledges, we give “shape” to events—we participate in their exigence—but, he insists, there is more that remains to be excavated in this relation (29).

Like Davis, Rickert is after a theory of rhetoric and ethics that better accounts for the temporal and material excesses of experience. He argues for a theory of rhetorical exchange that better attends to the material forces that precondition rhetoric, ethics, and ethos, thus conceptualizing ethos as a latent effect of material encounter. Similar to Davis, Rickert argues that the task for rhetoricians is to develop practices of attunement that might help us better respond to these conditions:

Rhetoric [...] is ambient. It surrounds; it is of the earth, both in the most mundane of senses and in the Heideggerian idiom, as that which withdraws from meaning and relationality [...] Rhetoric impacts the sense, circulates in waves of effect, and communes to join and disjoin people. It gathers and is gathered by things not as a denial of the social but as an essential complement to it. *Rhetoric may give priority to the expressly salient, but the salient must take part in and emerge from the ambient.* We can think this in terms of Richard Lanham's notion of rhetoric as the economics of attention, provided we expand the concept of attention beyond that which is limited to the subjective, intentional, or merely cognitive; attention would thereby come to include the materiality of our ambient environs, our affective compartments, the impact of that which escapes conscious notice, and the stumbling block presented by the finitude of knowledge when facing the plenitude of the world and its objects. (x-xi; my emphasis)

This passage solidifies Rickert's use of the acoustic metaphor and shores up its intersections with object-oriented ontology (OOO), particularly the work of figures like Graham Harman and Bruno Latour.<sup>17</sup> More, it highlights Rickert's interest in accounting for how "attention" shapes, redirects, appropriates, and otherwise intervenes on the material affordances of a given situation. This passage also says something about the obstinate obscurantism that inheres in ethics' newly ontological purview, an issue that I take up more directly in the conclusion to this chapter. In the passage above, Rickert makes an interesting distinction, between a rhetoric that aims at saliency and one that is

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<sup>17</sup> For more on this connection, see part one of Rickert's interview with Nathaniel Rivers, "Circumnavigation: An Interview with Thomas Rickert." Here, Rickert discusses Harman's influence on his work and the import of philosophy in rhetorical theory: <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/18.2/interviews/rivers/>

*in tune* with ambience. There's more at stake here than simply recognizing rhetoric as a latent effect (or affect) of ambience.<sup>18</sup> Ambience, in contrast to rhetoric, is not "salient." We can draw our attention to ambience as it radiates forth—through a process of attunement—but, upon intervening, ambience is disrupted or pulled elsewhere; in a sense, ambience is ruined by the will to intervene (xi).<sup>19</sup>

Stepping back for a moment, it is worth considering where Rickert's interest in a Heideggerian framework for ethics, particularly as inflected by object-oriented ontology, lands us. Again, though there are some clear affinities between Rickert's work and that of Davis, he makes some subtle and critical departures. Rickert seems less concerned for the constitutive uncertainties of encounter (i.e. with an Other) than for the contingencies wrought by our *aesthetic* experience of context. Rickert argues that subject/object relations "emerge" as a result of an "ambient coconstitutiveness" that operates before language: "Language emerges as it is because it is already entangled with the material realm, making the subject/object problem derivative of an ambient coconstitutiveness" (197). Pointing to research in the field of OOO, Rickert goes on to explain this theory of "things": "[...] human being requires an ontological weddedness to things and environs that affords rhetoricity as a modality of being-together but does not thereby exhaust rhetoric, since it cannot be relegated exclusively to human symbolicity and doing" (198).

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<sup>18</sup> Rickert makes a similar argument in the earlier of his two monographs, *Acts of Enjoyment*, noting that acts are caught in a "structure of belatedness": "If an Act remains caught to some degree in the structure of belatedness, since subjectivity is itself constituted retroactively, still the Act is not predicated on the desire to overcome or seek revenge on the past...The Act resonates less with critique and more with productive, cultural--which is also to say social and rhetorical--engagement. The Act is an event" (32).

<sup>19</sup> Reading this (dis)connection between ambience and rhetoric can be difficult. At times, Rickert seems to use the two terms interchangeably. Elsewhere, as in the passage I cite above, Rickert makes a distinction between ambience and rhetoric, suggesting that rhetorical practices insufficiently capture (perhaps are incapable of capturing) ambience.

Speaking to the ethical difficulties of this position, Rickert argues that the challenge of ethics is not to blindly impose our political or moral system on a situation, but rather, to be willing to “attend” to the world: “If one of the modalities of rhetoric is attention, then an ambient rhetoric is one that in its ecological dimensions hearkens and attends to the world, both for the meanings that we bring to what it offers and for what withdraws.” He continues:

On this view, a system of ethics is not *applied* to life. Our ethics are not something exterior we bring in and deploy but rather a set of comportments that emerge from life as it is lived, from what we do, say, and make. Thus, these ethics emerge already in the background chorography of relations that give meaning and direction to how we dwell with things and each other in the world. (223)

Like Davis, Rickert suggests that the challenge for rhetoric (and rhetoricians) is not to develop an ethical disposition—an ethos—that is then “applied” to the world ad hoc, but instead, to attend to the world as it (and we with it) unfolds.<sup>20</sup> Here, Rickert draws very directly from the Heideggerian well. As Daniel Gross argues in the introduction to *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, Heidegger pushes us to reconceive rhetoric not as “the art of speaking,” but alternatively, as the “art of listening” (*Heidegger and Rhetoric* 3). Further, and relevant to Rickert’s interest in rhetorical ambience, Gross explains that Heidegger’s influence is to challenge rhetoricians to consider how we are “composed” through and by language acts (4). Keying in on the same referents, Rickert offers the concept of attunement as a rhetorical and ethical resource, by which we can better tune in to (or perhaps “with”) the world.

In the passage above, Rickert pushes ethics beyond the borders of Davis’ analysis as he considers the material life of objects. Rickert addresses this distinction directly in

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<sup>20</sup> Davis’ efforts to distinguish between a Kantian and Levinasian system of ethics seems particularly relevant here. She explicates this distinction in the postscript to *Inessential Solidarity* (147-148).

*AR*, juxtaposing Davis' focus on human "affectability" with the worldview offered by Heideggerian ontology:

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. Such a matrix of engagement brings the world to reveal itself in various ways that never exhaust what is there, that never fully wrest from concealment what withdraws. *Nor, finally, does such a matrix allow for things to wrest themselves from the mutually conditioning forms of relationality that constitute any object whatsoever, including human beings.* As I have previously discussed, Diane Davis devotes her *Inessential Solidarity* to this position, although she emphasizes a presymbolic affectability and responsibility to the social other. In a similar way, I seek here to explore how "having" a world, in Heidegger's idiom, requires a certain sense of thingness from which world-having emerges. (199)

This "thingness," which Rickert argues is constitutive of world, of "having" a world, deemphasizes (human) agency in an effort to better identify the "mutually conditioning forms of relationality that constitute any object." If Rickert seems gently dismissive of Davis' position, we might speculate that this is because Rickert is concerned with the broader implications of our, borrowing from Heidegger, being with the world. Reading between the lines, Rickert seems to suggest that Davis' theory isn't radical enough, presumably, though he doesn't go on to clarify, because it does not adequately account for the broader contextual circumstances from which alterity springs. Though he builds on Davis' position, he notes that the challenge will be to avoid "falling back into naive realism, material determinism, or some new permutation of realism or idealism" (198). Whether or not Rickert believes that Davis risks these potential missteps is unclear. That said, it seems fair to suggest that though Rickert leans substantially on Davis' theory of affectability, he is after a wider frame of reference.

In an effort to better understand this second trajectory, it seems worth pointing to some other theorists that share Rickert's related concern for the interrelation of ambience

and ethos. We might point, for instance, to Matthew Heard's recent work on tonality. Similar to Rickert, Heard appropriates Heidegger's "dwelling" as a framework for cultivating rhetorical attunement. Heard pairs nicely with Rickert, showing us how the concept of attunement can be usefully enriched by giving attention to tonality, which he links with ethos. Or, as Heard puts it, "[a]ttunement, with its conceptual ties to the physical properties of tone, draws attention to the physical and metaphysical limits of hearing and responding to the world around us" ("Tonality and Ethos" 45). Similar to Rickert, Heard's interest in tonality centers on acts of listening. Heard argues that this listening process is difficult because we have to try to avoid (if possible) trying always to make "noises"—i.e. Otherness—"mean something." In this light, Heard appears to share Davis' concern that, even as we listen, we find ourselves appropriating the Other. But, where Heard departs from Davis, beyond his concern for the practical implications of attunement, is in his emphasis on tonality and in his commitments, similar to Rickert, to exploring the sonic valences of Heideggerian subjectivity. In a nod to the disciplinary implications of this work, Heard argues that the study of tone offers concrete steps by which we can practice ethics. Tone, he notes, offers us an ethos:

[...] offers a vital intervention in the conversation about radical alterity, since tone demands a special quality of attention that exceeds more familiar acts of listening, hearing, and even hospitality. I suggest here that attunement—the habit of paying attention to tone—describes less an act of interpretation than a recurring, prolonged dwelling within the complexities of tone. I argue that attunement should be conceived as an identity, an *ethos*, which can only be developed through trial and error encounters with real others in the physical world. As an *ethos*, attunement shifts our theoretical focus toward a habitual, repetitive engagement with alterity as it resonates through the tonality of others' linguistic and nonlinguistic gestures. (46; my emphasis)

Though my primary purpose for citing Heard here is to give the reader a sense of the broader strokes of this second trajectory in ethics—this passage succinctly summarizes

the connection between tonality and ethos—I also point to Heard’s work because it offers a clear, if even controversial, program for ethics. For Heard, the practice of ethics is rooted in the development of an ethos that we cultivate through trial and error in the world. It seems worth earmarking Heard’s interest in the process by which ethos is cultivated. I return to this connection below as I unpack potential intersections between Bizzell and Rickert.

For now, I’d like to point briefly to a few other instances in recent scholarship that help to illustrate this emerging ethical disposition, some of which Heard alerts us to in his own work. We might also look to Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005) and Byron Hawk’s “A Rhetoric/Pedagogy of Silences” (2003). Ratcliffe contends that our notions of hearing and listening can be productively complicated by rhetorical invention. Rhetorical listening, as she calls it, provides us tools for negotiating “troubled identifications,” thereby creating opportunities for new and more productive discourses. Borrowing from cybernetics, Ratcliffe conceptualizes subjectivity and ethos as a, “mobius strip relationship between [self and other]” (*Rhetorical Listening* 49); that is, subjectivity becomes a kind of exchange between the subject and an outside that Ratcliffe describes elsewhere as “place.” Ratcliffe argues that identification, though often a conscious construct, takes many forms, thus complicating the subjectivity/objectivity paradigm. Though the broader implications of Ratcliffe’s work are largely beyond the purview of this chapter, we see some clear affinities between Ratcliffe’s notion of identification and Rickert’s concern for the material conditions of ambience.

For his part, Byron Hawk concretizes Heidegger's notion of "dwelling," explaining that to teach is "already to dwell" ("A Rhetoric/Pedagogy of Silences" 389). Similar to the scholars I cite above, much hinges for Hawk in recognizing dwelling as an act (or acts) of listening. In this sense, dwelling is something that it seems we can activate, but to which we must ultimately also let ourselves succumb: "To dwell in building a text is not to master language but to live in it, listen to it, and let it guide meaning" (385).<sup>21</sup> Similar to Rickert, Hawk develops a theory of agency that is premised in acquiescence as opposed to, quoting Rickert, "mastery" over language. Or, to put the distinction another way, Hawk and Rickert cultivate a conception of agency that recognizes agency not only as "moving," imposing our will, but "being-moved" by the will of the world (15). As Rickert explains, such a position "reimagines human agency less as a form of potent mastery than as caretaking, shepherding, sparing, or cultivation" (15). Imported to rhetorical theory, Heidegger's conception of dwelling helps us to reimagine agency as a mutually transgressive experience; we shape the world as we are shaped by it.

Fleshing out the broader strokes of this trajectory in ethics, we get a clearer sense of the connections and resonances of ambience, a concept that can be productively linked with notions of listening, tonality, and ethos. As with the previous chapter, we are left questioning the degree to which Rickert et al.'s call for new practices of attunement sanctions disciplinary ethics. In some ways, this body of scholarship seems to suggest that we aren't listening closely enough. Or, as I imagine Heard would say, the problem might be that we are listening *too* closely. To be fair, Rickert is careful to articulate that

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<sup>21</sup>Hawk borrows substantively from Victor Vitanza here. See *PRE/TEXT* (1993) and Vitanza's reformulation of Heidegger: "To build a text is not then to master language but to yield to it, to let it guide meanings toward fruition" (15)

he is not advocating a “new” rhetorical position. Rather, as he notes in the introduction to *AR*, “we need conceptions of rhetoric that keep pace with these transformations and their attendant opportunities and dangers, that not only help us make sense of them but enable us to flourish (and that will, of course, spur new transformations).” Rickert seems to see recuperative value in rhetorical theory, although it is difficult to know how that value might be leveraged.

Rickert’s preoccupation with rhetoric speaks to larger concerns with disciplinary knowledge making. Again, quoting from *AR*: “We do not need a *new rhetoric*, however; rather, we must work anew with what has been brought forward in rhetorical theory and practice. Rhetoric is revealing and doing—doing as revealing and revealing as doing—and hence integral to our dwelling in the world.” It can be difficult to take Rickert’s brief defense of rhetoric at face value. Even as Rickert cautions against the tendency for “new” places for rhetoric, he reminds us that rhetoric “can no longer be understood solely as a subjective, verbal, visual, or even performative art” (33-34). This passage is instructive because it reveals much about Rickert’s seemingly tenuous position concerning the discipline. He concedes that rhetoric is essential but suggests that it has been too “tame.” If Rickert’s position is difficult to follow, it is precisely because he seems to want rhetoric both ways: We hazard risking too much by ditching rhetoric, he warns, but rhetoric can’t be (m)any of the things we’ve know it as: “This is a rhetoric dispersed, embodied, and embedded, one *no longer mired* in subjectivism and all the epistemological and ethical problems that ensue therefrom” (34; my emphasis).

Rickert plays to a kind of disciplinary fatalism that will be familiar to readers of scholarship around ethics this past decade. In a particularly telling moment, Rickert notes

that, “keeping [this older, traditional understanding of rhetoric] will be difficult” (34). It is difficult to conceive of how we reconcile “old” rhetoric with Rickert’s materialist approach exactly because Rickert doesn’t seem to believe in this possibility. Rickert battles a kind of nostalgia here. We see this in the passage I cite above, and, most tellingly, in the theme of the opening chapter of *AR*, “circumnavigation”; this theme seems to suggest that rhetorical theory, at least as a disciplinary venture, is something to be navigated around (even if it offers constructs we continue to navigate with). Although I am persuaded by Rickert’s position concerning rhetoric, there is considerable reason to pause and contemplate Rickert’s simultaneous affirmation and disaffirmation of rhetoric. Or, put a different way, it seems useful to consider what Rickert’s position, qua Heidegger, tells us about an emerging mood in Rhetoric and Composition, itself a disposition that resonates like the apocalyptic melancholy of punk music.

In the remainder of this chapter, I take Rickert’s suggestion that we, “work anew with what has been brought forward in rhetorical theory and practice” at face value. Turning back to this tradition, I ask what might be gained by revisiting critical pedagogy scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. As with the previous chapter, I set up a kind of dialectic—between Rickert and Bizzell—as I consider potential intersections and question what the discipline’s native ethical tradition might have to offer contemporary scholarship on the related topics of ethics and ethos. I hope to show that there is much value in revisiting the question of ethics’ practical and pedagogical implications. My interest here is less in juxtaposing these figures, though this may be purposeful, than in excavating potential linkages. In fact, the impetus for this turn is drawn directly from an

early passage in Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment*, where he emphasizes rhetoric's roots in "action":

I do not find a reason for despair, much less cynicism, in this way of thinking. For me, this approach gets at the heart of rhetoric: it is not just a means of reading or producing—rhetoric is fundamentally attuned to action. And, every action hinges on a decision, albeit in the broader conception of decision discussed above. Like a first line, every action, every de/cision, is a 'cut' marking out a space within which we come to exist and hence from which we are recovering. We could also say, from which we are inventing. (28)

Shifting the focus, we might provisionally ask: What is ethos' action? What decisions must we make? From where are we recovering? What might we recover? And, perhaps most importantly, what must we invent?

### **Patricia Bizzell: Ethos and Acts of Authority**

In the interest of tracking shifting conceptions of ethos in the discipline, with the aim of leveraging these distinctions in classroom practice, I turn here to Patricia Bizzell's early work on the topic. I turn to Bizzell not only because her position seems so radically removed from contemporary discussions of ethics, thus making her work a fitting rejoinder to Rickert and his contemporaries, but because, having written about this topic over several decades, Bizzell seems to occupy so many positions at once. In this sense, Bizzell's impressive body of work provides a useful test case for understanding how disciplinary frameworks for ethics have permutated, particularly in relation to larger political and institutional forces. We see a marked shift in Patricia Bizzell's work, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, which parallels, at least to some degree, a similar shift in emphasis from Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment* to *Ambient Rhetoric*. This shift is driven by Bizzell's developing interest in power relations that underwrite teacher-student relationships, and is captured most concretely in her attention to the challenge of ethos

that inheres in writing and the writing classroom. When Bizzell takes up the topic of ethos in her earliest work, her focus tends to be on the deceptive potential of public personality in overtly political situations and, relevant to this chapter, its potentially deleterious effect(s) on the rhetorical practices of students. Citing the Ford-Carter debates of 1976, Bizzell notes that public personalities draw on ethos tactically, often obscuring actual positions, and expresses concern that media, namely television, is complicit in this process. For Bizzell, politics is troubling because, like celebrity culture, it leans on ethos in a generally deceptive capacity. If Bizzell is suspicious of ethos in her early writings on the topic, it is because ethos seems to stand in the way of a truer, more direct, and potentially liberating experience of culture:

I would like to suggest that the dearth of extended rational presentation of ideas on television and the medium's dependence instead on the ethos of the speaker may help to create freshman students of composition who have trouble with 'the skills of elucidation and validation and sequencing in expository writing,' as Mina Shaughnessy defined the problem recently. ("The Ethos of Academic Discourse" 351)

Mired in the political circumstances of the day, Bizzell seems initially unwilling to accept these compromised bearings, in part, we might speculate, because she sees that the challenge of ethos that inheres in the American political macrocosm has pernicious implications for the microcosm of the college classroom. Simplified, her concern is that students accept this "ethos" at face value, adopting similarly deceptive approaches in their own practices: "I contend that students rely on this expression of the 'honest face' ethos not only because their teachers have waxed 'sentimental' over it but also because the students are unfamiliar with the 'rituals' of academic discourse" (353).

On one level, and perhaps most obviously, Bizzell's concern for the political stakes of such practice espouses a deeper, quasi-Platonic concern for the political

difficulties that enfold rhetoric. It would not be unfair, that is, to suggest that Bizzell's indictment of the American political system, and American political personalities more specifically, speaks to deeper suspicions regarding that old and "spurious" art of persuasion. Bizzell's focus on "rational" debate seems to say as much:

I contend that [students] most often see 'ideas' presented in the mass media in just this aphoristic, 'self-evident' way: a way that assumes that rational debate cannot resolve controversial problems, so that all that remains of importance is to identify what side one is on, to solidify the personal image or ethos one has found to be most acceptable to the peer audience with which one is most concerned. (353)

But, though Bizzell's critique may seem a bit dated, even for the 1970s, this reading misses the subtler nuances of her position. Looking forward to her work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we notice an important shift.

Embedded even in Bizzell's early writings on national politics is a concern for the material vicissitudes of ethos that underwrite teacher-student relations. Pivoting, Bizzell questions how we might best leverage ethos for the benefit of students, without, as she reminds us in an article from 1991, "Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy," committing the same trespasses:

Let me begin by assuming that many of us teaching today feel caught in a theoretical *impasse*. On the one hand, we wish to serve politically left-oriented or liberatory goals in our teaching, while on the other, we do not see how we can do so without committing the theoretically totalizing and pedagogically oppressive sins we have inveighed against in the systems we want to resist. Another way to describe this impasse would be to say we want to serve the common good with the power we possess by virtue of our position as teachers, and yet we are deeply suspicious of any exercise of power in the classroom. ("Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy" 54; my emphasis)

If Bizzell is suspicious of ethos in the late 1970s, particularly as manifests in the political sphere, her tenor changes as she begins to unpack possible programs for classroom practice. Here, we see a broader audience. Though Bizzell appeals most directly to fellow

instructors—the “we” in the final sentence—she is also clearly concerned with the implied “we” of the classroom. Bizzell is perhaps less interested in the political pretensions of teachers or in advocating for any singular political position, than in understanding how these pretensions are differentially exercised in the *already political* environment of the classroom. Bizzell says as much in the next paragraph of the same article, noting that we can overcome this political impasse by examining the, “theoretical bases for our suspicion of exercises of power.” She continues “[...] the categorical rejection of all uses of power results from an insufficiently differentiated concept of power; in other words, it results from a totalized notion of power as a unitary force with uniform effects.”

Returning to Rickert’s earlier critique of critical pedagogy approaches to classroom practice, particularly in *Acts of Enjoyment*, it seems worth examining the gravity of this charge. If Rickert is right to suggest that the problem with trying to instill a particular political disposition—and we might think here of Bizzell’s interest in leftist-oriented politics—is that students don’t find these positions persuasive, to what extent does this ignore the degree to which our political perspectives and aspirations differ, and the degree to which these aims are differentially exercised and processed in the classroom? the degree to which political circumstances emerge through the ambient dimensions of classroom experience? For his part, Rickert would likely respond by noting that an instructor’s particular political agenda is largely irrelevant. Though Rickert’s argument is a persuasive one—students are not only disinterested, but often put off by politically motivated approaches to classroom practice—this position can be difficult to accept, in part because it seems to ignore the ambience of the classroom.

The bigger difficulty of reading Rickert through Bizzell is understanding how ethos can be cultivated outside of politics. Here, I do not mean to portray Rickert's position as apolitical. Rickert is clearly concerned for the political dimensions of rhetoric and teaching, if even he pushes against political approaches to the teaching of writing (this is, it is worth noting, a deeply political maneuver). Rather, and more primarily, I am interested in using Bizzell as a test case for thinking about the already political and ethical environ of the classroom. Another way of framing this would be to ask what is at stake in thinking about the politics of classroom ethos? Or, alternatively, the ethos of classroom politics? What are the political and ethical implications of ambience?

Bizzell appears to see politics and ethos as enmeshed. Her use of these terms is actually so fluid in places that these two threads are difficult to distinguish in her work. For instance, in "Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy" she often talks about instructor credibility (ostensibly a conversation about ethos) through the lens of issues of "authority." Interestingly, the through line for Bizzell is always persuasion. This connection is not insignificant, and, as I hope we will see, requires further consideration. Having worked through two primary examples of how power relations (and ethos) might be established in the classroom, Bizzell reflects:

I certainly share this preference for persuasion over coercion, and yet I am uncomfortable with classroom situations in which persuasion becomes inadequate to the task of moving students in the direction of my own left-oriented political goals. For example, suppose I am unable to convince the class that this student's paper we are reading makes a weak argument when it rejects feminism on the grounds that women are biologically determined for the sole occupations of wife and mother. If I reject a return to coercion such that I require students to adopt a feminist perspective and penalize them with bad grades if they do not, what recourse do I have in such a situation? (57)

Here, as in much of her work, Bizzell makes efforts to balance two tendencies: her interest in having students understand and believe what she would like them to believe, and her interest in helping students to cultivate a perspective or disposition that they might inhabit. On one level, and earnestly, Bizzell asks whether we can ever truly accomplish our political aims without being, at least at times, coercive in the classroom. In this capacity, similar to the sentiment of her 1978 article, Bizzell is suspicious of our ethos as teachers, particularly as it is corrupted by individual political affinities. On another level, Bizzell is interested in the larger circumstances of negotiation that inform this continually recoded dialogue.

The above passage is significant because it marks a pivotal transition point in Bizzell's work, whereafter she charts a third and more promising approach for establishing "authority" in the classroom. She describes this approach in characteristically formulaic terms:

Authority is exercised by A [teachers] over B [students] instrumentally in the sense that sometimes B must do what A requires without seeing how B's best interests will be served thereby, but A can exercise such authority over B only if B initially grants it to A. This means that I am imagining authority as being exercised through a two-stage process. The beginning of the exercise of authority lies in persuasion: A must persuade B that if B grants A authority over B, B's best interests ultimately will be served. (57)

For our ethos to be persuasive, it must be (perceived as) legitimate. She continues:<sup>22</sup>

[...] for authority to be legitimate, A [the teacher] cannot take this power for granted, but must obtain it by the consent of B. This means that authority is exercised through a two-stage process. The beginning lies in persuasion: A must persuade B that if B grants A authority over B, B's best interests will be served. (56)

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<sup>22</sup> Here, Bizzell draws from Freire. For more on this connection, see her tribute "Paulo Freire and What Education Can Do" as well as *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*.

Again, to my point above, we see here how Bizzell's related concern for politics, ethos, and ethics collapses in this notion of legitimacy. This collapsing of concepts seems not so much a slippage as a purposeful reformulation, which seeks to capture the gravity of an emerging moment. Bizzell leaves us at an interesting political, and I argue ethical, precipice. Much hinges on this notion of legitimacy in Bizzell's work. By legitimacy, we might take Bizzell to mean "good"—what is good for teachers and students mutually—but, as she goes on to clarify, this is predicated on a dialogical agreement; this agreement depends on A's (the teacher) being persuasive. And, in order to be persuasive, Bizzell insists that we must attend to how ethos shifts or mutates in practice.

As Bizzell reminds us a few paragraphs later, drawing from Henry Giroux, we must work cautiously as instructors to cultivate this authority/ethos: "I am describing a kind of authority that cannot take itself for granted" (58). We cannot directly ask students for authority without jeopardizing our ethos, nor can we merely appeal to some "universal" grounds for authority. Rather, she notes, a teacher might try to highlight links "between his or her own historical circumstances and those of the students, to suggest that their joining together in a liberatory educational project will serve all of their best interests." Bizzell's position here is complicated and clearly not above scrutiny. Though she provides a useful taxonomy of approaches that we can use to cultivate ethos, and though, I argue, her approach productively combines a concern for politics, ethos, ethics, and classroom practice in a way that is still highly relevant today, she often falls back on the sentiment of her early work. For instance, in this same article, she concludes by suggesting that instructors include more overtly "political documents" in the classroom. Further, Bizzell has the tendency to appeal, often uncritically, to notions of citizenry

rooted in a kind of enlightenment logic. In this sense, Bizzell's work suffers some of the familiar pitfalls that Rickert peels apart in *Acts of Enjoyment*.

That said, Bizzell's taxonomy is useful because it points us to her interest in understanding, though not fully articulated in 1992, how ethos comes from within the spaces where it lives. This vision of ethos seems to cohere with Rickert's interest in conceptualizing ethos' kairotic (and ambient) dimensions. As Rickert explains in *Ambient Rhetoric*, ethos is perhaps too readily reduced to "credibility" in classroom practice. Rickert cautions that ethos should not be conflated, nor reduced by its association with, rhetorical notions of credibility:

[...] ethics is rooted in ethos, which comprises more than character: it pertains to how we live, how we dwell. Ethos is tied to character and credibility, yes, but this also reflects a focus on the subjective. When we broaden the word, in accordance with the ancient Greek conception, we see that character and credibility themselves emerge from a way of life that is itself already embedded within locations, communities, societies, and environments and hence 'spoken' by them even as we create and transform them. (222)

I cite Rickert here not only because he usefully enriches our notion of ethos, but because he connects ethos and ethics, thus capturing the connection between ethics, place, and emergence. In her focus on ethos, Bizzell, similarly, shows an interest in the vicissitudes of place, pushing instructors to teach more adaptively, with greater concern for the material conditions of *emerging* rhetorical situations. Again, from this perspective, we might say that Bizzell is interested in something like ambience. More to the point, Bizzell shows us how a concern for ethos and ambience might be leveraged in the teaching of writing.

To be fair, Rickert doesn't really address the classroom in *Ambient Rhetoric*. And, if he did, it isn't likely that he would point to Bizzell's work as an exemplar of the kind of

practice he is advocating, probably because it would seem to represent the failed project of critical pedagogy, and the kind of politically and pedagogically “oppressive” tendencies that Bizzell herself worries about (“Paulo Freire” 319-320; “Patricia Bizzell’s Response”). This critique is fair, but perhaps misses an opportunity to revitalize an interest in dialogue as one potential means for thinking about something like teaching to ambience. What Bizzell teaches us is not so much that one notion of ethos is outmoded, but that ethos is, as we often tell our students, conditional. Ethos, like the forces that Rickert identifies in his work—in *kairos* for instance—is born out of situational experiences. Ethos is emergent and ethics seems to be a condition of this very process. Might it be fair then, to contend not only that the “politics” of the writing classroom have a place, even beyond the so-called “failed project” of critical pedagogy, but that these forces are necessarily *the* test case for understanding rhetoric’s ambient dimensions?

If, as Rickert argues, “place” is important, it seems unusual that we would not attend more directly to the place(s) where ambience actually bears out. Perhaps the most persuasive argument for returning to the classroom comes from Rickert himself. In chapter seven of *Ambient Rhetoric*, Rickert works us through Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling” as a key metaphor for understanding ambience. Pushing the OOO angle, Rickert draws on Heidegger’s conception of the “fourfold” to explain how environmental and material conditions predict a thing’s “thingness.” Against the semiotic tendency to define an object as a condition of language (or at least in relation to language), Heidegger believed that an object is determined by the space that is carved out for it. Or, as Rickert explains, drawing on a useful example: “[...] a jug is a jug not because language presents it as such or because humans made it as such; rather, a jug, as a holding vessel, is already

a thing whose space is carved out in advance by material affordances (such as how the clay can be worked to hold liquids) and everyday need, which requires vesseling, as it were, and the world *is* in a way that makes vesseling possible” (236). This is an important insight for Rickert; it informs his conclusion that, to better understand dwelling and its potentially transformative implications for ambience, we must practice attunement dynamically, in a capacity that, “works within, reaches into, and potentially transforms how we dwell.”

As the chapter progresses, Rickert brings us to the broader stakes of this conceptual framework. He explains the difficulty of this practice of attunement: “We cannot simply and directly *choose* to dwell otherwise” (239). Like the jug from the example above, dwelling is constitutive, meaning that it presupposes our capacity to determine it. It is exactly this line that recalls Bizzell’s interest in the classroom, and the intensity of focus she gives the conditions of emergence that inform teacher-student relations. For the purposes of clarity, it is worth noting that Rickert does not take it in this direction. Rather, Rickert goes on to describe the difficulties of cultivating an “ambient sensibility” that more accurately captures the worldly excesses of dwelling and ambience. Whatever the theoretical trajectory of Rickert’s reworking of Heidegger, his assertion that dwelling is not something we simply “choose” is a fitting reminder of our obligations and responsibilities to the places where we do our work; where we dwell, and where we make efforts to comport an ambient sensibility to others. In other words, Rickert reminds us of the classroom. Rickert seems himself to implicitly acknowledge this in the preface to *AR*, arguing: “We cannot attend to what is salient concerning materiality *without* necessarily

also extending our sweep to the ambient environs and the numerous objects therein, all of which help scaffold our ability to generate what is salient” (*AR* xii).

### **Into the Classroom: Ethos and Critical Pedagogy**

This far, I’ve argued that there is great value to returning to the discipline’s native ethical tradition, particularly scholarship on the topic of ethos in the critical pedagogy movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Further, I’ve argued that revitalizing this rich body of scholarship offers potential inroads for putting ethics into action in the writing classroom. If, to this point, my approach has been largely theoretical, this still leaves the question of how the intersections I unpack above might actually be leveraged by instructors; that is, we might ask, what does this look like in practice? What teaching approaches might we offer instructors interested in marrying Rickert’s materialist disposition with Bizzell’s concern for ethos? To this end, I argue that we might best respond to Rickert’s call to ambience by turning to the material vicissitudes of the classroom, a move he seems unwilling to make in *Ambient Rhetoric*. Although, to be fair, Rickert shows a strong interest in thinking about ambience in the context of writing, or, perhaps better put, thinking writing in the context of ambience (see Chapter 3 in *AR*), the examples he cites—for instance, an album by Brian Enos and a personal interface project out of MIT (“ambientROOM”)—seem strangely incongruous with the objectives and aims of *AR*, a book that is, in many senses, positioned as a response to disciplinary paradigms relating to concepts like rhetorical agency, ethos, and kairos. This missed connection is interesting because the classroom seems a particularly fitting example of the ambient conditions that Rickert describes in *AR*: “Language, person, and environment, then, are perhaps not so much linked, and from such a linkage established as coadaptive, as they

are enmeshed and enfolded, making them mutually conditioning entities that have already emerged from a larger, worldly whole” (*Ambient Rhetoric* 106).

Bizzell’s work on ethos has much to offer Rickert’s notion of rhetorical ambience, just as Rickert’s theory of ambience offers new possibilities for thinking about how ethos gets constructed (and reconstructed) in the classroom. Beginning with the latter, Rickert’s theory of ambience helps us better conceptualize the challenges that we face in our efforts to cultivate ethos in the classroom, both as instructors and students. Rickert’s focus on adaptive and inductive approaches to the material features of emergence nicely complicates Bizzell’s sometimes tidy and formulaic taxonomies of classroom authority. I’d point readers in particular to Rickert’s notion of situational “equilibrium,” an ecological perspective he borrows from philosopher Mark C. Taylor. Like Taylor, Rickert distinguishes between “complicated” and “complex” systems; whereas “complicated” systems can be broken down and analyzed by their component parts, “complex” systems resist such practices. We cannot analyze these complex systems—Rickert cites the examples of the brain and pond ecosystems, but we might also think of the writing classroom—by their component parts; we cannot predict the tendencies of the whole by way of a part (of the system):

Complexity evolves; it is dynamic, and hence, while equilibrium can result, such stability is an achievement with the conditions for its transformation already built in. Such equilibrium, in other words, is temporary, or a perspectival view that masks how the system is already far from equilibrium, just in ways not perhaps apparent.

Simplifying, Rickert’s notion of ecological equilibrium can be usefully paired with Bizzell’s focus on the shifting character of ethos in the college classroom. What might it

mean, that is, to describe ethos not only as variable and situationally-constructed, but, in Rickert's terms, as a measure of equilibrium?

As for contemporary theorists of ethics, there is much to be gained by thinking about ambience contextually, in terms of the constitutive realities of classroom experience. As Rickert so persuasively puts it, "we do not choose where we dwell." So though Rickert is right that we need to deemphasize human agency as we consider the broader whole (the "whole world"), this does not invalidate questions of agency and authority. To hazard such a misstep would risk our missing the very kairotic moment that Rickert is after in *Ambient Rhetoric*. Contemporary scholarship on ethics, particularly that which takes up themes of public persuasion and collectivity, could usefully be enriched by turning to composition scholarship that focuses on issues of ethos in the teaching of writing. If Bizzell is a useful test case here it is because she writes persuasively about the rigors of cultivating ethos as a teacher, and in a way that is amenable to the ethical program offered by Rickert and his contemporaries.

I would point contemporary scholars of ethics to Bizzell's interest in the role persuasion plays in the mediation of ethics. Ethos is not only a tool for persuasion, but a measure of our capacity to persuade (and our capacity to be persuaded). Our ethos builds not so much from truths or certainties, but rather, in a parallel to Rickert, from our willingness to let ethos be ambient, to recognize ethos as it emerges and to be willing to respond. This approach shares affinities with Davis' interest in the affectability of the subject. Grounding her analysis in classroom practice, Bizzell helps to show us that ethos is contingent, based as much in uncertainty and (mutual) suspicion as knowledge or trust.

But what then of ethics, and in the teaching of writing? Paul Lynch has termed this approach a kind of casuistry, pushing for responsive approaches that play meaningfully to ambiguity. Lynch turns to Burke, who argues that the challenge is not to correct for situational ambiguities, but “to study and clarify the *resources* of ambiguity.” Similar to Bizzell, Lynch shows an interest in the way that authority is shaped by contextual experience, in the classroom. Speaking on issues of classroom management and grading, he questions:

Where would the discipline of composition be if people like Mina Shaughnessy, Mike Rose, Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, David Bartholomae, James Slevin, Patricia Bizzell and others had decided that rules were there to be followed and principles to be applied, period? All of these teachers have practiced casuistic thinking in that they recognized that circumstances sometimes require a response other than enforcement of the rules or appeal to principles. (“Unprincipled Pedagogy” 269)

I point to Lynch as I move towards the conclusion of this chapter because he identifies a potential common road or shared concern for practitioners of post process theory and more pedagogically-oriented scholarship; namely, Lynch points us to a kind of casuistry or casuistic orientation that inheres in the work we do as rhetoricians and teachers. In this sense, his position seems to cohere with Rickert’s view that, “a system of ethics is not *applied* to life,” but, rather, is experienced as a condition of our living. As Rickert reminds us in *Ambient Rhetoric*, ethics is best conceptualized, “not [as] something exterior we bring in and deploy,” but, instead, as a, “set of comportments that emerge from life as it is lived, from what we do, say, and make.” Ethics emerges, Rickert continues, “in the background chorography of relations that give meaning and direction to how we dwell with things and each other in the world” (223). Conceptualizing ethics, ambience, and, as I will argue below, critical pedagogy, as a “comportment,” a product of

our embeddedness “in the world,” offers potential common ground for practitioners in the field.

If, in parts of this chapter, I’ve downplayed Bizzell’s interest in critical consciousness in an effort to flesh out the broader implications of her work, I’d like to return to this connection here because, I argue, the concept provides a useful lens for evaluating the transitive and constitutive properties of ethos, ambience, and ethics. Though, as I have shown, there is more to critical pedagogy scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s than its investments in student consciousness formation, this connection should not be overlooked. We have perhaps too readily written off the notion of critical consciousness, ignoring its role as a critical, perhaps *the* driving, source of inquiry in the discipline.

How can we modify this concept—critical consciousness—so that it more adequately captures the emergent conditions of classroom practice (as described by Rickert)? A similar project has been attempted by David Seitz. In *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?* (2004), Seitz argues that cultural studies’ emphasis on “critical writing” can be made persuasive. Seitz connects this concept usefully with discussions of teacher ethos, emphasizing the value of ethnographic inquiry in the writing classroom. Of particular interest is Seitz’s work memoir project which asks students to examine cultural attitudes towards work. Here, Seitz argues for a “developmental situated process approach,” which alerts students to the broader social conditions that influence their writing practices. Seitz asks his students to think critically about the multiple voices they inhabit as authors and to consider how their projects, particularly at the stage of revision, are situated in a “social context of others.” I quote at length from Seitz’s description of

the drafting process, because his approach marries a concern for instructor/student ethos and the ambient dimensions of classroom practice:

For the first draft, students concentrate on the self in terms of action and reflection, requiring them to consider their sense of self as a tension between the character participating in the story and an observer reflecting on that participation. Through our readings of published and student model memoir essays [...] we discuss how the memoir genre requires conflict, complication, and/or growth of self, but not moralizing [...] The revision assignment then extends this sense of self in two ways. First, students compare their work values associated with their memoir drafts to assigned readings that categorize examples of work types and values. Second, students also craft scenes of their experience(s) in their memoir to explore the implications of the social contexts that helped shape their current perspectives. (116)

What Seitz seems to be after here, much simplified, is an assignment (sequence) that gets students thinking not only about how their experiences in the world shape their narratives, but, as we will see in a moment, how their writing is impacted by the cultural context of production (i.e. the classroom). Seitz's approach can be characterized as a "critical" intervention, not because he pushes any particular political platform or ideology, but because he offers opportunities for students to participate in the emergent conditions of classroom practice; Seitz's work memoir project offers opportunities for students to facilitate this process of emergence, sharing in the agential underpinnings of classroom activity.<sup>23</sup> Seitz acknowledges this distinction a page later, noting that he focuses on fostering ethnographic inquiry, "rather than provok[ing] an explicit political argument."

We get a sense of Seitz's interest in something like ambience both in his efforts to cultivate a hospitable environment for the peer review process and in the attention he

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<sup>23</sup> Bizzell is similarly invested in thinking about the social responsibilities that inform the basic structure of classroom writing. See in particular her chapter on "Composing Processes" in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, and her interest in thinking about how cultural influences predispose students to be good at writing particular genres (182-183).

gives the material conditions of classroom experience. Though situational observations are a trademark of ethnographic approaches more generally, Seitz focuses explicitly on the conversational spaces that we carve out as instructors: “I had also chosen to physically arrange all of us in a circle, where everyone would contribute one statement from their own response letters during our discussion, rather than have the strong voices in the small groups take over the classroom dynamic...” (118).

Though much more could be unpacked in Seitz’s work pertaining to the topics I take up in this chapter, particularly as relates to his discussions of ethos in Chapters 1-3, the work memoir offers a useful starting place for thinking about how the critical pedagogy project of the 1980s and 1990s can be reframed for present purposes. If we have tended to write off the critical pedagogy moment of the 1980s and 1990s for its “enlightenment” logic, programs like those offered by Seitz might help us shift focus and reevaluate what exactly it is that makes a critical pedagogy “critical.” What constitutes a “critical” disposition or approach? Borrowing a term from Ernesto Laclau’s *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014), the concept of critical consciousness might perhaps be described as “metonymic,” meaning that it is defined as a product of its relation to other concepts, objects, and meanings that extend beyond its borders. In this sense, our understanding of critical consciousness—critical consciousness’ “critical” reception—is a product of the web of relations in which the concept is situated or embedded. Combining this framework with Rickert’s interest in “complex” rhetorical systems, we might ask after the conditions that perpetuate this theoretical no-place in contemporary inquiry. How do new considerations augment the possibilities for critical pedagogy today?

In this metonymic capacity, the concept of critical consciousness *can* be usefully modified for our present purposes. Called by a different name, the notion of “critical pedagogy” might describe something akin to the frameworks and ambient sensibilities that Rickert is after in *Ambient Rhetoric*. What might it mean, that is, to describe Rickert’s investments in thinking about emergence as a kind of “critical” disposition? Might Rickert’s interest in attunement be characterized as a kind of critical pedagogy? one that seeks out a better politics for engaging rhetorical emergence on *its* own grounds?

In the spirit of revitalizing this “critical” charge, which I argue is at the heart of the work we do as theorists and instructors, I allude here briefly to three premises for an updated critical pedagogy that builds on a mutual concern for ethos and ambience. These approaches are intended to be suggestive, not prescriptive, providing guidelines that might help us better respond to the ambient dimensions of classroom practice. Revitalized for contemporary purposes, a “critical” approach:

***Shifts the focus from material production to material emergence***

In its Marxist inflection, the critical pedagogy movement of the 1980s and 1990s seeks to offer opportunities for students to reflect on the material circumstances that underwrite their personal and professional experiences, in the hope that alerting students to these conditions will engender new possibilities for agency. In this model, student agency emerges through a process of critical reflection, often termed “critical consciousness.” Students are asked to examine patterns of material production and consumption in the hope that alerting students to injustices and inequalities might offer tools for resistance. Critical pedagogies engage political inequities head on and are often reflective in nature, asking students to consider how they are complicit in this process.

We see this emphasis, for instance, in Bizzell's efforts to track how students recode ethos in the writing classroom, and, more specifically, in her concern for the broader political implications of the Ford-Carter debates.

In the interest of exploring potential intersections between contemporary scholarship and theories and pedagogies from this period, I offer the metaphor of material emergence to capture a shift in focus, from what Thomas Rickert has characterized as "enlightenment" consciousness to material consciousness. That is, I am interested in thinking about how we can rearticulate the aims and objectives of the critical pedagogy movement, shifting the emphasis from a Marxist focus on material production to an ecological framework that foregrounds the emergent material characteristics of institutional practice.<sup>24</sup> This, I argue, requires that we also shift the focus of our discussion from the political legacies of ideology critique to the topic of ethics. Describing this approach as an ethics as opposed to a politics reorients classroom practice and changes the stakes of classroom writing.

Borrowing from David Seitz, pedagogies predicated in material emergence might generally be described as "inductive," building from within experience. More specifically, such a move pushes us to reconceptualize politics, not as circumstances that we distill in classroom practice, that we bring with us to the fold, but that emerge from these very constraints. This, of course, does not mean that we stop talking about politics or, for that matter, ideology, but rather, that we balance this perspective by opening opportunities for students to discuss how these issues emerge out of the complex material

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<sup>24</sup> I continue this focus in the next chapter, where I give extended treatment to Marilyn Cooper's ecological model for rhetoric.

contextualities that they experience in the classroom (i.e. in the context of peer review, a topic I take up in the next section).

The problem facing critical pedagogy, in part, is that these isolated political programs find us talking about agency in isolated ways. Critiques of critical pedagogy approaches, like Rickert's, often miss the bigger challenge of classroom politics, which relates to the way that students come to understand how agency is experienced. Rickert is right to suggest that critical pedagogy approaches risk our alienating students because we do not share the same political investments, concerns, etc. Further, these political models often insufficiently capture the complexities of political experience, thus perpetuating political sensibilities that are incomplete. But, perhaps there is another risk that we've tended to overlook, that critical pedagogy's emphasis on political intervention, particularly through the study of discrete political texts, finds us practicing an oddly regimented version of politics, tied to stable and inflexible ecologies of production. Shifting the focus from the political economy of production to the ethical terrain of emergence requires that we ask different questions: what are the emergent features of classroom practice? How is our work mutually informed, and as a condition of our writing and working together, in *a* place? What responsibilities do we have to emergence and to Others?

There has been much recent interest in curricular design that foregrounds opportunities for student reflection in undergraduate composition courses. Popular textbooks like Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs' *Writing about Writing: A College Reader* argue that providing opportunities for students to reflect critically on the writing process better prepares students to navigate the myriad political circumstances that enfold

professional writing. Wardle and Downs' textbook makes the case that the real benefits of writing instruction come not so much in the form of explicit training in various professional genres, but in the form of assignments and discussions that offer opportunities for students to talk about acts of writing explicitly (this premise also coheres with *Scenes of Writing*, another popular textbook in Composition). In its most explicit incarnation, for instance in the work of James Paul Gee (also included in *Writing about Writing*), this resurgent interest in reflective writing and metaknowledge shares some clear affinities with critical pedagogy scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. Gee argues that providing opportunities for students to write about writing helps students to better appreciate the cultural challenges that they face with any writing task. Writing, that is, requires not only that we be good writers, but that we be good politicians; it is through writing, and practices of communication more generally, that we, channeling David Bartholomae, gain admission at the level of the institution. In this sense, teaching approaches that foreground the value of reflection share affinities with critical pedagogy approaches that suggest that students can better perform politics if they are alerted to its constraints.

If such approaches are still mired in a Marxist notion of material production, we might ask after pedagogies that better attune students to rhetorical ambience, which, of course, gets us back to the political challenges of material emergence. To this end, it seems useful to play to the inherent dynamism of political agency, trading the sometimes rigidly-defined and confrontational strategies of Marxist ideology critique for pedagogies that better attend the continually recoded and emergent conditions of political life. To be clear, we need not abandon this focus on reflection, nor the related political commitments

that such an approach espouses. Rather, I argue for a shift in emphasis, one that reimagines reflection, not as a process by which we come to a *truer* experience of politics, as if pulling back the veil, but as an enduring (and defining) modality of political experience. Put another way, what I'm after is a pedagogical program that reappropriates reflection, not as a tool for discovering agency, but as a primary activity through which agency is exercised. In addition to helping students recognize the importance of continually returning to and improving their reflective practices, this approach emphasizes the mutually conditioning experience(s) of material emergence. If the critical pedagogy project can be likened in strategy and content to a workers strike and direct confrontation of a rigidly defined (political) economy, we might offer Occupy as an alternative test case; Occupy is a useful example because its political successes stem from a deliberately adaptive approach.

***Emphasizes the practice of hospitality over collaboration***

Providing opportunities for students to collaborate in the writing classroom has clear benefits. Students develop a better understanding of the social import of their work, as well as skills and strategies for working with their peers. This emphasis has practical and political stakes. Students learn group-oriented skills that will be of use to them professionally, particularly as they learn to work with colleagues (as colleagues). More importantly, we hope that students develop a sense of the social constraints on and possibilities for their work. Writing, we often tell students, is a social process, meaning not only that we write for others, but that the audiences we encounter shape and (re)direct our work. Speaking to professional interests, students are reminded that, working in groups in the writing classroom prepares them to work better with others when they land

a job. Nowhere is this emphasis more prevalent than in discussions around peer review. The problem with this approach is that its pragmatic emphasis potentially undermines our efforts to help students understand the broader ethical importance of collaboration.

Here, I offer that there is some use to shifting the conceptual framework for peer review, balancing our focus on the practical and pragmatic benefits of this process with an emphasis on hospitality. There has been resurgent interest in the concept of hospitality in recent years, from contemporary critical theory, as in the case of the late Derrida's interest in rethinking national relations, to Diane Davis' interest in the topic of "foreigner relations," to James Brown Jr.'s recent work in the area of rhetorical theory and software studies. I argue that this term, which has a history tracing at least as far back as the Homeric tradition, could usefully be imported to the Composition classroom. This concept helps us to capture two features or characteristics of collaboration that seem pertinent: First, the term "hospitality" opens opportunities for instructors and students to discuss dimensions of social responsibility in a way that is more, well, responsible. Although it is important that students are given opportunities to consider the functional attributes and practical benefits of group activities, we do them a disservice if they are not also given opportunities to see that group work in the writing classroom is more than a venture in pragmatism. We are responsible to others, not only because our collaborative efforts benefit our own work, but because this process facilitates opportunities for dialogue, openness, and, hopefully, responsive, adaptive and hospitable practices. Students benefit from learning to make space for other students. Second, and perhaps more importantly, hospitality confers a disposition. Like the practice of writing, students should be reminded that practicing hospitality is a conscious and deliberative venture,

that must be practiced and maintained with regularity to be effectual. This, of course, is also a kind of ethos, and students benefit from connecting these practical dimensions of writing—i.e. cultivating ethos—with an emphasis on the importance of developing collaborative relationships premised in hospitable actions.

***Seeks to balance an emphasis on emergence with a focus on negotiation***

Helping students understand the gravity of emergence, in the classroom as well as in their writing practices, can be challenging, but is usefully balanced by basing this work in activities and actions that are premised in negotiation. Channeling Bizzell, it seems useful to provide opportunities for students to think critically for instance about how authority and ethos are cultivated through a kind of negotiation within a space; authority is transactional, not only in the sense that its ethos is premised in transactions with other actants, but with(in), to use Rickert's term, a "place." If recent ontologically-oriented scholarship tends to deemphasize human actants and human agency, and, relatedly, seeks to de-operationalize experience, I ask if it is possible to balance this perspective by promoting practices designed to help students better appreciate and *manage* these emergent material constraints (and possibilities). Further, it seems useful to emphasize the latter; though place can be a difficult experience to manage, it also offers opportunities, however unexpected.

Such an approach might lead us back to something like Rickert's discussion of *kairos*, and his efforts to contextualize *kairos* as an emergent and ambient condition of our situatedness. Yet, though I see great value in Rickert's interest in the material circumstances that underwrite our experiences, it can be difficult to understand how or where we (instructors and students) can intervene. Recognizing that we are already

always intervening, we never stop being agents, there is much value in talking about how we manage this experience. Here, again, I argue that it might be useful to recuperate the activity of negotiation, as in the case of Bizzell's varied frameworks for constructing authority with students in the classroom. Reframing the activity of negotiation as less of a politics and more as a way to operationalize or manage ambience seems productive. Sure, this approach risks our intervening in ways that are potentially disruptive or that, in a sense, seem to disrupt ambience, but we seem always to be doing this already.

Again, I intend these premises to be suggestive, opening opportunities to think about intersections between contemporary ethics and critical pedagogy scholarship. I take these very premises up in the conclusion of the dissertation, offering teaching approaches that help to operationalize ethics in classroom practice. For now, in the interest of fleshing out what I refer to in this chapter as ethics' recent materialist emphasis, I turn in the next chapter to the scholarship that focuses more explicitly on the topic of ecology as relates to Composition. Interestingly, this move will find us, at times, further away from the classroom, and, at other times, closer than we might have imagined.

#### **CHAPTER 4: THEORIZING THE ENDS OF COMPOSITION STUDIES: MANAGEMENT AND ECOLOGY IN DOBRIN AND COOPER**

Sid Dobrin's *Postcomposition* (2011) offers a relatively bleak portrait of the field of composition studies. In Dobrin's reading, composition studies has given insufficient attention to its intellectual future, an oversight he attributes to the field's "historically imposed prohibition on theory" and "bureaucratic" trajectory (6). For Dobrin, our histories rarely attend to the real political challenges that inhere in composition studies beyond "narratives of how writing instructors were and are treated as labor and devalued in relation to those who taught literature." If this tendency is duplicitous, Dobrin argues, it is because these histories often willfully ignore the extent to which we are complicit in the bureaucratic processes we critique:

As an academic effort, the field has followed an economic, bureaucratic, and organizational trajectory as much as it has followed theoretical and pedagogical/pragmatic lines of development. In order for composition studies to become an academic field, those doing the work of composition studies had to persuade administrators that the teaching of rhetoric and writing was important enough to secure funding. From these positions, then, composition studies could justify funding for journals, professional organizations, graduate programs, and all of the trappings that make and validate a discipline as disciplinary to its members and others in the academy. (6-7)

Here, Dobrin speaks to two related tendencies that exist in disciplinary scholarship: Our early efforts to codify an "academic" history and confer legitimacy on the field, and our continued (financial) interest in protecting our investments against administrative scrutiny. Building from the latter premise, Dobrin's critique centers on the bureaucratic trajectory in composition studies, which he links with the field's subjectivist orientation. Dobrin argues that this bureaucratic trajectory attains "a state of self-perpetuation by creating its own audiences and need for publication and conferences," replicating itself through "disciplinary standards, core knowledge, and professional doctrine and lore" (7).

For Dobrin, the bureaucratization of composition studies represents a shift in the way that we conceptualize our work as compositionists: as we trade writing instruction for the paradigm of writing administration, and the subject of writing for the “administration of subjects” (13). Though Dobrin is concerned for our complicity in this process, he seems more directly preoccupied with the integrity of this shift, which, he argues, destabilizes our efforts in the writing classroom. Put another way, Dobrin seems less concerned that practitioners “sold out,” though this is clearly at issue, than for what we “sold off” in the process: our distinct purview in writing instruction.

*Postcomposition* builds purposefully, if a little expectedly, from this critique, pushing at the limits of this bureaucratic tendency. Deploying the conceptual framework “postcomposition” as a disciplinary injunction, Dobrin gestures at a space *post*-composition, aside and apart from composition studies. In this sense, postcomposition offers not so much a corrective, but a potential departure point; it seeks not to retool compositions studies, but rather to inspire a veritable reconfiguration of the field, a “disruption,” as Dobrin calls it, that shifts our focus from “writing subjects” to “writing itself.” Though the stakes of this shift require further explication, a task I take up below, Dobrin’s critique offers a useful starting place for the fourth chapter of this dissertation, opening opportunities to discuss broader institutional challenges in composition studies as well as potential disciplinary limit-lines. We might ask, how is ethics defined by the disciplinary-limit situation? Or, alternatively, what is ethics’ bureaucratic character?

Of course Dobrin is not alone in his critique of composition studies’ bureaucratic tendencies, nor in his call for new places for composition scholarship, topics that have been taken up by figures like David Smit (2007), Victor Vitanza (1993; 2003), Cynthia

Haynes (2003), and Sharon Crowley (1998). Smit, like Dobrin, offers that our purposes would be well-served by recognizing the practical “ends” of composition studies, at least in its current institutional configuration; Crowley gestures at a similar fate for first year composition courses, noting that the requirement should be seriously reviewed, if not outright abolished; Offering the metaphor of a “disappearing coastline” to describe the troubled status of the field, Haynes encourages practitioners to take the venture “offshore.” Yet, despite these congruities, the ethical tenor of Dobrin’s critique stands out. Dobrin argues that “the disciplinary imperative is not enough” because, as he explains, “there is an (ethical) imperative beyond the boundaries of composition studies’ field that demands that work be pursued that theorizes writing beyond the disciplinary limit-situation” (3). A key challenge of this chapter, then, will be to un-bracket this “ethical” imperative and to examine how ethics is leveraged against composition studies. Postcomposition situates ethics outside of composition studies in an imperative that, in Dobrin’s words, lies “beyond the boundaries of composition studies.” This intervention marks a critical shift in how we conceptualize the ethical mission and purview of composition, not only in its suggestion that our ethical mission has been compromised, but in its reconfiguration of the ethical subject as an agent *in search of ethics*, an agent that must work to (re)locate ethics beyond disciplinary borders.

Building from Dobrin’s concerns, this chapter is organized into three sections through which I consider the disciplinary challenges inveighed by postcomposition. In the first section, I unpack Dobrin’s theoretical framework for *Postcomposition*, drawing connections to the work of figures like Thomas Rickert and Sharon Crowley. Here, I am interested in thinking about how Dobrin leverages the idea of “writing itself,” as opposed

to the more familiar formulation “teaching of writing,” as an expression of place, sometimes within and sometimes outside composition studies. Critical to making sense of this shift, which I argue constitutes a third, distinct trajectory in contemporary ethics, is understanding how the construct “writing” comes to be separated from other conceptual nodes and signifiers (for example, writing practice, writing pedagogy, writing process). What does it mean, borrowing from Dobrin, to conceptualize writing as a phenomenon that precedes subjectivity, and, further, to suggest that this thing, writing, is constitutive of ethics? Relevant to the purpose of the dissertation as a whole, how does this configuration modify our sense of what it means to teach writing?

In the second section, I turn my attention more directly to the “bureaucratic trajectory” in composition studies, organizing my analysis of the field’s bureaucratic structure around the conceptual framework of ecology. Although Dobrin has largely abandoned the ecological premise of his earlier work, the concept of ecology provides useful resources for conceptualizing ethics in the context of writing instruction and administration, particularly in its attention to emergent conditions of writing practice. The challenge here, which I discuss in further detail below, is to manage a balance between the localized space of the writing classroom and the broader institutional coordinates of writing administration. To this end, the concept of ecology provides a critical through line by which to interrogate these related levels of practice. In this section, I offer some alternative models for understanding the interplay of bureaucratic restraints, focusing specifically on the work of Donna Strickland and Joseph Harris. Strickland and Harris offer modified versions of Dobrin’s critique, but focus more directly on the practical constraints (and possibilities) of writing administration.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I apply pressure to Dobrin's framework for postcomposition in an effort to relocate ethics, not outside the borders (or off the "coastline," to borrow Haynes expression) of composition studies, but as a condition of negotiation specific to the work of writing instruction. If it is fair to suggest that Dobrin wants an ethics without institutional constraints, but I ask after the practical difficulties of such a position. My point here is not to suggest that there are no other options, nor to accept this disciplinary trajectory at face value; rather, I argue there is benefit to operationalizing bureaucratic features of writing administration *in the service of* writing instruction. Like the previous two chapters, I build from a dialectical approach, focusing on the work of Marilyn Cooper, an important early proponent of ecological frameworks for classroom practice. I argue in particular for the value of her concept of the "social world," a concept that connects usefully with Patricia Bizzell's notion of "lived experience" (see Chapter 3), and, more specifically, her focus on "emergent" and "enacted" forms of agency. Whereas in the first two chapters I focused on figures that are perhaps more readily identified with the critical pedagogy movement in composition studies, I make efforts in this chapter to build out from this locus point in the hopes of capturing the broader character of composition studies' native ethical tradition. Building from Cooper's work, I argue for the continuing viability of composition studies' ethical program, particularly its commitments to practical and pedagogical concerns.

### **Postcomposition**

*Postcomposition* opens familiar disputes about labor, praxis, and the legitimacy of composition scholarship. In its Marxist inflection, Dobrin's critique centers on the

distribution of labor in composition studies, which find us acting, as Sharon Crowley might argue, more like “managers” than teachers of writing:

Much of this discrepancy over composition studies’ legitimacy as a field results from/in an inability to articulate an *intellectual* focus beyond the training of teachers, an activity set in service of the continued management of student bodies rather than in pursuit of understanding of writing in the formation of the signifier ‘student.’ Composition studies, if it is a field, is a field that has little vision of its own frontiers beyond its reliance upon management of students, but at the same time has rampant fear of losing what little territory it has gained, clinging tightly to its academic territory. (18)

If these management tendencies are “ethically abhorrent,” Dobrin continues, it is because, composition studies “[masks] its institutional missions as agendas of improvement,” with “little, if any, critical examination of the work toward improvement” (13). In order to “escape the shackles of classrooms, students, and management,” Dobrin suggests that we move beyond composition studies’ “neurosis of pedagogy,” which he sees as symptomatic of a broader “anti-intellectual” condition in the field:

*Postcomposition* contends that the field’s narrow-minded attention to teaching, to subjects, and to the management of those subjects has not only created an anti-intellectual condition but has given rise to the need to cast aside composition studies as an intellectual endeavor, bequeathing it to its own powerful position as a service entity and training ground for professionals in education and midlevel management. (28)

If we have tended to be distracted by institutional matters, Dobrin asks after theories of writing that can disrupt this bureaucratic trajectory, thus opening opportunities to talk about writing more directly.

Disruption is a tall order, but the critical charge of this “post-” polemic seems to have increasing sway in the field. In this sense, *Postcomposition* is representative of a broader movement that seeks, paradoxically, to relocate the work of composition studies beyond its borders. More specifically, this third trajectory in contemporary ethics is

characterized by its interest in localizing resistance around writing, and writing alone (“writing itself”). To the latter point, Dobrin argues that composition studies has been unable to develop sufficient vocabulary to describe “writing as a phenomena precursory to the phenomena it writes.” Though we have been attentive to writing products, we have given little attention to phenomenological dimensions of writing experience, which means considering how writing is produced by and functions to produce other phenomena.

Like Rickert, Dobrin pushes for theories that better recognize the situational or “ecological” fabrics that (pre)condition our experience of writing. Here, Dobrin makes an interesting intervention, offering the term “postcomposition” to describe not only a potential departure point for composition studies, but a “spatial” alternative to linear frameworks for writing practice. Dobrin explains this distinction in a short passage from Chapter 2, “The Space of Writing”:

Because of the more popular use of ‘post’ as an indicator of chronology, many may hear postcomposition to indicate an issue of time, a marker of a shift in era, a time after composition studies. However, as I hope I have indicated thus far, I intend “post” *primarily* as a spatial indicator [...] I emphasize the role of the spatial, turning to the temporal only when unavoidable, conveniently placing time aside until invoking it becomes strategically useful. I do this because time is the more familiar approach (think: process); space, in its unfamiliarity, offers potential for theorizing writing in ways not yet put forward and not confined by chronological thinking. Space and time are inseparable, but they are also politically loaded terms of demarcation. (29)

Unpacking Dobrin’s search for a spatio-temporal model for writing is challenging, in part because this conceptual framework seems still very much in-work in *Postcomposition*. That said, there is value in dissecting this distinction because, as Dobrin tells us, the bureaucratic trajectory in composition studies informs (and is informed by) our sense of what writing does.

Megan McIntyre rightly identifies *Postcomposition* as a provocation, one that teases out disciplinary borders while pushing for new spaces beyond composition studies. For her part, McIntyre sees promise in this agitational stance, which she credits with initiating important conversations regarding posthumanism, subjectivity, and agency. John Pell makes a similar argument in his review for *Composition Forum*, noting that this “new critical paradigm” gets us away from the troubling legacies and metaphors of literary criticism, particularly the tendency to conceptualize writing as a product of linear movements across time. For Pell, Dobrin opens up composition studies’ model of writing, offering a new language for making sense of writing’s temporal and spatial coordinates:

Spatiality as a metaphor for potentiality leads Dobrin to perhaps his most provocative claim about Postcomposition: writing theory needs to reflect a posthuman stance toward discourse. If writing theory is no longer beholden to the classroom or to the administration of subjects then it becomes clear that discourse is not simply the result of deliberate, historically and culturally informed composing; rather, discourse is the ‘never-ending (re)circulation’ of writing ‘throughout network, system, and environment.’ (2)

Dobrin’s successes seem to be a measure of his ability to “provoke,” a term that comes up repeatedly in both reviews. Reviews of Dobrin’s work tend to respond in kind, keying in more primarily on Dobrin’s agitational tactics than any actual alternative model for writing offered by postcomposition. *Postcomposition* is likened to Byron Hawk’s *A Counter-History of Composition*, David Smit’s *The End of Composition Studies*, as well as the work of figures like Raul Sanchez and Susan Miller. These comparisons are not unwarranted, especially when we consider the extent to which Dobrin borrows from each of these sources, but such reviews tend to downplay the broader challenges inveighed by

postcomposition, particularly its efforts to relocate writing (and ethics) outside composition studies.

Christine Farris pulls this connection out succinctly in her review of *Postcomposition*, “Managing the Subject of Composition Studies.” Farris takes specific exception with Dobrin’s push to deoperationalize theory as well as his efforts to “disassociate writing studies from pedagogy and administration.” Farris is concerned not so much with Dobrin’s efforts to engage theory “on its own terms,” but rather with Dobrin’s seeming disinterest in the practical implications of writing theory. She argues that this approach finds Dobrin missing useful examples:

Certainly critique is imperative to disrupt what inevitably becomes stable and management-driven. To disassociate writing studies from pedagogy and administration, however, because of how it functions to limit what we care to know about writing is another matter. If one is to understand the system in which writing circulates, is not how writing instruction is delivered and administered--all communication about communication--a part of that system? Why the need to reject pedagogical implications of what an ever-becoming postcomposition engages? (212)

Put another way, what Farris seems to be asking is whether postcomposition needs to reject composition studies altogether. Farris’ critique mirrors contentions I raise in my discussion of Patricia Bizzell’s work in Chapter 2, and similar criticism has been offered by Paul Lynch and Nathaniel Rivers’ in the collection *Thinking With Bruno Latour In Rhetoric and Composition* (TWL; 2015). Tracking the writing imperative from Dobrin to Stanley Fish, Lynch and Rivers note that the post-composition imperative risks as much as it hopes to gain, effectively *gutting* composition studies: “From Dobrin to Fish, composition moves from boutique to big box, but this is a distinction without a difference. Together Fish and the fisherman gut composition of both teaching and

scholarship. This is what a crisis of belief looks like: two--and only two--bad choices” (8).

This “crisis of belief” has a growing audience in composition studies, and it is worth considering how this emerging idea, postcomposition, redirects our sense of what it means to teach writing. As a theoretical project, Dobrin’s push to unhinge writing from subjectivity is a challenging premise. In characteristically tongue-in-cheek fashion, Lynch and Rivers reframe the premise as follows: “No students, no classrooms, no programs, no university, and no composition--just writing” (8). More, Dobrin seems unwilling to commit to a theory of writing that is about “how writers write” (11). And yet, in other places, he backs away from this premise, leaving us to wonder after a theory of writing that can be simultaneously about and not about writers:

[...] I do not forward a no-student approach but instead a not-only-students or a writing-without-students position, not grounding writing in *student* or even in *subjectivity*. Certainly, the idea of postcomposition that I develop here is post-student, or at least post-student as student is currently conceived, and it is certainly postpedagogy. (15)

This premise is further complicated by Dobrin’s efforts to distinguish between pedagogical and “intellectual” scholarship. To this end, Dobrin can be said to be rehashing old arguments, though with more dramatic flare. His critique that composition studies fails to take its intellectual future seriously reworks familiar disputes about the institutional province of the field. Dobrin, like Sharon Crowley, questions the merit of this pedagogical affiliation, and seems to conclude that our purposes would be better served by devoting our attention to intellectual matters. This is, of course, a possibility--it is in fact possible to think of composition studies as a distinctly intellectual endeavor--but, the question of how composition studies can have an *ethical* force beyond the

classroom is a thornier one, begging the question, does “writing itself” satisfy our purposes?

Playing on prefixes, postcomposition could, just as easily, be rebranded “precomposition.” Both expressions engender a sense of writing as an activity that we can, if we are careful enough, distinguish from other related phenomena. Precomposition, like postcomposition, seems to denote a space aside (perhaps even before) process, and thus claims to offer a truer, more defined or absolute vision of writing. And yet, interestingly enough, the modified “precomposition” seems a more direct expression of this vision, opening a space that remains (as of yet) uncorrupted by subjectivity, ideology, and the humanist imperative more generally. This, Dobrin contends, is the value of postcomposition’s posthuman inflection, which, he clarifies, seeks not a space “outside of writing,” but rather recognizes the posthuman 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 it or imposes it” (65). Dobrin explains that, as a “posthuman” model, postcomposition is directly concerned with the “making of the posthuman,” again gesturing towards a space pre-process, pre-product and, relevant to our purposes, pre-composition.

Where Dobrin’s theory of writing becomes particularly complicated is in the uneasy interface between subjectivity and agency. Though Dobrin’s ire for subjectivist frameworks is palpable throughout *Postcomposition*, the topic of agency gets less direct treatment:

By seeing writing not as the product (or process) of a producing subject but as a never-ending (re)circulation in which larger producing/desiring machines generate and perpetuate writing throughout network, system, and environment, we

are better able to attend to the issue of writing and circulation as primary to the theoretical work of postcomposition. (77)

Agency offers a kind of intervention here, redirecting our attention to the activity and ecology of systems (theory), but though Dobrin distinguishes between the “circulation” of agency and the rigidity of subjectivity, maintaining these conceptual borders seems a difficult, if not impossible, task. This “circulation” is not insignificant, especially as concerns our understanding of the writing model offered by postcomposition, and, as I note elsewhere, finds us circling back (or perhaps recirculating) pre-composition.

At the level of disciplinary practice, precomposition offers a fitting characterization of the institutional charge of Dobrin’s critique, which is reminiscent of earlier concerns about the province of composition studies in relation to English studies. Strangely enough, Dobrin’s vision for composition studies seems to find us not at the end, but back at the beginning, trading teachers for intellectuals, the classroom for scholarship, and the writing process for the written word (Crowley offers the term “language”). Or, as James Berlin might say, postcomposition finds us trading politics for poetics. This collapsing of pre- and post-, the slippage between, finds us at a theoretical precipice, balancing, on one hand, process as a spatio-temporal construct and, on the other, what we might liken to an *aesthetics of the text*. One practice, Berlin reminds us, strives to find an entrance in the movement; the other engenders difference, remaking the object as an object for study.<sup>25</sup> The real difficulty of Dobrin’s position, and the broader difficulty of calls for the end of composition studies, is that these two positions seem always collapsing. We witness this in the tension between (a) Dobrin’s concept of rhetorical circulation, which suggests a broader (becoming-) world with which we

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<sup>25</sup> For an extended analysis of this distinction, please refer to Chapter 2.

interface, and (b) his suggestion that writing (and perhaps also ethics) can be located apart (or aside) from subjectivity, pedagogy, and the classroom.

### **Two Ecologies of Bureaucracy**

In *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, published the same year as *Postcomposition*, Donna Strickland voices similar concerns regarding the bureaucratic trajectory in composition studies. Like Dobrin, Strickland argues that our histories have given little critical consideration to the role of writing administration in writing pedagogy (4):

The managerial has been largely ignored in the stories codified in the classic histories of composition studies, all written by scholars who focus on the teaching of writing at the very moment that most of them were working as directors of writing programs or centers. These histories of composition studies--for example, Albert Kitzhaber's classic dissertation, James Berlin's two volumes on writing instruction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Robert Connors's study of composition-rhetoric--have focused primarily on developments in writing pedagogy. While writing and the teaching of writing have indeed been the primary areas of scholarly inquiry over the past thirty years, the working conditions that have supported this scholarship have more often than not involved administration. (4-5)

This tendency is problematic, Strickland continues, not merely because it “idealizes” composition studies, but because these histories “presume an audience of professionally secure teachers” (5). In a passage that is reminiscent of Sharon Crowley's work in the late-1990s, Strickland argues that these narratives have tended only to engage managerial challenges from the perspective of “tragedy,” “telling of the marginalization of teaching and writing in departments that privilege the interpretation of texts (criticism) over the production of texts (rhetoric) and thus the study of literature over the teaching of writing” (5).

Strickland makes the case for a “vigorous materiality” in composition studies that would call attention to the “managerial unconscious” that inheres in the field. For Strickland, managerial unconscious offers a conceptual framework for understanding how certain material conditions--labor, management, institutional forces--are ignored or overlooked, thus proliferating as “unconscious” formations in the field. The term “unconscious” is also suggestive because it explains how the day-to-day, administrative business of composition studies persists, even without our direct attention. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, there is a sense in which the unconscious is a deliberate manifestation or repression resulting from our willing complicity in the managerial process.

Despite similarities in tone and argument, *Managerial Unconscious* and *Postcomposition* end in very different places. In part, this may be owing Strickland’s “managerial” as opposed to “bureaucratic” approach, which suggests potential openings for intervention in management. If Strickland is concerned that the management imperative undermines our work as teachers of writing, she sees recuperative value in the work that we do, even as managers. For Strickland, a management position does not automatically confer a management “identity” and thus a fixed and immediately compromised position. Rather, she explains, management might be characterized as a “class struggle,” wherein opportunities exist to mitigate exploitation:

To manage, then, is not necessarily to exploit, though it may by default contribute to exploitation when the work of management is not critically examined. What seems essential, then, is not to get rid of the managerial function: all complex organizations, which certainly include writing programs, depend on some sort of leadership. What *is* essential is that the effects of that work are always examined, that we do not dismiss as unnecessary what Richard Miller regards as the “easy part” of critique. Critical questions need to be asked: When does leadership

become exploitation? How can a person in a managerial position work *with* the people being managed rather than take advantage of them? (15-16)

Unlike Dobrin, Strickland offers not an escape trajectory, but rather a premise for management that sees administrative positions as a necessary evil: How can managers work “with” those that are managed? Composition studies “does not need to defend itself against the ‘managerial’ epithet,” Strickland explains, because this “epithet” is a natural condition of any “complex” organization.

Joseph Harris offers a similar reading in his wonderful 2000 *CCC* article, “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss.” Like Strickland, Harris appeals to the notion of class consciousness for its diagnostic import, arguing that consciousness “proves a much harder thing to get (or, more accurately, to *make*) than one might at first think” (45). To this end, Harris offers practical approaches for dealing with the management problem in composition studies: He argues, for instance, that supervisors (for example, directors of composition) should teach the courses they supervise (58; 63), and that we should reconfigure the first-year writing course so that it “lessens the demands it places on staffing, thus alleviating some of the (part time) labor challenges we are seeing in the field” (62). Though these strategies provide useful opportunities to re-operationalize writing administration, the real force of Harris’ critique begins with a distinction he borrows from a former student. In his writing courses, Harris asks students to “describe the social class of their own families” (49). Harris examines a few student responses in his article, noting that, in one example, a student distinguishes between his father’s experience working “for” and “at” IBM: “And while the family of the third writer has kept their ‘heads above water,’ doing so has required his dad to bounce from a job where

he worked *for* IBM to one where he now works *at* it” (50; emphasis in original). Harris goes on to explain the potential significance of this distinction:

While I don’t know exactly what the third writer is getting at when he stresses that his father now works *at* rather than *for* IBM, it could be that his dad is now an outsourced worker, without the benefits or job security given ‘regular’ employees. Kovacic writes of her father, the electrician, that he was ‘proud to work for the university.’ As the biographies attached to our books and articles attest, however, academics usually speak of themselves as teaching *at* a university or in a program or department--a phrasing that suggests we keep a measure of control over the work we do, that our labor is not directly ‘for’ our employers. It’s worth remember, though, that many of our fellow writing teachers work ‘at’ the university in the weak sense of the term--as contingent labor, on a per-course basis, without benefits or job security, or even, in many cases, much say over the content of what they teach. (50)

Harris draws an important distinction here, which he continues to build on throughout the article. While “for” connotes a connection to an organization, a strong bond of identification, “at” implies difference and a relation premised in practical, as opposed to philosophical, affiliations. Leveraging this distinction for its corrective import, Harris argues that, in order to redirect the management imperative we must acknowledge “that we are indeed workers in a corporate system that we hope to reform, rather than persisting in fantasies of escaping that system, of operating in some pure space as critics who may happen to work *at* a university but who are somehow not *of* it” (51).

Returning to Dobrin’s work, the disciplinary evacuation staged by postcomposition represents not so much a “crisis of belief,” as Lynch and Rivers argue, but a crisis of identification. If postcomposition problematizes our working “at” composition studies, it seems to suggest that we can locate stronger points of identification elsewhere. Harris provides one potential model for responding to the proposed evacuation of composition studies, arguing that identification is a matter of responsibility, or, as Lynch and Rivers might say “stewardship.” How can we work “at” a

university, capitalizing on the benefits this system confers, and somehow not be “of” the university? Marc Bousquet rightly identifies Harris’ project as being premised in issues of identification, noting that Harris’ “boss” is a “worker struggling to make himself available to the rhetoric and social project of solidarity” (31). Practically speaking, then, Harris’ push for writing administrators to teach freshman composition could be seen to have the value of (re)awakening writing administrators to real challenges other workers face, thus creating opportunities for increased solidarity among administrators and workers. Or, as Bousquet puts it: “This means that if institutional critique is the answer to the pessimistic structure of feeling that presently characterizes professional and managerial compositionists, it is a kind of critique that the professionals and the managers will have to learn from the works in their charge” (31). Though Bousquet goes on to argue for the abolishment of the WPA position, in an effort to balance out relations between colleagues (“learning to write as colleagues among colleagues”) to improve opportunities for true solidarity, Bousquet seems also to see promise in Harris’ efforts to revitalize a bond of identification or “solidarity” in composition studies.

What Harris seems to offer, simplifying, is an ecological perspective for management which recognizes the interrelation between administrative and pedagogical levels of practice, and seeks to understand how agents, in this case practitioners in the field, are embedded within this broader institutional ecology. My analysis seeks to build on Strickland and Harris’ mutual concern for the activity and responsibilities of management, while emphasizing the importance of identification to the management process. We can develop, I think, a theory of managerial consciousness which brings a consideration for management into our histories, theories, and teaching approaches,

without, as Strickland argues, having “management” become a fixed identity. More, as Harris explains, there is an ethical imperative at work, even at the level of management. Harris provides an opening to talk about the ethical challenges that inhere in the managerial unconscious, particularly in his insistence that we are responsible for making the unconscious conscious. In this sense, the ethical imperative is better served not by an ecological perspective that seeks a brand new ecology, but rather a perspective that recognizes, with the aim of improving, conditions in composition studies. This will require us to think critically about what is at stake in identifying at/of composition studies, and that we give more serious consideration to the role of rhetorical agency as a potential mediating force in this broader ecological system.

### **Emergent, Enacted, and Bureaucratic Ethics**

The concept of ecology offers important tools for interrogating the bureaucratic constraints of composition studies and represents another critical locus point for recuperating the discipline’s native ethical tradition. This chapter offers a third, alternative ecology of the bureaucratic “crisis” in composition studies premised in Marilyn Cooper’s foundational work on the topic. In contrast to the “bureaucratic” focus of Dobrin’s critique, and the related “managerial” focus of Strickland’s analysis, Cooper gives critical attention to issues of agency, showing special concern for how agency is actualized or, in her terms, “enacted” in context. As I will work to show, postcompositions’ anti-bureaucratic antagonisms are actually, and perhaps ironically, anti-ecological, particularly given that this approach misses opportunities to examine the unique institutional ecology of composition studies. To this end, Cooper’s body of work offers important inroads to revitalize an ecological model of the field. In my juxtaposition

of Dobrin and Cooper's approaches, I mean not to suggest that Dobrin's concerns are misplaced, but rather to identify potential connections that remain unexamined. My aim, in short, is to develop a fuller and more complete ecological model for composition studies that, in Cooper's terms, might help us better capture the unique ethical challenges that inhere in this "social world."

Before turning to Cooper's work directly, a key focus of this final section, it is worth reviewing some of Dobrin's more direct comments on ecological models of writing practice. Though much of his earlier work deals directly with the topic of ecocomposition, Dobrin occupies a more ambivalent position in *Postcomposition*. In some places, Dobrin seems optimistic about the potential of ecocomposition and, in other places, markedly less so. For instance, Dobrin sees value in ecocomposition's efforts to capture the complexity of writing systems. Speaking to Cooper's work directly, he notes that she succeeds in opening opportunities to "engage writing as a complex system," and develops a theory that "encompass[es] writer, writing, and system within a single gaze" (133). Elsewhere, Dobrin suggests that the ecocomposition project has failed, citing two key contentions: He notes that ecological models have generally (1) failed to produce "any substantial theory regarding the ecological facets of writing or even the relationships between writing and any ecological or environmental 'crisis'" and (2) tended to embrace "floating signifiers like 'nature' and 'environment' as its primary objects of study *rather than writing*" (125; my emphasis).

Dobrin sees similar problems in Cooper's work, noting that her model for writing, "falls prey to the *will of stability*, identifying that 'systems are concrete' and that all writers are involved in systems in which they can 'specify the domain of ideas activated

and supplemented” (133; my emphasis). Dobrin’s specific concern with Cooper’s work is that her model leans too heavily on the agent as a stable configuration of ecological systems, thus underestimating the complexity of these systems. Dobrin also gestures at more systemic issues in the field, suggesting that Cooper’s recourse to the agent is representative of a broader “will of stability.” Dobrin concludes that we would be better served, not by pursuing the ecological premise any further, but rather, by devoting our attention more directly to phenomenological dimensions of writing practice.

Leaving aside the fact that Dobrin’s critique borders on the kind of social-epistemic and critical pedagogy models he is critical of elsewhere, particularly in his suggestion that the solution is to take more risk (“the edge of chaos”), his critique of the “will of stability” in composition studies warrants consideration. To this end, it may be instructive to turn back to Cooper directly, if even for the purpose of considering other currents at work in her writing. Though much attention has been given to Cooper’s early article “The Ecology of Writing,” which is generally credited with initiating a critical ecological discourse in composition studies, relatively little attention has been given her more recent work on the related topics of “emergent” and “enacted” agency, which I argue connects with and builds from her earlier work in important ways. As I will work to show, Cooper’s recent scholarship fills out and repigments her earlier work, providing a useful resource for practitioners interested in alternative models of writing administration in composition studies.

In “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted” (2011), Cooper continues her ecological project, but with a more direct focus on the agent. If Cooper’s early work can be said to build up from the agent with the purpose of reading agent and broader system

together, her recent article stages an inversion of that premise, burrowing back down (from the level of the broader ecological system) in search of the agent. Here, Cooper responds directly to the theoretical challenges instigated by posthumanism, expressing concern that, in an increasingly globalized world, the “possibility of agency seems increasingly impossible” (420). If the death of the subject is disconcerting, Cooper continues, it is because, as a theoretical venture, postmodernism seems to disassociate agency from “responsibility,” raising the question “whether we must simply resign ourselves to modernist lamenting or postmodern rejoicing at the loss of our responsibility for the way our world turns out, or whether some notion of human agency in bringing about positive changes can be rescued” (420). For her part, Cooper argues that a version of agency *should* be recuperated and, building from Latour’s notion of a “good common world,” points to broader social commitments that the practice of agency engenders. Cooper seeks an approach that acknowledges the problems of intentionality and free will, but that stops short of (fully) embracing the turn from conscious, deliberative practice, and builds purposefully from earlier critiques of the “rational” subject, noting that although agents “do reflect on their actions consciously [...] agency does not arise from conscious mental acts,” even if consciousness does play a role. Instead, she continues, agency takes shape from “lived knowledge” and a sense that “[our] actions are [our] own” (421).

In her recent work, Cooper builds what she describes as a “neurophenomenological” account of rhetorical agency, combining complexity theory and phenomenology. She argues that the concept of neurophenomenology helps us to understand how “things” like perception and behavior emerge from “processes of living

in the world.” Though Cooper, similar to Dobrin, invokes the concept of ecology in the interest of better capturing the spatial coordinates of social experience (“the ideal image the ecological model projects is of an infinitely extended group of people who interact through writing”), the concept of ecology has a broader political significance for Cooper, offering a distinct vision of agency and formula for action. Cooper shows a special concern for rhetoric’s practical coordinates, particularly the mundane, exploratory features of rhetorical experience. Paired together, “emergent” and “enacted” agency could be said to offer an ecology of agency which seeks to identify how agency emerges, not as a product of context, but rather as a configuration of processes intrinsic to the workings of a system. In Cooper’s reading, emergence precipitates a “disposition” that impacts “how we experience the neurodynamic structure of individuals, ourselves included.” This means not that we are conscious of every formation that causes experience--much of this process is unconscious--but that we become aware of particular configurations or patterns of emergence as these patterns emerge.

If Cooper and Dobrin share a similar vision of emergence, their positions differ critically at the level of how emergence is actualized. For his part, Dobrin seems suspicious of the fixedness with which we seize on individual agents in our models of writing practice. In contrast, Cooper sees value in recognizing a form of agency in emergence, if even it requires that we modify the way we talk about what the agent does. Not only does agency exist, Cooper takes this position a step further, arguing that there is a “skill” to agency that inheres in our “practical consciousness,” a term she borrows from Anthony Giddens (434). Cooper cautions against a model of agency that sees the agent as a defining “cause,” precipitating change, and instead offers a model that works to account

for what she refers to as the “embodied” and “inescapable” experience of agency. That is, if we have tended to see agency as a political tool or form of empowerment that we leverage during moments of need, Cooper contends that agency is probably better thought of as a condition of emergence that impacts the agent, and that the task for the agent is to try to modify the way that agency is enacted (443). Speaking to the issue of student agency directly, a topic that is largely ignored in *Postcomposition*, Cooper notes that her theory of agency requires that we shift our emphasis in the classroom, from a pedagogy of “empowerment” (after Shor) to a pedagogy of “responsibility”:

We need to help students understand that writing and speaking (rhetoric) are always serious actions. The meanings they create in their rhetoric arise from and feed back into the construction of their own dispositions, their own ethos. What they write or argue, as with all other actions they perform, makes them who they are. And though their actions do not directly cause anything to happen, their rhetorical actions, even if they are embedded in the confines of a college class, always have effects: they perturb anyone who reads or hears their words. (443)

Turning our attention to broader disciplinary challenges, Cooper’s model for agency offers resources for reinterpreting the challenges that inhere in composition studies’ bureaucratic trajectory, particularly as it aligns with Harris’ suggestion that we own up to the management problem in the field.

Cooper offers some important insights that can be usefully modified for present purposes: Cooper attunes us to conditions of fluctuation in dynamic ecological systems, which suggests that opportunities for change inhere in any system: “These attitudes, procedures, and arrangements make up a system of cultural norms which are [...] neither stable nor uniform throughout a culture” (373). Further, her emphasis on the role that agents play in this process is instructive, offering a program for intervention: “People move from group to group, bringing along with them different complexes of ideas,

purposes, and norms, different ways of interacting, different interpersonal roles and textual forms.” What is interesting about Cooper’s ecological model, as juxtaposed with Dobrin’s, is that she sees individual actors as bringing their own ecological “complexes” to broader ecological systems. Cooper makes efforts to explain how micro and macro ecologies become enmeshed through, for instance, culture. Similar to Berlin, Cooper sees the activity of culture playing a critical and constitutive role in ecological exchange: “Writing, thus, is seen to be both constituted by and constitutive of these ever-changing systems, systems through which people relate as complete, social beings, rather than imagining each other as remote images: an author, an audience.”

Cooper is well aware of the of the risks that inheres in her theory of how ecological systems mutate, admitting that systems “are often resistant to change and not easily accessible”:

Whenever ideas are seen as commodities they are not shared; whenever individual and group purposes cannot be negotiated someone is shut out; differences in status, or power, or intimacy curtail interpersonal interactions; cultural institutions and attitudes discourage writing as often as they encourage it; textual forms are just as easily used as barriers to discourse as they are used as a means of discourse. (373)

Yet, despite these concerns, Cooper maintains that the value of an ecological model is that it suggests a course of action, offering opportunities to “diagnose” and remedy problems that exist within systems.

Bringing the conversation back to writing (and ethics), Cooper explains that ecological models should be premised in “good writing.” In one of the more thought-provoking statements of “The Ecology of Writing,” Cooper explains that the promise of an ecological model for composition studies is that such a model, “encourages us to direct our corrective energies away from the characteristics of the individual writer and

toward imbalances in social systems that prevent good writing” (373). Cooper, like Dobrin, seems committed to talking about writing directly, seeing it as a barometer of the vitality of the broader ecological system. And yet, Cooper’s modifier “good” stands out, not only because it suggests an agential force which works to shape the exigence of writing (to make writing “good”), but because “good writing” seems also to connote “good ethics.” Writing is an activity through which ecologies take shape and offers a method by which we, as agents, can “locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world.” That is, writing is an activity by which we manage our relations with others and, taking this formula a step further, “good” writing describes a system where these relations are well managed.

Returning to the myriad institutional and disciplinary challenges inveighed by *Postcomposition*, Cooper could be said to share some of Dobrin’s concerns about the way that writing is managed in composition studies. Both offer similar models for conceptualizing writing as a condition of ecological emergence. Cooper and Dobrin both also share a concern for the ethical challenges that inhere in conceptualizing what writing does for us in the social world. *But, where Dobrin’s model risks isolating writing as an activity without broader coordinates, Cooper seems to suggest that writing is a potential coordinate itself.* In this sense, Cooper offers a useful rejoinder to models and programs offered by figures like Donna Strickland and Joseph Harris. Harris’ point that writing program administrators should teach freshman composition courses is well taken, particularly in that it seeks to reconfigure the way that agency emerges and is enacted by writing program administrators, but what is missing, interestingly enough, from conversations about writing administration is a concern for how, to use Dobrin’s phrase,

“writing itself” is managed. To this end, though I think Dobrin is right to emphasize a return to writing, I am not convinced that this return requires us to evacuate composition studies. In fact, as I’ve tried to demonstrate in this chapter, there remains much value in revisiting a rich tradition of writing, administrative, and, germane to the dissertation as a whole, ethical scholarship that exists within the discipline. The real challenge then might be to manage our histories better. If these histories perpetuate a problematic ecology in rhetoric and composition, the task is not to go looking for a new and more hospitable environment (as if such a feat was a possibility), but to recognize and make better use of resources that inhere in this tradition. And, if Cooper’s work is instructive, there is reason to believe that better management, and better managers, can participate in this exigence. This might get us closer, as Marc Bousquet would say, to “*writing as* colleagues among colleagues.” Though, reworking Bousquet’s formulation, and building from Harris’ distinction, we might say that the aim is to write “for” colleagues among colleagues.

## CHAPTER 5: ASSESSING ETHICS: TOWARDS ETHICAL PROGRAMS FOR RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

As I work towards the conclusion of this project, I am drawn back to James Porter's prognostic remarks regarding the relationship between rhetoric and ethics, what he described as "rhetorical ethics," in *Ethics and Internetworked Writing* (1998). It would be an overstatement to suggest that Porter predicts the gravity of tensions that we are witnessing today, both because the relationship between rhetoric and ethics has long been a site of contention in our tradition and because many of the critical disciplinary tensions that are coming to a head today—for example, the rift between theory and praxis, knowledge and phenomenology—were already well-established at the time of Porter's writing. That said, Porter's work is instructive because he manages a balance that is difficult to locate in contemporary scholarship on the topic. For Porter, teachers of writing have a specific obligation to ethics, not as arbiters of the moral good, nor in the interest of a "static body of foundational principles, laws, and procedures," but rather as a "mode of questioning and a manner of positioning" (68-69). In Porter's reading, rhetorical ethics does not so much "provide specific answers to specific problems," but rather "suggests the process through which ethical conflicts can be adjudicated" (69).

As I've shown, ethics' trial in Rhetoric and Composition is anything but over, whatever the ruling of theory's high court, and Porter's call for adjudication offers prescient insights and possibilities for action. As practitioners, Porter reminds us that we have a responsibility to "rhetoric" which is defined by rhetoric's relationship to ethics. Not only must we "reconstruct [rhetoric's] historical and conceptual relationship to ethics," Porter argues for specific attention to ethical concerns in classroom practice.

Porter's comments on writing are compelling, particularly where he addresses the relationship between writings' "ethical consequences" and the broader "social good":

From the perspective of rhetoric-as-composing, writing is both a product and action, an action with political and ethical consequences. Every act of writing is an attempt to change an audience, and the ethical question that must intersect that attempt pertains to the ultimate goal of the action, which—if it is not precisely the "the social good"—will be someone's sense of "the good." We do not need Aristotle to remind us that all writing has an aim, that all writing is rhetorical, and therefore that all writing has an ethical component: It aims for the good of somebody or something. (68)

We do not need Aristotle to remind us that writing is a deeply ethical act because we *know* that writing is a deeply ethical act. And yet, despite this felt sense of the connection between writing and ethics, the topic has received little direct attention in many of our histories, often only appearing in a subsidiary capacity, attached but subordinate to rhetoric.

Taking Porter seriously at his call to reconstruct rhetoric's historical relationship with ethics, the pages that follow offer a compendium of ethical programs for those interested in further exploring the intersections between writing (pedagogy) and ethics, as well as between agency and alterity, theory and praxis, ambience and ethos, and writing and ecology, to name a few critical areas of focus in this dissertation. This compendium is organized into three sections that roughly correspond to the three body chapters of this dissertation. Realizing the difficulties of presenting a unified theory of "the social good," I begin from smaller origins, focusing, as Porter might say, on each scholar's "sense" of "the good" before exploring broader connections. In each section, I work to develop ethical programs rooted in classroom practice and give specific attention to teaching approaches and classroom activities that these programs might engender. Realizing the

constraints of space, I conclude each section by alluding to other possible connection points in the hope that readers may pursue these connections further.

Further, as the title of this chapter suggests (“Assessing Ethics”), this project is interested not only in assessing possibilities for an ethical program in the native ethical tradition, but in pursuing questions related to the formal practice of writing assessment. This chapter builds towards an assessment model, more fully articulated in the second section below, that is specifically attenuated to the ethical issues addressed herein. As Brian Huot (1996) has persuasively argued, the discipline is wanting for an alternative model of writing assessment that builds constructively from context, writing and rhetoric (“Toward a New Theory” 552). Continuing the project of Samuel Messick and Lee Cronbach, Huot explains that assessment has too long been dominated by a concern for statistical reliability and validity. Huot makes two important arguments here: (1) Validity, Huot argues, “must include a recognizable and supportable theoretical foundation as well as empirical data from students’ work.” “To be valid,” he continues, “writing assessment would need input from the scholarly literature about the teaching and learning of writing” (550). (2) Huot also notes that a test’s validity “includes its use,” which means thinking about how writing assessment procedures impact teaching *and* learning (551). In the interest of pursuing these connections, the second section below focuses on the topic of teacher feedback on student writing and how this might factor in the writing assessment process. There, I make an argument for an assessment program that is directly tied to the classroom and that gives specific attention to how the findings of writing assessment get actualized in context.

A note on terminology: I borrow the notion of an “ethical program” from James J. Brown, Jr.’s recent book by the same title, *Ethical Programs: Hospitality and the Rhetorics of Software* (2015). Brown identifies two primary meanings for ethical programs, noting that ethical programs refer both to (a) ethical challenges that inhere in complex computational systems, and (b) the “procedures we develop in order to deal with ethical predicaments” (para. 10). Though the broader aims of Brown’s analysis are largely beyond the purview of this project, particularly his investment in developing ethical programs for software studies, the notion of an ethical program for rhetoric and composition has significant value. First and most primarily, the concept suggests a course of action (“a program of action,” as Brown describes it) and a “set of steps taken to address an ethical predicament.” Second, ethical programs help us to identify a broader matrix for ethical action and offer a heuristic for tracking how programs coordinate, compete, and otherwise interact with each other. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the descriptor “program” suggests an ongoing process. As Brown notes, “ethical programs are enacted constantly.” Taking Brown a step further, we might say that ethical systems are defined by a programmatic persistence. In this sense, this chapter seeks to intervene and offer its own ethical programs while recognizing that these programs are part of a broader, complex and ongoing ethical system. The purpose of this chapter is not to argue for one kind of ethics over another, nor one program over another, but rather to suggest that there is agency in examining these overlapping systems.

### **Alterity and Agency**

Writing in the late-1990s, Calvin O. Schrag discusses the related possibilities for and limitations of rhetorical hermeneutics, a topic I address at length in Chapter 2. Schrag's critique shares clear affinities with that of Diane Davis, particularly in his appropriation of a Levinasian framework for ethics. For his part, Schrag argues that rhetorical reference might be thought of as "centrifugal" as opposed to "centripetal," emanating from a point of reference outside of the rhetor:

The lifeworld, with its multiple patterns of meaning, is indeed the proper referent in the rhetorical situation, enabling one to speak of a dynamics of 'rhetorical reference' that at once delimits, supplements, and enriches the dynamics of the circularity of 'hermeneutical reference.' Rhetorical reference is centrifugal rather than centripetal, adventitious, coming from the outside as it were, impinging upon rhetor and interlocutor alike, effecting an incursive disclosure, setting the requirement for each speaker to respond to the discourses and actions of a lifeworld that is not of his or her doing. ("Hermeneutical Circles" 138)

Similar to Davis, Schrag gives serious consideration to the challenges alterity creates for conventional models of rhetorical agency, noting that rhetorical reference begins from "outside" the speaker, "setting the requirement" to respond. Yet, despite congruities between Schrag and Davis' respective approaches, Schrag is markedly more hospitable to rhetorical hermeneutics; In Schrag's reading, rhetoric and hermeneutics are not only compatible, but intersecting forces. Schrag goes on to warn against "agonistic" approaches, a term that might be applied to the work of figures like Victor Vitanza and Diane Davis, arguing that such approaches are too totalizing.

In response to this "agonistic" trend in the field, Schrag searches after possibilities for agency within alterity. Here, Schrag could be said to occupy a middle position, offering the concept of a "transversal" relation to explain the rhetorical challenges that inhere in the interface between rhetor and interlocutor: "This recasting enables an

acceptance of the conflict of interpretations and the clash of convictions as indigenous features of existence in a cosmopolitan lifeworld” (144). Schrag concludes that a version of agency *is* possible and argues that much could be gained by exploring conditions of communality that inhere in our “common” world. If Davis’ position borders on the risk of “absolute exteriority,” particularly in its dismissal of the agent, Schrag offers a potential alternative reading, locating in the transversal a line that, to simplify, splits the difference between alterity and agency; these concepts (alterity and agency; rhetor and interlocutor) are not, Schrag reminds us, absolute: “The proper end of the transversal communication is convergence without coincidence, conjuncture without identity; it exhibits a self-understanding that works with an understanding of the other, geared to possible agenda for collaboration in spite of difference” (145).

Building from Schrag’s premise of rhetorical transversality and his interest in possibilities for agency that can be located in the “common world,” we would be well-served by revitalizing a notion of rhetorical citizenship in the writing classroom. Schrag does not use the term “citizenship” directly in his work, but the rhetorical challenges he inventories recall a rich body of scholarship on the topic. Borrowing from Schrag, rhetorical citizenship seems not so much a possibility, a path to be pursued, but a condition of rhetorical exchange, for better or worse. Viewed from this angle, James Berlin’s work seems directly relevant (see Chapter 2), but so too does a broader body of scholarship on the topics of citizenship and agency (Stark; Mathieu; Shor; Sidler; Greenbaum). Also pertinent is a rich tradition of questioning how the student-agent negotiates professional, academic and institutional citizenship (Harris; Bartholomae; Cushman; Gee; Elbow; Bizzell), even if the term “citizenship” is not used directly in

much of this work. As a primary point of entry, there may be benefit to operationalizing the connection between the two traditions mentioned above, balancing, for instance, Berlin's interest in the civic potential of deliberative rhetoric with David Bartholomae's concern for the challenges students encounter as they "invent" the university. This approach offers one concrete angle for reinterpreting challenges of alterity specific to institutional settings. Combining the aims of both bodies of scholarship we are provided a different perspective on the relationship between writing and group membership. The experience of writing at the university requires more than a set of tools or a (professional) language or identity, as many of the aforementioned scholars have argued. Rather, remixing Schrag and Davis, institutional citizenship requires that students find a way to manage institutional alterity.

The concept of citizenship can also help us better explain the confluence of forces that Schrag identifies in the transversal relationship between rhetor and interlocutor. Even if it is true that alterity impinges on the rhetor, from the outside, there is value in examining how the rhetor responds in context. Redirecting the aims of the critical pedagogy movement, this approach requires a kind of politics, though the question is not so much how to politicize the classroom (what kind of politics to bring with us?), but rather, how to make sense of the *already* political circumstances that enfold classroom practice; these dimensions of classroom experience are, as Rickert and Dobrin remind us, emergent. The question of how we respond might be usefully redirected by recuperating a version of rhetorical citizenship, not as a tool for leftist critique a la Henry Giroux (2000; 2007), nor in the interest of making students better politicians, but rather with the aim of

helping students better understand how agency is conditioned by emergence. Can we, we might ask, operationalize emergence? alterity?

Jeff Pruchnic addresses the difficulties of classroom agency in “Ironic Encounters: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the ‘Liberal Bias’ of Composition Pedagogy,” asking after the “strategic room” we have as instructors to intervene on “social power today” (73). Though Pruchnic uses the term “citizenship” only in passing, as a barometer of the political climate of the university in the post-war 1940s, Pruchnic shows a specific concern for the rapidly shifting terrain of contemporary politics, and, relevant to our purposes here, the modes of political response available to instructors. As Pruchnic argues, shifts in the “operation of power”—“from the maintenance of particular subjectivities ‘desirable’ to capitalist functioning to the flexible response to subjectivities or desires of any kind”—leave seemingly little “strategic room to move ‘against’ such a system,” thus raising serious questions about the viability of rhetoric and composition’s political tradition moving forward (73):

[this shift] calls into question the very viability of our traditional conceptions of ‘domination’ and ‘resistance’ as useful tools for diagnosing power in control societies, particularly in one of the former sites of struggle in disciplinary society, the classroom. All of which asks some challenging questions of the progressive pedagogue: to appropriate a line from bell hooks, how can one ‘teach to transgress’ when ‘the system’ itself runs on transgression? (73)

And yet, even if transgression seems increasingly impossible in a system where transgression is the norm, Pruchnic maintains that a version of rhetorical agency remains tenable, even desirable (74).

Leveraging agency as instructors is no simple task, Pruchnic explains, because it requires that we “rethink the thematics of resistance as a whole in order to attend to its current identity not as a scarce social quality that can be used as a wedge against

dominant culture, but as networks of practices” that can be leveraged “in the service of particular goals” (74). We must also rethink the purview of rhetorical and ethical training in the writing classroom, and refocus our efforts on training for “rhetorical and aesthetic flexibility,” to use Pruchnic’s expression, as opposed to “base recognition of operations of manipulation or exploitation” (75). Here, Pruchnic seems to suggest that the aims of progressive pedagogy could be usefully reordinated by focusing on “performative” and “non-teleological” dimensions of rhetorical action (76). Borrowing from Hannah Arendt and Machiavelli, he argues for a version of “virtuosity” in the writing course which sees ethics not as a definitive pronouncement on the social good, but rather as a tool for attuning students to “individual events” and “particular acts” (78).

Expanding the frame of focus, the past decade has witnessed a burgeoning interest in revitalizing a model of citizenship and agency in the composition classroom. As in Pruchnic’s work, specific attention has also been given to how these concepts must be modified to reflect changing sociopolitical conditions. Of particular interest, some of this scholarship has focused on how we might reappropriate approaches that have been co-opted by the political “right,” corporations, and other groups whose aims have traditionally been seen as antithetical to those of liberal education. We might point, for instance, to the work of Ellen Cushman (2002), who has discussed the value of rhetorics of “sustainability” in service learning, or, similarly, J. Blake Scott’s recent interest in examining how the concept of “corporate citizenship” could be redirected in a service learning course (2009). What would it mean, Scott asks, to think of citizenship as a venture in “risk management”? The topic of “sustainability,” which offers a related vector for thinking about citizenship, has been taken up persuasively by a broad range of

scholars including Matthew Newcomb (2012), Shannon Carter and James H. Conrad (2012), and Derek Owens (2001). Exploring further intersections, scholarship on the topic of “publics” combines a concern for performative, localized, contingent and emergent features of agency, thus offering another potential synecdoche for rethinking the relationship between alterity, agency, and citizenship. I would point to the work of Rosa A. Eberly (1999), Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber (2011), and Jenny Edbauer (2005; 2012) as critical intervention points for an expanded ecology of rhetorical agency and citizenship in composition studies.

The above examples offer varied approaches for tracking the intersection of agency and alterity and highlight a more specific concern for the roles and responsibilities of agents in communities. These examples further my argument that there are important ethical resources (and programs) extant in the tradition and that there is potential benefit to recuperating these resources as we work to develop practical, coherent, and strategic ethical programs for Rhetoric and Composition.

### **Ambience and Ethos**

In the interest of better understanding how we negotiate ambience and ethos in the context of writing pedagogy, it seems worth reexamining that activity which is most fundamental to any writing course, student writing. Though there is a long disciplinary tradition devoted to the topic of student writing, we have tended to talk about student writing in increasingly disconnected and delocalized ways, preferring instead the more distant formulation “student agent” to any direct examination of who this agent is or what this agent does. This is particularly true for the related topic of teacher feedback on student papers, another critical mode of writing in college writing courses, which serves

as an important entry point for cultivating ethos as instructors. Despite there being a rich body of scholarship on teacher feedback from the late-1970s through the 1990s, there has been a substantial waning of attention to the topic the past two decades. It seems fair to suggest that the topic of teacher feedback, like the topic of teacher agency, has become something of a *passé* configuration in the field because of its associations with critical pedagogy and process-based approaches to writing instruction.

Revisiting scholarship on the topic of teacher feedback offers an opportunity to further interrogate the connection between *ambience* and *ethos*. Teacher feedback represents a critical site where instructors negotiate authority and agency under the pressure of emerging, emergent and ambient conditions, and thus a valuable opportunity to consider disciplinary tensions I discuss in Chapter 3. Writing in the late 1990s, Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford offer a thorough examination of teachers' "rhetorical comments" on student papers, focusing in particular on a study of 3,000 sample student papers. Some of the insights they gleaned from this study seem particularly relevant. For instance, Connors and Lunsford determined that teachers "tend to return to well-understood *topoi* as well as to familiar terms, phrases, and locutions as they make their judgments on student writing" (209). They go on to explain that these *topoi* have several origins and operate as "tacit genres" in our responses to student work: "they are public and private, conscious and habitual, social and individualistic. They are powerful tacit genres, and we were particularly interested in how these patterns of commentary reflected the beliefs of the field of composition studies" (209-210).

Connors and Lunsford ask after possible connections between the "beliefs of the field" and the comments instructors leave on student work. The study is by no means

conclusive, as Connors and Lunsford point out, but offers important insights into how teachers construct ethos in their comments on student work. Taking stock of the good and the bad, Connors and Lunsford offer the following comments: First, as expected, readers for the study applauded teachers who left careful marginal comments, providing context for comments, as well as those that offered opportunities for revision. Readers also liked when teachers experimented with different systems for revision, citing an example of an instructor who had developed a contract system for the revision process (216). Perhaps more interesting were the kinds of comments readers made about examples of “bad” feedback. Often, Connors and Lunsford explain, the evaluative process reflected a “rigid stage model,” inflexible and unyielding (216). On some papers, comments were sparse, if nonexistent.

If we take Connors and Lunsford’s study at face value, we reach several conclusions: Good feedback seems a product of deliberate and thoughtful effort on behalf of the instructor. Good feedback deploys rhetorical concepts purposefully, alerting students to a broader context for their writing. Teacher comments are often predetermined by disciplinary values, which would seem to highlight a connection between theory and practice (how theory gets distilled in practice). Alternatively, bad feedback is robotic, point-based, and does not engage at the level of a “global” assessment of the student’s work. All that said, and there is a lot that deserves further consideration here, I reference Connors and Lunsford’s work because, as they show us, there is value in thinking more critically about how instructors and students interface through writing, and because, related to the broader goals of this section, Connors and Lunsford alert us to conditions of emergence in the feedback process that we might (after

Rickert) describe as “ambient.” In their call for “thick descriptions” of “teacher-responders at work,” Connors and Lunsford rightfully point us to the contextual challenges that undergird teacher evaluation. Connors and Lunsford seem less concerned that teachers grade “right”—they identify no real universal standard for evaluation—than that we develop better tools for examining, understanding, and managing material circumstances that are borne out of context.

This, of course, ties in with Chapter 3, particularly my examination of Bizzell’s interest in how instructors cultivate authority, but there are a host of related resources that warrant further consideration. We might point, for instance, to Sarah Warshauer Freedman’s 1979 article “Why Do Teachers Give the Grades that They Do?,” which, though a relatively short assessment, offers a useful program for assessment premised in “what influences teachers as they evaluate student writing” (164). We might also point to the work of Peter Elbow (1997), Lad Tobin (1993), and Anne Gere (1980), to name a few of many scholars interested in what motivates variations in grading practice.<sup>26</sup> More than a concern for consistency in grading practice, which is how this scholarship is sometimes characterized, I argue that this body of scholarship shows a specific, tangible concern for the conditions of emergence that mitigate teacher-student evaluation (and perhaps also student-teacher evaluation). Borrowing Ellen Cushman’s well-known formulation, these scholars seek to interrogate the “struggle” by way of the “tools.” Revisiting studies like Connors and Lunsford’s may offer a kind of ethical program for composition studies premised not so much in identifying what motivates instructor evaluation from the perspective of a fixed, identity-based configuration, but rather through an examination of

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Straub has compiled a really useful selected bibliography of on “Teacher Response,” available at the following link:  
<http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/pt/straub/bibliography.htm>

the complex ecological fabrics through which teachers negotiate acts of (evaluating) writing.

Richard Straub attempts just such an approach in his 1996 article, “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response.” Speaking to the topic of teacher agency in the evaluation of student writing, Straub notes that a key challenge in evaluating student work is determining not only where, but “how much” to intervene:

How much are we to assert our vision of what makes writing good and direct students’ work as writers? How much are we to allow students to find their own ways as learning writers? How much do we teach to the written product? How much do we try to help students develop their attitudes toward writing, their composing processes, and their understanding of writing as a social action? (223)

Straub argues that our responses to these questions have tended to be dualistic; we have tended, that is, to describe the process as “either directive or facilitative, authoritative or collaborative, teacher-based or student-based” (224). One model is “encouraging and good” and the other, by default, “critical and bad.” In response, Straub challenges readers to interrogate the supposed borders between directive and facilitative writing and asks after other modes of evaluation.

Straub offers his own methodology for analyzing teacher comments, arguing that we need to develop a richer sense of individual instructor’s “responding style[s]” (233). Straub goes on to note that the meaning of comments is also determined by the way comments are “presented on the page” (235):

[I]t is arguable that, during the time the student reads a set of comments, the image of the teacher that comes off the page *becomes* the teacher for that student

and has an immediate impact on how those comments come to mean. Instead of the actual or intended meaning, I am attempting to interpret the immediate sense of the comment—the conventional meaning derivable from the words on the page—and define the typical ways that teacher comments inscribe certain implicit relationships with students. (235)

Though Straub's premise is relatively straightforward—we are well served by carefully examining larger samples of teacher evaluation, and by paying careful attention to each instructor's style—his concern for the specific conditions that inform the exigence of evaluation is instructive. Straub's work is representative of an early concern for what I would refer to (after Rickert) as the ambient dimensions of teacher-student evaluation, a mutually intersecting and implicating experience, wherein we can think of the student document prior-to-review and the student document post-review as ambient genres, ripe with missed connections and emergent meanings.

Straub argues that we have yet to seriously investigate “what transpires between teacher and student across the written page,” an issue that, to his credit, remains largely unaddressed to this day (246). Describing the purpose of his study, Straub notes that it “offers a more detailed and open-ended way of analyzing teacher commentary, one that is based on a close reading of comments as they appear on the page” (246). Though what Straub is talking about here is fairly direct—he is interested in developing studies that better account for how the actual appearance of our comments on the page impacts the way that these comments are processed—this line is also suggestive, because it attunes us to a process through which words come to “appear on the page,” which might just as well refer to the the instructor's writing process. This process is perhaps in part formula—as

instructors we deploy specific strategies or revert to patterns and formula that are familiar—but is also, overwhelmingly, a process of emergence, defined perhaps by Schrag’s rhetorical transversal.

Taken together, Connors and Lunsford’s and Straub’s respective studies represent two critical forms of assessment operating at different levels. Whereas Connors and Lunsford develop a system for tracking evaluation at the level of the field, moving from the top down, Straub’s model for self-assessment builds from the ground up. Combining these approaches may offer an ethical program for Rhetoric and Composition that refocuses assessment. As we will see in the next section, we may be well-served by moving away from outcomes-based assessment and towards assessment practices that reflect an interest in helping instructors develop a better sense of their “responding styles,” as well as how these responding styles match up with those of their colleagues. There may also be some benefit to conducting programmatic assessment that accounts for how students respond to instances of feedback, thus providing a richer database of resources for instructors interested in learning how to better navigate and mitigate emergence.

### **Writing and Ecology**

Building from Marilyn Cooper’s distinction between “emergent” and “enacted” forms of agency (see Chapter 4), the final section of this compendium makes an argument for returning to early scholarship on the model of “self-efficacy” in student writing. As McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer (1985) point out, there is strong evidence to support a correlation between self-evaluation (as an assessment of “self-efficacy”) and the overall quality of work that students produce (“Self-Efficacy” 465). This connection

is well-documented (Pajares; Shell, Colvin & Bruning; Stewart & Heaney; Shaw), but I point to McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer's work specifically because they make some important distinctions that have gone largely unaddressed in secondary scholarship. Namely, McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer note that, when it comes to a student's sense of his or her self-efficacy, we must distinguish between a student's knowledge of writing outcomes—the expectations of the course, of the instructor—and a student's "belief that he or she can achieve the desired outcome," which suggests a pattern of "behavior" (465-466): "[A] student might know what is expected in an effective piece of writing and might even know the steps necessary to produce such a piece. But if the person lacks the belief that he or she can achieve the desired outcome, then effective behavior will likely not result" (466). Though it may be true that there is a correlation between student understanding of outcomes and student performance on individual projects, this knowledge is not always actualized in context.

McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer attribute student success to patterns of behavior and a student's willingness to continue working despite challenges. Here, they borrow extensively from cognitivist approaches, particularly the work of Linda Flowers and John Hayes, noting that better writers "appear more self-directed or more internally controlled" (467). Though this approach risks isolating and internalizing the problem, particularly in its cognitivist inflection, McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer's research is usefully combined with (and augmented by) Cooper's model of emergent and enacted agency. Grounding self-efficacy in emergence has the benefit of opening the otherwise isolated model of the individual student actor to broader contexts and possibilities for self-actualization. Of course, this raises as many questions as it answers: What exactly does it mean for student

writing to be efficacious? What is the relationship between emergence and self-efficacy? How is a student's sense of agency tied to broader circumstances, actions and activities outside of his or her control? that are, again, emergent? What might it mean for self-efficacy to be characterized as fluid as opposed to fixed, determining but not determinate? That is, if Cooper is right that different conditions of emergence require different patterns of enactment, might it also be accurate to suggest that self-efficacy is continually reconstructed in process? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what is the connection between student self-efficacy and ethics? Where, we might ask, does student self-efficacy depend on an evaluation of *others*?

Answering these questions is no easy task, but McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer offer a potential starting place, pointing us back to the circumstances that inform (in a strange parallel to Sid Dobrin) "actual writing performance." Though their study provides one potential test case for rethinking the value of self-efficacy as a model for student performance, there are other points of connection that might be examined further. There exist substantial bodies of scholarship, for instance, on the topics of student reflection and fulfillment of learning outcomes (Peters & Robertson; Carter; Stenberg & Whealy; Leaker & Ostman; Danielewicz & Elbow), student transfer of knowledge across cultural and institutional settings (Driscoll & Wells; Wardle; Addison & McGee; Bird; Downs & Wardle; Kutney), and the benefits of parity in course and programmatic evaluation (Cosgrove; Peters & Robertson; Inoue; Reardon & Wulff; Broad et al.).

Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells (2012) usefully pick up where McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer leave off, arguing for more attention to "individual" and "internal" qualities that impact student transfer of knowledge. Driscoll and Wells connect two important

bodies of scholarship, uniting a model of student self-efficacy with a concern for student transfer of writing knowledge. Driscoll and Wells argue that these qualities (individual, internal) constitute a student “disposition,” which, in turn, might be characterized by five key characteristics: (1) “Dispositions are a critical part of a larger system that includes the person, the context, the process through which learning happens, and time”; (2) “Dispositions are not intellectual traits like knowledge, skills, or aptitude, but rather determine how those intellectual traits are used or applied”; (3) “Dispositions determine students’ sensitivity toward and willingness to engage in transfer”; (4) “Dispositions can positively or negatively impact the learning environment; they can be generative or disruptive”; (5) “Dispositions are dynamic and may be context-specific or broadly generalized” (“Beyond Knowledge and Skills” 5-6). Characteristics 1, 4, and 5 point us to a broader environment which shapes (just as it is shaped by) student dispositions, alerting us to a broader, ecological environment through and by which dispositions emerge (5).

Further, in the description for characteristic 5, Driscoll and Wells explain that students exhibit not one disposition, but rather, seem to experience many different dispositions simultaneously: “[...] it is critical to understand that many different types of dispositions exist and that certain dispositions may be more or less prevalent within an individual learner.” These dispositions, Driscoll and Wells name four, include “value,” “self-efficacy,” “attribution,” and “self-regulation” (6). These categories are helpful, particularly in thinking about how we respond to students (as teachers): How do we respond to student dispositions in the classroom? And, if it is true that dispositions refer to a potential to actualize certain processes, how do we modify our teaching approaches to promote better dispositions? improved processes of actualization? The challenge,

which Driscoll and Wells seem to identify implicitly in their distinctions between concepts like knowledge and aptitude *and* dispositions, is that such a practice borders on a psychology of the classroom that seeks to identify problems at the level of student motivation in the interest of rooting these problems out. That said, self-efficacy models are productively combined with and complemented by an attention to broader ecological forces and a concern for how these forces mitigate our dispositions, as students and instructors.

In the interest of thinking about how Driscoll and Well's approach could be further modified for these purposes, there might be value in rethinking the concept of self-regulation, which is directly related to self-efficacy. As Driscoll and Well's note, self-regulation refers to the process students go through when they "choose how they will adapt to new learning situations" (9-10). This process is complicated, involving an ability to:

[...] set reasonable goals, to choose to utilize strategies to achieve those goals, to self-evaluate progress, to manage the physical and social settings so that they serve to support and not distract from those goals, to practice effective time management, to reflect on the success of choices made or strategies used, to understand how performance leads to results, and to be able to make changes to any of these preceding actions to improve future performance. (10)

Though I agree with Driscoll and Wells that self-regulation is critical to student transfer of knowledge, and that promoting opportunities for positive transfer is important, actualizing productive forms of self-regulation is a difficult process to facilitate. Perhaps, building from my work in Chapter 4, there is benefit not only in recuperating a model of agency that is emergent and enacted, but in pushing the ecological model a bit further, opening opportunities to explore how processes of self-regulation are impacted by broader processes of group- or communal-regulation. The question, then, may not be, as

Driscoll and Wells ask, “am I doing ok?”, but “are we doing ok?” And, how is *my* “doing ok” impacted by others’ interests in achieving similar goals?

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**ABSTRACT****POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY: RECUPERATING RHETORIC AND  
COMPOSITION'S NATIVE ETHICAL TRADITION**

by

**DEREK RISSE****August 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Jeff Pruchnic**Major:** English (Rhetoric and Composition)**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Over the past decade, scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have shown renewed interest in the topic of ethics, prompting what some have described as an ethical turn in the discipline. Spurred by a deep-seated concern for the legacies of humanism, scholars have turned increasingly to extra-disciplinary referents in continental philosophy. This dissertation works to recuperate the discipline's native ethical tradition via a critical rereading of the often-implicit treatment of ethics in Composition scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. Returning to this "critical" moment and emphasizing the rich thinking around the question of ethics provides fuller and more disciplinary-specific resources for the ethical dilemmas raised by the ethical turn. The dissertation also works to reclaim disciplinary commitments to the practical and pedagogical implications of ethical inquiry, which offers a much-needed corrective to the densely theoretical frameworks of the ethical turn. Building from a dialectical approach, the dissertation examines affinities between these two bodies of scholarship, and argues for the value of developing ethical programs (for the writing classroom) that build from within shared premises.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Derek Risse joined the graduate program in English at Wayne State University in the Fall 2009 semester. An alumnus of WSU (B.A., 2009; M.A. 2014), he teaches composition and technical communication courses. His research interests include ethics, new media writing and digital design, progressive pedagogy, and revisionist historiography. Derek has presented at numerous national and regional conferences, including CCCC, Computers and Writing, RSA, SLSA and the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition.