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Imagining a "Poethical" Classroom

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Imagining a *Poethical* Classroom

by

Erica J. Kaufman

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Imagining a *Poethical* Classroom

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Erica J. Kaufman

Adviser: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

This dissertation begins at the crossroads of three fields—creative writing, contemporary poetics, and composition studies—and attempts to unite what is normally kept separate: the teaching of freshman composition and contemporary poetry. It is rooted, then, in the following anomalies: few students (unless they are English majors) encounter contemporary poetry; and few living poets (who often earn their livings as adjuncts, teaching composition) ever engage in a conversation about composition pedagogy. Fewer still teach the kind of poetry they write. Through a qualitative study of student writing in composition courses, this project investigates how encouraging students to engage with this form of experimental poetry results in unsurpassed growth in critical writing and thinking skills, as well as a shift in how students own and value language. I take poet and theorist Joan Retallack’s idea of “poethics” as my frame, and explore how a writing-based pedagogy committed to the fusing of poesis and ethics inspires students to take risks in their writing, abandon traditional modes of meaning-making, and ultimately leads to higher levels of literacy and critical inquiry-driven essay-writing. The goal of this dissertation, then, is to theorize and enact a new pedagogy, one that grows out of a linking between contemporary poetics and composition studies. It presents portraits of composition classrooms in action, ones that embrace contemporary poetry as a method for engaging students in language itself.
Acknowledgements

The process of writing this dissertation embodied the content of what I write about—writing as a mode of learning and discovery, the importance of chance and unpredictability, and the importance of sustained inquiry through writing. If not for the support and encouragement of many friends, colleagues, and teachers, I would probably still be engaged in the drafting process, remaining true to the idea that no essay draft is every really final. First, I am indebted to Joan Retallack, for her mentoring and willingness to engage in endless conversations about poethics, language games, thought experiments, John Cage, and the manifold chance operations always at work in any and every classroom. I also extend my most profound gratitude to Wayne Koestenbaum for his support and guidance—I first discovered what I knew would become my dissertation in his class on “Repetition,” and continue to learn from his writing, pedagogy, and generosity. I am grateful to Ammiel Alcalay for his thoughtful feedback and for pushing me to complicate my thinking and theorizing of how I’ve come to understand “poethics.” Many thanks go to Mark McBeth, for this careful reading of many first drafts, and to Sondra Perl for her initial comments and ideas. My parents deserve my deep thanks for their endless support. Simone White, Matt Longabucco, Tyler Schmidt, Ian Bickford, Delia Mellis, Anselm Berrigan, John Coletti, CAConrad, E. Tracy Grinnell, Kristy McMorris, and Celia Bland all offered tremendous advice and helped to focus this project as it continued to grow and expand. I am grateful to the Stein Society (Amy Robbins and Logan Esdale) for giving me the opportunity to share my work on Gertrude Stein with a larger community of Stein scholars. Al Filreis and the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania also provided me with the opportunity to co-author a series of commentaries for Jacket2, in collaboration with my students—a series that evolved into
the chapters that comprise this dissertation. I am also indebted to the generosity of many of the writers quoted in these pages—Eileen Myles, Anne Waldman, and Charles Bernstein, in particular—who not only spent time working through these ideas with me, but also spent time with my students and my classes. Finally, this dissertation would never have come to fruition without my incredibly talented students at Baruch College, CUNY. I’m grateful for all that I’ve learned from them.
Foreword

Jordan was a student who opted to take both composition courses that I taught—I had him both semesters his freshman year. Despite the early start-time of the class, 8:40AM, and despite his long commute from Long Island, Jordan always came to class prepared and ready to engage. However, in the fall semester this engagement was more of a portrait of questioning—Why do we need to write so much? What if I don’t think I need to revise my paper? How could you give me a “B” on this paper—no one has ever given me less than an “A”? There’s nothing unusual about these complaints—most of the first-year composition courses I’ve taught have been a cacophony of these sorts of queries. However, Jordan happened to be a student in these courses the year I decided to begin to look at how and why I was teaching writing. That fall semester, I began to try to articulate what it would look like to teach a composition course that was truly “writing-based,” and that came with no prescribed textbook or reader. Jordan’s freshman year was the year this dissertation began.

The theme of the fall Composition I course was “Persuasion(s)” — a topic vague enough that I could do almost anything, but specific enough to be listed under course offerings. I knew, at that time, that I wanted to be more consistent in how I used in-class writing; each class would begin with private freewriting and revolve around conversations that moved in and out of sharing different pieces of our own writing. The readings we did that semester were determined by class consensus and I supplemented when necessary. The spring Composition II course looked much the same, but with an emphasis on “difficult” poetry. Prior to that year I’d been using a composition textbook (usually Ways of Reading) and did some in-class writing, but mostly spent the ninety-minute sessions discussing the reading for the week.

At the end of our year together, Jordan handed me a typed letter—because of the
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reflective writing we’d been doing at the end of each class, he felt as though he wanted to end his freshman year with a longer piece of reflective writing, in the form of a note to me. I wanted to begin with this note because Jordan articulated many of the ideas I was interested in studying when I began this project. Jordan wrote: “At the end of the first semester you said, ‘the key to college writing is to not be afraid of your own thoughts.’ I had to jot that down in my notebook.” This idea of not being afraid of one’s own thoughts is the driving reason why I believe that in order to teach anyone to write, we must also invite students to experiment and play with language.

Jordan’s note continued, “I learned that the writing process does not have to be stressful, how much peer editing can help, how text rendering can do more than rouse us from morning weariness, how revision means to ‘resee’ a paper, how being organized can quickly place you at the top of a class, and how we were all unrealized talented writers.” Of course, this is an ideal note to receive, but it is significant that Jordan’s list of things he “learned” includes the different pedagogical activities I’d decided to begin to revolve the class around. Jordan’s letter ends: “It feels good to call myself a writer. And, now I can say that in my first year of college, I have read Anne Waldman and Jayne Cortez and share their strong messages.” That spring we’d read a variety of different poetry and fiction, but for Jordan to end his note by singling out Waldman and Cortez signaled to me that teaching specifically that “kind” of poetry (through in-class writing) represented a particular shift in Jordan’s relationship to his own work.

None of Jordan’s papers drew directly from any of the poets or poetry that we worked with in class. He wrote papers on Chopin, Hemingway, Emerson, DuBois, Gladwell, and others. Yet, Jordan links his own newly discovered identity as a writer to these two contemporary poets—both women whose work does not appear in any of the composition readers I’d used in
the past. What was it about Waldman’s “Makeup on Empty Space” and Cortez’s “I am New York City” that had such an impact on Jordan? Why did these poets help him to see himself as a writer? What was it about the form of poetry coupled with regular informal writing that sparked this shift?


Introduction

This dissertation, “Imagining a Poethical Classroom,” grows out of my belief that reading “difficult” poetry, and immersing oneself in continuous writing of all kinds, is the key to any first-year writing course, or any course that expects students to become proficient in the academic conventions of critical and analytical writing.¹ My experience teaching composition for over a decade in a variety of different kinds of classrooms taught me that sadly, more often than not, students enter college with no sense of what it means to value the act of writing, nor do they seem to realize that they can (and should) “own their own language.”² What I mean by this is slightly different from what is often called “language rights.” I am not arguing that freshmen college students do not feel free to speak in their own ways, what I am arguing is that they do not know how to adapt their speech so that their writing reflects this thinking in a way that is audience-appropriate. Instead, most beginning writers attempt to put on the voice of the academy and because this is not the language they feel as though they own, the writing lacks opinion, assertion, and barely moves beyond summary.

Through introducing poetry by Joan Retallack, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Eileen Myles, and Anne Waldman, I began to notice that students first resisted these writings emphatically—they were very vocal in their responses to these poets’ works. In

¹ My use of the term “difficult” goes beyond referring to texts that can be challenging. In this context, “difficult” refers to a kind of writing that challenges readers to rethink the familiar ways we read and use language. In order to understand a “difficult” text, one must open his/herself up to alternative ways of reading and sense making.

² In 1974, the National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” Resolution which “assert[ed] students’ right to speak, write, and be taught in the language variety in which they find their own identity and style. The statement challenges tendencies that elevate a singular ‘standard American dialect’ over other language varieties” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoownlanguage).
response to being pushed to engage with the various and varying forms these particular writers use, I noticed that my own students’ written work was changing drastically. This project began as a way for me to begin to think about why this happened.

As I began to collect qualitative data in the form of student writing, I also began to notice that these changes in the way students saw their own capacities to produce and use language were rooted in more than just how students would respond (in writing) to complex “experimental” poems. This led me to begin to think that the catalyst for this shift in student writing was much larger; something that I think fits into the category of “poetics.” Instead of focusing on how and why students were responding to certain kinds of poetry, I began to think about what the forms of those poems did, and how those forms were replicated in the classroom. In other words, my study shifted from one that was focused on teaching specific poets in the composition classroom to one centered on the pedagogy of the composition course, and how, if this pedagogy coordinates with the kind of use of language that poetics values, student work changes noticeably.

And so, this became a project that needed to begin with the composing process, and then consider the impact of texts and classroom time on that process. In other words, at first I thought I needed to ask questions like: how will beginning writers react to Stein’s poem “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso”? Or, what happens if I choose specifically not to use a typical textbook and instead build a course around contemporary experimental writing? Now, it is clear

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3 The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of poetics: “creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these; a theory of form.” This definition builds on Aristotle’s sense of “poetics” as “the art which uses language unaccompanied” (4). My understanding (and use of) the term “poetics” continues in this tradition. Poetics is a complex, philosophical container that holds imaginative writing and writing which privileges language over conscious meaning-making.
to me that the questions at hand have more to do with the composition of the classroom and the life of a text within that space. If students are struggling to write argumentative papers, will Gertrude Stein’s devotion to language and her playful ideas about composing help to resolve this struggle? How should one work with Stein’s text with students so that it becomes clear that language in itself has agency? And, what texts might be beneficially used in the classroom in order to empower students to see what it means to have and to write “in their own languages”?

In “The Cultures of Literature and Composition,” Peter Elbow writes, “The culture of composition carries a concern not just for teaching but also for students: attention, interest, and care for them, their lives, and what’s on their minds” (College English 537). Elbow reminds us of the unique potential of the environment of the first-year writing class, one where the work of students, specifically their written work, should be front and center. In order to make this kind of environment possible, what we ask students to read and how they work with and through these texts must be both completely intentional, and open to chance and change. Since one can never fully know how a student will respond to a piece of text, the teacher must be willing to allow the class space to follow the trajectory of thinking, to empower students to see the classroom, and the act of writing, as a place for discovery.

The way I imagine this specific learning environment is largely informed by John Cage’s “Diary: Emma Lake Music Workshop 1965,” which places the reader in Cage’s classroom, where “Teaching, too, is no longer transmission of a body of useful information, but conversation, alone, together, whether in a place appointed or not in that place, whether with those concerned or those unaware of what is being said” (A Year From Monday 21). Although the “classroom” described here is a “music workshop,” the pedagogy being explored is one that places the interactions and collaborative work of the students in the room as its priority. This is
not a classroom that delineates clear outcomes, rather one that acknowledges that if one is willing to be open to knowledge that does not come in the form of concretely “useful information,” learning can happen. There is no denying that this is a rather abstract idea, so to help ground my study, I take poet, teacher, and scholar Joan Retallack’s idea of “poethics” as the frame for the kind of classroom I am proposing.

Retallack is the only contemporary experimental poet who writes explicitly about the composing process and discusses her own experience working with beginning writers (in the context of the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College, which Retallack directed for a decade and taught in since the early 1980s). Retallack’s collection of essays, The Poethical Wager (2003), is central to the way I understand both writing and teaching. The essays in her book are largely about the “relationship(s) between art and life in today’s chaotic world.” These essays explore what it means to write an essay, to embark upon the form of the essay as a piece of writing deeply connected with the way one lives and interacts with his/her world. These are the kinds of essays I strive for my students to write.

The field of composition studies has a history of using Thomas Kuhn’s idea of the “paradigm shift” in order to describe shifts from one way of thinking/theorizing the field to another. These shifts are caused by changes in the landscape of education, socio-political changes both in and out of the classroom, and urge us to rethink our approaches to teaching first-year writing. In “Kuhn, Scientism, and English Studies,” Patricia Bizzell sees the “new paradigm” of “English Studies” in the late 1970’s as one where “the ways in which a language community’s methods of argumentation establish standards for thinking and acting together that

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are “neither compelling nor arbitrary,” but reasonable” (47-48). Bizzell is writing about a moment right after the Students’ Right to Their Own Language Resolution, and asserts that this particular paradigm shift will bring a better awareness on the parts of both teacher and student of the conventions of academic discourse and the way language is used. However, almost forty years later, there is still a need for “a community to understand its language, for that language expresses “certain definite positions”—an ideology or paradigm—and cannot be simply taken as ‘the reflection of an objective reality” (47). The place to build the kind of “understanding of language” mentioned here is the first-year writing classroom.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines how Retallack came to create and define “poethics,” while also unpacking and situating the term within the parallel landscapes of composition studies (specifically the writing process movement), poetry, and poetics. Chapter two shifts to Gertrude Stein and explores Stein’s own writing process, particularly in conversation with her early experiences practicing automatic writing, and uses Gertrude Stein as evidence to help continue to clarify what is meant by “poethics,” closing with a portrait of teaching Stein’s work as a way to further describe what I mean by the idea of a poethical classroom. Chapter three investigates how Retallack’s own approach to teaching embodies “poethics,” focusing specifically on analyzing materials drawn from a recent undergraduate interdisciplinary course taught in Spring 2014. Chapter four looks specifically at the kinds of texts taught in the composition course, and examines how and why experimental poetry should be employed as a way to improve student writing. Chapter five presents a practical “guide” to the daily life of a composition classroom, considering the structures present when one is asked to teach this first-year writing course, and how “poethics” presents a model that offers a more productive pedagogical approach. This chapter then continues to investigate the impact of a
poethical approach to teaching composition through the presentation and analysis of the various components that comprise the difference between a poethical classroom and a regular composition classroom (i.e. what does the classroom look like, what kinds of texts do students write and read). Finally, by way of closing, chapter five includes a synthesis of what I’ve discovered about teaching composition poethically, and what this pedagogical approach has to offer the field of writing studies, alongside excerpts from a transcript of an interview between myself and Retallack, reflecting on and reevaluating her own definition of “poethics” in the specific context of writing pedagogies (a field she has not written about explicitly or commented on before). Appendices include syllabi and course reading lists from the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College, selections from my own course syllabi, and a range of assignments that engage and exemplify this kind of approach to the teaching of writing.
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Chapter One: Articulating a *Poethical Classroom*

“And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19)

“Composition studies, you see, does not matter; writing does.”
(Sidney Dobrin, *Postcomposition*, p. 3)
“Poethics” and Process

The 1980’s was a period that saw a wealth of publications contributing to the field of process pedagogy. Some of these include: “Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process” by James A. Reither (1985), “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal” by Lester Faigley (1986), A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (1989), and The Sense of Learning by Ann E. Berthoff. At this same time, Joan Retallack coined the term “poethics” as “an attempt to note and value traditions in art exemplified by a linking of aesthetic registers to the fluid and rapidly changing experiences of everyday life” (The Poethical Wager 11). As it turns out, this theory helps to expand the limits of process pedagogy. While we ask “What does it mean to compose?” Retallack uses the term “poethics” to gesture towards the imperative that both reading and writing be central to any effort to make sense of the world around us. James A. Reither describes the same phenomenon in “Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process,” with a specific focus on writing and the composition classroom as:

…writing and what writers do during writing cannot be artificially separated from the social-rhetorical situations in which writing gets done, from the conditions that enable writers to do what they do, and from the motives writers have for doing what they do…Writing is, in fact, one of those processes which, in its use, creates and constitutes its own contexts. (Landmark Essays 142)

Reither is, of course, referring to the potential writing holds for beginning writers in a composition class; Retallack’s use of “poethics” is in the context of a larger idea of “writing” or “composing.” But, the fact that Retallack’s ideas echo those of theoreticians of the process movement is no accident. It speaks to the fact that from its inception, “poethics” is a term in
direct conversation with considerations of the composing processes of all writers, as well as with theories of how we learn and the central relationship between experience and education.\(^1\) John Dewey proposed in *Democracy and Education* that “an activity which brings education or instruction with it makes one aware of some of the connections which had been imperceptible.” Similarly, the terms used thus far to describe writing and the writing classroom involve a certain commitment to the idea that we must “have students think on paper, to objectify their knowledge and therefore help them discover both what they know and what they need to learn” (McLeod, “The Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum”). To build a *poethical* classroom is to create a space where students learn by writing, collaborating, and conversing. This is process pedagogy.

**Close Reading “Poethics”**

In her “Acknowledgements” to *The Poethical Wager*, Joan Retallack writes, “A small disclaimer. The essays in this book are the product of more than a decade of writing about and applying a conceptual framework I’ve been calling poethics.” (xii) What Retallack does here, before the reader even enters into the work of this book, is offer up a lens into her own process—she foregrounds the idea that the essays that make up *The Poethical Wager* are in conversation with each other, are intertwined, and are also the result of years of “essaying” the framework that is “poethics.”

What does the act of writing, particularly for students in first-year writing courses, actually accomplish? Joan Retallack, in *The Poethical Wager*, explains exactly this. Just as James Britton states that, “a child’s need of language arises out of his attempts to explore the

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\(^1\) John Dewey is a regular voice in Retallack’s work, specifically his theories of “experiential education” and “learning by doing.” Similarly, many theorists affiliated with the process movement mention John Dewey in their work—including Peter Elbow and Janet Emig, who states that Dewey is “everywhere in our work” (see Emig’s “The Tacit Tradition”).
world around him” (Prospect and Retrospect 20), “poethics” is a term used to define the way written language can help to build the kind of world one wants to live in. In “Inserting an H in Poetics: A Slef Interview,” Retallack provides a bit of context regarding how and why she created the word itself. Retallack links “poethics” directly to John Cage and her desire to “characterize his aesthetic of making art that models how we want to live…So the question arises, given the troubles of our society in the world right now, shouldn’t we be devoting ourselves entirely to direct social action rather than the ‘luxury’ of poetry?” (TPW 44) This question raises the omnipresent conversation surrounding the question: “why write?” And, leads us to ask, what is the writer’s responsibility to his/her own worlds? What “poethics” offers is an actual term that one can use to acknowledge the necessity of “art that models how we want to live.” Similarly, “poethics” also indicates that it is possible to think of daily life as always in dialogue with the art we create.

Retallack first met John Cage in 1965, when “the Merce Cunningham Dance Company came to perform in a dance festival being held at the Harper Theater in the Hyde Park section of Chicago.” (Musicage xvi) Retallack was pursuing her interests in literature and philosophy on a graduate level, particularly the fields of ethics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science. These performances had a huge impact on Retallack—she describes her experience as having “seen and heard more acutely and complexly than ever before during a programmed aesthetic event” (Musicage xvii). After one of these performances, John Cage asked Retallack

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2 The idea of a “Slef Interview” is one of many language games that Retallack plays throughout her work. “Slef” is an anagram for “self,” shedding even more light on the fact that this particular piece is described as “an interview between old friends (only sometimes at odds).” (TPW 21) So, if this “interview” is really a “self interview,” what is Retallack trying to ask readers to think about? It is significant that this quasi “interview” is also the piece where Retallack most clearly articulates the rationale behind “poethics”—if one is interviewing oneself, isn’t this a written conversation?

3 See essays by the same (or similar) titles by Joan Didion, George Orwell, and Paul Auster.
what she “did,” and she replied, “painting, writing poetry, studying music (cello), all more or less “on the side.” I was a graduate student studying philosophy at the University of Chicago…primarily interested in the methods of philosophy of language, particularly the work of Wittgenstein.” (Musicage xviii) These first conversations marked the start of over thirty years of conversations between Retallack and Cage—sonic, verbal, and written compositions that put their respective interests in dialogue with each other—Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhism, John Dewey and the I Ching.

Retallack left Chicago for Washington, DC in the late 1960’s, shortly after meeting Cage. In 1968, Retallack was working with Robert Emrich as a “potential consultant in social philosophy” at a “newly formed interdisciplinary institute at the Department of Justice.” (Musicage xxi) Through this job, Retallack again crossed paths with John Cage, as well as with his mentor, Buckminster Fuller—entering into conversations with both that revolved around “rethinking the language of government in the U.S.,” ways that art might help to address the larger societal turmoil of the late 1960’s. (Musicage xxii) This consulting position ended shortly after Retallack interviewed Cage and Fuller, but her investment in social justice and the way that language could inspire change continued. Retallack then moved on to teach at an accelerated high school in Washington, DC (until the early 1970’s), where she worked with various demographics of nontraditional students, teaching both composition courses and a philosophy course focused on “logics of discovery.”

It is also important to note that during this same time period, Retallack was involved in the DC poetry community (which included writers like Tina Darragh, Bruce Andrews, P. Inman, Michael Lally, Terrence Winch, Diane Ward, Lynne Dreyer, to name a few). Retallack describes the DC “poetry scene,” particularly the Mass Transit reading series as:
There was a pervasive anti-establishment (government, church, middle-class decorum) stance, anti-straight. The point was to affirm, echoing Derrida, writing and difference, a decentering, ex-centric urban scene, a project peculiarly appropriate to Washington, which has always been off-center. (Those who come to the city expecting to find the "center of power" soon find they must look elsewhere.) One might say the unifying poetic project in an atmosphere characterized by difference was to create with language, on the page, the kind of figure-ground shift occurring in the socio-political world; to redefine what was at stake, what did or did not lie within the bounds of the poem.  4

What’s striking about this description is the way Retallack again emphasizes the ways in which language can and should be seen as a way to address a much needed shift in the “socio-political world.” It is less important that this shift is a result of the catalyst of poetry; what resonates is the way that she uses the same language to describe this community as she does to paint the picture of her early interactions with Cage—moments where one sees what she calls “a poethics of everyday life and work where forms of art and the art of life interpenetrate within a coherent framework of values.” (Musicage xxv)

These descriptions of Retallack’s own history lay the backdrop for how I’ve come to understand the term “poethics.” Retallack writes, “The most pressing question for me is how art, particularly literature, helps for the direction and quality of attention, the intelligences, the senses we bring into contact with contemporary experience” (TPW 12). Here, art, specifically the writing of literary forms, is established and interconnected with the way we use our senses to make sense of our surroundings. Retallack continues, “Making,” (poesis), is always key. This is imaginative activity that materially affects the life one lives in language, the life of language at

4 http://www.dcpoetry.com/history/retallack
large, the world of which language is both made and inextricable part” *(TPW* 12). Retallack grounds “poethics” clearly in “poiesis,” which translates as “to make” and particularly points towards the idea that the kind of “making” the verb does is an “action that transforms and continues the world.”5

Because “poesis” is “always key,” “poethics” involves a relationship to language that is always in flux, changing as one’s experience grows and changes. She complicates this process of “making” by bringing “ethos” into the equation. However, instead of working with the idea that “ethos” is part and parcel with ethics, Retallack situates it as follows: “Any making of forms out of language (poesis) is a practice with a discernible character (ethos)” *(TPW* 11). “Ethos” as “character” stems from Aristotle’s “Three Modes of Persuasion.”6 In the context of this triad, “ethos” is important because of the way “there is persuasion through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence…character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion.” *(Rhetoric* 37-8) In other words, in traditional rhetoric, “ethos” is the term that qualifies the traits of a speaker—his or her integrity or “fair-mindedness.” “Ethos” is a term that is directly connected to the way a single human being functions, and here, is a term that is full of generative and creative processes, even more so when coupled with poesis—the “making” of one’s “character” fluidly through writing. It is this process, “the making of one’s character through writing,” that is relevant to both the writing process movement and the composition curriculum.

So, when Retallack proposes that “the working idea of the poethical wager is nothing more than a casting of one’s lot into contemporary conversation as it is occurring not on a

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5 Quotations with regards to “poesis” are all taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary.*
6 See Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in which he outlines these “Three Modes of Persuasion,” which consist of ethos, logos, and pathos.
pseudoserene horizon of time but along the dynamic coastline of a historical poesis,” we understand that she is proposing a relationship to writing that is inextricable from its “contemporariness” (TPW 15). Another way to think about this is to consider John Dewey’s description of schools in “My Pedagogic Creed.” In “What the School Is,” Dewey provides a list of his beliefs about education that includes, “education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Education Today 6). In “The Subject-Matter of Education,” Dewey continues this list with: “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (Education Today 12). The way that Dewey aligns his description (or definition) of education with “a process of living” is exactly the way that Retallack is describing “poethics” and what it means with regards to writing. To “cast one’s lot into into contemporary conversation as it is occurring” is to see the composing of language as something that should always be in process and in the present tense. The “conversation” here is one that happens via writing and reading, and I would add teaching to that list.

When Retallack adds that this written conversation is “occurring not on a pseudoserene horizon of time but along the dynamic coastline of a historical poesis,” what she is actually doing is enacting her sense of what “poethics” does to the way language is used. The “pseudoserene horizon of time” is meant to represent what happens when we become complacent in the way we think about the work of language, and conversely, “the dynamic coastline of a historical poesis,” is the space where language is always in process and is a “continuing reconstruction of experience.” Retallack’s exposition [of the form] of a sentence mirrors the ethos of poethics; in this case she takes readers on the risky journey where “the working idea of the poethical wager is nothing more than a casting of one’s lot into contemporary conversation as it is occurring not on
a pseudoserene horizon of time but along the dynamic coastline of a historical poesis.” This is central to the way we understand “poethics” as a commitment to the kind of pedagogy that involves the active use of language, learning through the experience of the composing process. The fact that the root, poesis/poein, of poetry is central to the forming of “poethics” also indicates that poetry is indelibly connected with a form of language use through which experiential (and experimental) learning occurs and recurs. What Retallack gestures towards is a kind of writing that, in both form and content, questions what language does and how it works. To read this kind of poethical text, one is pushed to develop a heightened sensitivity to language, the desire to place a magnifying glass on even the smallest word.

**A “Different” Kind of Pedagogy**

When Donald Murray first published “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product” in 1972, it contributed to the rise of what became called the process movement in pedagogy—a moment in pedagogical history where there was an emphasis on the importance of experiential learning, learning through the act of writing. Sondra Perl dates the beginning of the process movement in composition studies: “Nineteen seventy-one marks the movement in the field of composition from an almost exclusive focus on written products to an examination of composing processes” (*Landmark Essays* xii). In this same essay, Perl also poses a series of questions that in themselves help us to understand what we mean when we use the term “process pedagogy.” “What does it mean to compose? How do we, as observers of composing processes, make sense of what we see? And what is it we are actually composing?” (*Landmark Essays* xviii). In other words, to foreground writing in the classroom, to create a writing-based space, is to acknowledge
the important fact that “we shape our understanding of life through the writing we do” (Landmark Essays xx).

This shift from seeing writing as a product to be evaluated, to an emphasis on the “process of writing,” marked a radical change in the vision of what the first-year writing course was for. In “How the Writing Process was Born—and Other Conversion Narratives,” Lad Tobin dramatically describes what “life before the writing process movement” looked like in classrooms: “They were told, with a straight face, that no decent person ever wrote without outlining first…that there is a clear distinction between description, definition, narrative, and argument; that grammatical errors were moral and mortal sins…” (Taking Stock 2). The stories Tobin tells demonstrate how different the kind of pedagogy the writing process movement advocates for is, particularly when compared to a version of teaching completely preoccupied with rigidity, correctness, and grades. Sharon Crowley’s study, Composition in the University (1998), adds to this image by specifying that in the late 1960’s, a “humanist” approach to the composition course involved “literary study combined with drills in usage, grammar, and mechanics” (113).

In contrast, in “The Interior View: One Writer’s Philosophy of Composition” (1970), Donald Murray positions himself as both writer and teacher of writing, proposing that “a writer is an individual who uses language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it.” Murray continues to explore the implications of this statement: “he uses the tool of language to discover the meanings which exist in his experience. As he uses his language to try to put down on the page what he thinks he means he keeps changing the words…an order evolves as his mind uses language to explore what is significant in his experience.” Murray’s emphasis is clearly on the way that language is used by a writer in order to make sense of his or her own world, and the
value that this process has on a larger holistic level. Instead of teaching students to write in order to fulfill an assignment or prove rote grammatical fluency, one should invite students to enter into a conversation with themselves and the world that the writing process ignites.

Similarly, although from the standpoint of teacher as researcher, Janet Emig, in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (1971), criticizes the “old model” of teaching composition because “the concern is with sending a message…ultimately [for] the evaluation of another. Too often, the other is a teacher, interested chiefly in a product he can criticize rather than in a process he can help initiate through imagination and sustain through empathy and support” (The Web of Meaning 92-3). Emig’s emphasis on a “process” of writing that can be encouraged by a teacher echoes Murray’s more personal meditation on how the “mind uses language.” Additionally, this quote comes from a section subtitled “Implications for Teaching,” demonstrating the methodology of Emig’s study—the way she observed eight students, collected qualitative data based on what she saw, and then crafted case studies documenting the importance of writing as an individualized process and how teachers might work with this process rather than against it.

In an earlier essay, “On Teaching Composition: Some Hypotheses as Definitions” (1967), Emig investigates teaching as in itself a process, and advocates for a doing away with the idea that there is a “single process of writing” (planning, writing revising), instead proposing that teachers think of writing as “a loop rather than a linear affair” (131). What Emig is really asserting here is that there is no “one size fits all” way to teach students how to write; there is no single formula that will guarantee an “A” paper from every student. Emig even goes as far as to provide some specific ideas for how to create this kind of classroom: “we should ask students to keep writing diaries in which they recount how they set about and persist in writing” (135).
suggesting this kind of writing journal, Emig points to the importance that metacognition plays in writing—the idea the workings of any individual composing process are closely linked to our own awareness of what happens when we write.

Perhaps one of the most significant hallmarks of this first “wave” of the writing process movement is the way these scholars fully embodied their identities as both teachers and academics, providing concrete pedagogical techniques alongside theoretical philosophies. In other words, research in the teaching of this first-year college writing course also began to include examples of what a process-based classroom might look like. For example, Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) is a book that provides its reader with a variety of ways into the writing process—i.e. freewriting, freewriting “exercises,” and strategies for editing and locating the “center of gravity” in a written piece. Similarly, Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing* (1970) offers suggestions for both “writing with focus” and “writing without focus.” By including hands-on advice alongside the theoretical, the writing process movement offered not only a new way to think about the ever-tricky job of teaching first-year writing, but the tools (importantly not templates) with which to explore how to do it.

Critics of the writing process movement, most notably those affiliated with “post-process theory,” argue that writing should never and can never be generalized as a singular process. In his “Introduction” to *Post-Process Theory* (1999), Thomas Kent outlines the three main beliefs that “post-process theorists” hold “about the act of writing: (1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (1). None of these beliefs run counter to what I consider to be the central theories of the process movement. Even when engaged in what Elbow might call “private writing,” we are always in public, either literally or in the way that all individual identities are somewhat shaped by the environment surrounding us. Similarly, what post-process
theorists refer to as “interpretive” and “situated” actually speaks to the fact that written work is powerful because of the way it enables us to communicate across boundaries by understanding the variety of languages and conventions we are surrounded by at all times. What post-process theorists do not offer is the same level of realistic consideration of the world of the classroom, the space where the writing often takes place and shape.

The idea of a *poethical* classroom addresses many of the concerns of post-process theorists directly through making explicit how the writing process movement does not offer any one way to write well. In fact, process pedagogy advocates for building space for the composing processes of individuals, as they experience them. Post-process theorists (specifically Thomas Kent and Gary Olson) argue “writing cannot be taught,” misunderstanding the central idea of approaching writing as a process—not “the” process. The term “post-process” was first used in John Trimbur’s 1994 review essay, “Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process.” In his discussion of three new books in the field of composition studies by “leading teacher-theorists,” Trimbur frames his comments by stating that these new texts “enact what has come to be called the ‘social turn’ of the 1980s, a post-process, post-cognitivist theory and pedagogy that represent literacy as an ideological arena and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions.” Initially the process movement did aim to empower the individual student composer through placing an emphasis on the integrity of his/her journey of discovery through writing. And, this was often done through expressive, personal, non-academic forms. However, Trimbur’s purpose is not to undermine or critique the process movement, rather he addresses the absence of political realities, such as how the “meanings of literacy are named from privileged positions of power.”
The theorizing of the process movement doesn’t directly address the complex critical and cultural literacies that Trimbur mentions, but that is not to say that they are simply absent. This is where “poethics” comes in. Beyond defining the same ideological prioritizing of the importance of the relationship between writing and thinking, “poethics” proposes a writing-based practice that is inextricably linked to a critical engagement with one’s surroundings. One writes to discover through language, but this is a rigorous process, pushing one’s understanding to the complexities that lie at its edges. For Retallack, central to any kind of “poethics” is the idea that the writing must be “about startling the mind into action when much is at stake and intelligibility is poor” (TPW 48). The key word here is “stake:” “poethics” moves beyond the limits of the composing process, pushing students to learn that their writing can not only be active—it can take action, and this is difficult work.
Katerina: Writing as/in Translation

Katerina’s experience in Composition II pushed her to engage with herself as a writer on multiple levels. As a student new to the United States, the stakes of writing in English for a required course felt high. By pushing herself to take on paper topics that pushed the boundaries of her own experience living between languages, Katerina began to see the use-value of essay writing—the way that even a research paper could be active and engaged with one’s present surroundings, even if written about an Ancient Greek text.

When given the option to pick a text that she loved or felt very interested in as the subject for her final paper of the Spring 2013 semester in my Composition II course, Katerina selected Cavafy’s “Ithaka.” Instead of working with one of the many translations of Cavafy’s poem (there are at least five), Katerina decided to take advantage of her own fluency in Greek and create her own translation of Cavafy’s canonical text. Her reasoning was that she wanted to take advantage of her own “cultural heritage, Greek Cypriot,” a heritage that Katerina grappled with throughout the semester. As a first-year college student new to New York City, Katerina was continually surprised by how much she felt as if she was back in Greece on a daily basis. Earlier in the semester, she submitted a response paper noting the ways her experience in Astoria, Queens reminded her of home. She wrote, “I can hear conversations in the street in Greek, almost every store I pass has a Greek name and of course a Greek owner, I go to Neptune Diner and I get to eat the meals that my mother and grandmother cooked for me back home.” Katerina also noticed a focus on Greece prevalent in her academic courses: “I walk into philosophy class and I listen to my professor talk about how the Greeks invented democracy, he quotes the words of Aristotle and Plato and Socrates like words spoken by Gods…Then I walk into communication class, art
history class, and so on, and legendary names of Ancient Greeks are studied, their society is analyzed and their art is on the walls of museums.”

So, when it came time to settle on a topic for a research paper, it was not surprising that Katerina chose to work with something connected to Cyprus. However, in her proposal for this paper, Katerina’s rationale for working on Cavafy was attributed to her experience reading Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” a piece that Katerina wrote “intrigued me; the ranges of very important issues that are covered are almost overwhelming: introspection, critical thinking, art and its importance to humanity, equality of sexes and race.” Lorde’s piece reminded her of a quote from “Socrates or Plato (one of those Greek geniuses, #patriotic pride) which said that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living,’ an ideology that I completely agree with and now try my best to practice every day.” Katerina wanted to work with a text that she could engage with in a way that she felt was “unexamined” (at least from her perspective), and this led her to think about the act of translation and how her reading of Cavafy in Greek differed from what her classmates would experience in English.

Katerina’s proposal for why she wanted to work with Cavafy for the last chunk of the semester included a detailed analysis of Lorde’s essay. She wrote, “I think the author uses poetry as an example of a means to constantly examine life, introspect, analyze and evaluate the world around us—poetry is only one form of art—art is one of the best ways to accomplish that. We all have creativity inside us, even accountants or mathematicians, but we need to release that creativity out in the world thus benefiting us and the world.” Instead of using her own background as grounds for embarking upon this Cavafy translation project, Katerina focused on the importance she saw in the act of creating poetry. This decision was particularly resonant given Katerina’s academic focus—accounting. Prior to my class, Katerina’s experience with
poetry was limited to the Greek classics she studied in Cyprus. And, her experience with writing in English was limited to that academic year (she moved to the United States the August before beginning college).

The Composition II course Katerina took was taught entirely through writing. At first she was a bit anxious about her own fluency in English, then anxious about her capabilities as a writer in English, but by the end of the semester, grades mattered less to Katerina. She was far more engaged in writing about things that felt important to her. This is particularly clear in one of her process notes from the Cavafy paper, “Every poem is product of a culture, of an idea, of a country’s history and of what it stands for—[“Ithaka”] is written in the context of Greek culture and history thus translating the words to English may still hold the general message of the poem but it won’t be rooted or natural.” This commentary offers a glimpse into Katerina’s struggles throughout the paper writing process—grappling with the difficulties of translation while still remaining somehow committed to staying true to Cavafy’s “Ithaka.” Katerina’s next process note read: “Translating a poem from one language to another is far more complicated than it seems. I unfortunately came to the conclusion that when a poem is translated it loses most of its original value, however a translator must try the best he or she can to imitate the author’s ways and intentions as well as try to create the illusion of the effect of the original poem.” Again, in this reflection we see Katerina’s own struggles, the way that she realized how hard it is to take the sentiment and syntax from one language and convey it in another. And, again, there is no evidence that Katerina is even remotely thinking of shifting topics/texts (as many of her classmates did when they hit similar roadblocks). Instead, she articulates the difficulties she had, and continued to write.
In the “Dear Reader” letter that accompanied Katerina’s final draft, she notes, “I really feel sorry for Odysseus, but I feel sorry for myself as well—writing isn’t less difficult than fighting Skylla or the Cyclopes, we all know that by now.” Just as “Ithaka” was Odysseus’ home, Katerina was able to write a place for herself as a college freshman in New York City, who very much sees the content of her classes through the lens of her own experience as a Greek Cypriot. Instead of looking to return to her own “homeland,” or idealizing her native language, Katerina accepts and even embraces the challenges that learning to find one’s way into making meaning through translation presents. Cavafy’s poem revolves around the Ithaka that Odysseus returns home to after the Trojan War. Yet, the poem’s focus is not Odysseus’ arrival in Ithaka; Cavafy begins, “As you set out for Ithaka/hope your road is a long one,/full of adventure, full of discovery.” Ithaka’s significance is in its role as a destination, a mythic place that Odysseus journeys towards, a place that can easily be read as a metaphor for any kind of goal. The poem ends, “And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you./Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,/you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.” Cavafy’s emphasis is on wisdom, which stems from becoming “so full of experience,” and this experience can only be gained through the act of embarking upon a journey of some kind.

Katerina’s acknowledgement of the challenges she faced in the process of taking on this paper mirrors the kinds of experiences Cavafy sees as invaluable to the journey implied by

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7 The complete paper assignment for this project, including all scaffolded steps (i.e. the “Dear Reader” letter) is included as part of the Appendices on page 218.
8 While Katerina did give her permission for me to quote her essay and reflective writings, she requested that I not share her translation of the Cavafy poem. For her, the process of using her native language and experience to translate Cavafy’s famous text was far more important than the poem she produced. Her paper itself was an investigation of the process of translation and the constraints English can place on a poem.
9 For the text of Cavafy’s “Ithaka” translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard see: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/181782
Ithaka (place and poem). In fact, her final research paper began as a close reading of Cavafy’s poem (from which I took the inspiration for much of my own interpretation here), but evolved through multiple drafts into a much more persuasive and nuanced meditation on the journey of translation. Through the act of translating Cavafy’s poem, Katerina learned a lot about her own literacy and learning experiences in English, and her argument about Cafavy’s (now somewhat clichéd) notion that “life is a journey” morphed into a critical investigation of her own journey as a writer. Katerina also acknowledged that this process would not have been as important to her if she had not been given the “mandate” to discover a poem she was “interested in.” She also noted that the form of the poem was crucial to her ability to engage with the English language on an individual word basis in the way that she did. Her own desire to take into account the visual form of the poem in its original Greek (stanzas, line breaks), caused her to struggle with the changes that the English language proposed. And, as we see in Katerina’s own thinking through of her process, “every poem is a product of a culture,” and it is that product that Katerina learned to recognize through this paper-writing experience.
A “Different” Kind of Poetics

In his essay, “Poetry as Prose,” poet and teacher Kenneth Koch writes, “language makes one aware not only of what it describes, but also of language itself—of the word among words” (31). Ideally, this awareness of “the word among words” is what should be the foundation for teaching all first-year composition courses—the notion that language in itself is eye opening, empowering, necessary, and beautiful. However, poetry is a genre that is often met with “hostility rested in the observation frequently made by students that poetry is willfully obscure, difficult to read, and filled with hidden meanings” (Taking Stock 85). Yet, poetry and poetics occupy a uniquely central place in the writing process movement. James Britton’s later work, specifically his selected essays, Prospect and Retrospect (1982), and Literature in Its Place (1993), underscored the importance of poetry to the development of language abilities.\(^\text{10}\) The first essay in Prospect and Retrospect, “Reading and Writing Poetry,” focuses on how and why poetry should be included in the classroom because of its unique potential to spark formative experiences for students of a variety of ages (particularly ages nine to eleven). Britton states, “The writer of a poem is not out to inform or instruct: he draws upon his experience not in order to pass on formulations about experience or facts about the world; what he does is create fresh experience—something that is like life itself” (12). In other words, both the writing and reading of poetry eschew any easy interpretation; rather the process of reading poetry is one that fully engages the student in the act of working with and through language. This is poesis, an action with transformative potential, and one of the central components of “poethics.”

\(^\text{10}\) Britton was a British educator who is often seen as responsible (along with Janet Emig) for translating theories of language and learning into the kinds of pedagogical approaches articulated by the writing process movement (i.e. writing to discover, freewriting).
Shifting focus to the college-level composition course, in “The Process of Poetry,” Daniel Reagan presents examples of how working with poetry leads to writing as discovery. Reagan writes, “I urge students to apply discoveries made while working with poetry to other types of writing, primarily the expository essay” (85). Reagan continues to share the details of how he introduces his students to poetry, following a sequence of freewriting that engages questions like “what is poetry?” to writing poetry, and finally to reflecting on “what makes a poem a poem.” In order to fully engage beginning writers in the kind of “empowerment” that Reagan (and Britton) see as the result of using poetry as a catalyst for a “deeper understanding of the processes of reading and writing,” I would argue that one needs to look to more contemporary poetries. If, as Lester Faigley points out in “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and A Proposal” (1986), the process movement largely hinges on “ways of resisting static modes of teaching writing—methods based on…adherence to the ‘rules’ of Standard English” (Landmark 160), then why present beginning writers with poetry that is easily recognizable as verse? Why not work with poems that ask students and teachers alike to rethink the way that they define poetry as a genre? If the process movement came out of a space of challenging the idea of teaching writing by way of “drills” and emphasizing correct usage of “standard” English, why wouldn’t practitioners turn to poetries that mirror these same beliefs in questioning normative ways of writing? In other words, for students who are reading poetry in the context of first-year composition, students who will not be English majors, what kind of poetry can help them to see their own writing as active and necessary?

Central to “poethics” is this idea of “resisting static modes” of writing, which leads Retallack to ask, “what is implied about the forms with which we attempt to make meaning of our experience?” (TPW 83) Theorists of the writing process movement might see the answer to
this question in terms of Donald Murray’s assertion\textsuperscript{11} that, what matters in the teaching of writing is the “process of discovery through language,” advocating that we teach “unfinished writing” because language is in itself an “evolving process.” This response is synonymous to how Retallack imagines her own question addressed, and demonstrates how and why a kind of poetry that presents itself as an evolving organism, a form in process, is central to a classroom that aims to use a poem as an invitation for students to write.\textsuperscript{12}

The epigram that begins \textit{Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary} (2005), edited by Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr, is an excerpt from a personal exchange between Joan Retallack and Paul Connolly\textsuperscript{13}: “We need to think about the practical educative force of poetry and, from another angle, about the performative poetic practice of pedagogy…I believe that it is not arguing well but speaking differently that changes a culture. Poetry is the place where speaking differently is most prevalent.” Spahr and Retallack expand on what this kind of poetry does in the classroom in their introductory essay, “Why Teach Contemporary Poeties?” They write, “what poetry has to offer is a compound experience in which the dynamic engagement of self and otherness, of formal discipline and experiment is played out through the

\textsuperscript{11} See “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product” (1972).

\textsuperscript{12} Katerina’s essay on Cavafy’s “Ithaka” is one of many examples of how a poem opens doors to critical thinking and analysis for beginning writers purely because of the form of the poem. Katerina would not have discovered what she discovered about the problems translation poses if she had been working with a prose text because in prose, the weight of the single word functions differently. For example, Katerina spent a lot of of her paper analyzing the choices she had to make on a word level because of the ways line breaks impact the meaning of a poem. The Keeley/Sherrard translation of “Ithaka” begins “As you set out for Ithaka,” yet Katerina notes that this line is not accurate in terms of the original Greek which translates to mean something more like “As you sail your boat out for Ithaka.” But Katerina found herself noticing how the more accurate translation did not quite work as well as the Keeley/Sherrard, and this became something she found herself working through again and again in her paper. In prose, her eye would not have been drawn to individual words as intensely.

\textsuperscript{13} Paul Connolly directed the Institute for Writing & Thinking at Bard College from 1982-1998. This particular correspondence revolved around Retallack and Connolly’s shared desire to host a conference on poetry and pedagogy at Bard.
foregrounding of language” (2). By defining contemporary poetry as “foregrounding language,” there is a clear echo of the central tenets of the process movement—“we shape our understanding of life through the composing we do” (Landmark xx). And, if these “understanding[s] of life” are linked to making sense of the increasingly complex world around us, shouldn’t the poetries students read reflect this same complexity?

The kind of “contemporary poetry” represented in Poetry and Pedagogy is writing that is decidedly non-narrative and often labeled “experimental.” Detailed descriptions of the rationale behind this kind of poetry is found in the writings of poets associated with Language poetry, a movement or school of poetry that was largely articulated in the mid to late 1970’s. This “school” of poetry and poetics is described as “aim[ing] to place complete emphasis on the language of the poem and to create a new way for the reader to interact with the work…Language poetry also seeks to involve the reader in the text, placing importance on reader participation in the construction of meaning.” In contrast to the poetry being written at that same moment in time, Language poetry resisted the idea that “a poem exists, that is, primarily to convey from writer to reader an experience” (Bartlett 745). The “so-called Language

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14 Language Poetry’s “birth date” is often referred to as 1971, which is the year This magazine was founded by Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine began seven years later, in 1978, edited by Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, and Ted Greenwald.

15 I find the idea of “schools” of poetry to be reductive and not particularly helpful. However, in this context, I’m using the term in order to differentiate between one “genre” of avant-garde writing/writers and the others in conversation with it. It is also interesting to note that the moniker, “Language Poetry,” is a term that came from critics of this work, it was never a term that the poets affiliated with this “school” ever felt comfortable using.


17 I’m thinking here specifically of the Beat poets (Allen Ginsberg’s Howl was published in 1956), Confessional poets (Plath’s “Daddy” is dated 1962), The New York School (Frank O’Hara’s Lunch Poems was first published in 1964), and The Black Mountain poets (Robert Duncan’s Bending the Bow came out in 1968). While all of these poets are certainly experimental and influenced the Language Poets, their poems demonstrate a kind of narrative familiarity for readers that Language Poetry aimed to resist.
poets” were (and still are) writing in contrast (or in opposition) to the idea that a poem encapsulates a specific experience that has a right/wrong reading. While this motivation for writing a certain way is no longer unique to the Language poets, their theorizing of the poetics underlying the texts they wrote is central to understanding the kinds of texts integral to a poethical classroom.

In “What Is “Language Poetry?” Lee Bartlett defines what this “group” of poets aimed to explore (through language) by pointing out that “the workshop poem, with its insistence on translatable experience, fails to question the historical, social, and economic context, merely excepting as given the prevailing ‘market value’” (748). The “failings” of the “workshop poem” are the same failings described in the context of “product-centered” pedagogies—the insistence that readers and writers conform to a legible narrative that reproduces standard uses of English, a standardization that leaves no room to investigate the intricacies of language.

Take, for example, David Lehman’s18 “Goodnight Poem” (first published in the May 1971 issue of Poetry):

The clarinets of my voice love you

accidentally, even as the right-wing fanatics

of my dictatorial heart love you

dynamically, or the Siamese Twins I own

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18 I specifically picked a poem by David Lehman because he is a poet of the same generation as the Language poets. Lehman, beyond being the author of nine books of poems, is also a “prominent editor and literary critic.” He is the series editor of The Best American Poetry and editor of The Oxford Book of American Poetry. The poetry that Lehman himself writes, as well as the collections he edits can be considered examples of the sort of poems the Language poets were initially writing against. Although Lehman’s The Best American Poetry series showcases a diverse range of poetics, and although his own work is heavily influenced by New York School poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O’Hara, Lehman’s work does not take the kind of rhetorical risks that Language poetry promoted.
Kaufman

(which carry procreation) love you
on purpose, while the male chauvanists
of my eyes twinkle their love for you
in their own incongruous, if insensitive,
way. Don’t be alarmed. I even love
your baffled embarrassment, when you
switch off the lights, and your face,
as pure and wet as a sob, is the only light
left in the somber museum

I’ve created. Don’t be alarmed. Goodnight.

Beginning with the image of “clarinets of my voice,” Lehman guides his reader through a predictable love sonnet. The poem is fourteen lines and does not have a clear rhyme/meter scheme (which is not a “requirement” of a contemporary sonnet). The images Lehman uses to describe his “love” are not the typical canonical images (flowers, hearts, etc.). Instead, he draws on unexpected, even jarring images—“the Siamese Twins I own” and “the male chauvinists/of my eyes,” for example. Yet, as the poem nears its end, it takes the usual volta, the swerve of a traditional sonnet, where the gaze turns onto the subject of the speaker’s love, whose “face,/as pure and wet as a sob, is the only light.”

Given its clear narrative, descriptive structure, the poem’s tight conclusion—the speaker sees the object of his love’s face, glowing and gorgeous, and bids her “Goodnight”—is inevitable, obvious, and easy. The poem is titled “Goodnight Poem,” so of course it would end with “Goodnight.” But, this raises an important question, a question clearly on the minds of the Language poets: what’s at stake in a poem like this? In a 2014 interview, Lehman describes the
“purpose” or “use-value” of poetry as “something we need not because it can change our social reality but because it allows us to escape from it.”¹⁹ This interpretation of the purpose of poetry seems a bit limited—why restrict the poem to escapism? Why not challenge the lyric to challenge “our social reality”? What kind of writing would a poem like this inspire students to do?

In contrast, let’s look at a poem from Joan Retallack’s first book, *Circumstantial Evidence*, which contains works written in the late sixties and seventies. “In Search of Man”:

He has just committed a murder.  
He is substituting for flight  
a fixed stare into what  
for others would be  
the alarming throat  
of a tuba, irreversibly wide  
as the stain  
forming a thick shadow  
outside.  
Homely girls are sitting out this dance.  
Priests are sitting in confessionals.  
Birds are sitting on their eggs.  
Pilots are sitting in the sky.  
Someone,  
briegged by too many  
unassailable world views,  
is boiling his hat  
to make it smaller.  
Scholars are sitting in their carrels.  
The blind are sitting in the front row.

Retallack’s poem is six lines longer than Lehman’s and has a title, “In Search of Man,” that connotes a kind of journey or quest—a narrative that is in pursuit of something “searching” for “man.” The poem begins, “He has just committed a murder.” This sentence places the reader inside of a specific situation, one that is urgent and current—the “murder” has “just” happened.

Yet, the second line of the poem, “He is substituting for flight,” begins the series of unexpected twists and turns that comprises the rest of the poem. Retallack’s biographical note at the end of *Circumstantial Evidence* mentions that she “has been interested in paradox and disjunction […]”, terms that both point towards the kind of meaning making that exceeds logic. Whereas Lehman’s love sonnet takes its reader on a fairly expected sojourn inside the speaker’s heart, Retallack’s text asks the reader to participate in a far more intellectually rigorous task—to collaborate with the language of the poem in the making of meaning. In “A Philosopher Among the Poets, A Poet Among the Philosophers” (2001), Burton Hatlen offers further insight into Retallack’s devotion to “paradox and disjunction.” He describes Retallack’s poetry as showing “a distinct tendency to test logic against the materiality of language, to interrogate and reinvent the rules of syntax and thereby to interrogate the Image that stands at the center of modernist poetics” (357).

An example of what Hatlen means occurs in the second sentence (which spans eight lines) of the poem: “He is substituting for flight/a fixed stare into what/for others would be/the alarming throat/of a tuba, irreversibly wide/as the stain/forming a thick shadow/outside.” In line one the reader learns that the “he” of the poem has committed “murder,” a serious offense, which positions the action of line two (“substituting for flight”) as something rife with tension—if the murderer isn’t about to flee, what is “he” doing? Retallack’s careful use of line breaks enables her to create a space within the poem where the reader is propelled through the poem by the suspense of what happens from line to line. We’re drawn into the text because of the “murder” in line one, and want to know what the fate of the “he” will be—what kind of alternative to “flight” he will choose. “A fixed stare into what” is an unusual choice, and becomes even more jarring when the reader learns that this is an immersion “into what/for others would be/the alarming throat/of a tuba.” We don’t have a concrete definition of what the “he” is staring into outside of
what we know “others” experience as “alarming.” Yet, even this emotion is undone by the “tuba, irreversibly wide.” Is the tuba a metaphor for something else?

In her close reading of one of Retallack’s later books, *Afterimages* (1995), Ann Vickery links this way of disorienting the reader to the way Retallack “carefully assembles a confluence of coordinates that will generate a paradigmatic shift in the very way we think about our own positioning within time and space” (169). The reader lives this refiguring of the “way we think about our own positioning within time and space” in the latter half of “In Search of Man.” It seems as though the “murder” has left the purview of the poem and in its place we’re met with a litany of those who are sitting. For example, “Homely girls are sitting out this dance./Priests are sitting in confessionals.” Both of these lines read as complete sentences representing a believable action—priests do sit in confessionals, and stereotypically, unattractive girls do not get asked to dance. Yet, the link between these mini-portraits and the beginning of the poem is left in flux. Are these moments what the “he” places his “fixed stare” onto? Are they the key to the “thick shadow/outside”?

This sense that reading a poem can push one to rethink how one reads, what it means to recognize a word as familiar, are all part of what make Retallack’s poem such a strikingly different experience from Lehman’s. “In Search of Man” activates the reader to think carefully and critically before defining what the poem (or the words that make up the poem) is about. This experience is one that teaches readers the all-encompassing lesson that language and meaning are not as easy to pinpoint and define as one might want them to be. There is no “standard” way to read Retallack’s poem. While Lehman’s sonnet provides readers with a story that gives readers clear moments to cling to (i.e. the repetition of “love you”), Retallack’s poem offers readers the challenge to grapple with language in a way that holds the potential to change us as readers. The
middle of the second stanza of “In Search of Man” reads, “Someone, besieged by too many/unassailable world views, is boiling his hat/to make it smaller.” Again, an unidentified character grapples with certainty here, a moment in stark contrast to the bodies “sitting” that surround it. But, it appears as though in the face of these impenetrable “world views,” this “someone” is taking the agency to find his/her place of understanding, “boiling” as a way to “make it smaller.”

We never find out what happens to the “He” who has “just committed a murder;” but we also realize that the telling of that story is not the purpose of the poem. Instead, Retallack invites readers to participate in the experience of “knowing in the form of poetry” (TPW 69); a way of engaging with a text that is purposefully both challenging and alarming in the way it asks that the reader take active responsibility for the experience he or she constructs through the writer’s use of words. In his “Introduction” to In the American Tree (1986)20, poet/critic Ron Silliman describes this sort of experimental verse as demanding that poets (as well as readers) “look (in some ways for the first time) at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one’s mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself” (xviii).

These differences between Lehman’s and Retallack’s poems represent the differences between the “workshop poem” and a way of conceptualizing what a poem should be made of so that the language used demonstrates that there is something at stake. In Silliman’s description, he places emphasis on the idea that “language itself” is what the “poem is actually made of.”

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20 In the American Tree is perhaps the earliest anthology that collects a variety of Language poetry and poetics all concerned with the same issues regarding form and content. In his introductory essay, “Language, Realism, Poetry,” Ron Silliman acknowledges that the volume’s contents reflect the idea that “what a poem is actually made of” gains clout through “the invocation of a specific medium, language itself.”
Embedded in this assertion is the idea that “the language which structures reality is not a given, but clearly of our own making, to the idea that by changing our language we, to some extent, alter our form of life” (“The Meta-Physick of Play” 222). Through reading poetry that invites active engagement with the form and language of the text, without imposing pre-made meanings and judgments, one is able to begin to uncover specific habits of reading and writing that open the doors to unique new ways of seeing.

The juxtaposition of Lehman’s somewhat predictable sonnet, and Retallack’s “choose your own adventure” verse, are significant in that they foreground the kind of poetry I consider to be integral to the experience with writing that students have in a poethical classroom. If the process movement initially advocated for the privileging of the composing process and the connection between writing and intellectual discovery, then the poetry taught should mirror that same engagement with language as an unpredictable tool for garnering meaning. The poetics and poetry embedded in the idea of the poethical ask students to become part of the experience of the poem, to feel the intensity of being ensconced in language, to feel the importance of making sense of and using language for himself or herself, rather than to create a document to get a grade. In “Using Focused Freewriting to Promote Critical Thinking” (1991), Lynn Hammond shares her own process and rationale for using poetry in the first-year writing course. She concludes, “the implication is that we need to help students find their own perplexity, as the poetry freewriting strategy does, rather than trying to get to students to show an interest in answering our questions” (Nothing Begins with N 89). Hammond is referring specifically to a sequence of interconnected in-class writings geared towards working with a student to help him/her locate their own reading of a poem. The process begins with some writing in response to the poem’s title, then to how it sounds when read aloud, and finally a series of sustained pieces
of writing in response to the images the student remembers from the poem. By working through a poem in this way, the student finds him/herself with a series of analytical and reflective paragraphs about a poem and can then revise these pieces into a more cohesive essayistic whole.

This process is emblematic of the way that a poem represents a form that can feel unfamiliar at first, to a student, but ultimately is the kind of text that opens up to more and more analysis once one commits to being “rigorous in not censoring ourselves, in plunging into the slough of not-knowing, for more profound insights to emerge” (*Nothing Begins with N* 91). What Hammond points out is the way that poetry lends itself to the kind of (*poethical*) pedagogy that encourages students to grapple with their readings of texts by using writing as a way to puzzle through and discover their own ideas and readings.
In Fall 2009, I taught a Composition II course that resembled more of a template than a freestanding course. We were instructed what to cover over the course of the semester, we were provided with exams, and we were not permitted to grade our own students’ midterm and final examinations. The required textbook was titled *Lead, Follow, or Move Out of the Way: Global Perspectives in Literature*, and seemed to assume that no student could be expected to read any text that exceeded six pages. It was difficult to teach three pages of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, or five pages from Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.” There was no way to share with the class how exciting the language of these writers was, when the excerpts were so reductive. And, when the course’s contents were so pre-determined, it was hard to figure out ways to engage the students while still checking off the boxes required.

The class was also at 7:30AM, meaning that most students were there prior to heading off to their jobs, or after working a night shift. And, the class was large (thirty students), and time (seventy-five minutes) was short.

About halfway through the semester I began to supplement the textbook with an array of contemporary poetry that spoke to some of the themes that were coming up in the texts; more specifically, writing about New York City (past and present) and texts that dealt with money and class. I tried to steer clear of anything that the students might encounter in their coursework moving forward, and mostly drew from poems that offered unexpected and divergent ways to see New York City through writing. We spent two weeks looking at Jayne Cortez’s “I am New York City” and Bruce Andrews’ “Mistaken Identity.” Jayne Cortez was a poet associated with the Black Arts Movement, and particularly connected to the music world (she was married to Ornette Coleman) and spoken-word. Bruce Andrews is a political science professor who is
affiliated with the first wave of Language poetry, and is known for working with overheard and found language, with particular interest in socioeconomics and politics.

Cortez’s poem begins:

i am new york city
here is my brain of hot sauce
my tobacco teeth my
mattress of bedbug tongue
legs aphaarthand on chin
war on the roof insults
pointed fingspushcarts

Echoing with the intonations of rap music and its details of daily life in the city, Cortez’s poetry resonated with the contemporary city, and was a somewhat easy “sell.” The poem takes the shape of a litany of sights and experiences in New York City, and is particularly honest in its description of the realities of city life. Bruce Andrews’ work was a much more risky text—less narrative, increasingly disjointed and jarring. “Mistaken Identity” begins:

The situation has a situation
Electro-convulsive opinions eat us
Pig brink dollarization, the marriage of money gobble gobble money
Profit margin American cream dream cultures of vultures
A social predicament, the losers are self-preoccupied
Jellyfish FBI—are you a vending machine?
Who fights the free?—at least the exploited ones have a future

Andrews’ poem is a string of aggressive language that comes at the reader, criticizing the world we live in, while also calling into question language itself because language is the “principle medium of control” of the elite. Andrews’ concern as a writer is with the experience of the reader, the way that through using language in unexpected ways the reader then becomes empowered to create meaning outside of the weight of the familiar way of reading words.
I presented these two poems to the class and we simply read them over and over again out loud. We did some writing in response to what the language was doing (and how and why); and we did some writing in between the lines of the poems. For homework, between the two weeks, I gave the class the option of either performing a close reading of either poem, or writing their own poem that somehow embodied what they valued in these works by Cortez and Andrews.

J., a student who barely spoke all semester, who was consistently late, and who seldom handed in work, turned in the following response:

I wake up in the morning and step on the cold floor
Sleep walking to the bathroom, I bump my head with the door
I turn on the faucet and there’s no hot water
It’s like the super doesn’t care, the man doesn’t even bother --
To turn on the boiler
Rich girls are like princesses, they’re parents always spoil her
But what they don’t know is that money doesn’t make you happy
A lot of girls don’t like their appearance; they don’t want their hair nappy
So truth is, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I guess this world is blind
You see people asking for change but nobody pays them any mind
I speed past them; I’m living life in the fast lane
Fast cars, money comes and goes, I treat pennies all the same --
I throw them out the window, oops did I just litter?
Its sucks for the people who hate, I guess they’re all just bitter

If two wrongs don’t make a right, why don’t you take a left?
If you don’t like what people say, then make pretend that you’re deaf
Because we’re all so ignorant and the “others” we ignore
We take two steps forward, three behind and were back to where we were before

Are we traveling backwards, are we pressing rewind?
We’re still at war for peace, but we’re not at peace, we got out soldiers on the line
So what are we really fighting for? For oil, for money, for power?
It’s winter and we’re all in a recession, the bees don’t get honey from the flowers
Why? Because the flowers are dead, but who killed them?
We did, we’re bringing our world to extinction
And I’m not nostradamus but I will make a prediction

I had a dream of a black president
And my words break the rules, they set precedents
But I’m no Eminem, this isn’t a chocolate candy
We’re using each other to excel in life, I guess we all come in handy
But what happens when your stock is depleted
When you run out of words but your poem isn’t completed?
You start making up words that are not in the dictionary
So now pick up what the media portrays in your local stationary

Read between the lines
The government is making us blind
They want to instill this false image in the back of our minds

But don’t fall for these fallacies, don’t follow the norm
If you learned something from this class, you should know better than to conform!

This response, although it takes the form of a poem, demonstrates many of the conventions I hope students will master with regards to academic prose. The piece takes the form and sound of spoken word and rap, but has a clear argument with regards to the contemporary moment and the role the government plays in the way students see their lives—what opportunities are valid and what feels out of reach. J. borders on cliché several times in this piece, i.e. “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but she manipulates these moments to support her overall point, “don’t follow the norm.” Stylistically, J.’s response mirrors many of the tactics that Cortez uses—description and the rhythm of words and how they provoke emotion by bumping up against one another. The themes of what J. addresses mirror Andrews’ content—the idea of “money gobble gobble money” as a driving force behind the ways in which we operate in the world.

J.’s reflection on the process of this piece included addressing the connection she felt to both poems without necessarily being able to “say what they meant.” There was something in the way the language greeted and challenged her that she felt compelled to respond to, and this response shocked me, as teacher, because it was the most critically engaged piece of writing I’d seen all semester. J. also noted that these particular texts were much more “relevant and interesting” than anything from the text book. She felt as though the required readings were
“dumb,” a comment that I read as reacting against the “dumbing down” that happens when long, complex works are abbreviated for anthologizing.

These contemporary experimental poems offered J. a way in to the process of writing, to the idea that she could articulate her ideas and opinions in written form, and that the form it took might exist outside of the five-paragraph essay.
A Poethical Classroom

In the closing paragraph of their introduction to *Poetry and Pedagogy*, Retallack and Spahr articulate their goals for the book: “Teaching has formidable impact…This makes a difference not only in what one attends to in the language of one’s times, but in whether and how that language will transfigure our ability to make meaning” (8). Earlier in the same essay, the authors remind us: “…[that] we are literally composing the time in which we live brings into focus the poethical urgency of what we value most in our uses of language” (2). Both of these quotations point to the image of a classroom that is charged with valuing the use of writing as a way to discover and think through any inquiry or text at hand. The importance of this writing-based teaching method becomes particularly clear when imagining the kind of classroom Retallack creates for herself, at Bard College, where she “decided to structure all of my classes as seminar workshop hybrids. I do not teach workshops. I do not teach seminars. I teach hybrids” (KWH). Retallack, as a senior faculty member at Bard College, has the privilege to be able to make such decisions; however, it is notable that she opted not to limit the size of her courses or restrict enrollment to only upperclassmen.

Instead, Retallack creates her own model of a “hybrid” course. She describes her rationale for this as: “everyone who is in any of our classes can write, and can write in response, and can be invited into doing writing that surprises themselves in relation to texts that surprise them” (KWH). Retallack’s description of how she sees the students in her own classes (during any given semester) is similar to the way writing process theorists describe their own classrooms.

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21 Quotations cited as “KWH” are from a transcription of “Alternative Poetries and Alternative Pedagogies: A discussion at the Kelly Writers House,” which took place on February 28, 2001 at the University of Pennsylvania. Participants in the conversation include: Joan Retallack, Al Filreis, Bob Perelman, Jena Osman, Eli Goldblatt, Kerry Sherin, and Kathy Lou Schultz. This conversation came about as a continuation of some of the questions raised at the 1999 Poetry & Pedagogy Conference, organized by the Institute for Writing & Thinking at Bard College.
However, Retallack draws no distinction between skilled and unskilled writers, freshmen and upperclassmen, students and teachers. Of course, given that Retallack is the one who is speaking, she occupies the position of power (that of teacher), but the specific words she uses to characterize the other individuals in the room are purposely only pronouns.

With this understanding of how Retallack views the construction of her own classroom, it is important to note that, there are two central theoretical underpinnings to the way she thinks about teaching and the writing process. As a poet and interdisciplinary scholar, Retallack’s academic interests are widely and wildly interdisciplinary, yet always return to the central figures of John Cage, Gertrude Stein, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Retallack’s connection to Cage has already been addressed given his influence in the coining of “poethics.” But, alongside Cage, Retallack’s work is indebted to Wittgenstein’s maxim that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations* §19). This phrase embodies the idea that words engage in activities and have the power to create ideas that may surprise their writer. Similarly, Retallack is also deeply in dialogue with the work of Gertrude Stein, particularly Stein’s idea of the “continuous present.” Stein articulates this definition of temporality in “Composition as Explanation”: “The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living…” Retallack unpacks Stein’s words by stating, “the action of time *is* the action of composition” (*TPW* 57). In other words, the composing process is inextricably connected to the ways we navigate our ordinary daily experience(s).
Of course, none of these references are at all at odds with the theories put forth by the writing process movement.\textsuperscript{22} To understand the way that “language” is in itself “a form of life” is no different from the way James Britton proposes that language “gives shape to experience” (\textit{Prospect and Retrospect} 74). Similarly, in “Understanding Composing,” Sondra Perl looks at “recursiveness in writing,” specifically through working with teachers to “see their own composing processes at work” (\textit{Landmark} 100). Perl continues to explore “the ability to recognize what one needs to do or where one needs to go is informed by calling on felt sense…The continuing presence of this felt sense, waiting for us to discover it and see where it leads…” (\textit{Landmark} 102). These quotations, in the context of Perl’s essay, all point to the way in which central to the writing process is learning to hear and read the intangible signals both body and mind sends. But it is significant to note Perl’s word choice, “the continuing presence”—the composing process is active and embodied, just as Stein’s “composition” exists actively in “the living they are doing.”

Therefore, to imagine a \textit{poethical} classroom is to imagine a classroom in which everyone is actively “making knowledge of their own”\textsuperscript{23} and involved “in a process that will lead them to discover, and pursue, the work’s internal demands” (Connolly 15-16). This is a class engaged in the rigorous work of self-directed (and discovered) inquiry, while also in conversation with others and a myriad of “difficult” texts. The goal of a \textit{poethical} classroom is to allow the space for individual composing processes to develop and flourish, while also pursuing essays driven by complex questions and ideas where something is at stake. Perhaps the central driving question

\textsuperscript{22} As noted in Chapter Two, Emig, Elbow, and Berthoff all refer explicitly to Gertrude Stein in their composition theories; David W. Smit and Sidney Dobrin both draw on Wittgenstein in their writings about process and post-process composition theories; and Gregory Ulmer draws on John Cage in \textit{Applied Grammatology}.

\textsuperscript{23} Paul Connolly, “The Poet(h)ical Art of Teaching” (1998).
behind this kind of classroom is: “What is possible? What is possible given the complexity of the circumstances in which we live, given the material character of the medium in which we happen to be working, given the hellish interpenetrations of history, given the hope that material process and experience will come together in a manner useful to society?” (Musicage xxxix)

The complexity of this question represents the complexity of what it means to propose this kind of shift in pedagogy, a shift that is also recursive—circling back to the original articulation of writing process pedagogy, while also moving forward to consider and reconsider “what we make of events as we use language in the present” (TPW 9). A poethical classroom invites us to write to discover how to read texts and contexts that might be normally thought of as unreadable (i.e. difficult poetries), texts that challenge and represent the way language is used. But, the core of this kind of classroom always lies in the writing that happens, the composing process as it manifests itself amidst the “chaos of the contemporary moment.”

Before turning to more specific lesson plans that document the happenings of a poethical classroom, it is necessary to dwell on possible origins of freewriting and theories of the composing process that pre-date the articulation of these terms in composition studies.
on literacy

the last time we sat in a room and pretended
to meet i got a coffee cup out of it
and the word missing redefined as state
adjusted autonomy, with all the pretenses
of greeting complexity as standard fugitive
practice through which relationships
materialize and we drive the car forward
and be “creative” because we can’t add
anything else and not all conspiracies
are conscious uncontestable so let’s join
hands and fight the lost war, chant—
money money importance money compose

money and when a bacterial cell dies it leaves
behind packets of dna, i say they’re like diaries

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24 Process Note: This sonnet was composed through gathering language at random from several anthologies devoted to seminal articles by writing process theorists (Nothing Begins with N, Landmark Essays on Writing Process, and Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the 90’s). I then used this “word bank” of found words and phrases to build a poem. The goal I had in mind for this process was to make sense of how to think about theories of literacy through engaging with the language these writers use to talk about the relationship between writing and learning.
Chapter Two: “a rose is a rose is a” Thesis Statement

“Complex thought in writing is always surprising”
(Joan Retallack, “The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein I & II”)

“The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing.”
(Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”)

“Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.” (Stein, “If I Told Him”)

Gertrude Stein famously wrote “civilization begins with a rose. A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. It continues with blooming and it fastens clearly upon excellent examples” (As Fine as Melanchthta 262). Stein’s “rose” has much in common with a developing composing process—to begin with an object (words) and then allow this base to grow, expand, critique, convince. Thus Stein's work (both poetry and prose), despite its initial strangeness to students and teachers alike, reverberates with many concerns of compositionists and beginning writers: clarity, rhythm, detail, evidence, and argument. In fact, Stein’s work comes up often in composition studies, specifically within the writing process movement,25 as an example of how one learns through the act of writing. As Janet Emig points out in “The Composing Process: Review of the Literature” (1971), “according to Stein, writing is an act of discovery emanating ‘out of the pen and out of you” (16).26

These references to Stein within seminal texts of the process movement might seem surprising given the wealth of criticism surrounding her work. One might even argue that there is no text more expansive and more alternative than the poetry and prose of Gertrude Stein. In “The Work of Gertrude Stein,” William Carlos Williams describes Stein’s writing as “a general attack on the scholastic viewpoint” and “a break away from that paralyzing vulgarity of logic for which the habits of science and philosophy coming over into literature (where they do not belong) are to blame” (Hoffman 55). In “The Impossible,” John Ashbery claims that readers who are drawn

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25 Examples can be found in Janet Emig’s “The Relation of Thought and Language Implicit in some Early American Rhetoric and Composition Texts” (1963) and “The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing” (1964); “Writing and Voice” in Peter Elbow’s Writing with Power (1981); and “Recognition, Representation, and Revision” by Ann E. Berthoff (1981).

to Stein’s work are “satisfied only by literary extremes” and describes the experience of reading Stein as “perseverance has its rewards” (Hoffman 106). What both Williams and Ashbery point to is Stein’s “difficulty.” Despite both being established poets and critics, Williams and Ashbery use words like “paralyzing” and “extreme” to describe a Steinian text. These terms also connect to the way Stein is historically depicted as a writer. Judy Grahn writes of “[Stein’s] personal life whose every overt definition—Jewish, lesbian, female, artist, financially independent woman—was seen as alien, dangerous, forbidden, exotic or vile by much of Western civilization” (124). Yet, one gets the sense that what makes the experience of interacting with Stein’s work so viscerally unsettling, and what makes Gertrude Stein an almost mythic figure in literary history, is also her strength.

The difficulties of Stein are what mandates that her work serve as a model for beginning writers, particularly those who feel that their writing is inadequate or doesn’t make “sense.” Joan Retallack describes Stein’s writing “style” as “composing distilled patterns out of the most basic elements of a language: simple, functional vocabulary and dynamically innovative grammars” (Selections 32). By attributing the impact of Stein’s language to “vocabulary” and “grammars,” Retallack shows how what is significant about Stein’s writing style are the same “elements of style” with which many students are preoccupied by. Stein was a prolific writer, publishing regularly beginning with the release of Three Lives (1909), and her work continues to be reprinted and reissued long after her death in 1946. Yet Stein, who wrote “unabashedly strange things in self-chosen cultural exile” (Selections 4), possessed the power to breathe life back into routine vocabulary and the unique ability to reinvent “the essay” repeatedly.

Karin Cope describes Stein’s writing as “a record of the passing passions of a life—more specifically, an evocative and provocative record of the various sites of body, memory, affect
and relation where her passion and curiosity etched themselves (7). By focusing on Stein’s living body, alongside her body of work and words, Cope draws attention away from the “difficulty” of the text and instead reminds readers that “her literary experiments were consciously framed investigations into the evocative powers of grammatical innovation” (*Gertrude Stein: Selections* 9). In other words, Stein’s work cannot be dismissed as simply “difficult”—her writings intentionally cause these reactions in readers, responses that ask us to rethink the way we read and the way we construct and enact our own speech acts.27 Retallack connects reader’s responses to Stein with the idea that “writing as Stein constructs it is an act of knowing even if she does not know where it will take her” (*TPW* 165). This kind of approach to the composing process is one that Retallack also deems to be a “poethical wager,” the realization that “to compose authentically out of one’s contemporary situation is to live in the new time that one is taking part in making through the act of composition” (*TPW* 170).

Given this rendering of the relationship between writing and time, it is fitting that there is no “authoritative” biography of Gertrude Stein—there are a number of excellent ones, but they each focus on one particular aspect of Stein’s life. Brenda Wineapple’s *Sister Brother* focuses on the fascinating relationship between Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo Stein; Janet Malcolm’s *Two Lives* attempts to paint a portrait of Stein and Alice B. Toklas’ private life together; and James R. Mellow’s *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* homes in on Stein’s writing life in France, painting a portrait of the “circle” of artists that surrounded her. These are only three of a number of varied and various biographies, but Stein’s life was in itself various and almost too much for any one volume.

27 As Joan Retallack notes in her “Introduction” to *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, Stein genuinely wanted her work to reach a broad audience; she wanted to explore the way that repetition (or “the patterning of language”) might mirror time. I think that Stein was truly an example of the Wittgensteinian notion that “language is a form of life.”
Ulla Dydo’s *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises* represents the first thorough investigation of Stein’s papers—asking questions of handwriting, drafting, revising, and imagining what Stein’s process really looked like. Most recently, Sharon Kirsch’s *Gertrude Stein and the Reinvention of Rhetoric* focuses on Stein’s evolution as a rhetorician, paying particular attention to the evolution of her theory of “supposing a grammar.” While each of these volumes offers invaluable information and insight, none of them focus on what I find most compelling about Gertrude Stein and her work. I am interested in the methods of composition that Stein practiced, what her own learning process was like, and how Stein’s composing process can and does shape contemporary composition theory and even anticipates the rise of freewriting and process pedagogy.

**From Automatic Writing to Freewriting**

In 1893 Gertrude Stein began her studies at Radcliffe College, and by 1894 her brother, Leo Stein reported to the Stein family: “Gertrude is deep in psychology” (Wineapple 67). Stein was more than “deep in psychology.” As a reluctant college student (notoriously not interested in “pursuing a degree”), Stein’s meeting of Hugo Münsterberg and William James certainly changed the course of her initial move to Cambridge, MA. John Malcolm Brinnin writes, “the predominant interest of her college years was the mind and person of William James…Since she was a mere undergraduate, his particular request that she be admitted to his graduate seminar was an honor in itself” (28-9). Stein’s relationship with James was one of mutual admiration and mentorship, and she quickly found herself ensconced in his experiments in “automatism” and “automatic writing.” James R. Mellow describes James’ interests at this time as “learning more about the distinction between the conscious and subconscious mind. He had, as well, an interest
in spiritualism—much to the dismay of his more rationalistic colleagues—and in the ability of certain mediums to write out automatic messages while supposedly in a state of trance” (32). Steven Meyer expands on James’ interest in “spiritualism” by noting that “the automatic writing that James examined as a psychical researcher was something entirely different, concentrations of words produced by mediums—human agents—writing for, or in the name of, other persons” (232).

Stein conducted experiments in automatic writing with friend and fellow student of William James, Leon M. Solomons. Stein and Solomons aimed to investigate the relationship between writing and the unconscious, the idea that one can write without knowing what the content of that text is or will become. In their 1896 article, “Normal Motor Automatism,” Stein and Solomons write, “the object of our experiments, then, was primarily to determine the limits of normal automatism, and, if possible, show them to be really equal to the explanation of the second personality; and incidentally to study as carefully as possible the process by which a reaction becomes automatic” (493).

I find it difficult to imagine the kinds of experiments Stein and Solomons were conducting under the supervision of James. The Jamesian version of “automatic writing” (which is more often associated with French surrealist writers)28 is centered on the “cosmic” much more so than on “consciousness.” Rather than looking to automatic writing as a way to study what the waking self might repress, James used automatic writing as another manifestation of his idea that

28 Barbara Will attributes automatic writing’s “fame” to “the joint publication by André Breton and Philippe Soupault of Les Champs magnétiques (1920)” (169). Will continues to describe the Surrealist’s version of automatic writing as “giving access to the subjective treasury of the psyche normally repressed by convention and civilization” (169). James was pursuing this as early as 1869 (which marked the appearance of a review he wrote on Epes Sargent’s Planchette), yet his rendering of automatism seemed more concerned with identifying a second self, rather than a subconscious self.
the natural world was a sign for an invisible world beyond and [we should] distrust the scientific hypothesis that the material world was the ultimate reality” (Hawkins 64). My understanding of what these experiments in “automatic writing” aimed to do is to basically uncover the kinds of “information” lurking below the ordinary person’s surface. In “The Confidence of a Psychical Researcher,” James writes, “there is a residuum of knowledge displayed that can only be called super-normal: the medium taps some source of information not open to ordinary people” (American Magazine 585). By writing “automatically,” via distraction and through harnessing a self not in sync with the waking mind, James hoped to learn more about the kinds of information generated when our motor functions are separated from thought—i.e. the mind is not necessarily aware of what the hand is doing. The key, for James, is that “automatic writing” actually produces a piece of writing—a record of “a personality other than the natural one of the writer” (“Notes on Automatic Writing” 45).

In the 1896 Stein and Solomons article, Stein served not only as co-writer but as one of the two subjects that participated in these experiments, planchette in hand. In 1898, Stein published a second article, titled “Cultivated Motor Automatism: A Study of Character in its Relation to Attention.” Instead of relying on the experiences of only two subjects (one of whom is Stein herself), for this study Stein aimed to work with a large number of “normal individuals,” all affiliated with either Harvard or Radcliffe College. In the subtitle, we can already see Stein beginning to move away from the kinds of studies of “automatism” she and Solomons had

29 In “Notes on Automatic Writing,” James both shares actual manuscripts produced by automatic writing experiments and acknowledges that (for him) the “great theoretic interest of these automatic performances…consists in the questions they awaken as to the boundaries of our individuality” (45). The key here is that James focuses in on the malleability of one’s own identity, whereas Stein is much more concerned with the fact of the writing and the literal physical body that produces it. For James, the actual product of the writing is only significant because it serves as evidence of these alternate selves and voices.
focused on (under the guidance of James). She describes the motive and methodology behind this article as “attempt[ing] to examine the phenomena of normal automatism in a study of normal individuals, both in regard to variations in this capacity found in a large number of subjects, and also in regard to the types of character that accompany a greater or less tendency to automatic action” (“Cultivated Motor Automatism” 295). In other words, rather than focus on the personas that might surface when distracted, in this study Stein turns her attention to the conscious “character” of her subjects—the “differing capabilities of individuals to perform particular automatic actions” (Meyer 225-6).30

When looking at Stein’s “literary” writing, it makes perfect sense that she would be drawn to “automatic writing”—however, it is also clear that while both James and Solomons were focused on the various “characters” that arise in one individual during these experiments, Stein was always far more interested in the product—what the experiments taught her about writing itself. In her 1926 lecture, “Composition as Explanation,” Stein outlines one of her central ideas about her own writing process—during her experience working on Three Lives (1909), “the composition forming around me was a prolonged present…I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one” (Stein: Selections 220). This idea of a “continuous present” runs through all of Stein’s work and parallels the experience of “automatic writing” in that Stein was most concerned with “register[ing] a new time sense particular to her era,” focusing mostly on repetition and the way words sounded when they bumped up against each other, rather than on narrative and meaning making (Stein: Selections 6).

Similarly, ten years later, in 1936, Stein outlines her definition of “genius” in “What are

30 The “particular automatic actions” referred to here are “movements,” which Stein describes as “circles, the figure eight, a long curve, or an m-figure” (“Cultivated Motor Automatism” 296). She further defines these “movements” as motions taught to the subjects by Stein herself, by guiding their hands with her own as she distracts them by talking or reading.
Masterpieces and Why are There So Few of Them.” Stein writes, “the essence of being a genius is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening but all this is very important…” (Stein: Selections 309). As with her own earlier scientific experiments, Stein is clearly committed to the way that each person’s attention works and, as a writer, believes that the ability to take in and synthesize at once—to observe and contribute both orally and auditorally—is true “genius.” Barbara Will describes this as “the automatic writing of the scientific experiment has become the talking of genius; the consciousness without memory has become genial listening” (“Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing, and the Mechanics of Genius” 174). Given that “genius” comes from the Latin term for “productive,” what Will argues here is that Stein’s rendering of “automatic writing” is connected to the idea that one can take in (listen) and produce (talk) language simultaneously, but this is not an easy task. It requires intense listening alongside trust in one’s facility with language.

So, the central question becomes: what did Stein need to learn from James and automatic writing in order to then pave the way for her own creative endeavors? And, when Stein began to reflect on her own writing process and experience as a writer, why does she turn to terminologies, which, in her word choice alone, hearken back to Jamesian psychical research? How does this help us to understand the pedagogical rationale behind freewriting? Stein continued her work with James at Radcliffe until 1897, after which she moved on to Johns Hopkins to continue work in the sciences (ultimately opting to leave in 1901 with no degree). And, despite Stein’s growing skepticism of automatic writing, William James “remained a hero for her until the end of her life” (Mellow 34).

31 In the opening paragraph of Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow suggests, “The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly…They are sometimes called ‘automatic writing’…Don’t stop for anything” (3).
**Freewriting as Automatic Writing**

Although Stein ultimately distanced herself from theories of “automatic writing,” it is clear that her work with James and Solomons shaped the way she would approach generating text for the remainder of her life. Meyer attempts to explain Stein’s objection to being classified as an “automatic writer” as “what she objected to was the characterization of any of this writing as automatic and hence—this is the crux of the matter—both unconscious and meaningless. No writing was meaningless, she countered, and her compositions were certainly not unconscious” (227).\(^{32}\) Stein is not willing to attribute her writing to something other than her own self—she is continually wary of the unconscious, thinking of the writing process as “a direct inscription of the human machine as it rumbles beneath the surface of conscious thought” (“Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing, and the Mechanics of Genius” 171). The key here is that even if the writer is not necessarily aware of the content being generated on the page, it is still a process connected to the self—one’s body knows that the pen is moving. So, if it isn’t automatic writing, what is it?

In the 1935 interview with John Hyde Preston, Stein comments, “you will write…if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting…It will come if it is there and if you will let it come” (*The Creative Process* 164). While Stein’s description of her process is not surprising

\(^{32}\) Meyer is specifically referring to texts like *The Making of Americans* (written in 1911) and *Tender Buttons* (written in 1913). In a “review” in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1934, B.F. Skinner attributes Stein’s writing style to her experiments in automatic writing and essentially states that her creative work is all automatic writing—closing the review by stating, “I regret the unfortunate effect it has had in obscuring the finer work of a very fine mind” (Hoffman 71). Stein was rightly upset by Skinner’s take on her work and repeatedly began to mention that her work is not “automatic”—Meyer quotes *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “Solomons reported what he called his and my automatic writing but I did not think that we either of us had been doing automatic writing, we always knew what we were doing…” (226).
considering that this interview took place shortly after Skinner’s review, it is surprising to see Stein use the phrase “writing in terms of discovery.” “Writing to discover” is an idea that is central to process pedagogy, and almost synonymous with freewriting. It is also important to notice that Stein is speaking before the publication of Williams’ 1936 essay, “How to Write,” in which he urges, “Forget all rules, forget all restrictions, as to taste, as to what ought to be said, write for the pleasure of it—whether slowly or fast—every form of resistance to a complete release should be abandoned…” Again, Williams seems to be describing the process that would later become dubbed “freewriting,” and, again, his phrasing echoes Stein’s—“if you will let it come.”

Janet Emig begins her seminal process pedagogy text, *The Web of Meaning*, by meditating on the “relationship of thought and language” and how this connection plays out in foundational composition texts that emphasize “the acts leading to writing” (3). In his attempt to unpack the evolution of process pedagogy, Lad Tobin describes Emig’s work in this volume as “identify[ing] an intellectual tradition and philosophical basis for process pedagogy” (3). Tobin oversimplifies the work that Emig does. She interrogates existing methods of data collection and analyses of composing processes, ultimately proving that methodologies in place cannot adequately track and reflect student growth. Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth*

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33 Williams’ essay appeared in *New Directions in Prose & Poetry* in 1936. Stein had a piece in the same issue (“A Water-fall and a Piano”). Williams’ piece “The Work of Gertrude Stein” had already been published in 1930, and it is clear that he was reading her work and influenced by her. Additionally, Stein’s own book, *How to Write*, was published in a small edition (1000 copies) in 1931. I do not know if Williams read *How to Write* before composing this piece of the same title. But I do know that in “The Work of Gertrude Stein” he states that her main theme is “writing,” and her own *How to Write* is an extended take on that theme—including pieces with titles like “Sentences and Paragraphs” and “A Vocabulary of Thinking.”
Graders (1971) offers a radical alternative to typical quantitative data collection—she documents and studies student composing in action, as it unfolds, morphs, and changes.

Tobin does provide some useful language that qualifies the kind of writing that becomes associated with the process movement. He writes, “Process pedagogy was decidedly anti-establishment, antiauthoritarian, anti-inauthenticity” (5). The repetition of “anti” sets up a sense of the radical shift in pedagogy that this movement signifies. As noted in Chapter One, the process movement is credited for the shift in composition studies from seeing writing as a product, to taking the individual composing process into account in the classroom. Joan Retallack’s description of Stein’s work echoes this shift; however, instead of speaking in terms of what the writing is “anti” (or against), Retallack depicts Stein’s writing as follows: “that bundle of swerving tenses is an example of revolutionary grammar as literary innovation as the composing of a new temporal logic” (Selections 13). The emphasis here is on the active voice and presence of the writer. Retallack also refers to Stein’s work (specifically her “portraits”) as “word patterns carrying active principles of being” (Selections 26). There is nothing in Stein’s writing, according to Retallack, that could be read as “canned, dull, lifeless” or even “rules-driven.” The “new temporal logic” Stein’s writing creates comes from the charge one experiences in writing where the pen and the mind are clearly interconnected.³⁴

Sharon Kirsch situates Stein’s “bundle of swerving tenses” as a result of Stein’s own experience in the required composition course at Radcliffe College. Kirsch points out, “[Stein] was unwilling to limit the study of writing to a system of rules for arranging words because that

³⁴ Stein differentiates her own process from “automatic writing” in order to distance herself from critiques of “automatic writing,” which was often referred to as “trance writing” and thought of as writing that was done without any consciousness (instead of writing that draws on many different kinds of consciousness). This is the same critique that freewriting continues to face—that it is irresponsible to use writing as therapy or as emotive in the context of the classroom.
alone was useless” (28). Stein’s experience as a “beginning writer” in college was clearly one where the written product reigned over the process of composing, where correctness mattered more than voice and revision. Kirsch posits that perhaps the result of Stein’s “college writing course was learning how not to write” (27), an experience that would later inspire Stein to embark upon an “extended meditation on language including the place of invention and the function of grammar” (29). Kirsch’s argument is clearly in agreement with Retallack’s interpretation of Stein’s “revolutionary grammar”; however, it is important to underscore that Kirsch’s interest lies centrally in grammar, not the composing process or how Stein approached writing as an activity or action.

**Gertrude Stein’s Freewriting Relationship**

Peter Elbow’s first book, *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), is often hailed as the text that really sparked teachers and students to begin the practice of “writing without stopping,” and to embrace “wrongness” in favor of the practice of putting words down on a blank page. Any “good” Elbowian would refer to this ethos as “the goal is in the process, not the product” (*Writing With Power* 13). However, “freewriting,” both term and practice, actually originates with Ken Macrorie, whose *Telling Writing* was first published in 1970. In “The Freewriting Relationship,” Macrorie candidly describes his own early experience freewriting, “In 1940, with a library copy of Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* in hand, I rose early for seven mornings in a row…I didn’t write well more than once or twice in that week…I was thinking of how my words sounded, and not of what they were saying” (*Nothing Begins with N* 173). Picking up from where Macrorie left off, Elbow’s rendering of freewriting is described as “Freewriting makes writing easier by helping you with the root psychological or existential difficulty in writing:
finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper…teach[ing] you to write without thinking about writing” (Writing With Power 14-5). Elbow approaches writing from the vantage point of someone who actually suffers from so-called “writer’s block.” The agony of finding oneself an English professor, an academic expected to publish, yet unable to write a word, is what led Elbow to connect Macrorie’s freewriting with the ways our own minds can prevent us from writing a single word.

Much earlier, in “Saving the Sentence,” Stein writes, “What is a sentence. A sentence is a part of a speech” (How to Write 13). The way that Stein articulates her ideas about fundamental grammatical issues is simultaneously soothingly simple, yet nonsensical. “What is a sentence” is a question without a question mark. And, if taken literally, a sentence is not a part of speech in the same way a noun is. Yet, somehow this quote makes perfect sense. When we speak, we speak mostly in sentences. Framing the logistics of the composing process in such a seemingly simple way shifts the anxiety that often surrounds the writing process, particularly for beginning writers. Here, one sees how Elbow is influenced by Stein, particularly the way he discusses “written voice” as a hallmark of the way that freewriting paves the way for a reconsideration of the kinds of lively writing students can be doing.

In “Composition as Explanation,” Stein talks about the composing process as a whole. She writes, “the composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of

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35 In the first edition of Writing Without Teachers, Elbow tells his own story of struggling to write, suffering from severe writer’s block, and how discovering freewriting (and its various incarnations) “saved” him.
36 Sharon Kirsch proposes that How to Write is Stein’s subversion of the grammar “rule-book,” How to Write Clearly that was required when she was a college student.
the time in which they are living…” (Gertrude Stein: Selections 218). Stein’s use of “the composition” and “living” indicate that, for her, the composing process is active, bodily, and present. Elbow appears to think this also when he says, “readers must get an experience out of words, not just a meaning” (Writing with Power 315). Referring directly to Stein’s “Poetry and Grammar,” Elbow writes, “She doesn’t just get voice into her writing. She heightens the effect by breaking rules in just such a way that we can’t even understand her meaning unless we actually say her words” (WwP 291). Elbow is narrating an experience he feels one gets through Stein that can only happen by experiencing her words through one’s own pronouncing of them. The writer/reader becomes aligned with Stein as she composes and hears the rhythm of the text outside of its appearance on the page.

Stein’s descriptions of her own composing process, aligned with theories of freewriting and process pedagogy, are strikingly similar. Both value the physical movement of the pen across the page, the privileging of letting the mind and page connect (even if it doesn’t make perfect sense), and the value of the individual producing whatever he/she feels compelled to write. It is the process of moving the pen that matters, not the latent segments of individual personality that might surface when in a quasi-trance state. Ann Berthoff articulates this huge difference between automatic and free writing in “The Intelligent Eye and The Thinking Hand.” She writes, “the new […] psychologists, like the old, are concerned with what can be plotted and quantified, and that does not include the things we want to know about—the composing process or the writer’s mind or modes of learning and their relationship to kinds of writing” (Landmark

38 Elbow quotes (at length) the following passage from Stein’s 1934 lecture, “And what does a comma do, a comma does nothing but make easy a thing that if you like it enough is easy enough without the comma. A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it…”
Essays 108). Berthoff is referring specifically to James’ *Talks to Teachers* and raises the question that, despite similarities in the physical ritual of writing, psychologists interested in automatism and writers differ vastly—mainly because of the latter’s commitment to the process of generating words, while the scientist values any kind of alternate self that one might see through the relic of words.

As undeniable as the connections between Stein and James are, the link between Stein and the writing-based teaching movements that surface almost twenty years after her death are just as crucial. These connections provide clear ways to think about how to approach a composition classroom so that students are engaged in the “continuous present” their own writing provides. Retallack points to the way Stein’s writing draws its inspiration from “the objects and rhythms of everyday life in the present” (29). These “objects and rhythms” are source materials students can learn to write through and use.

*“Composition as Explanation”: Stein’s “Poethics”*

It is in her 1926 lecture, “Composition as Explanation,” that Stein describes her own writings and writing process, and offers a way to imagine the experience of “poethics” as Retallack later defines it. Rachel Blau DuPlessis situates “Composition as Explanation” as “one of the more important critical texts of the twentieth century” because of its “illustration of one of the key tactics for writing: “beginning again and again.” DuPlessis expands on this by noting that “the way to stay current, in time now, in the contemporary, is to begin again repeatedly” (*Primary Stein* 42). Astrid Lorange paraphrases some of Stein’s central arguments in this lecture, particularly the idea that “what changes from generation to generation are modes of composition as well as modes of engaging with composition…when Stein speaks of “composing” she is
referring to both art practices and, more broadly, *modes of existence*” (55). What DuPlessis and Lorange both propose is that “Composition as Explanation” is Stein’s foray into providing some “explanation” of her work, while also shedding light on her own composing process.

One of the pivotal statements Stein makes in “Composition as Explanation” is: “The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing” (*Selections* 218). The term, “composition,” is defined as “the action of putting together or being combined” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). For Stein, the creating of a composition is the experience of arranging words in such a way that they signified “living” in her specific moment. This concept echoes John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, in which he explains: “the act of expression” as something “that constitutes a work of art is a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission” (67). For the teacher of a first-year writing course, this act of expression is the crafting of a composition and refers to the works students create using language. Central to the idea of “composition” is the active (present tense) activity of arranging words so that they reflect a view into the contemporary moment of their maker, or “construction in time.”

Retallack, a prominent Stein scholar, draws on “Composition as Explanation” in her theorization of “poethics.” As stated in Chapter One of this dissertation, Retallack is particularly interested in the way that Stein uses the “continuous present” in “Composition as Explanation” as a way to ground all writing in the “time in which they are living” (*Selections* 218). Retallack elaborates on this idea in the context of defining “poethics” by proposing that through the act of writing, one can “literally compose (live) their way through the necessary uncertainty that

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39 Published in 1934, *Art as Experience* is the text by John Dewey that is most central to “poethics,” and to Joan Retallack and John Cage respectively. This book collects a series of lectures Dewey gave in 1932 as the first William James Lecturer at Harvard. James was one of Dewey’s heroes; the two met in the early 1880’s, when Dewey was first working out his philosophy of education. Dewey refers to James, specifically his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), repeatedly throughout *Art as Experience*. 
transforms language according to one’s sense of the active principles of change in one’s time” (TPW 57). The emphasis placed on the relationship between “composing” as a practice and the “transformation” of language directly echoes Stein’s belief that “Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition” (Selections 219). In other words, Stein advocates for a composing process that is in sync with “the active principles of change in one’s time.” To compose, for both Stein and Retallack, is to enter into a dialogue through language that results in a tangible shift in the way one makes sense of language.

Central to “poethics” and to “Composition as Explanation” is the idea that “it is in the act of composing, and only in composing, that one notices and arranges memory; fully lives in, makes something of one’s contemporary experience” (TPW 58). The way that Retallack describes the composing process here is in direct conversation with the way the process movement sees the first-year writing course—a place where writing is an active way to make sense of one’s surroundings in a form that is legible to an outside audience. In “Reimagining the Nature of the FYC,” Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle share a list of the central questions underlying any first-year writing course: “How does writing work? How did a text get to be the way it is? How do writers get writing done? How is writing a rhetorical activity, and how are texts rhetorical discourse? How is writing technological? How is writing learned, and what are better and worse ways of teaching it?” (124).

These questions can all be answered by looking to both Stein and Retallack for ways of understanding the composing process’s relationship to the present, as well as by applying aspects of the process movement’s ideas of how to organize a composition course. For example, let’s look at “How do writers get writing done?” I would wager that this question could be answered
through advocating for a pedagogy that includes consistent writing both in and out of the classroom, freewriting of many kinds and for various purposes (i.e. formal papers, metacognitive/reflective writing, generative writing, etc.). This view of writing as continuous is central to “poethics” and present in Stein. Another example: “How is writing a rhetorical activity, and how are texts rhetorical discourse?” One could easily answer this by looking to “poethics” and the way in which freewriting and a privileging of writing of any form creates a discourse community that “meets the contemporary moment on its terms—not in ignorance of history but in informed composition of it” (TPW 18).

Retallack describes the paradigm shift that Stein’s writing demonstrates as “inventing new grammars for the new times in which she was living. This was a means both of being in touch with contemporary rhythms and logics and actively composing new ways of being in the contemporary moment” (Selections 75). One of the ideas repeated in both the theorizing of process pedagogy and the description of Stein’s writings is that of the importance of “invention.” Just as Stein was “inventing new grammars,” through placing attention on student invention, the process movement advocated for the space of the composition classroom to become a place where students were encouraged to “compose new ways of being in th[eir] contemporary moment.”

Stein in Composition

In his study of how to teach Stein productively, Kirk Curnutt writes, “audiences must assume an active, creative role in determining the meaning” (3). I find it both interesting and problematic that Curnett places meaning front and center, and this positioning of meaning
indicates that Curnett’s classroom is most likely a literature class, and most likely not a freshman Composition class. To instruct freshmen to approach Stein on a quest for meaning is to open the doorways to frustration and discouragement. Curnutt continues by stating that “several undergraduates—usually creative writers—were inspired to a greater appreciation of the role that repetition and word choice played in their styles” (3). Again, by limiting the “appreciation” to “creative writers,” is to limit Stein’s real potential in the classroom.

There is a great wealth of writing on Stein’s usefulness in the literature classroom. There is a great wealth of writing on Stein’s usefulness in the creative writing classroom. There is virtually no writing on Stein’s usefulness in the Freshman Composition and/or Basic Writing classrooms, let alone Stein’s importance for second-language learners (at least not that I’ve found). Spahr and Retallack state that “[the] making of meaning [is] as significant as the act of writing” (7), and this becomes all the more true when students are at the beginning of their academic writing lives. If meaning making is “as significant as the act of writing,” it becomes all the more clear why students must learn to read and repeat. Students learn to write by taking what they know because it is familiar and a part of their daily wordsmith lives, and they learn to make meaning and to assert their own stylistic choices once confidence in this process is established.

In “What is English?” Peter Elbow investigates the problem of the kinds of texts normally taught:

As grammar and literature are taught in schools and colleges, they are characteristically experienced as agents of gentility and good taste or as mechanisms for discriminating—discriminating among linguistic forms, among texts and elements in the text, and also among people: who has taste and sound judgment and who is crude. The teaching of grammar and literature so often
makes people feel unwashed or not right—as though there is something wrong with what feels most “them”: the way words come naturally come out of their mouths and the way they naturally feel about stories and the people in those stories (111).

What Elbow advocates for is a teaching of literature (or non-literature) that centers more around a relationship and respect for how students feel, speak, and think. Elbow, and this is true of much of his work, is concerned with finding a way for students to locate “what feels most them” and transcribe it. The music of student speech and the repetition of Stein’s work are in surprising dialogue with one another. Students who are normally self-conscious when composing make more grammatical and comprehension level errors than students who feel more comfortable writing in their “home voice.”

Lyn Hejinian continues this dialogue of the “teachable” by declaring Stein’s work as central to “opening questions regarding words’ and sentences’ ability to “hold” meaning” (102). She feels Stein addresses foundational grammatical concepts that are often very difficult for students to grasp. On a sentence level, many freshmen writers feel the need to populate their sentences with “power words” rather than powerful words. On the word level, students have a tendency to overuse or under-use nouns—either writing paragraphs that are pronoun heavy to the extent that subject clarity is compromised, or paragraphs that are entirely disjointed and consumed by nouns. So, how does Stein write, and how can students learn to hear her music?

Perhaps the key to Stein’s pedagogical use lies in the area she was most frequently criticized for: grammar. And, grammar, as Kirsch points out, is the space Stein placed herself in when negotiating her place at Radcliffe, a space that stems from “the belief that writing was an
activity, an intellectual recreation, not a mere imitation or accurate reproduction” (32). As much as Stein, a prolific and published author, was criticized for her repetition, sentence structure, and avoidance of narrative, she also represents a model for students. Stein is a writer who succeeded despite these criticisms—a vote of confidence for students worried about their own competence, ashamed that they do not know “how to write.” Instead of worrying about producing a “college paper,” students need to be offered a model or method for entering into their own journey towards an academic prose that feels like an extension of themselves, rather than a mask they think the professor wants them to wear. This is where Gertrude Stein enters the room. In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein voices anxieties about “understanding or not understanding something,” the very sentiment students often bring into the classroom.

There is no shortage of current writing about alternatives and innovations in how grammar should be taught. In “Analyzing Grammar Rants,” Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia A. Dunn writes, “traditional grammar instruction can encourage distorted views of how language works, ignoring some of the most interesting aspects of language shift and change” (71). These distorted views result from a heightened reliance on rules, and students’ preoccupation with the grade they will receive for their writing. However, many of these non-traditional grammar pedagogies do not actually give students a tangible, neutral text to work with. Students are asked to look at their own writing and “map their mistakes,” students are given anonymous peer writing excerpts and asked to edit their comrade’s papers, or students are encouraged to read out loud and “hear their mistakes.” Each of these tactics has a lot of potential, but inevitably causes the student to feel a bit defeated and discouraged. “Mapping mistakes” involves students

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40Despite her in-depth writing about Stein’s value to rhetoric, Kirsch never places her readers inside the classroom, demonstrating in concrete terms how Stein’s rhetorical grammar impacts student writing.
covering their own papers with highlighting and scrawl. Students inevitably find out whom the anonymous writing samples belong to. Students hate hearing themselves read out loud and tend not to take it seriously.

When given a foreign text to actually work on (particularly a “difficult poem”\(^{41}\))—and asked to physically move the words around, rewrite the sentences—students not only find themselves determined to “solve the puzzle,” but also develop a new level of confidence, as if to say “hey, this person is published and I can fix their grammar!” In realizing that they can recognize when something is wrong, particularly in a piece that has authority (i.e. it has appeared in a book), students are excited by the fact that they can “repair” the problem. When faced with Stein without having to worry about “what it all means,” students engage in word games, grammar crossword puzzles, and develop a newfound relationship to words and language “as matter that does matter” (Bleich 289). They become fascinated by how much words can do when we allow them to move around.

For example, by suggesting students look at how Stein’s use of repetition liberates words from narrativity, students are encouraged to think about writing as “play” instead of as “formula.” As Joan Retallack points out in “The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein,” “there’s an intense need for play when one is in a particularly untenable situation like adulthood” (TPW 159). And, what situation seems more untenable in the moment as being a burgeoning adult in a required class that makes you write? By taking into account the discomfort of the majority of freshmen writers, and alleviating some of the stress of the permanence that a paper can represent, students learn to think more about the repetition of the writing process and less about the final

\(^{41}\) Here I am referring specifically to Charles Bernstein’s essay, “The Difficult Poem,” a comical and satirical essay that addresses the very real feeling that many people feel when reading something that he/she does not understand—discomfort, inadequacy, and even distress.
grade. In writing about ESL and Basic Writing students, Rebecca Mlynarczyk observes that, “thinking, talking, and writing are obviously all ways of assimilating ideas, but writing, with its capability for being reread and revised is, for many people, characterized by a higher level of awareness” (19). Once absorbed in a text that circles in and out of itself, students are able to see that even written language has the potential for change and to change. And, in thinking about Stein’s repetition alongside their own processes of writing and rewriting and revising, students realize that no text needs to be permanent. Students become encouraged to see the sentence and the essay as part of a journey, or integral to what Peter Elbow calls “writing to see.”

Similarly, Sondra Perl’s influential theory of “felt sense” also revolves around linguistic play and scenarios where “when the words that are emerging feel right, we often feel excited or at least pleased…leading us to write and think in unexpected ways, leading, often, to discovery and to surprise” (Felt Sense 3) Students learn to pinpoint when something does not “feel right” and intuitively shift words around until the text works sonically. With content, students learn to relish the process of writing as routine, and papers as drafts always in flux. Just as we should encourage our students to write every day, students should also learn to use Stein as a model for bringing the everyday into what they write.

Through learning to experience and work with language as a tangible object, the central idea of process pedagogy becomes more organic in the classroom—the idea that one writes and thinks simultaneously, and learns to then shape that writing for various purposes. Rather than continue to theorize the links between Stein, “poethics,” and process pedagogy, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a series of examples that demonstrate what happens when Stein’s writing is used in a required first-year writing course as a way to engage and invite students to develop a confidence in their own fluency in writing in English as well as a relationship to their
own written academic work. I think of these examples as moments inside the poethical classroom because they extend the limits of writing-based teaching to encompass challenging beginning writers to work their way through “difficult” texts, while simultaneously requiring students to use writing to express their own ideas in an active and informed manner.

What follows are portraits of several class sessions, in freshman composition courses at a large public urban university, taught as writing-based, student-centered courses. I’ve chosen to include my own teaching notes and plans, as well as excerpts from student work, as a way to demonstrate the kind of writing with and through Stein the course involved, as well as to show the changes and attitudinal shifts clearly visible in student writing and thinking. These samples move between in-class collaborative activities and writings, and individual student papers as a way to present a full portrait of the ways in which Stein’s writings can impact formal and informal (graded and ungraded) student work.
Class One: “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso”

It’s the fall, October to be exact, and my Composition I students are struggling to craft essays that “show” instead of “tell,” essays that present detailed original arguments that are proven and explored through the use of evidence (quotations and analysis). They’re working on their second essay of the semester, in response to an assignment that invites students to imagine their ideal “learning environment” and then build it through words, convincing the reader that this kind of classroom is “the best.” Needless to say, I am surprised to read a stack of first drafts that assert little more than “my ideal learning environment is outside because nature helps me think.” We’d spent weeks looking at persuasive essays that immerse their readers in the world of argument of the text. I begin the next class by asking students to write about the word “portrait,” and then we explore some of the common definitions of portraiture (visual, realistic, focus on a person from the shoulders up, etc.). By doing this, my goal is to help students to flesh out their own beliefs and interpretations about a seemingly common word. We think about the definitions we created ourselves and then compare them to dictionary definitions, paying close attention to the differences between the two, and the surprises seen through these differences. We then write about what a “completed portrait” might be—delving into the implications of Stein’s title, “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” (1924), before looking at the text itself.

We discuss and decide a “completed portrait” reminds us of a finished painting, something housed in a museum. In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein describes her turn to portraiture as “I was creating in my writing by simply looking” (113)42. For students, this statement underscores the value of detail and description in formal writing. But it also provides

42 “Portraits and Repetition” is not an essay I used in its entirety in this particular class session. Instead, I wrote this quote on the board as a way to guide the work we were doing. My goal was to focus on “If I Told Him” as a way to push students to think about description and ways to push their own language further than they might think is possible.
students with an example of how one can trust what he or she sees/hears and how those sights and sounds can be subsequently translated into words; this approach forces the student to avoid relying on outside research and ideas that belong to others. Just as Stein draws a clear distinction between “entity” and “identity,” writing, “I created something out of something without adding anything” (121), students too need to realize that writing centers around one’s own ability (and willingness) to “[make it] contained within the thing I wrote that was them” (118). Instead of summarizing the kinds of learning environments that other writers describe, I want my students to find value in the kinds of classrooms they saw in their own minds. Stein’s portraits open the doors for students to understand what it means to look and record—from one’s own lens, painstakingly.

After we dwell on portraits for a short while, I then hand out “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso,” saying nothing about what the document is. We read the poem out loud together several times: one student reads the entire poem from start to finish; we alternate reading one line each; we listen to a recording of Stein reading the poem; we read the poem backwards; and then again straight through. We pause between each reading of the poem to jot down our “first thoughts,” anything we notice about the poem, how it sounds, what the language is doing. We also pause to hear some of these initial notes taken during the various readings, with the trajectory of responses moving from resistance and confusion, to observations about the music (or drone) of the piece, and then finally (after our 4th or 5th reading) to some level of “acceptance.”

We then revisit our earlier writing, asking what additions we want to make to our “completed portraits.” They ask—where is “he” in Stein’s portrait? Who is Picasso? My response—what do we really need to make a portrait out of words? What is the goal of a
portrait—for you, for Stein? These questions help us to begin to come to an understanding of the motive of Stein’s piece and help us to feel as though we can participate in this very different genre of word portraiture. Stein’s language and use of repetition, the students note, create a sense of Picasso even if we never get to see him. I then ask my students to write their own self-portraits (or auto-portraits). They exchange auto-portraits anonymously and write a new “portrait” of what the reader thinks the writer learned from Stein. Is there a way to write a portrait of the learning process? Can we write to discover what it means to write to discover? Stein: "do you do you do you really understand" ("Portraits” 107).
Class Two: “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso”

In preparation for the next class period, the class rereads “If I Told Him” and completes the following assignment: Look over the writing you did about portraiture, as well as the way you engaged with Stein’s poem. Write a short (no more than two pages) “portrait” that embodies what Stein teaches you. This “portrait” should be specific to your reading of “If I Told Him.” It should be a representation of your own reading process and might not involve a human being at all. Through this assignment, students think about what the parts of Stein’s lines, sentences, phrases, accomplish and why. This prompt gives the students the freedom to write about whatever associations they have to Stein’s piece, but to also respond to how words function in a given (con)text. We begin class by hearing excerpts from these response papers and then pause to do some process writing in order to take a step outside of the text to think about why and how we responded to Stein in the way we did.

In preparation for the next class period, the class rereads “If I Told Him” and everyone writes a short response paper (never more than two pages). The suggested assignment is as follows: Look over the writing you did about portraiture, as well as the way you engaged with Stein’s poem. Write a short “portrait” that you think embodies what Stein teaches you. This “portrait” should be specific to your reading of “If I Told Him.” Students think about what the parts of Stein’s lines, sentences, phrases, accomplish and why. This prompt gives the students the freedom to write about whatever associations they have to Stein’s piece, but to also respond to how words function in a given (con)text. We begin class by hearing excerpts from these response papers; and then pause to do some process writing in order to take a step outside of the text to think about why and how we responded to Stein in the way we did.
Excerpt from a Student Response Paper⁴³:

…I’m not sure what happened, but by the end of the day I honestly started thinking that I had done something wrong. It was almost as if I was making this kid’s skin crawl. It was so painful just and awkward, I didn’t think it was a good idea to ever hang out again. And then I think I started to go back and rethink EVERYTHING. “Was there was there was there what was there was there what was there was there there was there.” Was I mistaken from the beginning? Had I just thought so much that I made something that wasn’t there, there? I mean, if you repeat something enough, you start to believe it… This brings me to the connection between that and the poem for this response paper, “If I Told Him” by Gertrude Stein. See all the time that I was crushing on this guy, despite how often we spoke, in my head I thought carefully about everything I said. And I’d think about it more than once before saying it. This was a lot easier when we spoke online because I had time to think before I typed. So I’d just edit and reedit all the little words that I wanted to string together to hopefully make up the perfect sentence. Often it would sound like, which is also my favorite part of the poem, “If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him. /Now. /Not now. /And now. /Now.”

The fact that this excerpt is taken from a “response paper,” a piece of writing that is not graded, implies that the student’s writing is less formal and less hindered by a fear of being evaluated, or of being right or wrong about Stein’s text. The paper does have a unique narrative flow, asserts an idea or argument about Stein’s poem, and uses quotes in an innovative manner. Even though

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⁴³ This student is an eighteen-year-old female college freshman. She is the first person in her family to attend college and wants to pursue a career in marketing. This student is also a non-native speaker, originally from China, who had been having a tremendous amount of difficulty with sentence structure and word order all semester. She is very vocal in class discussions, but was having a hard time translating how she speaks to how she writes.
the style of this response is not typical of more formal academic writing, this student definitely fulfills many of the “learning goals” privileged in a composition course. This paper shows that the student is able to identify key ideas in Stein’s text, recognize the different stylistic choices Stein makes, and analyze this by way of crafting an imaginative argument. And, the student accomplishes this while also honoring the way Stein’s repetition echoes in her own head.

As Joan Retallack notes in “The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein,” “For Stein, to compose authentically out of one’s contemporary situation is to live in the new time that one is taking part in making through the act of composition” (TPW 170). For this student to understand Stein, she had to compose through Stein’s work, to experience “taking part in making” through the act of engaging the poem in writing. And it is important to note that this student uses Stein’s repetition and “continuous present” as a way to spark her own composing process, a process that is undeniably repetitive.44

This student’s process writing45 continues to demonstrate the impact that working with “If I Told Him” had on her own relationship to writing in English. Students were invited to think (in writing) about what happened during the writing of their own response papers. More specifically, what gift did reading Stein give you, if any? This student observes, “It was like I was reading the way my voice sounds in my head. Then I understood how to fix the words on the

44 The composing process, particularly for beginning writers, is in itself an act of repetition. We write, draft, revise, edit, and repeat. Yet most students actually fear repeating themselves because they are unable to see it as a necessary practice. In her 1979 study, Sondra Perl notes the importance of repetition as setting up “a particular kind of composing rhythm, one that was cumulative in nature and that set ideas in motion by its very repetitiveness” (324).

45 Process writing is a kind of in-class writing I use on a regular basis, particularly when students have just completed something—a paper or any kind of activity. Alfred E. Guy defines this kind of writing and its use in the classroom as “a practice of using writing to step back from an activity to assess how that activity is going” (Writing-Based Teaching 53). When students are asked to “process write,” they know that they will be taking a few minutes to write as a way to think through and take account of how they approached reading or writing a text.
paper.” This reflection begins with an acknowledgment of the impact the sound of Stein’s words had on how this student heard her own words in English, ultimately encouraging and empowering her to shift the way she thought about how to approach writing an essay.

It is important to keep in mind that this is in no way a perfect formal paper. It is a “response paper,” meaning that the student was not graded on it, which ultimately frees the writing somewhat. But it is also important to note that this is a paper that has a narrative flow, asserts an idea or argument about Stein’s poem, and uses quotes in an innovative manner. This student internalized and learned from Stein’s syntax and rhythm. As Joan Retallack notes in “The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein,” “For Stein, to compose authentically out of one’s contemporary situation is to live in the new time that one is taking part in making through the act of composition” (TPW 170). For this student, to understand Stein she had to compose through Stein’s work, to experience “taking part in making” through the act of engaging the poem in writing. And, it’s important to note that this student uses Stein’s repetition and “continuous present” as a way to spark her own composing process, a process that is undeniably repetitious.

What is it about “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait” and about Stein’s work generally that pushes students to this moment where a text welcomes them to enter into a conversation with themselves, their peers, and the writer herself? Why is it that Stein’s compositions, which, as Sharon Kirsch notes, “rarely provid[e] pre-packaged meanings for readers to extract” (109), prompt students to take risks in their own writing? “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” is a piece I teach often because it always provokes a kind of transformation in students’ attitudes towards their own writing. One reason that it provokes such transformation is that the poem is composed entirely of words that are familiar: “If I told him would he like it. Would he
like it if I told him.” Stein envelops and invites readers into a vocabulary that is our own, encouraging us to think more carefully about the words we use and (think we) know.

After hearing bits of these response papers, followed by process writings, I ask students to work in pairs. They have no more than fifteen minutes to engage with Stein’s poem as a real thing made of words, to take as much of “If I Told Him” as possible and somehow transform it into a “correct” paragraph. They cannot change or add words—they rearrange Stein’s page, engage with her words as objects, adding in punctuation as needed. After these fifteen minutes pass, each student does a short piece of process writing—in response to some incarnation of the prompt—“how did you approach this task?” We then hear from each pair—the groups read their “corrections” out loud and then share their individual process writing.

**Sample “Correction”:** “I told him he would like it. He liked it and I told him, Napoleon would like it. Now kings would like it for this exact resemblance.”

**Sample Process Response:** “We began by reading the beginning of the poem again. We underlined the parts of the poem that we knew did not make grammatical sense. We talked about what a sentence is supposed to do and then tried to make the words do it. Some of Stein’s ideas seemed backwards so we fixed them. We did not know what to do with Napoleon, so we decided to just include him as a neutral character.”

In “Two Stein Talks,” Lyn Hejinian delves into Stein’s linguistic meanderings by wondering if “perhaps it was the discovery that language is an order of reality itself and not a mere mediating medium” (90). Here Hejinian recognizes the potential of reading a text to be as influential as a conversation, and specifically, the way the act of reading Stein engages the reader in a dialogue with the written page. In other words, Stein shows us how the familiar can triumph over the elite, the repetitive over the lexically unique, and the sentence as pattern over the
grammar rules which students appear to be governed by. This is a very different definition of
what it means to be a writer from what students (particularly those who will not become English
majors) understand to be the academic canon.

Students seldom enter a freshman Composition course as self-proclaimed writers,
although they have all likely written hundreds of pages of material (whether on blogs, twitter,
Facebook, etc). Stein writes, “I had always been I because I had words that had to be written
inside me and now any word I had inside could be spoken it did not need to be written”
(Everybody’s Autobiography 66). Stein confesses a sentiment that all humans experience—that
of feeling as though there is a divide between speech and composition—and that the two cannot
coexist. Peter Elbow advocates for celebrating the repetitive and familiar nature of “home
voice,” and admits, “if the words that come naturally to our mouth or pen are labeled wrong, we
feel ourselves to have a problem” (Everyone Can Write 324). Perhaps this is one of the central
lessons that Stein teaches students, particularly students in these mandatory composition
courses—the idea that everyone has “words that had to be written inside me,” and that these
words are valid, even when learning to speak “the language of the university.”

In Everybody’s Autonomy, Juliana Spahr recounts her own experiences teaching Stein in the context of the first-
year writing course. Spahr’s focus is on the “readings” students devise, noting that, “Stein’s
work serves as an empathic relation for second-language speakers. They see a reflection and
validation of their sense that English is unusually structured” (45). In other words, Stein gives

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46 See David Bartholomae’s seminal essay, “Inventing the University” (1985), which begins,
“Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion”
(60). It’s also interesting to note that in “Living with Style,” the first essay in Bartholomae’s
Writing on the Margins (2005) collection, begins with a list of quotes from his “reading and
teaching...moments of striking eloquence” (1). Two out of these six quotes are from Gertrude
Stein (“Poetry and Grammar” and How to Write).
students permission to see their own language and writing as full of potential to “continue with blooming,” even in the context of the required course.
Class Three: “Beginning again and again is a natural thing”

I decide that the best way to approach a full set of terrible first drafts of traditional research papers might very well be to read “Composition as Explanation.” This class had uniformly never heard of or encountered Stein before. We read a sizeable excerpt out loud in a number of ways—sentence by sentence rotating readers, one person per “paragraph,” etc. I then suggest that we take a few minutes and jot down some “first thoughts.” This gives the class a chance to take stock of our reactions to reading this piece and hearing Stein’s syntax.

Sample Responses:

- “This might read like something from the department of redundancy department. But Stein does make a conscious choice here to use the words she uses how she uses them.”
- “I don’t fully understand the purpose of this writing, but it also does not bother me in the least. Perhaps the composition of the composition is time and composition and through the composition of composition and time Stein seeks to reveal the nature of composition and time. At the time of the composition the composition of composition and time some things are certain. Or are they?”
- “Holey moley. What a riddle of a maze of a piece and I like what she’s saying though and it does make sense to me. This makes me think about philosophy and cultural relativism. Except maybe this is location relativism, era relativism, age relativism, etc.”
- “I realize that I’m not sure what a composition is.”

As expected, the class uniformly reacted to the sensation one gets from Stein’s repetition; the way the essay circles around itself. Yet, at the same time, some students seem to begin to notice that Stein’s vocabulary is entirely familiar, and that there is something in this strange essay that might teach us something about what an essay (or a composition) could be.
I then asked the class to underline Stein’s “thesis statement.” We then compare theses in pairs and figure out which discrete sentence each pair will work with. Changing nothing about Stein’s text except her word order, the pairs then create “grammatically correct” thesis statements out of Stein’s phrases. We hear these.

The students then do two pieces of process writing—the first asks them to think about what is at “stake” in Stein’s text. The second is to reflect on how their response to “Composition as Explanation” changes after playing with the physical words.

Sample Responses:

- “Now I think Stein might be trying to tell us that writing is in the moment and determined by the time and circumstance which the author is in. I guess this also has something to do with why we have to revise our drafts so many times—every time I sit down to look at the paper, it is a different time, and then a different paper.”
- “Did you make us read this because you knew we would be forced to really think about our writing? I guess we need to think about our writing and if we think about our writing it can become great.”
- “Writing is to be written and it will thus fall into place. Or, writing must be written. It falls onto the page.”

It is interesting to note that after working with Stein’s lexicon as objects, the class opinion of “Composition as Explanation” shifts. Instead of feeling confused in the face of Stein’s sentences, students became interested in “writing in the moment” and the way that writing can be influenced by the specific time and circumstances in which it is composed. “Writing must be written,” one student says. This echoes the underlying ethos of both process pedagogy and “poethics,” the fact that writing is the locus of discovery.
Chris: What are Masterpieces?  

In the Fall 2012 semester I, again, found myself somewhat disappointed by the work my students were producing, mostly because it was so generic—summaries of things we read, collages of quotes from a myriad of texts I imposed upon them. Chris was in a class in which we worked with Stein in ways familiar to what I narrated earlier; Chris participated in activities surrounding portraiture and Stein’s “If I Told Him.” Yet, after those classes, she kept shyly showing up at my office for more.

That semester, for that section of Composition II, the final paper assignment was to pick a specific piece of writing that the student felt was truly “excellent” and do research and extensive reading to craft a ten-page paper that convinced its reader of why. I also gave the class the following quote from Ezra Pound, “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree.”  

Chris’ paper proposal focused on the idea that “What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” was indeed “a masterpiece” because of the way it is written, “the accessibility of the diction, interplay of assonance and consonance, the imagery evoked, and the effortless handling of words.”

I approved Chris’ proposal, but felt a bit anxious setting her free in the library with Stein—I know how much information there is on her work, and could also see (from the proposal), that Chris had yet to settle on a specific “way in” to thinking about how to write about

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47 The student work referred to prior to Chris is all work done on a “class” basis (with the exception of the response paper excerpt), meaning that these are compositions created (through specific processes) through working with a larger group of students. Chris’ work is different. She was fascinated by Stein and pursued working with her words after we’d moved onwards in our curriculum. In 2012, Chris was a non-traditional freshman, a first-generation college student who spoke two other languages before learning English. Chris also worked two jobs while pursuing her Bachelor’s degree full time.

48 ABC of Reading, 1934.

49 This is an essay written in 1935 and published in America in 1940.
her experience of falling in love with Gertrude Stein. So, we had semi-weekly individual meetings that involved Chris reading her research notes out loud to me, and in return I would give her some questions to write in response to, and readings that I thought might help her to find her way.50

Chris’ rough drafts were all either inchoate copies of the notes she made while reading (see Figure One), or lists of quotes she liked interspersed with her fragmentary responses to them. Following the Pound quote, for example, she wrote, “great literature illuminates possibilities that inevitably lead to action. It changes people, however slight.” In another draft, Chris handed in a list of long quotes from “What Are Masterpieces,” followed by, “manifest in her masterful manipulation of words, the accessibility of diction and interplay of hard and soft sounds incite within her reader an appreciation for language, which is often lost amidst the superfluity of daily word use.” This particular sentence is interesting because it is somewhat close to her original proposal, repeating words and phrases, even. Chris toyed with her initial sentence over and over again. (See Figure Two for additional drafts.) Two drafts into the process, it became clear that Chris had discovered that her attraction to Stein stemmed from what she did to “daily word use.”

Chris’ first rough draft cover letter also demonstrated that she was connecting Stein to her experience in our class, as well as to her own writing process—connections that led to her settling on the “daily” as her central argument. She wrote, “very much the way you teach appears to be heavily influenced by Stein because you let students come to what they will come to if they

50 The questions I asked ranged from the very general (what’s great about great literature?) to the Stein-specific (what does Stein do to the way you are used to processing language?). The texts I shared were also not limited to Stein and included: “Poetry is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde, the 1935 interview between Stein and John Hyde Preston, and short snippets from Janet Emig and Ken Macrorie.
let themselves. You tell of no wrong or right ways but rather ways that prevent students from realizing sooner what they will if they continue to think on it.” The syntax of this note reflects how deeply engaged in Stein’s language Chris was; it reads drastically differently from the other quotes we see from her. She also seems to be working through her own frustrations that instead of giving her a reading list for the paper, I met with her in person and asked her to write. During one particularly tough meeting, Chris wrote, “my writing process is delayed because I always try forcing something to come cause I know it has to be written but in doing that nothing come naturally.” By the end of that session, Chris said, “I see all the ideas that transpire by listening to what was already there.” These process moments present an even clearer picture of Chris’ comment on my pedagogy, a comment that ultimately taught her something about her own reading of Stein.

In her final reflective “cover letter,” she continues to explain, “Stein makes me want to write for the sake of writing in order to develop my voice outside of school assignments.” Chris continues, “When I write for myself, I feel as though what I say goes dead to me. I don’t return to it in order to make something of it. But when I write for this class (English class), I feel I want to keep every thought. What Stein does for me is point me to the self-discovery that happens when I write […] I feel like the words I read were word portraits of myself.” In Stein, particularly Stein’s prose, Chris hears language and syntax that feel familiar, a way of expressing oneself that is empowering in how it mirrors the kinds of speech Chris hears at home.

Yet Chris is aware of the boundaries of Stein’s relatability—she notes, “her sentence’s length naturally intimidates” and forces a reader to venture beyond “passive acceptance of the accepted view.” But, this is linked to the idea that Stein serves as a model for a new way of reading, one that doesn’t “put the reader through the unfortunate downfall of what happens in
school, which is the polarizing ways of right and wrong ways to come to thoughts.” Chris ultimately presents a very complex argument that through de-familiarizing familiar language, Stein’s work teaches us to read and write creatively, and to learn to pay close attention to everything, particularly that which usually goes unnoticed. This offers an antidote to what Chris describes as the problem of “readers who look for the end before starting with what is in front of them.” Chris’ paper closes with the assertion that what makes Stein’s work so “excellent” is that “it makes a reader reliant upon her own faculties, and in doing so, realizes to the reader the great potential with herself for the piece managed to hold enough interest that it enabled a creative process to occur without obstruction of critical thoughts of polar right and wrongs.”

It’s fascinating that Chris’ otherwise grammatically sound paper ends with such a complex run on, and very unusual for the kind of writing that Chris turned in for grading. But, I think that what she found herself with, at the end of over ten pages, was a desire to enact her own argument—to twist and tangle words in such a way that the reader becomes immersed in them and makes his/her own sense. It’s also fascinating that, while the other student work referred to in this chapter has something to do with grammar or paper structure, Chris’ case feels different. She was one of the stronger writers in the class, but was also unreliable in terms of her attendance, preparedness, and engagement. Her work was fine, but she didn’t push herself, until her first encounter with Stein. Something about this writing provoked Chris to seek out an inquiry that she was wholeheartedly invested in, even if that driving question wasn’t articulated beyond the name “Gertrude Stein.” Ultimately, Stein pushed Chris to want to interrogate her own ideas about writing and reading, and analyze the way this is taught in schools, as well as what she noticed about her own processes.
What is it about Gertrude Stein that motivates students to take agency over their own writing? Why does Stein, whom many literary critics still question as a writer, rouse the writers that lurk within these typically reticent students? These are questions that arise because of the poethical values inherent in Stein’s writing itself and Stein’s approach to writing. When worked with in the context of the composition classroom, Stein’s work moves students to discover a way of composing that “creates structures with the intention of making possible an active, unimpeded attention to the sounds, words, voices, bodies, lines, marks, colors, textures, and/or any other perceptible events/sensory delights…that by chance or intention pass through them” (TPW 237). This idea manifests itself in this chapter’s description of students interacting with Stein’s language (and their own) in ways that are playful and intentional, fueled by a desire to make sense of how and why writing is used.
Figure One: Chris’ outline and notes in response to “Portraits and Repetition” and “What Are Masterpieces.” We see her connect “simple, accessible, words” to “life experience.”

Reading something that sends your mind reeling surely guiding you to depths of self discovery not previously reached. And that’s why I chose Stein. Because it was the first unfamiliar piece that reminded me why I love writing however clouded I am with self doubt. It’s that ability to craft with words that are simply a string of a limited amount of letters.

From the accessibility of the diction, interplay of assonance and consonance, to the imagery evoked, her masterful and effortless handling of words incites within her reader a sheer appreciation, [however varying] for language and its remarkable dynamics.

Manifest in her masterful and effortless handling of words, the accessibility of the diction and interplay of assonance and consonance incite within her reader a sheer appreciation for language and its remarkable dynamics.

Figure Two: Two additional drafts of what become Chris’ “argument” in her final paper, and a short piece of reflective writing that seemed to lead to these renderings.
**Sample Lesson Plans**

*The Language Game of Portraiture*
(First-Year Writing Course, 15 students)
**FFW = Focused Freewrite**

**Private Write.** [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** First thoughts on the word portrait. What is a portrait? A good portrait? Try to write a definition that best encapsulates your thoughts on the word in no more than one sentence. [5 Minutes]

**Share.** Quickly without comment or pause. **Read** what you’ve written as it appears on the page. [10 Minutes]

**Pick a person in the room that you do not know well,** or perhaps know the least out of everyone (instructors are fair game). **Create a portrait of this person.** (This prompt is intentionally blank so that students might either draw or write their portraits.) [7 Minutes]

**Share.** Again, without comment and without trying to guess who is who. [10 Minutes]

**Multimedia Stein Lecturette**—a sort of show and tell of portraits of Stein and a bit on her background, pause between each image for 2 minutes. Ask students to jot down what is seen or not seen. [10 Minutes]

**Process Write:** Where is your thinking now about portraits? What new idea or new image do you have on your mind because of the things we’ve just seen? [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** What is a completed portrait? [3 Minutes]

**Group Work:** Creating the “Language Game of a Completed Portrait.” (In groups of 4)
1. You now have **15 minutes** to create a “language game” that will turn the portrait you created at the beginning of this session into a “completed portrait” in words. This means that you need to create a set of guidelines or instructions that would enable someone to turn a portrait into a “completed portrait.”
2. Some rules and constraints:
   a. When I say 15 minutes I mean 15 minutes. Exactly. So you will need a scribe and a timekeeper.
   b. Make sure that your game is legible, it will be shared and given to another person.
   c. Every language game must include the following:
      • Each group member contributes one constraint/rule for the game (that is approved by the rest of the group).
      • Make sure your language game answers this question: What do I need as a prompt in order to turn my original portrait into something “completed”?
      • Your language game must include one restriction on language (mechanics)—what I mean by this is that each game should include a rule like: “do not use any pronouns.”
• One rule that comes directly out of your collective understanding of one of the points on the Stein handout about her own ideas about portraits and writing—What do you think she is telling us that she does? How can and should be emulate it?

3. Yes, this is overly complicated. But so is language. You can do it!

Suggested Steps:
• Share your definitions/thoughts on a “completed portrait”
• Revisit Wittgenstein, specifically axiom 23 (on language games) and 19 (to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life).

Reconvene as a group. Turn to “If I Told Him”—
• Read 2x out loud
• Watch the dancers
• Listen to DJ Spooky
• Hear Stein
• Pause after each to quickly jot responses

FFW: How or why is this piece a “completed portrait of Picasso”? [5 Minutes]

Share. Hear only a few. [5 Minutes]

Return to original groups. Exchange language games. Revise original portraits. [15 Minutes]

Return as a group. Hear portraits. Match portrait to subject. [20 Minutes]

Process Write: Tell the story of this session. Where did you travel? Where will you return? [5 Minutes]

Share. [10 Minutes]
"Composition as Explanation"
(First-Year Writing Course, 20 students)
**FFW = Focused Freewrite**

Private Write. [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** Tell the story of your experience reading “Composition as Explanation.” Do not just say things like I was “confused,” “I don’t get it,” “I don’t like it.” The key here is to describe, to tell a story with a narrative arc that shows us what it was like for you to read Stein’s words. [7 Minutes]

Share. Hear something from everyone. [15 Minutes]

**Drop In Readings of Stein:**
1. “It is very likely…time-sense” (first 2 paragraphs on p. 191)
2. “Beginning again and again” to “us naturally” (bottom of p. 192 to 193)
3. “Here again it was all so natural” to “again and again” (p. 194—continuous present definition)
4. “The time of the composition” to the end of the essay (bottom of p. 197-198)

Now that we have Stein’s voice in the room, take a few minutes to review the essay and underline or circle what you think is Stein’s thesis statement.

**FFW:** Once you’ve found your thesis, do some writing to explore/assert why this is her thesis. [5 Minutes]

**In small groups of 3-4:** [20 Minutes]
- Share your “thesis” statements.
- Decide which thesis is the “right” one and rewrite it so that it makes “grammatical” sense.
- So, you need to come to a consensus about which moment to work with, then you need to shift Stein’s language so that it “makes sense.” However, you may not change or add any words or punctuation. You can only rearrange things.

**Groups Report Back.**

**Process Write:** What did you need to do in order to find Stein’s thesis. What did your group need to do to agree on a thesis and then transform it? What does it mean to make sense? [5 Minutes]

**Bringing Other Voices to Stein:** Think back to the signposts you identified in Stein’s work. Handout the last paragraph from “To Write in a Foreign Language” by Etel Adnan.51

Adnan excerpt: Hear out loud (underline, etc.) [5 Minutes]

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51 http://www.epoetry.org/issues/issue1/alltext/esadn.htm
FFW: Shift a signpost you worked with from Adnan into “Steinese.” [10 Minutes]
FFW: Why place Stein and Adnan in conversation? (Just jot down some notes.) [5 Minutes]

Quick share. [5 Minutes]

FFW: Given what we’ve been doing with regards to the language in Adnan and Stein and the way they use language in the shape of prose, you have 10 minutes to write an “essay on language” that is in the form of a poem. The poem must be at least 14 lines.

Reading! [20 Minutes]

Process Write: Where is your thinking and understanding about “Composition as Explanation” now? [5 Minutes]
on “the stories we tell”

if a fire hydrant implies a way of listening to a landscape, and benches house the body as guide book, let’s stop and polish the monuments, stage postcards, plaster the word active over what we know because without awe, without say back we are ciphers who judge, forget to play private to return to the conversation we have with our mirrored cells languaging in the air, finding meaning in even the most placid fishbowls untimely autonomous read out loud

then returned gently, in generous ways, i your arm, you a turn of phrase

52 Process Note: For this sonnet, I wanted to experiment with using found language as a way to come to terms with certain ideas prevalent in the writing process movement that I find troubling, particularly the use of narrative and personal writing in the Composition course. I took note of every place where the words “story” and “feeling” appeared in the work of several composition theorists (Sondra Perl, Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Ann Berthoff) and collected language that surrounded these words. I then used this language to build a sonnet that I thought existed in the kind of continuous present that Stein prioritizes, a sonnet that tells my own story as a reader grappling with theoretical ideas about the stories of my own classrooms.
Chapter Three: In(ter)vention and Discovery

“The meaning of something is in its use, not in itself.”
(John Cage, in conversation, 1970)

“We look at a thing, we read a thing, it tells us what it is. We then share this information to help others get into the work.”
(Dick Higgins, “Blank Images”)

“A sentence is a proposition during which if there is a difficulty there will be value since value is contingent on noticing and noticing occurs only when there is a difficulty.”
(Joan Retallack, “Witt & Stein”)
Re-Imagining the First-Year Writing Course

If seeing the composition classroom as an opportunity to create a *poethical* space, a space in which students are fully immersed in studying the language they create and use alongside texts by a range of writers, what would it take to build this place? It has already been established that Retallack’s theory is deeply rooted in the works of Gertrude Stein, and subsequently in William James and John Dewey. What kinds of alternative classrooms existed in the time in between Stein’s central texts on composing and Retallack’s envisioning of this neologism? Where were the spaces where James and Dewey’s ideas became most visibly employed, and what connection was there to composition studies? If the writing process movement is indebted to Dewey, what examples of college pedagogies can we turn to as models? If, jumping forward to our contemporary moment where, in many universities and colleges, composition is seen as a required course that has no real place within any academic department, what kind of “paradigm shift” in the field of writing studies needs to happen to wholly emphasize the importance of returning to experiential, process-based pedagogy? How might we *poethically* reimagine this course for beginning writers about to enter a life of critical thinking? This chapter aims to demonstrate what a *poethical* classroom looks like by way of focusing on revisiting the experiment of Black Mountain College (1933-1957), how this differs from the traditional depiction of the first-year writing course, and why this approach is necessary to insure all students have the tools to negotiate, question, and interact with their environments through the use of their own language.

Returning to Black Mountain

Black Mountain College’s first catalog (1933) included a forward describing the school’s impetus and founding as connected to providing “a place where free use might be made of tested
and proved methods of education and new methods tried out in a purely experimental spirit.” This opening sentence underscores the idea that “experiment” and “experience” are inextricably linked, which, in an educational context, points to the kind of “learning by doing” central to Dewey’s philosophy of education. By connecting “experience” with “experiment,” the pedagogy of Black Mountain College was one that hinged on the individual student taking responsibility for his or her own intellectual growth, and this growth happens through the practice and praxis of actively engaging with one’s own curiosities, and the discoveries that result from this kind of experimentation. *Fully Awake* (2007), a documentary about Black Mountain College by Cathryn Davis Zommer and Neeley Dawson, pays attention to the unsurpassed educational model Black Mountain offered. *Fully Awake* includes quotations from Alfred North Whitehead’s *The Aims of Education* (1929), including: “The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively” (139). The relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and the activity of the imagination is located in the experience of learning, hypothetically in the environment of the classroom.

Similarly, the founding rector of Black Mountain, John Andrew Rice, described his vision of education as something that can “only be experienced; one “gets” only information or “facts”—and the “facts” acquired in the average college have to do with the past and are mainly worthless to one destined to live in the future” (Adamic 518). Like Whitehead and Dewey, Rice’s version of education, specifically college-level education, involved student-driven inquiry.

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53 Rice served as rector of Black Mountain College from 1933-1940. Prior to Black Mountain’s inception, Rice was a faculty member at Rollins College, where his critique of the enterprise of higher education ultimately led to a hearing with the American Association of University Professors, and then to his dismissal. A number of fellow faculty members and students joined Rice in leaving Rollins, and this was the original group that created Black Mountain College as an alternative to the “prevalent system of education” (Adamic 517).
and meaning making. Rice continues, “It is only through imagination that education can reach and develop the whole human being, and hope to affect beneficially the state of human affairs. In the average person, imagination needs training, and education can give it training” (Adamic 518). Again, Rice places the same kind of emphasis on the role of the “imagination” in education, an idea that played a central role in the way he conceived of Black Mountain’s course of study. The 1945 Black Mountain Bulletin described the college’s curriculum as follows:

It rejects the required curriculum, the report card, the board of trustees. It finds that intensive and independent work under faculty guidance, discussion classes, continual contact with teachers, are more conducive to learning than the syllabus and the weekly quiz. It finds that participation in the operation and maintenance of the College and its community are better guides to a democratic way of life than fraternity politics or organized athletics. It finds that eager students living, studying, working with interesting people in a stimulating community, discover themselves and the world as they never could through the academic formality of a more traditional college.

What this description underscores is the fact that central to Black Mountain College was a democratic view of education that involved a school governing system that was controlled by faculty and students (instead of administrators who are not actively engaged in the classroom); a self-directed curriculum that involved small class sizes and a significant amount of independent study and one-to-one meetings with faculty; and “practical activities” in the form of working to help sustain the college campus (i.e. farming, maintenance, building construction, etc.). Black Mountain ran on a semester system (fall and spring), and also hosted summer institutes that involved an array of visiting faculty. Each student devised his or her own “plan of study,” and the only time grades were given was to mark the completion of the oral and written qualifying
exams that all students took to move from the “junior division” to the “senior division,” the latter signifying a move towards graduation.

This kind of curricular structure is strikingly different than the general education (or core curriculum) found in contemporary universities (even liberal arts colleges). Central to this general education curriculum is the first-year writing course, usually a two-semester requirement for all college freshmen. In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987), Stephen North dates the origin of this required course as “1873, the year Harvard first added an English composition requirement to its list of admission standards. Even more promising, perhaps, would be 1949, the year that the Conference on College Composition and Communication…was constituted” (9). Although North ultimately dates the actual birth of “Composition with a capital C” to 1963\(^{54}\), this timeline demonstrates the longevity of this required course’s history, a history that Rice was no doubt cognizant of when conceptualizing the pedagogical structure of Black Mountain.

However, instead of taking his cue from the “general education” movement that involved requiring certain courses of all students with an eye towards preparation for the professional world,\(^ {55}\) Rice was far more interested in the experiential model of schooling Dewey outlined in

\(^{54}\) North’s reference to 1963 as the more accurate date for the birth of “modern Composition” because it is the same year that Albert Kitzhaber’s *Themes, Theories, and Therapy*, “the first book-length study of college writing appeared” (14). North also places emphasis on the “academic reform movement” of the early 1960’s, more specifically the “reform of English,” and how the general atmosphere of change in the academy led to an acknowledgement of the field of Composition Studies as something other than a component of English departments.

\(^{55}\) At the time of Black Mountain College’s founding, general education meant “some configuration of required courses” (AAC 18), and was in the midst of a shift from “an excessive degree of specialization and emphasis on utility” (Rudolph 278). What this meant was, in the early 1930’s, American colleges and universities were moving away from a core curriculum focused on preparation for the workforce, to a model focused on “a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the Western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics” (Hutchins 938).
Democracy and Education (1916). Instead of assuming that it was possible to predict any set of courses that would prepare students for their lives beyond college, Dewey (and subsequently Rice) advocated for a course of study that revolved heavily around the individual student and his or her own experience and specific needs. Dewey writes, “To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things” (164). Given Dewey’s clear focus on “what we do,” it is no surprise that Rice resisted any kind of required course model of higher education. Given that all individuals experience the world differently, it is impossible to decide on a set roster of courses that all students will experience in the same way. There was no required first-year writing course at Black Mountain College, for example, simply because Rice, as stated in “Fundamentalism and the Higher Learning” (1937), was opposed to any kind of standardizing of the learning experience—a process “abstracted from action and experiment” (594).

Retallack, via an alter ego, Genre Tallique, translates this vision of education as “a matter of taking one’s bearings from spatial, temporal, material cues in order to capitulate or move on. The approach toward the knowledge is an urgent, strange, self-implicating gathering of the senses” (TPW 64). In other words, the learning process is a process that involves an interaction with everyone and everything surrounding the individual. However, Retallack is writing about writing, about the experience of learning through writing and through allowing one’s engagement with his/her own circumstances to permeate their use of language. While Rice and Dewey are not specifically concerned with writing, their progressivist views of how education
should be structured run parallel to the ways in which the writing process works. And, it is curious to note that this concern with “the adventure of seeking the word for the meaning, rather than the meaning for the word, where action and word merge and become one” (Rice 596), reverberates with the same chorus of the theorists of the writing process movement: students “come to an understanding of what it means to write by actually engaging in the process” (Hairston 442).

**The Required Course**

The purpose of the required first-year writing course (composition course) is often described as:

to insure the academic community that its entering members are taught the discursive behaviors and traits of character that qualify them to join the community. This course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies. (Crowley 8-9)

This description appears in the context of the title essay of Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University* (1998), a text that provides a realistic portrait of the required first-year writing course in the context of the larger university. Crowley points to the omnipresent idea that the freshman writing course *should* teach students grammatical correctness and how to mimic generic academic writing. The 2014 Council of Writing Program Administrators’ (CWPA) “Statement for First-Year Composition” also describes “the writing knowledge, practices, and attitudes that undergraduate students develop in first-year composition, which at most schools is a required general education course or sequence of courses.”

See [http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html](http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html).
“outcomes” of the first-year composition course into categories including: “rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading, and composing, processes, and knowledge of conventions.” All of these categories point to the same overarching idea that the rationale behind requiring all college freshmen to take a first-year writing course is the fact that all students must understand the conventions of academic writing in order to succeed in life after college.

But, what’s lurking in these descriptions of hypothetical “standards” for the first-year writing course is what the actual classroom should look like. What does it mean to teach a student fluency in writing in academic discourses? How does this happen? The answer to these questions is where we see a clear divide between a process approach to the first-year writing classroom, and the way many composition theorists conceptualize the in-class activities of such a space. This is also a moment where Dewey’s theories and the “experiment” of Black Mountain College remind us of the importance of student-centered learning that hinges on “initiative, self-expression, creativity, and independence” (Rudolph 273). Is the job of the composition course to indoctrinate beginning writers into academic discourse, or to teach them that writing is a form of discovery which enables students to figure out what they are thinking and contribute to a larger dialogue? Can the teaching of writing be both standardized and experiential? How can a required

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57 The most well-known explication of these differences lie in the famous Bartholomae-Elbow debates (1995), which focus on the tension between Bartholomae’s conception that “there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing” (“Writing with Teachers” 62) and Elbow’s belief in freewriting and the idea that “the process itself of engaging in writing, of trying to find words for one’s thinking and experience and trying them out on others—will ultimately lead to the kind of questioning and self-contradiction that we both seek. But I want them to get there by a path where the student is steering, not me” (“Interchanges” 92). Elbow clearly favors the student-centered, process-based approach, where the composition classroom is a space where students learn to “feel themselves as writers and feel themselves as academic” (“Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic” 490). And, Bartholomae’s central point is that all students enter into a relationship with a particular tradition and history of academic writing; this means that the job of the composition course is to “teach students to be able to work closely with the ways that their writing constructs a relationship with tradition, power and authority—with other people’s words” (“Interchanges” 86).
course become experimental?

In “Personal and Academic Writing: Revisiting the Debate” (2006), Rebecca Mlynarczyk points out that we are still asking ourselves, as teachers of composition, the same question: “What types of writing (and reading) to assign in the first-year composition or basic writing course?” (5) Mlynarczyk addresses this question by positing, “Students first need to explore ideas encountered in academic work in language (whether spoken or written) that feels comfortable, not strained, in order to work toward the goal of being able to write convincingly about these ideas in more formal language” (5). What I see here is a return to Elbow’s idea that the writing (of and by students) should largely be the text of the class, and I agree. Students learn by mastering different occasions and modes for and of writing. But, again, what does this actually look like in the classroom?

Critics of the process movement point to the “standardizing” of the writing process into predictable stages (“prewriting, writing, and revising”), arguing that there is no formula for an individual’s composing process. Additional problems identified within this approach include: grammar and mechanics is not explicitly taught (it is learned experientially); process theorists tend to speak of a “writer,” not taking into account differences in class, gender, and race; and process pedagogies tend to put so much emphasis on the student as writer, that the social aspect of composition (context) falls by the wayside.58 In making critiques such as these, so-called post-process theorists are falling victim to the same kind of generalizing that they base their evaluation of the process movement on. Theoretical writing and the life of a classroom are very different things and it is impossible to claim that anyone who practices a form of process-based teaching is also reducing student writing to generic stages (what Thomas Kent calls “systemizing

something that simply is not susceptible to systemization"). 

Even more recently, in *The End of Composition Studies* (2004), David W. Smit proposes that the solution to a crisis in the field of composition studies is to “give students practice in sentence fluency and editing and introduce them to the analysis and critique of writing practices in one of more social contexts” (185). The latter half of this statement appears to be realistic, the idea that students are writing in response to “social contexts”; however, the us/them language of the practicing of grammar rules in the first half of the sentence pervades Smit’s book. Instead of focusing on what these (unpredictable) “social contexts” are and how students might be asked to delve into and participate in them through writing, Smit focuses on formulaic ways of thinking of the composition course as a way to prescribe student engagement in “big issues.” Sidney Dobrin (one of the “founders” of post-process theory) proposes, in *Postcomposition* (2011), that the field move beyond the focus on student composing processes, listing the study of “how (student) subjects write” (9) as one of the problems with the discipline. Dobrin’s central argument is that the problem with contemporary composition studies lies in its “intellectual focus upon (writing) subjects and the teaching and management of those subjects rather than upon writing itself” (7). As with Smit, the latter segment of this claim is relevant and important. Why doesn’t composition studies focus its lens more specifically on “writing itself”? However, Dobrin’s proposal to rid the field’s research of subjectivity (student compositions) is difficult to digest. If focusing on “writing itself,” doesn’t the theorist always have to take into account the author of the piece of writing? How can we propose any kind of theories of composing without also carefully thinking about who these composers are and what unique experiences and literacies

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59 Thomas Kent’s *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm* (1999) is a collection of essays that aims to prove the idea that “writing is not a generalizable process” by way of three assumptions: “1) writing is public; 2) writing is interpretive; and 3) writing is situated” (1).
they may bring to the classroom?

Rather than dwell on the typical academic mode of one theory refuting another, I propose that we return to the first “wave” of writing process theories, and consider the contemporary composition classroom in light of these ideas alongside theories of critical thinking and writing from other disciplines, specifically philosophy, poetics, and composition in the context of other art forms (as experienced by students at Black Mountain College). This is where we return to and recognize the significance of Retallack’s “poethics” as a way of thinking about the classroom space that engages and prioritizes the writing process, while also challenging students and teachers to grapple with difficult texts, each other, and their own minds. The frame of “poethics” offers the landscape of contemporary composition a way to think about the teaching of writing as an integral component of the daily life of the student and teacher—a space where “the improbable swerve opens up new prospects” (*Musicage* xxxiii).

**Personal, Procedural, Experimental**

In “On Teaching Composition: some hypotheses as definitions” (1967), Janet Emig asks: “What could we possibly mean when we say we are teaching composition?...If teaching is intervention, the primal question in teaching composition is, of course, “In what kinds of intervention should we engage?” (128). The word “intervention” indicates a “stepping in, or interfering” that results in some kind of improvement or changing of the issue at hand. “Intervention” implies action, and, within the landscape of writing pedagogy, one *intervenes* when a student is struggling, implying that there is a right and wrong way to advance as a writer within the context of academia. However, Emig’s early piece (referred to as a “quite private expression” in its abstract), frames the idea of “intervention” in the classroom as much more
reciprocal process. She writes, “Teaching can also be mutual intervention, an exchange of insights and competencies between older and younger [people]” (128). Here, Emig is describing a conversation between peers, where the age and teacher/student relationship is not important to the issue that the “intervention” is addressing. Within the poethical classroom, “mutual intervention” is one of the central ways that students and faculty are able to write and discover together.

In “Essay as Wager,” Retallack poses similar questions, specifically questions that concern the way the processes of reading and writing can in themselves serve as experiential moments of intervention for an individual. She writes, “What kind of life is one living in the act of reading Gertrude Stein?...The most pressing question for me is how art, particularly literature, helps form the direction and quality of attention, the intelligences, the senses we bring into contact with contemporary experience” (TPW 12). Within the category of “literature,” Retallack is including much more than what one usually considers to be a literary text—fiction, poetry, essay/nonfiction, but also philosophy, social science texts, etc. So, when she mentions that her “most pressing question” deals with the way what one reads and writes effects “the direction and quality of attention,” this becomes an inquiry into the way one’s own composing process is shaped by the texts that orbit around the writer and perhaps vice versa.

Retallack’s own work is deeply in dialogue with and influenced by John Cage, who was a regular visitor to the Summer Institute at Black Mountain College from 1948 until it closed in 1957. With regards to composition studies, the most important lesson one can learn from the short life of Black Mountain College is from the pedagogies of John Cage and R. Buckminster Fuller. Black Mountain College, with John Dewey serving on its board, was known for its foregrounding of experiential education, particularly during its Summer Institute, which Cage
and Fuller took to mean a kind of pedagogy that emphasized the action of composing and the idea of the “experiment.” Cage describes his investment in this kind of “experiment,” specifically that which should happen in the classroom, as “an act the outcome of which is unknown” (Diaz 5). This emphasis on the unpredictability of an activity echoes the way that the writing process is theorized—when writing to discover, one never knows where the writing will take him/her. And, this is part of the importance of the process. As noted in Chapter Two, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, the word “composition” refers to the “forming (of anything) by combination of various elements, parts, or ingredients.” The “composing process,” as defined in this context, is what happens when one begins to use his/her imagination in order to synthesize an array of different materials into an unpredictable shape reflecting the context and contents of the materials (and ideas) accessible in that moment. And, isn’t this synthesizing what we want students to learn in the first-year composition course? Both Cage and Fuller were also interested in a pedagogy of “innovation without personal expression” (Diaz 5), which is where we see a clear disconnect from the more expressivist tendencies of the process movement. For Cage and Fuller, the process of “innovation” is one in which questions and questioning are imperative—in other words, instead of looking inside to explore oneself, this rendering of process begins with looking outside of oneself, into the world, and asks, “what are the questions I need to ask in order to learn…”

It’s interesting to note that one of the more repeated terms in Elbow’s pedagogical writings is the verb “to feel”; for example, “‘feel themselves as writers and feel themselves as academic.” Cage and Fuller share the same creative impulse that Elbow advocates, the “chance procedure” of allowing oneself to write without necessarily having a product in mind or predetermined objective. However, for Elbow, it seems as though the process of writing revolves
around the ideal that only the individual writer has access to the inner thinking of the self, or what Christopher Burnham refers to as a concern with “the individual or authentic voice” of the writer (A Guide to Composition Pedagogies 28).

Wendy Bishop addresses this tension between the idea of writing as therapeutic, along with the space of writing in the classroom, focusing on the connection between writing and an individual’s personality. Bishop claims that “writing is intensively a matter of self-exploration” (“Writing Is/And Therapy? 504). I do not think that the idea of writing as an “indeterminate” process, and writing as “self-exploration,” need to be all that different. What happens when one writes to “discover,” is essentially the same as “self-exploration” in that the outcome is unpredictable. However, the role of “feelings” and the individual experience is where Bishop and Cage diverge, or where process approaches to pedagogy and more “experimental” (or experiment-based) teaching differ.

A definition or description of what this means is found in R. Buckminster Fuller’s 1961 talk to the “planning committee” at Southern Illinois University on April 22, 1961, which was later published under the title Education Automation. The topic of the talk, as described by Fuller, is “to disclose to you what I think I have discovered regarding education’s trending evolutionary needs” (3). Fuller’s text begins with an analysis of his own experience at Harvard and then delves in and out of his own scientific findings as a way to rationalize his view for “campuses of the future.” Amidst the scientific “jargon,” we see Fuller providing a coherent pedagogy by way of presenting accounts of experiments he participated in and conducted. Fuller goes as far as to attribute, and offer as supporting evidence for the feasibility of his idea of higher education, “what I have learned that may be useful as proven by experiments in my own self-
disciplining” (35). As an architect, scientist, inventor, philosopher, Fuller’s pedagogy is admirably interdisciplinary in the way that he focused on the way that “a student’s understanding of dynamic structures and the way they relate to social problems could emerge only through heuristic experimentation” (Diaz). Although Fuller is referring to design pedagogy, this belief echoes the ethos of “learning through doing” which stemmed from John Dewey’s influence on Black Mountain. It is also important to note that this way of thinking about structures and man-made systems as a process of learning through discovery runs counter to the kind of “focused perceptual training” that others in Fuller’s field were advocating for.

Fuller offers a very different way to think about the composition classroom. Fuller treated his time teaching in the Summer Institute at Black Mountain College as a chance to fully engage in “exploratory work.” This aligns with Fuller’s 1927 decision to view his life as an “experiment in individual initiative,” devoting himself to enormous questions regarding how to “make the world work,” questions seemingly too big to answer, and questions where the stakes were undeniably high. Fuller’s work always prioritizes failure and risk-taking as a way to foreground the idea that the experiment is central to education because “designers [must] challenge problems creatively while risking short-term failures” (Diaz 125). In the context of composition studies, this idea translates as the importance that students learn through writing, specifically writing to inquire (making mistakes, revising, etc.).

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Fuller was a uniquely interdisciplinary force. He is best known for popularizing the “geodesic dome” (of which he has the US patents). Fuller’s main interest architecturally was in structures that were practical and inexpensive. In the case of the “geodesic dome,” Fuller figured out how the construction of such a spherical structure essentially makes the most use of space/volume with the least surface area. *Education Automation*, when read in its entirety, is actually an argument advocating that Southern Illinois University should restructure so that the university would be inside “a dome without any internal divisions.”
In the summer of 1948, Fuller and John Cage began to build what I think of as a pedagogy that foregrounds composition and experiment or a “poethical classroom.” In Fuller, we find an “ethos of speculative experimentation…[and] the process of personal growth and transformation possible in education itself” (Diaz 132). That same summer, John Cage was engaged in rethinking his own composition process and was greatly effected by Fuller’s ethos of participatory experimentation. Cage was actively exploring ways to subvert and push beyond expressive and sentimental composition, pursuing the question of “why one would make a work of art in this society” (Kostelanetz 76). An example of how Cage carried out his inquiry, specifically through collaborating with those at Black Mountain in the summers, is his 1952 “Theater Piece No. 1” (later thought of as the first “happening”). This performance was “a multi-focus event in which simultaneous unrelated activities would be taking place both in front of and around the audience, each person’s perception of the event depended on where he or she was sitting and on what happened to attract his or her attention” (The Arts at Black Mountain College 226). One can interpret this performance as a form of “continuous invention;” the audience is continuously inventing how they are listening and watching, just as the performers are engaged in their own myriad of actions. This is a physical embodiment of composition.

Any kind of pedagogy that emphasizes the importance of student-centered and experiential learning, as process pedagogy and writing-based teaching do, should also consider Fuller’s idea that central to any kind of pedagogy or teaching is the idea that one must “give [students] a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking.” Cage’s performance piece is an example of the kinds of new thinking one can experience through dedicating his or herself to investigating a problem with no solution in mind. Both Cage and Fuller advocated a pedagogy that saw the student as an engaged citizen of the world, which meant that he or she was
responsible for investigating an all-encompassing range of subjects, while also learning to look outside of one’s own ego. This way of conceiving of the student is very different from academic discourse seen as a place in which there are no restrictions placed on the kind of discourse or language the student must become fluent in—he or she first and foremost must learn to ask the kinds of questions that will promote the learning that leads to participating in any discourse. And, this way of composing in order to discover is also different from the process movement (and Elbow’s idea) of freewriting in that the composition is never a form of free association. The act of composing is always grounded in a serious inquiry, generated by the composer.\textsuperscript{61}

\textit{Teaching Composition ‘Poethically’: A Necessary Intervention}

The kind of environment that Retallack would deem “poethical” is one in which there is an interchange between the writer and the texts (written and otherwise) that surround his/herself. The point is not whether or not students are producing academic writing, or are even envisioning themselves as writers per se; but rather that there is an active, ongoing process of sense-making happening through language. Retallack describes this impulse in her introduction to \textit{Musicage} as, “Engaging with it is enacting a very particular form of life, on of attentive conversation—\textit{turning} toward, turning \textit{with}” (xxvii). This “particular form of life” is one that is extremely productive in the context of the composition classroom where all engagements with language should take the form of “attentive conversation.” Students listen to themselves and to each other, and begin to locate the value in their own inquiries, taking responsibility for the course their learning takes.

\textsuperscript{61} My use of the word “compose” in this context is completely interdisciplinary. I am referring not only to a musical composition, but to any process that involves the practice of making something.
One of the clearest examples of the implications this kind of pedagogy (one that is fundamentally process-based and maintains an echo of the self-guided experiential learning that was so valuable about Black Mountain) can be seen in the arc of the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College. Retallack was involved as a faculty member, and later the director, of this two and a half week intensive version of the first-year writing course. During her tenure as director, Retallack shifted the focus of the program from a concentration on informal student writing of many forms, to a writing-based composition course that engaged a wide range of rigorous texts (written, visual, aural, etc.). The program’s mission statement is as follows:

Established at Bard College in 1981, Language and Thinking fosters robust interdisciplinary study, innovative pedagogy, and writing across a wide range of genres. Students read extensively, work on a variety of projects in writing and other formats, and meet throughout the day in small groups and in one-on-one conferences with faculty. The work aims to cultivate habits of thoughtful reading and discussion, clear articulation, accurate self-critique, and productive collaboration. Central to all of this is an examination of the link between thought and expression.62

What we see in this “mission statement” is a program that prioritizes writing and reading a lot. However, what is missing from this course description is a definition of the kinds of writing (or academic learning goals) students will gain from this course. There is no mention of terms like “academic” or “personal,” rather the emphasis is on linking “thought and expression,” “cultivating habits of thoughtful reading,” and “productive collaboration.” This directly echoes the priorities of Cage and Fuller, which may be surprising, given that the program was conceived by Peter Elbow in conjunction with Bard College’s President, Leon Botstein. The original idea

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62 http://languageandthinking.bard.edu/about/
behind the Language & Thinking Program was to give all Bard College freshmen a common experience and initiation into the life of the college, while also completely immersing them in the sort of writing that they will be doing as college students. In its early days, the program focused more on low-stakes student writing, often drawing on that writing as a central text in the classroom, and revolved around themes like “memory.” What the writing students did was exploratory, and the program culminated in papers that could take any variety of forms (personal narrative, free association).

In his essay, “What is an Essay” (1981), long-term Language & Thinking director Paul Connolly outlines the ways in which “essays are best read and written.” Connolly proposes the following guidelines: “The essay admits many moods, subjects, and personalities, and it is adaptable to many purposes…Essays, therefore, must be read as they are written—with a pluralistic tolerance for diverse methods and purposes.” Connolly continues by situating the essay as “written by individuals who seek qualified truths where they can find them; who are unafraid to admit candidly their ignorance; or to express personal feelings and original judgments.” In Connolly, we hear echoes of Elbow’s idea that writing essays need not be part of an “academic culture that overvalues skepticism and critique” (Newkirk, Writing with Elbow 21). In other words, an essay can be defined as working out one’s own ideas in writing. In “Sentimental Journeys,” his essay on Elbow’s idea of “the believing game,” Thomas Newkirk addresses the idea that the “language of power” is not necessarily “personal writing.” This complicating of what constitutes “personal writing” is also present in the way that Connolly places “personal feelings” alongside “qualified truths” (with the word “qualified” indicating that these truths are backed up by evidence). However, more contemporary readings of the process movement often focus on the moment in Writing without Teachers where Elbow defines the
writing process as “a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive” (15). And, this definition of writing is often connected to “free association,” what Freud described in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* as a therapeutic process through which one temporarily stops censoring his or herself and freely communicates anything that comes to mind.

Elbow certainly does advocate for a classroom space that operates “without teachers” and privileges student work as a valid text to be studied. But he also states that “writing involves skill at generating and criticizing” (“The Uses of Binary Thinking” 55). However, as a faculty member of the Language & Thinking Program (1984-1992), Retallack describes the program’s pedagogical focus as much more in line with the more “personal” aspects of Elbow’s freewriting techniques. Retallack explains this as, “there was enormous value put in emotional responses to texts, autobiographical revelations, finding one’s “authentic voice,” (for some) an explicitly therapeutic use of the practices.”

Retallack also specifies that when she began teaching in the program, there was no formal essay requirement and students were generally “protected from intellectual anxiety.” As a result, student portfolios were often composed of mostly creative writing and barely revised in-class freewriting. The anthology of texts that year included works by Sharon Olds, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Simic, Ernest Hemingway, William Blake, and Maya Angelou. This 1984 selection of texts clearly has a motive, one that invites students into an essayistic tradition where the individual experience is celebrated.

When Retallack became the director of Language & Thinking in 2001 (after several years as co-director), she immediately made a few significant changes that pushed the program to become a *poethical* space. These changes included: redesigning the anthology of texts that

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63 From personal correspondence with Joan Retallack.
students work with so that they grapple with discourses and perspectives of many different disciplines; framing the entire course with a thematic question (instead of a one-word label); to foreground intellectual rigor and imaginative rigor as in dialogue with each other; and to clarify the “product” of the two and a half week course, a longer essay. Initially this essay was called “the intellectual essay” (as a way of reasserting the importance of this piece of writing as a challenging, academic work, explicitly not personal writing). The 2001 anthology contained texts including Thomas Kuhn’s “A Function for Thought Experiments,” Isaac Newton’s “The Laws of Motion,” Gertrude Stein’s “Three Portraits of Painters,” and Rosmarie Waldrop’s “Alarms & Excursions.” There was clearly a new emphasis on interdisciplinary, difficult texts that questioned students’ ways of reading and writing in productive ways. The following year (2002) adopted the theme, “Memory…The World As We Find It…Possibility,” including an even more diverse and surprising cornucopia of texts that are never found in the typical first-year writing anthology—works by Edward Said, Francis Bacon, M. Nourbese Philip, Ann Lauterbach, Gertrude Stein, Julia Kristeva, and Marcel Proust, for example.

These texts, combined with the variety of different ways of reading and writing through them, ultimately led to a different kind of essay to mark the culmination of Language & Thinking. Just as the writing that students read shifted and became more rigorous, this final essay became referred to and framed as “the final essay in the humanist tradition.” Central to this assignment is the idea that the entire Language & Thinking experience is a conversation with and through questions and questioning. This final essay asks students to ground their essay in a question that has been explored and of interest over the course of the program. Students are then asked to write an essay that

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64 The current version of the Language & Thinking Program still uses this same framing of “the final essay in the humanist tradition” for the culminating product of the program.
demonstrates inquiry and persuasion, has an autobiographical grounding within a worldview--"these are my ideas and how I interpret them"--and has a logical trajectory to its nature. It [the final essay] announces early on in the essay the idea(s), issue(s) you are exploring, the perspective you're taking, and briefly introduces its (their) complexity. Your perspective is NOT a general statement that cannot be argued. It presents your perspective on an idea or issue and tells us why we ought to be thinking about it (i.e. why it's important). And finally, it evolves throughout the development of the essay, so by the essay's end, you are not just repeating your initiating perspective, but rather, concluding with an idea(s) and perspective that has grown, been challenged, and has evolved and been modified through various modes of thinking and writing. Finally, in the humanist tradition, it follows a trajectory that is much more flexible than a traditional analytic essay: it allows for counter energies, digressions, narrative and digressive structures that illuminate the discussion and are logically grounded in the trajectory of the essay. Like the essay in miniature, it should demonstrate thought in action.

Returning to Cage and Fuller, Hannah Higgins\textsuperscript{65} situates the importance of the pedagogy prevalent at Black Mountain as stemming from the idea that “the value of learning lies in inquiring actively—with an expanding, abundant attitude—into the materials of one’s own environment” (189). The way that the “final essay in the humanist tradition” echoes this idea of “inquiring actively” is one of many ways that the Language & Thinking Program represents a

\textsuperscript{65} Hannah Higgins is the daughter of Dick Higgins, a former student of Cage (at The New School), and one of the central figures of Fluxus. In her book, \textit{Fluxus Experience}, Higgins provides an in-depth analysis and history of Fluxus, specifically grounded in the importance of Dewey’s theories of “experience” as it relates to art and education. The term “Fluxus” comes from the Latin word for “flow,” and the movement can be generally thought of as an international art movement concerned with “anti-art,” with a particular interest in performance and art that involves everyday objects. “Happenings” are one of many forms of performance art associated with Fluxus.
very different rendering of process pedagogy. In the essay assignment and Higgins’ interpretation of the kind of educational ideals Fuller and Cage sought out, there is a prioritizing of inquiry-centered learning. In short, one could say that everything Fuller and Cage did or experimented with began with a question, and, to paraphrase Retallack, the fundamental root of this kind of inquiry would be: what would happen if, given that these are my interests and this is what we care about in the world how do we do this...

This is not a private freewrite or any genre of writing that is solely rooted in the depths of one individual’s perspective with no reference to any outside texts or influences. This is also not the kind of freewrite rooted in a response to a specific question given to the student by the teacher. What this process represents is the kind of engaged inquiry that can only happen when a person is pushed to figure out (through writing) a specific idea or thought experiment that merits (or requires) figuring out. The entire Language & Thinking Program, under Retallack’s directorship, revolved around questioning—the central thematic question of the course, the individual questions the students discover and pursue for themselves, and the collaborative learning questions the class devises as the two and a half weeks progress. Framing this process through her idea of “poethics,” Retallack posits,

The poethics in all this has to do with the way in which deeply considered, critically aware values (the ethical-pedagogical framework that becomes the ethos of the [Language & Thinking] program inform the entire structure and are enacted by means of [writing-based teaching] practices...How is that done? It is always a function of the active intellectual/imaginative/ethical (socially responsible) lives of everyone involved...The task: a project (activities of the program) of making compassionate meaning in the complex world that is the context for the value of everything we do. To
try to know as much as possible about that world and, given that, to try to figure out what needs to be done in this program, in this classroom, with this text, in this act of writing or discussing.66

These remarks by Retallack are in many ways a much more apt mission statement for the Language & Thinking Program, while also a clear modus operandi for what composition instructors should aim to do in their classrooms—engage students (through writing) in questions that they feel to be imperative, and develop these inquiries (through writing) by reading and working through difficult and various texts. In her letter to the Language & Thinking faculty in 2002, Retallack described the work of the program as teaching students to “begin to invent social and intellectual selves.” She also invites the faculty to join her that August in “one of the more interesting worlds Gulliver might come across if he were still on his travels.” Retallack’s promise to her faculty was that “you will experience the pedagogical stimulus of collaboration and, to nourish yourselves as writers, you can join writing groups to experiment with language in much the way you’ll be encouraging your students to do.” This is not your usual orientation letter. Retallack’s epistolary greeting to her faculty is one that mirrors the pedagogy of the program she ran; a pedagogy that prided itself in privileging experimentation, collaboration, and conversation, instead of learning outcomes and standards.

66 From personal correspondence with Joan Retallack.
In August 2007 I remember sitting around a seminar table with a group of fourteen freshmen in college, deciding what the class would do for the “student reading that night.” I remember that at least five students wanted to turn Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* into a play. I also remember that Sam, who was my most challenging student that summer, suggested that we play with different ways that the group could present individual writing while still abiding by the “one minute each” rule of the reading. I remember the sound of the anxiety in the room when he suggested this. But, I also remember anxious laughter as we, as a class, watched youtube videos of a Cage piece titled “Indeterminacy.”

“Indeterminacy” is a piece that consists of one-minute stories read so that the central priority is that each story (regardless of its length) takes no more than one minute to read. This means that sometimes the speaker is reading rapidly, and other times at a much more soothing, comprehensible pace. In Cage’s original composition, the piece is accompanied by the sounds of the environment around him, as well as piano music spontaneously played (and composed) by David Tudor. I remember feeling excited by how much the storytelling genre changed when these unpredictable sounds were introduced, not to mention the visceral feelings the pacing required to meet the one-minute maximum evoked.

We composed our own stories and read them and none were longer than one minute. And, Sam played the piano on stage in the auditorium where the student reading was held. I remember one student coming up to me afterwards to say, “I’ve never written a story before.” And, I wish I’d responded with what I was thinking. *Me neither.*
The Pedagogy of “Poethics”

I use the phrase, “poethical classroom,” in the hopes to propose a new way of conceptualizing the composition classroom. Thus far, this chapter has: traveled in and out of composition studies (with an emphasis on what it might take to reimagine the composition classroom as a more experiential space); wandered the fields of Black Mountain College (in an effort to see the pedagogical experiments of R. Buckminster Fuller and John Cage); visited the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College; and looked at the links from Dewey’s progressivist ideas to Cage’s philosophies of composing to the way the Fluxus artists approach education. These various theoretical approaches serve to lay the foundation for what a poethical classroom looks like and entails (on the part of both teacher and student).

In his review of The Poethical Wager in The European Legacy, Gerald Bruns writes, “Poethics is a theory and practice of turbulence, of nomadic form or forms that never settle into place but consist of breaking patterns (like breaking news).” Bruns’ rendering of “poethics,” at first glance, might read as alarming for teachers, particularly with his use of words like “turbulence” and “nomadic.” The key to this sentence is the idea that both writing and teaching are activities that should always be in motion and unpredictable. When the classroom begins to follow a “pattern,” this indicates a lack of agency on the part of both students and teachers; a reliance on pre-defined standards instead of active investigative learning that requires every person in the room to be engaged. When students are listening to each other and hearing each other, the classroom becomes a non-hierarchical space—the teacher’s voice becomes just another contributing voice to class conversation.

Similarly, in “A Philosopher Among the Poets, A Poet Among the Philosophers,” Burton Hatlen presents a close reading of “:RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM” (an essay that
would later be included in *The Poethical Wager*), paying specific attention to the role of Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, and John Cage in Retallack’s theoretical work. In Dewey, Hatlen proposes, Retallack discovers the idea that “the world in which we find ourselves “makes us”; but we in turn remake it, and in the process we also change and grow” (351). Hatlen’s phrasing here is considerably close to the Donald Murray’s description of the writing process, “the most accurate definition of writing, I believe, is that it is the process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it” (*Learning by Teaching* 73). For Retallack, the difference lies in the idea that this process of “using language” is inextricably linked to “the world in which we find ourselves.” Another way of phrasing this distinction between Murray’s process pedagogical approach to the writing classroom and Retallack’s theoretical essaying about writing is the question she asks in “Uncaged Words: John Cage in Dialogue with Chance.” Retallack writes, “Might it be possible to move through our lives in other ways, guided by other processes and structures, perceiving connections, even constellations lost to our habitual grammars, seeing the side streets, getting lost and discovering something new?” (*TPW* 223)

The pedagogy of “poethics” foregrounds these “side streets” as avenues one takes through writing, as a way to “discover something new.” Paul Connolly, in response to Retallack’s idea of “poethics,” points out that “classrooms, too, can have a performative capacity to change the grammar of the way we are together,” and underscores the way that the writing classroom is a space where “a teacher’s task is to mediate the work of students, not determine what must be done” (“The Poet(h)ical Art of Teaching” 22-3). In other words, a *poethical* classroom, a classroom in which the pedagogy of “poethics” is embraced, is one in which teacher and students are collaboratively engaged in the act of asking difficult questions and making

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67 The “other ways” referred to here are the confines of normative grammar and other structures that can govern writing.
meaning through writing. The writing, thinking, and talking that happens in this space is respectful and rigorous, creating a landscape of social interaction that paves the way for difficult questions to be asked and possible answers to be explored.

Both *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and *Writing with Power* (1981) are written so that Peter Elbow provides readers with an accessible guide to the writing process that comes without jargon or any kind of linguistic intimidation. This kind of presentation makes the texts accessible to a large, diverse audience—providing the general reader with “a practical handbook for anyone who needs to write.” Retallack’s essays are not written with this kind of audience in mind, which makes part of the work of this project to clarify the vocabulary and praxis of “poethics” in a way that is easily transferrable into a variety of different composition classrooms.

*Writing Without Teachers* begins, “Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words” (vii). This opening functions as a “hook,” quickly drawing the reader in by way of empathizing with how difficult it can be to represent oneself and one’s ideas through written language. In contrast, *The Poethical Wager* begins with an introduction titled, “Essay as Wager,” that opens, “Life is subject to swerves—sometimes gentle, often violent out-of-the-blue motions that cut obliquely across material and conceptual logics. If everything were hunky-dory, it might not be so important to attend to them. As it is, they afford opportunities to usefully rethink habits of thought” (1). Retallack’s opening is also a “hook” of sorts, beginning the book with the word “life,” implying a collective experience; however, the way her sentences move occupy an entirely different rhetorical register from Elbow. Essentially, she is not

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68 This “slogan” appears across the top front cover of the second edition of *Writing with Power*, and is credited to *The Boston Globe*. 
proposing anything drastically different from Elbow—that one can and should use language (and writing) as a way to think through (or express) the current condition one finds his/herself in. Yet, when I’ve read this piece with students, they almost always resist the piece after the first few sentences. They claim that they “don’t understand,” but I find that when asked to read a bit more carefully, students learn to hear the pleasure in the way Retallack’s language works, and appreciate the unpredictability of her sentences. Elbow tells us what his book will do, Retallack engages her readers in an active sense-making process.

In her foundational reader response essay, “Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading” (1967), Louise Rosenblatt proposes that “[a] transactional view of the reading process not only frees us from notions of the impact of distinct and fixed entities, but also underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in the dynamic reading transaction” (43). By thinking of the reading process as “transactional,” the experience a reader has while reading becomes central to the creation of meaning for any given text. And, it is this kind of experiential reading, where meaning-making grows out of a conversation between text and reader, that happens when engaging with Retallack’s own essays. It is a poethical process, prioritizing an exchange between reader and text, between context and language, and between environment and individual.

Elbow’s “Preface” declares the book’s aim as to “try for two things: 1) to help you actually generate words better—more freely, lucidly, and powerfully: not make judgments about words but generate them better; 2) to help you improve your ability to make your own judgment about which parts of your own writing to keep and which parts to throw away” (viii). This is a succinct summary of what Writing Without Teachers aims to accomplish: to help anyone and everyone both generate writing and then figure out how to revise it. Retallack’s introduction has
no such statement of “intent.” Instead she states, “A primary value I assume in the essays that follow is that of the difficult pleasures of the most significant literatures…Literary pedagogies, among others, need to catch up with the active, collaborative reading demands of new forms” (TPW 18). Retallack’s emphasis is on writing, not the action of doing the writing. She is concerned with the kinds of texts readers need to read and writers need to write in order to make sense out of the “life we are living.” This is not to devalue Elbow’s text in any way, but rather to demonstrate that while the two books have very different objectives and audiences in mind, they both recognize the importance of writing.

Elbow’s book grows out of a writing-based teaching approach that he began to articulate as early as in his November 1968 College English piece, “A Method for Teaching Writing.” Elbow advises that teachers begin a composition course by asking “the class to reflect on situations—past or present—of putting words on paper to produce a desired behavior. It is important at this point that this conception be fleshed out from the class’s own experience and speculation—not the teacher’s” (116). The emphasis on the “class’s own experience” is clearly an indicator of the start of what would become Writing Without Teachers, and even in this short description, we see Elbow using freewriting by way of having his students “reflect on situations…of putting words to paper.”

This same reflective ethos is present in Retallack’s work, yet instead of providing suggested ways to generate writing, she provides readers with an “experience” of reading that echoes her belief that writing requires “strenuous engagement of one’s whole being” (TPW 18). “Poethics” and process pedagogy join hands in advocating for the student-centered, writing-based classroom. However, the work done in that classroom, the student/teacher dynamics, the
academic/personal writing balance—these are all moments where we see the mutually beneficial relationship that “poethics” offers to composition studies.
The Example of Poetry & Society

Rather than continuing to theorize what a poethical classroom involves, let’s take a look inside Retallack’s own classroom as a way to gain a concrete rendering of what this kind of educational experience looks like. In the Spring 2014, Joan Retallack taught a course titled Poetry & Society (cross-listed in Literature and Human Rights). This course was a writing-intensive seminar, open to students of any level and major, as long as they submitted a statement of interest prior to the semester’s start. The course description was as follows:

What, if anything, does poetry contribute to the most significant conversations of humankind? Conversations about our commonalities and differences—matters of race, class, gender, war and other forms of violence; cultural and political power; social values; responsibilities to fellow human beings as well as to other forms of life on the planet. Does poetry resonate with knowledge and intuition necessary for thinking about such matters but unavailable by other means? Can it be a potent form of agency? These are complex questions we will be examining via specific texts and writing explorations of our own in both essay and poetic forms. We’ll look at the role of poetics in human rights and environmental (ecopoetic) discourses, investigative poetics, ethical thought experiments and more. Texts by Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein, Wallace Stevens, Etel Adnan, Mahmoud Darwish, Raul Zurita, Nourbese Philip, Rachel Zolf, Jonathan Skinner, Juliana Spahr, and Jena Osman, among others are likely to be included. This is a practice-based seminar. You will have the opportunity to experiment with poetic forms, write short essays, and conduct collaborative research in areas of contemporary social concern that interest you. The final assignment will be a combined essay and poetic project.
In the course description, which one can view as a faculty member’s “advertisement” or invitation to students, we see a clear prioritizing of writing as a form of “agency,” as well as of student-centered content. The first sentence of the description uses the word “conversation,” underscoring the way that the reader converses with a written text, but also hinting at the way in which the class will work through texts collaboratively. Retallack also refers to the class as “practice-based,” indicating that she views the members of the class as individuals who already have a practice of writing, who are writers (as Peter Elbow might say). She also specifies that students “will have the opportunity to experiment,” and these experiments will take various forms (including essay and poetic projects). It is also interesting to note that Retallack does not use the word “write” anyplace in this description, despite the fact that it is clearly a course in which writing is central. This is because the act of writing, for Retallack, is ingrained in the way one thinks through the kinds of issues the class aimed to address (i.e. race, class, gender, war, etc.).

The first class meeting, according to the syllabus, focused on “the question of poetic agency.”\(^{69}\) The reality of that class session was that the group convened, began by doing five minutes of private freewriting, and then moved into introducing ourselves by writing in response to how and why we opted to take a course titled “Poetry & Society.” Retallack then began by asking what she referred to as the “large question about agency”: “Does poetry have a discernible and significant agency (in a society of all sorts)?” The group did not attempt to answer this question; it served as a framing device for the conversations that proceeded over the course of the semester.

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\(^{69}\) I sat in on this class as often as my schedule would permit. The seminar was small: Retallack, myself, three freshmen, and seven students who were a mix of sophomores and juniors. This section depends heavily on my own notes from the class sessions, as well as the various emails Retallack sent to the seminar regarding curricular issues.
However, in that initial moment of question posing, a moment where we were all new to each other and no one really knew what to expect from a class titled “Poetry & Society,” we investigated the rationale behind even asking such a question. We looked at the origin of the word “agency,” and the idea of someone doing something that has an effect—the way this kind of action is charged (has a charge in that it promises some kind of impact). Because all of the students in the seminar had the common experience of the Language & Thinking Program, even on the first day, writing and sharing became an immediate part of how we worked without any question or resistance.

The second week of class focused on “Ludwig Wittgenstein: silence; language games; forms of life. John Cage: silence.”

We begin with some private writing, which Retallack describes as a way to “warm up neural pathways in your brain; a way to activate thought that happens simultaneously as you write.” Another definition of this kind of freewriting (according to Sharon Marshall by way of Peter Elbow) is to use writing that is not shared as a way to “become centered, present for the learning that is about to begin, to ground out the static that we bring to class. To breathe, hear [ourselves] think” (Writing-Based Teaching 8). The difference between these two rationales for private freewriting is that Retallack grounds hers in the “neural pathways in your brain,” prioritizing the importance of thinking and writing simultaneously. All of the things listed in the more Elbowian definition imply the importance of the convergence of thought and written language; however, the emphasis there is on the bodily experience of calming oneself down to settle into the space of the classroom.

After five minutes of this kind of writing, Retallack handed out a document titled “Language Games & Forms of Life,” which included a series of Wittgenstein quotes (from both

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70 These are the notes listed on the course syllabus for the week of February 11, 2015.
Culture & Value and Philosophical Investigations); as well as additional excerpts from Minima Moralia by Theodor Adorno; The Poethical Wager by Retallack; and “Rethinking Poetics Log,” again by Retallack. We then proceeded to read the Wittgenstein excerpts out loud, “quaker style,” meaning that everyone was expected to read some portion of the text at some time, but the pattern of voices reading was not predetermined. From the perspective of a participant, this experience of not knowing what voice would speak when kept me on my toes as a reader. I also found myself being very conscious of when I wanted to read, which forced me to look at the text differently—instead of aiming to comprehend, I wanted words that resonated so much I wanted to hear them in my own voice.

Before hearing the Wittgenstein read a second time, Retallack invited the class to “intervene when one had a question.” In other words, this second reading included interruptions from anyone at any time in the text where he/she had a question or comment. The result of this was a democratizing of the way knowledge was shared in the classroom—Retallack was no longer the single Wittgenstein expert, and the text itself was no longer as daunting. For me, the term “language-game” was one that I had been stymied by for years and had always felt ashamed to ask for help understanding it. But, in this context, I didn’t hesitate. So, I immediately chimed in when we read, “the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Sect. 23). I remember one of the freshmen in the class, C., said something to the extent of: “I think a language-game is a way of acknowledging that to understand the meaning of a word is to also understand the cultural context surrounding the usage of the term.” This felt like an “aha” moment for me, and part of that is because of the relief I felt in simply participating in the language game of asking what a
“language-game” is. These kinds of interactions are significant in that the open embrace of inquiry is something that should be central to any composition environment.

Once we finished reading the Wittgenstein selections a second time, we paused to take notes for ourselves in response to the text. We then began a conversation about what we’d heard (both in Wittgenstein and in our own questioning and interruptions). We reread the text a third time, this time substituting the word “poetry” every time Wittgenstein used the word “language.” This led to questions like: How can we make meaning (sense, understand, figure out) from or through a poem? What is the language game of a poem? How does language function in a poem—how do words charge or give energy to each other? If the speaking of language is an activity, what about writing? How can writing be a “form of life”?

After this discussion, Retallack then added more texts to the table, passing out a handout that included the poem: “Last Night I Dreamed I was in Bucharest” by John Ashbery. She divided the class into two groups of about five to six people each. Our directions were to look at the Ashbery poem with the following questions in mind: “1) What kind of language game is this poem?; 2) What form of life is this language game connected to?; 3) What is Ashbery’s poem doing that must be done (in our time)?; and 4) What silences does the poem bring to the foreground of our noticing?” The group work continued until class ended, and Retallack left us with the question: “Can the language game of poetry bring out the things we don’t usually notice?”

The following week we began by doing some writing in response to the question we’d ended the previous week’s class with, and this fed into a conversation around “the language

71 Retallack conceptualized “silences” here as John Cage’s idea that silence is actually not the absence of sound, but rather the noticing or bringing into audibility of the sounds we don’t usually notice.
game of poetry” and questions relating to poetry and performance. We did some additional focused freewriting around the connection between reading a poem on the page and performing a poem. Following this writing, we then got into small groups to figure out different ways to render the Ashbery poem and Wittgenstein excerpts so that the act of performance would help us to figure out what and how the poem means. When we got back together as a class, each small group “performed” the Ashbery poem and Wittgenstein excerpts, and we then paused to do some process writing in response to the question: “As a result of performance, what do you notice about the language of the poem or essay?” We then spent the rest of the class session in conversation sparked by our responses to this question. I clearly remember what Retallack’s response was: “every poem is a score—a notation that gives cues—how to read it and how to perform it.”

The arc of these first three class meetings says a lot about the “poethics” of the way the class worked and evolved over the semester. From day one, there was a clear culture of writing in place in the classroom. We began the semester with private writing, and continued to begin each class that way. We also always did some focused freewriting as a way to first generate ideas in writing to help give form to our verbal discussions. Retallack always participated in any kind of writing she invited the class to do, much like the faculty at Black Mountain were always engaged in the same experiences as their students. The result of this kind of writing-based pedagogy was a seminar in which the teacher/student hierarchy of knowledge was collapsed; instead a space was created in which each person in the room was recognized as the holder of his/her own kinds of knowledge. We regularly learned from each other’s different backgrounds and areas of interest. And, each student in the room had the space to pursue whatever specific questions or lines of thinking the texts at hand sparked. Poetry & Society was a space that
enacted the kind of experiential learning John Dewey theorized, where the members of the learning community pursued a series of unpredictable experiences together and then learned through reflecting (in writing) on those experiences and sharing these reflections. This process of working collaboratively through texts and writing illustrates the ideas that “poethics” is rooted in, what Retallack describes as “art as the very life experience it draws our attention to” (TPW 211). In other words, by working through Wittgenstein, embodying Ashbery, and joining the two texts in performative inquiry, the class also participates in a poethical endeavor, enacting the kind of inquiry the texts on the table pose. The experience of placing these two texts into direct dialogue with each other through unexpected means was difficult and generative. Together, the texts and the class collaborated in the building of new ways of thinking about how to read and talk about these works.
P. : Silence

P.’s first paper of the spring semester for my first-year writing course began by referring to John Cage’s idea that his “responsibility [was] that of asking questions instead of making choices.” An aspiring musician who was quite unsure of his own reasons for attending college, P. wanted to use the assignment I gave (to write a “manifesto) as a way to investigate the ways in which people respond to media, specifically music. The theme of this course was “Happiness” and, more specifically, the assignment read:

A manifesto is “a public declaration of principles and intentions, often political in nature.” In other words, a manifesto is a statement (oftentimes meant to be read out loud) that outlines one’s opinions about an issue the author feels strongly about. For your first paper of the semester, you will write a “Happiness Manifesto.” You should aim to show your reader what you think happiness is and try to prove several “useful” points about “how to be happy.” What does it mean to be happy? Why do we strive for happiness? Should we strive for happiness? Remember, this paper must have a clear thesis that expresses your views on happiness, and in order to prove and support your thesis you will need to use quotes from materials we’re read in class. Outside research is not needed.

We’d worked with a number of popular music videos in class, and looked at a variety of texts presenting philosophical and psychological theories of happiness (Plato, Freud, Daniel Gilbert, Barbara Ehrenreich). So, when P. asked if he could write a manifesto that was rooted in music, specifically John Cage (who wrote a number of manifestos), I was excited to support his idea.

P.’s rough draft talked around his topic using language like, “experimental presentation subverts cultural paradigms,” and in our first individual conference we spent a lot of time talking
about what he admired about Cage. I learned that he hadn’t actually read Cage’s writing before—he came across it when googling “manifesto” and “music” in preparation for this paper.

It was interesting to me that P. was excited enough by Cage’s book, *Silence*, that he was willing to read it in its entirety and revolve his first paper around it—all in the span of two weeks, with a full course load. P. said that his interest in Cage was directly connected to the way Cage defines silence as ultimately full of noise. Cage writes, “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot” (*Silence* 8). P. interpreted this idea as “silence forces an audience to think.” When pushing P. to expand on why this mattered to him, he struggled. He talked a lot about Cage’s training, and how proficient he was in “traditional piano playing.” He then said, “you can only reject a traditional convention for something that you think is more meaningful after mastering the tradition first.”

P.’s final paper ended up focusing heavily on Cage’s essay “History of Experimental Music in the United States.” While the paper never quite reached a place where it succeeded as a manifesto, I could see that there was something in the way Cage composed on the page that P. was grappling with. His notion of writing a paper for school was imbued with the wearing of a formal language, a language that was extremely dense and seemed far from the ideas he was writing about. Instead of relying and drawing on his own experience and understanding of composition in music and how that connected to his interest in Cage, P. focused on a series of generalizations—“the idea of the cultural escapist as rejecting tradition linearly is fundamentally flawed.” In this quote, there’s clearly a very interesting idea afoot—the idea that a “cultural escapist” is one who is going against the grain to create something risky and meaningful—but P.’s rationale never gets there. But, P. is trying and his ideas are complex and demonstrate that
he had thought a great deal about his essay, but didn’t know how to put it in words within the context of a college composition class.

It is a happy accident that P. focused on this particular essay by Cage because it is the essay that directly correlates to the articulation of “poethics.” Composed in 1958, in “History of Experimental Music in the United States” Cage writes, “One does not then make just any experiment but does what must be done” (*Silence* 68). This is the moment where Cage clearly articulates his belief, which is hugely important to Retallack, that to compose anything (music, art, writing) is inextricably connected to daily experience, to listening to the sounds around us, and responding in a way that involves the chaos of one’s own surroundings in the making of the meaning of any text. This is what P. was referring to when he described Cage’s devotion to the practice of asking questions, and I think that this practice of inquiry is one that P. was trying out. Asking questions is much more difficult than making choices, because the results are not predetermined. But, this unpredictability is what Cage is most interested in, and is the signifier (for Retallack) of a moment when the “text and reader—grow and change together” (*TPW* 220). This moment is what we might imagine when picturing the ideal experience of a student’s growth during their first-year of college, a growth that happens in conjunction with and through writing.

I have no doubt that if P. had been able to revise his paper, the process of revising and pushing himself deeper into conversation with Cage’s ideas would have helped his writing to evolve into the excellent piece of prose I could see he was capable of writing. I would have asked him to meet with me regularly, and I can imagine each meeting being a chance to engage

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72 Revision is always a huge component of my composition classes, and most students rewrite each paper at least three times. However, extenuating circumstances caused P. to have to take an extended medical leave shortly after writing this paper, he ended up not returning to finish the semester.
in a translation of his paragraphs—moving from jargon to the messy ideas underneath. I can imagine asking him to play with some of the chance procedures Cage himself used, and I can imagine that P. would be relieved to discover that his initial draft mimicked a certain academic seat he thought he had to fill, instead of writing the paper he genuinely wanted to write.

It was a strange experience to see a student wrestling with the same ideas that I often wrestle with—figuring out how to convey extremely complex ideas in writing, and figuring out how to make that writing clear enough that others feel welcomed to participate in it. It was also interesting to see an eighteen-year-old student reading Cage for the first time, already deeply familiar with his music, devoting himself to figuring out “what has been composed?” for both Cage and himself.
“Poethics” in Composition

Poetry & Society, while representing a snapshot of what Retallack’s own pedagogy looks like, is not a first-year writing course. So, while the way the class worked is a vivid example of a poethical pedagogy in action, a pedagogy that I know can be replicated in the context of a composition course, it was not explicitly a class for beginning writers at the college level. In order to speak to this distinction, what follows is an example of one of my own composition classes, specifically a class session in which I used an excerpt from The Poethical Wager as a way to frame and introduce an upcoming longer formal essay assignment. Not only is the content of this class session specifically focused on Retallack’s own essaying about “poethics,” but, the way the class session was planned is in itself another example of a poethical pedagogy.

The class that this section will focus on is a Composition I class taught in the Fall 2012 at a large public urban university, focused specifically on students interested in majoring in business and business-related fields. This particular class was a “learning community” course, meaning that I was paired with another faculty who had the same group of students, and that we devised a common theme (bioethics) that both of our classes addressed, ideally reinforcing each other across disciplines. The class had twenty students, all were freshmen, and more than half of the group were both first-generation college students and non-native English speakers. The formal course description read:

Bioethics is a term at least familiar to most of us—one of those “hot controversial” labels affixed to news stories with headlines like “First Synthetic Life Form Holds Promise, Peril” and “Superfood Surprise? The Dish on Gene Foods” (Breaking Bioethics, MSNBC). But, in today’s world, what does a term like “bioethics” really mean? What issues are umbrellaed by this term? As noted by the Center for Ethics and Humanities in
the Life Sciences at Michigan State University, bioethics “has brought about significant changes in standards for the treatment of the sick and for the conduct of research…Our understanding of what is ethical has grown, but it is never complete.” Bioethics explores the difficult issues that confront us from the time of conception to the time of death. This learning community will explore the many ethical issues that seem to fall under “bioethics” and aim to engage in a larger conversation about how these questions of morality and judgment come into play in a wide range of texts. We will investigate texts including: Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*; John Colapinto’s *As Nature Made Him*; and Arthur Caplan’s *Breaking Bioethics* columns. We will also take our inquiries outside of the traditional classroom—possibly visiting the Museum of Natural History, the Discovery Science Center, and attending relevant lectures.

**English 2100 (Writing I)** is an intensive course introducing students to writing as a means of thinking and discovery. This course deals with the organization and development of ideas in coherent, interesting, effective essays. Students learn the nature of argument, the techniques of substantiation and coordination of ideas, and the structural principles that make a good essay. Through a wide variety of readings and writing assignments, a focus will be placed on the connection between ideas and human culture. This course will emphasize both the process and product of academic writing through in-class writing assignments, weekly response papers, rough draft workshops, self and peer edits, and individual conferences with me.

In my course description, there is a clear emphasis on writing—however, I purposely do not specify the quantity and specific kinds of writing that the students will be required to do. When I
wrote this description, it was important to me to accomplish several things: 1) provide some information about the course theme and hopefully get some students excited about it; 2) foreground the fact that students would be writing and reading a lot, and in a lot of different modes; and 3) provide enough information that students feel as though they understand what the class will be about and “for,” while not trapping myself by saying too much. I do not believe in handing out a complete (inflexible) syllabus in any class before I’ve had a chance to meet the students and read some kind of writing diagnostic. My reasoning behind this is that I do not believe that it is useful to prescribe what students need to read and write before I get a sense of who they are.

I chose to center this course around the idea of Bioethics, even though it is not necessarily an area of expertise for me. However, I knew that even if not all students in the class were newspaper readers, everyone would have some familiarity with the issues associated with bioethics (i.e. stem cell research, abortion, euthanasia, animal rights, etc.). I also knew that focusing on such a large (almost catch-all) term would enable the class to draw on their own areas of expertise across disciplines. Lastly, I hoped that this thematic focus would pave the way for the kind of persuasive academic writing that the course required. Bioethics is a term associated with “debates,” and this connection was one that I thought would help students to understand how to build, shape, and prove their own ideas through writing. However, the entire semester proved to be a bit of a struggle with regards to working with students to see that their

73 I always assign a brief writing diagnostic during the first week of class. This is a timed piece of in-class writing that students know will not be graded. I usually give students a short text that is similar to the kinds of things we’ll be reading, and then ask them to write in response to it. The purpose of doing this is to get a sense of where each student is in terms of writing abilities and fluency.
writing should be full of their own ideas, not the kind of summary or reproduction of an argument made by someone else.

Around the sixth week of the course, I received rough drafts of the first formal paper. We’d already read a series of excerpts from Aristotle’s *Ethics*, the “Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights,” and a series of *New York Times* articles. The paper assignment they were working with involved writing a “case study in order to explore what it means to thoughtfully approach problems and experiment with different perspectives in writing.” More specifically, students were to pick a literary “case” (from a selection of short stories we created as a class) and thoroughly analyze it by focusing on a central bioethical issue, then debating the case’s scenario, using evidence and examples. The guiding questions I suggested were: “1) What “ethical issue” is addressed in the story?; 2) What is at stake?; 3) What problem(s) are the characters grappling with?; and 4) What larger message or argument is the author trying to convey by way of this story?” And, I also specified that the papers must “have a solid thesis statement—you need to persuasively convey your stance on the issue you’ve identified. Through analysis of the story (using ample quotes) and additional evidence and examples, you will convince your reader that your stance on the issue is correct.”

After scanning through the set of rough drafts that the class turned in, I wondered what the students thought the job of an “essay” was—they turned in papers that were mostly summary, whereas in class, our conversations were heated and exciting. It seemed as though in class, everyone was committed to exploring their own ideas and listening to each other. Yet, in writing, most students reverted back to an overly general and bland simplification of someone else’s thoughts. An example of one such “thesis statement” from one of these drafts: “SeaWorld is a bad corporation because they do not treat the dolphins ethically.” This student, C., was someone
who was extremely interested in animal rights and had been doing a lot of her own research into zoos, bird sanctuaries, and aquariums. I knew that there was a lot that was left unsaid in her “argument,” and this was the case for most of these papers. I wondered if the class knew that college essays were very different from high school. I also wondered if students ever thought about the idea that an essay might be a pleasurable form.

The class session after receiving these drafts was devoted to exploring what we thought about when we thought about an “essay.” My goal for this class session was to invite students to rethink their conceptions of what an essay is. I wanted them to understand that I expected something much more than summary, and that they needed to quickly leave their “high school essay” definitions at the door. And, I wanted to accomplish this through working through a very difficult text about the essay, and working through it by writing. I’d already set up my class so that everyone understood that writing would be central to how we worked together (from day one we began every class session with five minutes of private writing). But, this particular class session was difficult, even heated.

After our ritual of beginning each class with five minutes of private freewriting, we then quickly jotted down anything that popped into our heads when hearing the word “essay.” Following this quick listing, I suggested that we all write in response to the following: “Describe how you think your draft is an “essay.” The key here is to provide us with as many details as possible itemizing the things that you think your essay does that are “the norm” for academic essays.” We then shared excerpts from our descriptions, trying to create a collective sense of what the class valued and recognized in their own essays. The point of this activity was to create a collective definition of what an essay was that existed outside of the instructor, to allow the class the chance to figure out how and why they wanted their writing to matter.
I then handed out copies of Joan Retallack’s “Essay as Wager” (the first piece in *The Poetical Wager*), and then asked everyone to mark off three very specific passages to focus our attention on,\(^74\) passages I selected because they offer alternative descriptions of what an essay can be and accomplish. We then read only these excerpts out loud multiple times, annotating as we read and listened, underlining language that was exciting, circling things that were puzzling.

The students wanted to know why we were talking about what an essay was. They wanted to know if I graded their rough drafts. They resisted the small pieces of Retallack’s language instantly—feeling alienated by words like “epistemology,” “provisional,” “conjecture,” etc. They kept saying that Retallack wasn’t saying anything. They kept saying they were not planning to be writers like Retallack, so why did they have to read this stuff? But, we stuck to the plan and I think it worked.

After reading the passages from “Essay as Wager,” we counted off by threes, assigning each person the Retallack passage that corresponded with their number, and individually, we each translated the passage into our own language, language that made sense for us in that moment. In small groups, one group per excerpt, we shared our translations and then worked to combine them all into one short statement, something no longer than one side of an index card. This required each group to listen carefully to each other, to pay close attention to our differing ways of reading the same passages, and to find some kind of consensus across interpretations and languages in order to write a statement that both made sense as a whole and reflected the ideas of all five people in the group. After fifteen minutes, we returned together as a class and heard these rewritings.

\(^74\) These quotes are included in their entirety as part of the sample lesson plan included at the end of this chapter.
We did some reflective writing in response to the following: “Based on what you just heard (and what we read together), what new ideas about the word ‘essay’ and the ‘job’ of the academic essay do you have? What questions are on your mind?” Each student shared a portion of their writing, and this sharing naturally evolved into a conversation around new ways of thinking about what an essay can and should do.

By the end of this class session, there was a general feeling of excitement in the room—we all felt comfortable seeing the space of the essay as a place in which something should be wagered. The process of “translating” Retallack’s language first individually, and then in small groups, brought clarity to what at first glance seemed complex. One student said, “Basically she thinks that essays should be about things that matter to the person writing the essay when he is writing it.” Another student remarked, “if an essay isn’t exciting for the writer, then it sure will be boring for the reader and no one wants to read boring things.” This class session culminated in plans for rough draft revisions that involved starting from scratch, beginning by figuring out which story was the most compelling for them, and then drafting an essay that reflected the how and why of the student’s interest in the story—as well as what larger issue was at stake in his/her analysis of the story. The final drafts were better—the “case studies” demonstrated that the students had picked something they were interested in to write about, and tried to do so without the kind of restating of information they’d relied on before.

The “poethics” of this class session is located in the way in which a collective “we” identified a problem and worked through it by writing together. More specifically, the design of this paper included a variety of moments where students got to choose their own focus and topics—allowing the space for each paper to explore something that mattered to its writer. The rhythm of the class session was one that moved in and out of writing and sharing, individual and
group work. There were never moments where the teacher was explaining something to the class or lecturing. It also would have been easier to hand out dictionary definitions of the word “essay” and ask students to think through the term’s original meaning—“to try.” But, that text would not have provoked the kind of resistance and difficulty as “Essay as Wager” did. It was important that we understand what was at stake when writing an essay in the context of a freshman composition course, and the only way to do this was through writing and collaborative questioning.
Sample Lesson Plan

Essaying the Essay
(First-Year Writing Course, 15 students)

**FFW = Focused Freewrite**

Private Write. [5 Minutes]

**FFW 1:** First thoughts on the word “essay.” [3 Minutes]

**FFW 2:** Describe how you think your draft is an “essay.” The key here is to provide us with as many details as possible itemizing the things that you think your essay does that are “the norm” for academic essays. [5 Minutes]

**Share** (Hear at least one sentence from each person.)

**Handout “Essay as Wager”** by Joan Retallack.

- Bracket off and number the following passages.
  - #1: “The essay, with its capacity to accommodate interruptions and digressions, may be the chief prose-based experimental instrument of humanistic thought. At its best it detaches itself from the epistemology implied by narrative grammars, a tone of certainty that pervades even the most provisional material. (It may be happening right here.) By contrast the distractible logics of the essay are, or should be, attempts at nothing other than productive conjecture. This is the work of the literary humanities as they meet up with the intrusive unintelligibilities of breaking experience. The source of vitality for the essay is its engagement in conversational invention rather than ordinal accounts of things (including thoughts) that have already taken place” (TPW 4).
  - #2: “The aim of my essay projects is to attend to alternative kinds of sense and—if possible, if lucky—to come up with some oddly relevant, frankly partial meaning. The difference between sense and meaning is important here: sense has to do with patterns and logics; meaning (which is larger than but includes this sense of sense) is what makes life worth living” (TPW 5).
  - #3: “There, I think, is the location of the essay as wager—in the intermediate zone between self and world, in the distancing act of play” (TPW 7).

**Read out loud:** Let’s hear each passage out loud, one person per passage. Remember to read loudly and slowly. And, always listen with a pen in hand, annotating—underline language that you find exciting, circle things that puzzle you.

**Let’s hear these 3 passages a second time**—We’ll go around the circle, reading one sentence each.

**Translating Retallack:** Count off by 3’s. [10 Minutes]
• All the #1’s have the first passage, the #2’s have the second, and the #3’s have the third. Your job is to rewrite (or translate) Retallack’s language into a language that makes sense to you, that feels familiar, that says something you find to be clear and important.
• #3’s—You only have one sentence, but that doesn’t mean your job is “easy.” This is a very important moment in Retallack’s essay, so you may want to read the entire paragraph this sentence is taken from, and make sure that your rewriting of it is crystal clear.

In Small Groups (by passage #—all the #1’s together, etc.)—handout index cards.[15 Minutes]
• You will need to appoint a scribe/note-taker, a timekeeper, and a presenter
• Share your translations, make sure to listen and take note of similarities and differences
• Combine all of your “translations” into one coherent rewriting of the passage you were assigned. Your rewriting needs to fit on one side of the index card.

Return as a Class. Share the rewritings on the index cards.

Process Write: Based on what you just heard (and what we read together), what new ideas about the word “essay” and the “job” of the academic essay do you have? What questions are on your mind? [5 Minutes]

Share Process Writes. Time to discuss.

FFW: Tell the story of the wager you plan to make in your revision of this essay. What needs to happen for you in the act of revising and how will this take place? [5 Minutes]

Share. Discuss.
Remainder of class spent creating “blueprints” for revising.
on several attempts\textsuperscript{75}

what does it mean to want nothing more than tall spires, to experience my sentence and feel safe in that sort of writhing.
clear, candid, sluggish—this intonation of glorious astroturf, fractal flesh-bots with the style and structure of credo building, a “this i believe” moment at the foot of a mountain where consensus constructing is no longer familiar and bull versus cow commentary becomes parrot versus frog no longer “only a metaphor” but a metaphor

in progress, a constellation in utero ideal because the tangent is learning

\textsuperscript{75} This sonnet was written in the spirit of John Cage’s chance procedures. I pulled individual words at random from the notebook I’ve been using to take notes for this dissertation. Once I had 28 index cards full of words I then constructed this sonnet by way of shuffling my “deck” of cards 5 times and then picking 3 cards at random. The poem is composed using only the words on those three index cards.
Chapter Four: The Wager of Poetry

“Was there ever any language to talk about the thing you wanted?
(Eileen Myles, “Iceland”)

“The class time is a blank page on which a composition takes place: *everything happens.*”
(Charles Bernstein, “Wreading, Writing, Wresponding”)

“I don’t give these lectures to surprise people, but out of a need for poetry.”
(John Cage, *Silence*)
“Poethics” and the Place of Poetry in the Composition Classroom

The kind of discoveries that working with Retallack’s “Essay as Wager,” an essay in which she spends a good deal of time introducing the idea of “poethics,” demonstrates the ways in which collaborative reading, writing, and dialogue empower students to rethink their own positions within the landscape of academic writing. Given that central to “poethics’” definition is poetry, a poethical classroom always regularly engages with challenging experimental poetry on a regular basis, particularly as a way to encourage students to push themselves outside of their comfort zones to write about something that genuinely matters. When poetry is used in the classroom in this way, it serves as a strategy to improve student writing, while also teaching students the lesson that language and meaning are never as easy to pinpoint or define as one might want them to be.

Poetry is a genre of writing that is met with consistent fear and resistance from both students and teachers. Rita Dove, named U.S. Poet Laureate in 1993, acknowledges this by saying, “Poetry—merely whispering its name—can frighten people out of the room.”76 The reasons for this poemophobia (or metrophobia, the actual term for a fear of poetry) is often linked to the stereotype of poetry as “difficult” or hard to understand. Within the classroom, students and teachers, alike, fear interpreting a poem in the wrong way, assuming that there is a correct answer to what any poem means.77 In his April 2014 article in The Atlantic Monthly, “Why Teaching Poetry is so Important,” Andrew Simmons (a high school literature teacher) points out that “poetry suffers from an image problem,” proving his point by way of describing “the tired lessons about iambic pentameter and teachers wringing interpretations from cryptic

76 http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/94/9409/dove.html
77 See Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica,” which ends with the couplet, “A poem should not mean/But be.”
stanzas.” Simmons’ essay details the pressures that teachers face when trying to “cram” poetry into an already crowded curriculum.

In “Can Poetry Matter,” Dana Gioia approaches the “poetry problem” by stating, “A poem is, after all, a fragile thing, and its intrinsic worth, or lack thereof, is a frighteningly subjective consideration.” Gioia’s essay title presents an interesting and timely question, but the piece itself is reductive in its consideration of the poetry community today, and the poem’s (or even poet’s) place in academia. But, the point at hand is that Gioia fetishizes the poem as object much in the same way that we fetishize student writing, or misuse writing to take up class time, empowered by the assumption that our students feel “free” when freewriting. Too often we think we liberate our students by offering up the expanse of a blank page. But, really, oftentimes that blank page is really met with the same sigh of frustration one might hear internally and/or externally when faced with lines like, “When I consider how my light is spent,/Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide…” (Milton 84).

This opening couplet belongs to one of Milton’s most anthologized poems—a sonnet many instructors feel compelled or even required to teach. But, how does one teach a poem this “difficult”? And, when faced with the temptation to present students with a “correct” theory of reading this poem, is there any road to travel? Is Milton reflecting on his life and offering up regrets? Is he meditating on the loss of his own vision? Does anyone really have the authority to know? Should anyone have the authority to really know what Milton might have meant—“how [his] light [was] spent?” And, is it this desire to know or to disseminate knowledge that might be holding back our students from becoming the kind of writers we hope they will be?

Richard E. Miller’s book, Writing at the End of the World (2005), begins with a poem (written by Miller himself)—
It is the end of the world.

And the work that lies ahead will involve,
as it always has and always will,
from moment to moment,
the building of new worlds.

Worlds end.
And worlds begin.

While the content of this poem serves as an excellent introduction to the work that the book will tackle, “a conversation about how and why reading, writing, and teaching the literate arts can be made to matter in 21st century schools” (x), I believe it is even more important to note that the path into this book is indeed a poem. Miller uses line breaks to place emphasis on words like “involve” (a term that seems invite the reader into the dialogue of the book), “moment,” and “new worlds”—important emphases for a book that proves that composition is the link that enables individuals to adequately think about and engage with their current (and often distressing) surroundings. At the end of the chapter entitled, “The Arts of Complicity,” Miller posits, “the more modest goal of the pragmatic pedagogy I’ve outlined here is to provide our students with the opportunity to speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts than is available to them when they labor under the codes of silence and manufactured consent that serve to define the lived experience of subordinates in the culture of schooling” (141). This notion of “building new worlds” rings particularly true when continuing to consider the omnipresent role “instability” plays in daily life. And, what Miller is proposing is that by encouraging students to question and address the various instabilities they function amidst, a more various and engaged lived experience ultimately results, a revisiting of Dewey’s important notion that “every experience lives on in further experiences” (*Experience and Education* 27).
These experiences and instabilities also fall into direct conversation with the notions of “journey” that process pedagogues use to describe the composing process.

Miller’s book deals more specifically with the situation of the writing (composition) classroom, and the place of this “space of opportunity” within the larger structures of English Departments and universities. Similarly, Charles Bernstein’s essays often deal with the place of poetry and poetics within academia and how too often teaching poetry becomes “turning a narrow range of designated difficulties into puzzles resolvable by checking off boxes on the ‘Understanding Poetry’ worksheet” (Attack of the Difficult Poems 10). The marginalization of poetry within curriculums is just as undeniable as the precarious place of the first-year writing program. However, instead of dwelling on why teaching poetry is thought of as “so difficult,” I propose that we look more closely at the “spaces of opportunity” that poetry provides within the context of the first-year writing course, and how experimental poetries can have a direct impact on the fluency of beginning writers’ academic prose.

“Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

“Poetry is Not a Luxury” (1977) is the title of one of Audre Lorde’s most well-known essays in which she describes the power of poetry (for women) is that it “is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Sister Outsider 27). What Lorde is addressing is the unique way that the form of the poem draws attention to “the capacity of language itself to astonish” (Collom 257). Poetry demands active language, meaning that the writer is actively

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78 Bob Perelman’s The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History (Princeton University Press 1996) is a text that aims to both provide readers with a history of Language poetry, while also underscoring ways in which this “kind” of poetry “blurs the distinction between reader and writer” (36).
engaged with how and why he or she places words on the page, and the reader is active in his/her envelopment in the sounds and surprises the twists and turns of a stanza can take.

In “Wreading, Writing, Wresponding,” Charles Bernstein describes the use of poetry in the classroom as “experiments in mutant forms conducted on the textual body of the living language” (Difficult Poems 50). As his playfully misspelled title indicates, Bernstein emphasizes how experimental poetry breaks conventional language rules and reminds us of how reading and responding connect to writing. Poetry, particularly when used in the composition/writing classroom, provides students with the opportunity to wade through challenging materials, read texts that demonstrate that not all writing needs to “make sense” in a typical way, and finally urges students to play with their own composing processes. In “The Art and Practice of the Ordinary,” Bernstein further reminds us “that the ordinary lies not in any one type of language but in the between” (Difficult Poems 176).

Paralleling Bernstein’s “experiments in mutant forms,” Ann Berthoff describes the composing process as emerging from a particular kind of chaos: “meanings do not come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and the uninformed” (“Learning the Uses of Chaos” 648). I would add to Berthoff’s stance on “the making of meaning,” that these meanings often are born on paper, and require reading materials that invoke and evoke chaos and provocation. In other words, to fully engage students in this kind of making of meaning, one needs to introduce them to texts that demand and demonstrate this same chaos. In her keynote at “Serious Play: Teaching Through Poetry,” a Conference presented by Bard College’s Institute for Writing & Thinking in April
2011, Joan Retallack described poetry as “the kind of laboratory where we set words in motion in often surprising ways and marvel at what happens.” It is important to note that this statement came in the context of a presentation advocating for the presence of more poetry, particularly more experimental and contemporary poetry, in classrooms of all levels. Retallack situated this kind of classroom and this definition of the potential of the poem as a chance to take part in the great “indoor-outdoor laboratory playground of words.” By reading, interpreting, and writing texts that clearly do not follow the traditional definitions and restrictions of “good writing,” students realize the possibilities texts can hold. These possibilities are crucial to the way that the poethical classroom creates the space (often through poetry) to be “using language in new ways” in order to “change the grammar of the way we are together” (TPW 44). Working with students to discover “new ways” of approaching their composing processes enables them to discover that academic writing does not need to fit into a normative five-paragraph mode.

An example of this kind of shift that a poethical classroom nurtures is seen in Retallack’s own poem, ICARUS FFFFALLING (1994), which is a procedural piece inspired by her Bard College freshman composition students “who when asked to go out and photograph Icarus falling found him everywhere.” Retallack’s students, through their own drive to explore “the form of the essay—as urgent and aesthetically aware thought experiment—to undertake a particular kind of inquiry that is neither poetry nor philosophy” (TPW 4), both discovered their own compositional interests and enabled Retallack to articulate hers (in this poem). By meshing

79 The description for this one-day conference included the following: “Poetry belongs everywhere—in middle and high schools, in the college core curriculum, and in classes across the curriculum. Poetry is a form of thinking that requires the reader to puzzle out a logic that is only implied. It sharpens our understanding of the world, language, and ourselves. Poetry is, as Jorie Graham suggests in the introduction to The Best American Poetry 1990, “an act of mind” that connects the reader to the world through precision of seeing, feeling, and thinking” (http://www.bard.edu/iwt/conferences.descriptions/?listing_id=2795023).
poetics with pedagogy, Retallack seamlessly weaves the poetic impulse into the critical/analytical essay writing process, and empowers students (and teachers) to rethink the way texts are presented as “assigned,” instead moving towards a reciprocal structure where reader is writer and writer often gently guides a reader’s inquiry.

Poet Tyrone Williams describes his own experience teaching poetry as having “to get [students] to shed years of reading habits, to return to a kind of play and wonder, not in order to romanticize poetry but in order to re-open those alternative ways of engaging language closed off by public and/or private education” (Poets on Teaching xviii). Williams pinpoints the ways in which beginning writers enter the composition classroom full of experiences with poetry that has shut down their ability to see the language on the page and find their own way to engage with it. If the central goal of the composition course is to learn to write, think, and read actively and critically, then the job of the composition instructor is to disrupt normative modes of reading and writing in ways that give students the reins to drive language to a place where they want it.

Working with poetry in a composition course is not a new technique; working with contemporary experimental poetry to improve students’ academic writing is. There are a number of works by compositionists that allude to the value of working with this specific kind of writing, yet none fully demonstrate how this plays out in the actual classroom and what these avant-garde poetic forms push students to accomplish. In Resisting Writing (and the Boundaries of Composition) (1994), Derek Owens argues for a “call for pedagogies of composition privileging supreme variety rather than an aesthetics of exclusion” (11). Owens persuasively examines the ways in which creative writers “reconstruct the form of the critical essay to meet their own needs” (47), performing a series of close readings of specific contemporary texts by Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Charles Olson, among others. In his section on John Cage, Owens
proposes that “an alternative view of the composing process might place added focus on the significance chance plays in the realization and inclusion of material” (62). However, what this would look like in practice is left unexamined. Owens also skirts the issue of teaching poetry—he refers to the genre of verse as an important part of the multiple discourses that should be included in composition, criticizes the reductive forms of poetry published in *College English*, but the reader never gets a clear sense of the kinds of poetry he is talking about, nor how or why it would be taught.

Tim Mayers’ *Rewriting Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (2005) and Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice’s *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy* (2007) both examine the place of creative writing within the larger landscape of writing studies, and focus on the ways “craft criticism” should be mutually beneficial to both the fields of creative writing and composition studies. Both of these books focus on structural issues of the field—in particular the “the division of English studies into subfields or strands such as literary studies, composition, and creative writing” (Mayers 31). The idea that the fields of creative writing and composition studies should join hands is one that makes a lot of sense, particularly since the fields share many important commitments, namely, a focus on writing processes and an emphasis on the individual as writer. However, these texts are focused on the structure of the field, not the daily life of the classroom or how the uses of an understanding of the composing processes of contemporary creative writers might enrich the teaching of freshman writing courses.

*Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies* (2014) by Patricia Suzanne Sullivan continues this trend of theoretical texts within composition studies that seem problematically distanced from the practice they propose. What Sullivan accomplishes is that she
connects the ideas of Owens, Mayers, Ritter, and Vanderslice and offers the term “aesthetics” as a way to consider what a “commonsense assumption about what writing as art does or could do” (9). Although Sullivan states that she is not arguing “for teaching experimental writing in composition classrooms” (2), the book revolves mostly around what experimental writing is, how compositionists refer to it as a way to reform the field, and differing ways we should think about evaluating student writing that is experimental. The text is extremely theoretical, with the exception of a chapter on “collage,” which includes close readings of student work created in response to Peter Elbow’s “Collage: Your Cheatin’ Art” (1997). It seems that Sullivan was disappointed in the collage process, mostly because her students relied on their old writing strategies and weren’t able to really produce a text that worked as a collage. But, I wonder if that is the point? When I ask students to make a collage, I want them to make a mess so that they can see the spaces that need clear transitions, evidence, anecdotes—spaces to write into to shape their own prose. While Sullivan does give a glimpse into her own classroom, she seems to be a bit heavy-handed with her pedagogical approach. How can one assume that beginning writers are interested in experimental composing? Why affix labels like aesthetics and collage to writing? What do we want our students to leave the classroom feeling that they learned?

By proposing a poethical classroom, I aim to articulate a space in which writing and learning happens, a space that is heavily rooted inside the classroom, and the potential that place holds for thinking about what we write and do and why.

*The Problem of the Required Anthology of Readings*

This limited lens into the kinds of texts students should write and produce is connected to the tradition of assigning “readers” and “handbooks” as the required books for the course. In “Why Read What?: The Politics of Composition Anthologies” (1992), George Otte defines these
texts as “the reader for writers (the anthology for first-year English courses) began as a way of sanctioning readings for a course that was not a literature course yet was taught by teachers (or would-be teachers) of literature” (139). Otte continues to analyze the contents of many composition readers and deems them “constrained by some notion of accessibility from the very start, since what must be kept in mind (apparently) is not just what students are capable of reading but what they are capable of writing as well” (140). Otte points to the fact that textbooks and readers for these courses are often underwhelming—featuring texts that are not particularly challenging and texts meant to be easily imitated by students. The larger problem here, however, is the idea that editors and publishers believe that there is a way to predict what students need to read in order to learn to write. If every student comes to class with differing experiences and literacies, the idea that one anthology could hold readings that would interest every student in any given class is simply impossible.

In the introduction to his composition textbook, A Short Course in Writing (1980), Kenneth Bruffee describes the writing process that students are expected to experience in these courses as learning to “order our thoughts and feelings so that other people can understand and accept them. We give them form, a shape and order which educated people agree on so that they can communicate with one another” (xvii). Bruffee’s focus is on what the writing students do in first-year composition courses is, and what that writing should accomplish—basically that this course is a place where students should be taught how to communicate their ideas in such a way that others understand them. It is notable that Bruffee’s textbook doesn’t include readings; instead, the book is organized around different writing processes and strategies, with prompts to help students experience each. Some examples of this include “invention,” “defending and explaining a proposition,” “research writing,” and an appendix of “example essays” written in
response to any of the areas covered in the individual chapters. The emphasis, however, is clearly on the writing that students need to learn how to do, rather than the kinds of texts that they should be reading.

Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan’s *Thinking in Writing* (1983) presents a reader organized by similar facets of the writing process—“observation and inference,” “definition,” “comparison and contrast,” and “argument,” to name a few. In their preface, McQuade and Atwan write,

the main instructional principle of this book can be stated quite simply: we think most rigorously and productively when we make the effort to put our thoughts down in writing, and we write most fluently and maturely when we recognize the underlying patterns of our thinking… The book demonstrates in accessible language how familiar rhetorical structures can stimulate the production of thoughts to the point where they will do us the most good—as words on paper (xviii-xix).

Through these initial remarks, McQuade and Atwan situate their book in such a way that it appears to be focused, like Bruffee, on what students need to be writing in these courses and how faculty can support them in this journey. Their preface even ends with the following statement: “the act of writing doesn’t begin with the mastery of basic compositional skills. It begins, quite simply, with something far more fundamental and broadly human: the stubborn itch to think for ourselves and the corresponding urge to say something that means something” (xxii). By concluding their opening remarks with this kind of sentiment, it seems as though the book that students are about to enter into is one that focuses on individual thought and expression, a text that goes against the more formulaic rendering of composition as a course where students learn to write certain kinds of academic essays.
However, the very first formal chapter of the book, “Getting Started,” advises students to think about “key words,” and frames this chapter with the idea that “we will see how a few writers find their working words and put them to use at various stages of a composition” (6). The tone of this introduction to the chapter is much more prescriptive than the voice of the book’s preface—the editors are assuming that learning to generate and recognize “key words” is a process that writers need to learn how to do, assuming also that this is something student writers won’t know how to do. And, the readings that appear in this section are limiting in their own use of the idea of “key words,” most even announcing their “key words” in the title of the included excerpts (Simone De Beauvoir’s “Woman” and Langston Hughes’ “That Word Black”). These readings are also barely longer than one page, and leave little room for a student mind to push the boundaries of the page, to hunt for terms that are lurking at the margins of a text, to find a way to articulate what is not said. As bell hooks writes in the opening to Teaching Critical Thinking (2010), “the heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works” (7). In other words, what kinds of texts do students need to read in order to continue to light this fire of curiosity? If a student is to learn about pinpointing specific words that might spark writing, shouldn’t they be reading texts that ask the reader to look for their key words, to discover, as the writer did, where these terms hide?

One might respond to this critique with the fact that the textbooks referred to thus far were both published in the early 1980’s and consequently are dated. But, if one looks at a text like Bruce Ballenger’s The Curious Writer (2007), the same phenomenon holds true. The first paragraph of Ballenger’s preface even includes the idea that “the most powerful thing is that writing isn’t just for getting down what you know but discovering what you think” (xvii). As the preface continues, however, the reader receives a lot of information about the design of the book
and the strategies it employs—the text foregrounds elements of “inquiry-based learning” and defines inquiry as “a process of discovery” (xix). A diagram of what the text’s “strategy for inquiry” looks like is included—a flow chart that shifts between suspending and making judgments. Each chapter also includes “learning objectives,” “exercises,” “journal prompts,” charts and diagrams, and a segment titled “using what you have learned.” The amount of directives Ballenger provides students with calls his use of the phrase, The Curious Writer, into question. Where should the writer learn to be curious if the text includes directions and guidelines for every aspect of the writing process? In the first chapter of the text, “Writing as Inquiry,” Ballenger even includes a list of detailed “categories of inquiry questions;” providing students with templates to place their ideas into. Where is the space left for students to flounder a bit, to look for the question that hasn’t yet found its form?

A quick survey of other popular first-year readers demonstrates the same quandary—the editors describe their text book in a way that would seem to be in line with inquiry-driven, student-centered pedagogy, and yet the content of the book is prescriptive and makes many unproductive assumptions about what beginning writers can, cannot, and should read. Lynn Z. Bloom’s The Essay Connection (2013 edition) promises a variety of readings “placed in a context of materials designed to encourage reading, critical thinking, and good writing” (xxxiv). Bloom’s use of the word “design” in itself demonstrates that, while the book is clearly aligned with many of the process movements ideas about the teaching of writing (the book draws heavily on Donald Murray’s three-stage revision process model), it is also an entity crafted for specific use.

The most recent edition of Ways of Reading (2014), edited by David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Waite, frames the book as being “designed for a course where
students are given the opportunity to work on what they read, and to work on it by writing” (iii). The preface continues by identifying that many students struggle with reading and fully engaging with the reading they do, proposing that, “the issue is not only what students read, but what they can learn to do with what they read” (iii). Again, this emphasis on compiling a volume full of “selections that invite students to be active, critical readers, that present powerful readings of common experience, that open up the familiar world and make it puzzling, rich, and problematic” (iii), is ultimately the kind of ethos that should be embedded in the texts students read. However, the idea that there is any set of readings that prove to engage all students is problematic in the way it reduces the diversity of the students in our classrooms to a set of “common experiences.”

*Ways of Reading* is currently in its tenth edition, which demonstrates how widely the reader is used in first-year writing courses. In fact, this was the textbook used in the freshman Expository Writing courses I took over a decade ago. I distinctly remember being excited by the readings, particularly Foucault’s “Panopticism,” Freire’s “The “Banking” Concept of Education,” Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone,” and Rodriguez’s “The Achievement of Desire.” But, my eighteen-year-old self was already an avid reader, and my enthusiasm for the texts did nothing to compel me to attend the eight AM class with any regularity, particularly given the fact that the class was mostly discussion-based and the discussions were predictable permutations of identifying the text’s argument, looking at how the writer constructs the argument, and finally linking that argument to the experiences of the students in the course. I also distinctly remember the moment when I realized that the design of the course (which followed the sequenced readings and assignments in *Ways of Reading*) was ultimately predictable enough that I could follow a certain formula and always write an “A” paper. The papers I wrote followed this
pattern: begin by grabbing the reader’s attention and end the first paragraph with a thesis/argument; 3-5 paragraphs supporting the argument (one claim per paragraph with plenty of quoting and analyses); and a conclusion that proves the thesis and opens the paper back out more generally. My memory of this class, and the required writing associated with it, mirrors the editors’ description of the assignment sequences as the chance to “participate in an extended academic project, one in which you take a position, revise it, look at a new example, hear what someone else has to say, revise it again, and see what conclusions you can draw about your subject” (21). In other words, the text offers a prescribed sequence of readings intended to scaffold a certain kind of writing process for students, and this process and product takes a very specific form.

The poetry, on the rare occasions there is any, included in these texts always include predictable canonical choices: Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Thomas Hardy, Edgar Allan Poe, and if the book is particularly contemporary it might include Gwendolyn Brooks, Billy Collins, or Martin Espada. All of these poems are narrative and somewhat traditional, and many of them are poems that are often taught in high school. Given that this roster of potential poets taught in composition courses is sparse and limiting, when would a student be given the chance to explore the vast range of contemporary poetries that never appear in any textbooks? A poethical classroom devotes itself to the idea that writing about and through poetry enables students to enlarge their understanding of writing as both process and product, an understanding that allows them to generate and synthesize ideas in new and provocative ways. If the readings students are assigned in the first-year composition course are generic and predictable, how will they ever discover their own

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80 This list is taken from a look at the contents of the suggested composition readers that Pearson publishes.
unique composing processes, processes that ultimately lead to higher levels of critical inquiry-driven writing?

Similarly, even if an instructor (or department) does not rely on a composition reader to provide the content of the course, the alternative is often a course packet—a collection of texts the professor (or department) selects, but nonetheless it is a collection created before the class has convened, and a collection created based on either the faculty/department’s interest or some stereotypical belief regarding what “these” students need to read. Critical engagement with a text and with writing should be an invitation, not a top down mandate, and the way to achieve deep investment in language is by encouraging students to play, and gradually move towards an academic product. Why ask students to read dated prose, to muddle their way through (and into) Foucault’s panopticon or Alice Walker’s garden, when there are writers and texts that give students the agency they need to take ownership over language and the writing process so that it becomes a crucial part of who they are and how they operate as human selves?

Central to a poethical classroom is the idea that students should be part of the conversation that creates and builds the content of the course. This means that students are invited to contribute texts to the roster of readings, and that no schedule of readings and assignments is ever fully final. What happens in the classroom depends on what needs are expressed in the room, needs that cannot be pre-determined until we begin to write.
on literacy ii

dare i say spreadsheet, dare
i say engine economy retail
court this hard headed approach
to empathy because remember
it's a read/write world, a scale
tilting no longer grounded
in printing press, no longer low cost
authority functionally fluffed
a single phrase multiply produced
but i really want to underscore,
to vet interest in the blood run
economy as much fun as the whole

of childhood or the glee club
approach to sequence and trial
Chapter Five: Notes Towards an Anti-Handbook for *Poethical* Teaching

“yes it gives me vertigo knowing they've all been locked in that prose for centuries by comparison”
(Joan Retallack, “The Woman in the Chinese Room”)

“A difficult sentence is one that is welcome.”
(Gertrude Stein, “Sentences”)

“A writer by definition is a teacher.”
(Audre Lorde, “Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human”)

Building a Poethical Classroom

Thus far, this dissertation has proposed and theorized a specific kind of shift in the approach to teaching the first-year writing course, accompanied by sample lesson plans and student work in order to demonstrate the success of the poethical approach. The design of the poethical classroom is one that any teacher of composition can choose to adopt. Given that this is the kind of space that prioritizes writing, conversation, and collaboration, the first step to creating a poethical classroom is to examine the physical environment of the space itself.

In a poethical classroom all members of the class are seated in such a way that everyone can see each other easily. Ideally, this would be around a large seminar table so that students and teacher alike have space to write, while also preserving the ability to make eye contact with any one at any time. The poethical classroom depends on interaction and dialogue; this means that the space itself needs to be conducive to that. The walls of the classroom serve as space to experiment on. In an ideal classroom, all walls would be either chalkboard or whiteboard. In a realistic classroom, the teacher either brings big paper and tape, or makes explicit that the blackboard or whiteboard is a communal space for drafting and note taking. All humans learn differently, so we provide a place for visual learners to map out ideas, as well as a place to keep track of the class’ ideas and conversations. It is also central to note that the seating arrangement in a poethical classroom is such that there is no assigned seating and no hierarchy in terms of where the professor places his or herself. The seating changes with each class meeting, meaning that everyone learns names because they know each other, not because they can memorize a seating pattern.

The professor hands out a syllabus on the first day of class that outlines the departmental and institutional requirements of the course—rules against plagiarism, attendance policy,
required papers. The syllabus also includes a preliminary schedule of dates the class meets, when assignments are to be handed in, and a schedule of required readings for the first month or so of the class. This schedule is clearly marked “subject to change.” The professor makes clear that this is a class in which everyone will be expected to participate and be fully present at all times, and this means that everyone will also be expected to contribute to the intellectual trajectory of the course which includes the materials studied.

This first class meeting also introduces the class to the lexicon of different kinds of writing that they will be doing during each course session: private writing, focused freewriting, and process writing. These terms are defined through the experience of actually doing them. An environment is created where, beginning with day one, students know that they will begin each class session by writing for five minutes, silently. Students will get into the habit of writing by hand and conducting class discussion by way of reading their writing (done in response to questions the professor suggests) out loud to one another. Students will also get into the habit of regularly taking stock of their own thinking and how it changes during each class session, processing their own process as they write and read in this particular context. In sum, the first class session is devoted to defining the culture of the class and the classroom, using writing to introduce ourselves to one another and to set the tone for the way that the work will proceed and progress over the course of the semester.

The second class is also devoted to the shaping of this learning community. I often ask students to read Roland Barthes’ “To the Seminar” in advance of the second class session, a piece in which he provides a playful, admittedly utopian, list of descriptions of what happens in a seminar. Any text that addresses the way a classroom or community functions would work well. After beginning with private writing, the class reads bits and pieces of Barthes’ essay as a way to
get his voice into the room, as a way to hear the language and how it works. The way we read out loud is collaborative—students read until they feel they are done, and then another student picks up. What is important is that every person in the room participates in this reading. Every person’s voice reflects the writer’s writing differently, through different vocal inflections. After hearing the text out loud, we pause to take notes in writing—Where is our thinking about Barthes? What is the point of this kind of piece? How did hearing it read out loud change your thinking about it?

Through the reading of these notes, we enter into a conversation about Barthes and about what it means to participate in a seminar. The group begins to map out a series of different desires they have for the way our “seminar” will work, first making a list of words and values, deciding which ones we collectively prioritize, and then collectively drafting our own “To the Seminar.” The style of this document is decided upon by the class, the writing is done by all the members of the class, and the revisions are made by way of reading the text out loud and agreeing on moments that needed revision. (See Figure One for an example.)

Once our own “To the Seminar” is completed, and added to our course site (which should be done via some kind of open source platform that enables all users to have equal contributing and editing power), the class then does a bit of process writing to explore how we came to settle on this document, and what the process of drafting our own list of needs for our class has changed or shaped their perception of the semester’s work. When this process writing is shared, what we hear is that the class feels excited, and I attribute this excitement to the fact that from the very first moment of the semester, the students feel as though they are responsible and in control of the learning that happens in the room. The sequence described is an enactment of Retallack’s definition of “poethics” as “what we make as we use language in the present, how we
continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood” (TPW 9). What we “make” is a document that reflects the “ethos” of the class, the way in which we, together, created some way to “understand” and guide the learning that is about to transpire.

Figure Three: “To the Seminar”

document drafted by Fall 2011 Composition I class.

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81 This chapter purposely repeats certain quotations from *The Poethical Wager* that were used earlier in the dissertation because the goal of this chapter is to show how the theoretical definitions of the term align with classroom praxis.
**The Life of the Class**

In a conversation with David Bartholomae, Paul Bove, Colin McCabe, and Lynn Emanuel,\(^8\) Charles Bernstein offers the following vision of the pedagogy of any required first-year writing course by imagining the process of teaching it as:

working in and on a series of different language projects, employing different shapes, styles, and forms, and exploring how these make for different meanings, where meaning is understood as something socially and aesthetically—as much as logically or lexically—determined. That is, if you consider the limitations of, and possibilities for, each form and each standard, you create a more open and democratic conception of language practices that does not preclude the importance of standardized forms but rather sees those for what they are—the dominant choice, which you may need as a survival skill, but which has no direct relation to truth or coherence (“On Poetry, Language, and Teaching” 51).

Despite acknowledging that he has never taught a freshman composition course, Bernstein outlines a series of practices that depict what happens inside the regular meetings of the *poethical* class. We write together, working on a variety of different language projects (writing in response to texts and questions, drafting collectively, engaging in written conversations, writing to explore ideas while they are still in formation). We think and discuss the different forms writing might take and what those forms accomplish. We interrogate our own sense-making processes as a way of pushing our thinking further. And, we acknowledge standard forms by way of first playing with them and then learning to speak their language. The teacher participates in

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\(^8\) This conversation took place in 1996 at the University of Pittsburgh. Lynn Emmanuel is a poet and part of their Creative Writing faculty, Bove and MacCabe are both faculty in English, and Bartholomae is a compositionist and former chair of the Expository Writing Program.
every activity the students are asked to do as a way of reinforcing the idea that we are, as a class, embarking upon a collective project.

More specifically, a typical class session begins with private writing, which might be followed by a student presentation of an “artifact” of his or her own choosing. This artifact could be a text, video, song, object, etc. This practice sets up a routine of starting each class session with texts that the students select. The overarching idea is that the work we do in the classroom should be in conversation with the work they do as thinkers outside of the classroom; so this moment allows us to bring parts of those individual experiences into our collective space. The student who presents is also responsible for coming to class prepared with several questions or ideas that he/she hopes the class will write in response to. This creates the kind of environment where the teacher is not the only one who has the power to give writing “prompts”; instead, that process becomes democratic and students begin to think about what it means to ask pressing questions, questions that one will want to write in response to. This segment of the class then feeds into the grappling with the text selected for that session. Depending upon what the particular text is, and what the desires are of the students in the room, our group inquiry will attend to what seems to be at stake, both in the text and in our writing.

The Texts

Given that the pre-determined texts of a poethical classroom are extremely limited, what follows is a series of examples of texts that I’ve taught, how they’ve been used in the classroom, why they were selected, and what they accomplish (by way of in class discovery and/or student growth). And, given the emphasis on experimental poetry as useful in the context of a poethical classroom, this series of examples was selected so that it focuses specifically on work by
contemporary experimental poets, writers whose work I’ve used in the classroom almost every semester.

*Anne Waldman: “Think for Yourself with Public Mouth”*

In the Composition course organized around the theme of Bioethics, I continued to struggle with student writing. After working with Gertrude Stein, the actual prose of the class improved. It seemed as though the group felt more confident in making clear assertions that reflected their own ideas and analyses of the different ideas we were studying. However, when given the freedom of selecting their own topics for a research paper, few students seemed to be able to identify and settle on an issue that they really cared about, that they wanted to spend over a month working with, an issue that had something serious at stake. I tried bringing in news articles, asking the class to bring in samples of texts that they saw as being deeply invested in a complicated issue, but nothing really seemed to work.

I began to think about the kinds of texts that I turn to, as a writer myself; texts that are my own examples of writing that exudes the energy of responding to something that one cares fully and deeply about. I wanted a piece of writing that was unusual, that used the form of the writing as a way to mirror its content, a piece that enacted the work the writing itself was doing. I also wanted to find something that presented and proved an argument in a way such that the reader understood how deeply the writer had studied and thought about the topic. But, I also thought that the argument should be presented in a way that was different from the “bioethics debates” we’d been steeped in.

I found myself thinking about Anne Waldman, a poet/teacher/activist whose work is always in directly engaged with the political and environmental realities she’s living within.
Waldman cofounded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics with Allen Ginsberg in 1974 as a way to create a space for “non-competitive education…building a community of active readers and writers who carry the lineage in their genes” (Interview with Anne Waldman 2007). Waldman describes the “rhizomatic impulse” behind the pedagogy that Naropa was founded upon as “in response and as an alternative to poetry as a career…the composition by rhizome field—that way, as if poetry is an excursion and a necessity” (Outrider 18). The term “rhizome” comes from botany, and by definition is “a continuously growing horizontal underground stem” (OED). More recently, the word “rhizome” has been adopted by critical theorists (like Deleuze and Guattari), as a way to describe a network that is non-hierarchical and at odds with the tree (because its growth does not always lead back to the root). If a “rhizome” is injured or broken, it can generate a new network of possibilities or connections.83

For Waldman, the term represents a pedagogy of infinite unpredictable connections determined by “necessity.” The “rhizome” is a way of thinking about the writing process and the myriad of generative twists it can take. It is a pedagogy of growth, unpredictability, risk-taking, and invites an unlimited number of forms, influences, and connections. Waldman refers to this kind of writing pedagogy as that of the “Outrider,” rooted in the belief in “words as actions, of keeping the world safe for poetry with wit and attendant wisdom” (Civil Disobedience 2). These are all beliefs that echo “poethics” in that it is rooted in a “continual process of doing” (TPW 197) fueled by the impulse to “record our present experience and expose undeveloped images from our long period of cultural latency” (TPW 114-115).

I decided to prepare selections from Waldman’s work for the class, beginning with a short piece from the hybrid essay, “Outrider,” “What the OUTRIDER desires is a return to

83 http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/rhizome.htm
urgency for the work/because we are trying to wake up the awareness of the world…/What we need, OUTRIDERS, is the modality of compassion” (27-28). We read this three-line piece out loud several times and then did some writing around what the text might be saying or doing. I purposely decided not to give the students any information about who Anne Waldman is because I wanted them to engage with her words as they read and heard them. We then turned to an excerpt from Manatee/Humanity (2009), a complex multi-genre book-length project that “summons life-forms that seem particularly threatened” (4). In “undercurrent,” Waldman describes spending “several hours in the presence of a wounded,” which led her to “vow to include manatee” in this project (4).

We read the first thirteen pages of the lyric out loud numerous times. Waldman is a master of form, and in this book she creates all-encompassing chants, full of the music of repetition, with the sounds of manatees echoing in between the lines. We then skipped to the middle of the poem, a litany of lines that begin with “the manatee is…” (67-70). After reading this substantial chunk of Waldman out loud ourselves, we then listening to a recording of Waldman performing the litany section of the poem. After the recording ended, we paused to take note of what we heard, and how hearing Waldman changed or complicated our thinking about Manatee/Humanity.

The way that Waldman reads this particular piece includes chanting, singing, and various other vocal improvisations. The result is that the poem no longer sounds like what students might think a poem sounds like; it is much closer to song. The students’ process writing reflected this—most of them noted that they didn’t think that poetry could sound like “that.” A number of

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84 Beyond being the cofounder of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, Waldman is the author of over forty books of poetry, a huge force in the landscape of poetry internationally, often associated with the Beat poets, New York School writers, and New American Poetry.

85 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HM-H9rr9_yI
the students also remarked that Waldman was clearly some kind of “manatee expert” and asked about her background. When we discovered that the poem evolved out of careful research, along with observing the mammals we live among, several students were curious to know more about how one becomes so deeply immersed in something, immersed to the extent that you research it until you’re an “expert.”

One student suggested that we spend some time writing in order to see if we could find “our own manatees.” So we did. Just as Waldman writes, “what is the mind of manatee?/the manatee has no natural enemies” (69), collapsing the boundaries between human and animal, we thought about our own boundaries and how those can be traversed and subverted in order to become more inclusive. The way this experience manifested itself in class was that the students seemed to take from Waldman a certain kind of openness to thinking about the focus of their essays. They left the space of “bioethics,” while still working on topics connected to the theme. They stopped reciting vague arguments about genetically modified food and instead turned to the more specific and complex topic of factory farming.

One particular student, E., took from Waldman an opportunity to do some research about shark finning. E. had been interested in raising awareness about shark finning after she saw a documentary about it on television. She was disturbed by how cruel it was “to cut off a shark’s fin and then let the fish suffer and die.” E. did extensive research and developed a thesis specific to her topic, but deeply rooted in the way “Waldman defines the clear differences between “natural predators” and “unnatural man.” The result was the best paper E. wrote all semester, a paper that she noted that she wouldn’t have “thought about” without reading Waldman and

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86 I am not including any lesson plans for this particular class because the work we did was mostly generated and guided by students. I only have a record of the process writing they did on the course site and the final papers/projects written on Waldman.
“hearing her voice.” E. wrote, “I felt that because I had such a clear idea of what I wanted to do from the very onset, I was able to convey that message clearly in my work.”

By looking specifically at Waldman’s language it becomes clear that the form of the poem and its “difficulty” were crucial in terms of why students responded to it in a way that helped to focus their own paper topics. Waldman writes:

I said I would intone my litany of curiosity
I would dance with the language & dialects of bees
I would be mummified to speak the Egyptian way
out of cranial stuffing, messing with circadian rhythms
Let’s agree on the symbols dear partners in sound (7)

This early excerpt is a moment where students noticed that Waldman was using her own experience to speak to the topic she was exploring; she was pushing her own “curiosity” to its limits, and allowing her language to reflect that process. They also noticed how descriptive and visual the language was, signaling that this same kind of imagery could be present in their own writing as a way to involve and engage their readers.

the manatee is found in shallow slow-moving rivers
the manatee moves in estuaries moves in saltwater bays
the manatee in moving moves gently
the manatee is to be found in canals & coastal areas (67)

In this later moment of the text, students pinpointed Waldman’s use of research and the way the research she did became an integral part of the poem. Waldman was able to write about the manatee in the detail she does because of the body of knowledge she sought out. Again, here is a technique that students adopted when working on their own papers—the idea that one should
pursue an inquiry of his/her own choosing until he/she is an expert on the topic. This sense of responsibility was clearly reflected in the way that students used outside information and research in order to describe and flesh out the arguments they were exploring in their own papers.

**Audre Lorde: “I see much/better now/and my eyes hurt”**

The same semester that Katerina took on Cavafy’s “Ithaka,” other students in that Composition II course also seemed to be particularly effected by Audre Lorde’s essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” That semester, that particular section of Composition II had a number of SEEK students in it, and the majority of the class were coming out of the fall semester English Language Learner (ELL) composition course. As the teacher, this indicated to me was that I had to be aware of the diversity of the group and so I tried to select texts that modeled the kinds of language games I wanted to invite the students to play: works that might appear to be straightforward in their composition, but were ideologically quite challenging. I also wondered what kinds of texts might encourage this somewhat reticent group to feel more comfortable writing and speaking in English.

Although “Poetry is Not a Luxury” is short and quite readable, the ideas that Lorde presents are often shocking to students because of how direct and impassioned she is. Audre Lorde writes, “experience has taught us that action in the now is also necessary, always” (Sister

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87 SEEK stands for Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge, and is a New York State funded program for students who are from “economically disadvantaged” backgrounds and who are also “academically underprepared.” The SEEK Program offers these students funding that covers tuition, books, and school supplies, along with tutoring and academic support.

88 Audre Lorde was a self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” who began her teaching career in the SEEK Program at City College. Lorde was a New York City native and authored nine books of poems and five books of prose.
This sentiment, and the weight Lorde places on writing as a powerful form of action, is something that many students are drawn to. Lorde continues, “there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (39). When working with this essay in the context of a poethical classroom, these specific quotes offer moment to pause and think in writing about what it means to use language (or compose language) in the way that Lorde suggests.

I assigned this essay along with “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977), and a number of Lorde’s poems from The Black Unicorn (1978). We worked with these texts in the class sessions leading up to the final project of the semester, a research paper that specifically asks students to do some research and reading in order to ultimately “fall in love with a poem.” Because Lorde’s essays are so direct in their language, while also asking high stakes questions, “What are the words you do not yet have?” (Sister Outsider 41), they serve as a unique model for beginning writers to think about how to craft a heavily opinion-driven essay, while also maintaining a level of clarity in its language. In past semesters, many students picked Lorde poems for their final paper, but usually a poem we worked on together in class. That semester, for some reason, the students who researched Lorde picked poems they discovered (and fell in love with) on their own. There was something about Lorde’s poetry that seemed to change how these students thought about writing, specifically academic writing. In other words, Lorde’s poetry, and her commitment to the use of language, showed students how to take ownership over their own written voice.

One student, Leyda, decided to focus on “A Woman Speaks,” and came into class each week excited to discuss the progress of her paper. In an email, she mentioned, “English has always been a struggle for me…But Audre Lorde, she is more than amazing…” I was thrilled to
hear this, but the questions lurking for me were: *Why Lorde? Why this poem?* And, when I received Leyda’s final paper draft and saw a huge change in her writing, these questions became all the more pertinent. Leyda describes the impact Lorde’s poem had on her own critical academic writing as:

Audre Lorde made me think that sometimes writing doesn’t always have to be the “usual”—you must be yourself when you write. Before I had ideas and when I was in front of a blank page my ideas ran away. Lorde’s style influenced me to want to write in a way to that people could see me through the paper.

This statement reminds me of Lorde's "Difference and Survival" (a speech given at Hunter College), in which she states, "if the difference has been defined for us in our introductory courses as good, meaning useful in preserving the status quo, in perpetuating the myth of sameness, then we try to copy it..." (*I am your sister* 201). In other words, Lorde reminds us that the purpose of general education courses is not to train us to repeat, and particularly in first-year writing courses it is imperative that students somehow learn to see their own voice asserting ideas and opinions. For Lorde, a teacher advocates the necessity of writing as a way to “define and seek a world in which we all flourish” (*Sister Outsider* 112). This idea that writing can and does have this level of power resonates with the way “poethics” advocates for writing that is organically connected to muddling through one’s own experience.

Lorde’s work enabled a number of students to move beyond a resistance to a place where writing becomes an important and necessary part of their thinking processes. While Lorde taught Leyda to think of writing in ways that she didn’t think were possible before, Marina was drawn to Lorde because of an intense experience she had when reading “Power,” a poem about the 1973 murder of Clifford Glover. Marina admitted being unbelievably moved by the poem and
“could not hold back tears.” She ultimately wrote an excellent paper that moved between Lorde’s poem and the then recent murder of Oksana Makar, an 18-year-old teenager in the Ukraine. In her paper, Marina wrote about hearing the news of Makar from her mother (in Russia) and how “there was so much anger and frustration in her speech, but there was no fear.” Marina also recounted her mother stating, “The power of many can change the world full of injustice.”

Fueled by Lorde’s lines, “But unless I learn to use/the difference between poetry and rhetoric/my power too will run corrupt…,” Marina performed an extensive close reading of the poem as well as a variety of newspaper articles on both cases (Collected Poems 216). In an email to me she indicated that Lorde’s writing had changed her own writing—specifically because she felt as though Lorde called on her “to discover the tremendous source of power within.” And, for Marina, this power came in the form of realizing that she could write—wanted to write, provoked by finding a topic that moved her enough to grapple with a variety of issues (including her own story).

At the time, Marina had only been in New York for about two-years—in Russia she’d “had everything what a twenty-two-year-old girl could dream about: an apartment, a car, a very good job, friends and family.” Yet, Marina chose to challenge herself and decided to move and “start from the beginning because of the new language” she had to learn. In many ways this paper signified that Marina had embraced learning this “new language” (despite its difficulties) and recognized the “power” it could offer her.

Leyda and Marina’s experiences working with Audre Lorde’s language demonstrate that when given the space to find one’s own inquiry or interest, the attitude and approach to writing change. There was something about identifying with Lorde’s style, how gorgeous yet direct the writing was, that pushed Leyda to feel less uncomfortable with her own writing. And, once
Leyda was able to overcome her own self-censor, the paper she produced was noticeably different on a grammatical level. For Marina, Lorde’s poetry empowered her to draw upon her own unique experiences in order to connect the content of her paper to contemporary issues that were on her mind. This shifted her academic prose from wearing the mask of how she defined formal writing in English to persuasive critical writing that pointed to a problem and offered an opinion on how to approach it.

_Eileen Myles: “it’s choosing/that wakes things/up”_

One semester I focused my Composition I course around the theme of “Persuasion.” More specifically, I wondered what it would look like to use the space of the first-year writing course to look closely and critically at the way texts (images, advertisements, film/video, music, etc.) persuade us to think and behave in certain ways. We began the semester by looking at a variety of pop cultural artifacts ranging from American Apparel advertising campaigns to the latest Eminem music video. Yet, when it came to interacting reflectively and critically with their own surroundings, the students seemed puzzled. I remember I suggested that we spend some time “telling the story” of everything we noticed on our morning commute to the college. In my own writing I described the advertisements for storage space I saw on the subway, the new scaffolding on 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue, the new art installation throughout Madison Square Park, and the Sprint store that must have just opened on the street-level of the Flatiron building. My students’ stories were much different, and consisted mostly of a list of tasks—refilled metrocard, waited for train, had to stand, waited on line for the elevator, etc. There was a lack of detail in their narratives that I also found confusing. We spent some time doing some process writing around the idea of what we notice as we interact with the world around us, as we move
through the city streets. What messages are we taking in? What messages do we hope to be sharing?

This preliminary writing hinted at the kind of papers that were turned in for their first rough drafts of the semester. These were overly general essays that relied heavily on summary when the assignment offered a number of open options—to explore Emerson’s definition of “nonconformity” in “Self-Reliance” as a way to make an argument about individualism; to keep track of how the Internet effects the way we function on a daily basis and make an argument about whether or not “google [might be] making us stupid”; or to perform a close reading of a poem as a way to think about whether or not computers are capable of doing everything humans can. I wondered if the real question was hiding in whether or not students really understood what it meant to actively look at and into their surroundings, to read their worlds as if they were a text.

I turned to Eileen Myles’ work to help us. Myles is a vital writer and teacher who reclaims poetry as a necessary public and political vocation.89 Myles’ work, with its short-lined poems, tends to feel welcoming for students—they recognize the “everydayness,” learn from her stylistic and vernacular choices, and find a model in her sentences and line breaks. A lot of Myles’ poems revolve around New York City, which also felt particularly useful that semester, when the class was trying to read the city itself.

The next class session began with private writing, after which I passed out copies of Myles’ “Compassion”:

is shrieked

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89 Eileen Myles is the author of over twenty books including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, libretti, plays, art writing, and performance pieces. In 1991/1992 Myles conducted an “openly female” write-in campaign for President of the United States. That alone provides a lens into the kind of devotion to language she practices.
by a
golden cone
topped
by an
ornate
hypodermic
of Good Business.
4 rooks
of gold
sit on the
platform
of a tall stone building,
clouds of style
move pompously.
Only gold
lives in
the shot
of New York Life,
believe me.

We read the poem out loud several times, pausing between each to write down any “first thoughts” about what the text was saying or doing. We then discussed what we noticed about the poem, and allowed time to ask any questions we might have. Many students noted that the piece was comprised of three sentences and had a number of lines with only one of two words. We
discussed the way the form of the poem influenced its reading and the class seemed to be split between feeling as though the line breaks slowed the poem down or sped it up.

I asked the class if they recognized anything familiar in the poem, and one student said that we all live the “New York Life.” At this moment I realized that there was a good chance that no one in the class knew what the New York Life Building was, nor that it housed the New York Life Insurance Company. The classroom we were sitting in was only a few blocks away from the building itself. I suggested that we take a walk together, with our notebooks, and practice noticing and reading what we see. All thirty of us meandered out of the building onto Lexington Avenue, down 25th Street, until we were standing in front of 51 Madison Avenue. I suggested that we just gather there in silence, taking notes of everything we saw in as much detail as possible. We then returned back to the classroom.

Once we were back in the room, everyone shared at least one detail they noticed during the walk. A number of students described the “gold pyramid” that is the top of the New York Life Building, a couple noticed that the building had New York Life etched into its stone archway. We then turned back to the poem and read it out loud another two times. This time someone pointed out that the poem might be about the building we just visited. This led to a discussion about why—what is life insurance? Why would a poem about life insurance be called “Compassion”? This evolved into a collaborative close reading of the text where we dwelled on each word and each line break.

After doing this, we did some reflective writing about how the poem changed because of the work we had done together (the reading out loud, our walk, note taking, discussion). Sample student responses included:

“I think I now see what I didn’t know how to recognize.”
“A sentence should have a lot of details. Details are good. I like to watch things so my readers might like a little image too.”

“I guess I didn’t realize I could write about things that are like here now, that I think about. I thought that I needed to just like say what the people we read say. But not plagiarize of course : )”

These student responses point to the way that Myles’ short poem helped them to see something different about their own ways of writing and reading. The poem helped us to understand what it meant to look closely at something and really analyze it.

In much of her work, Myles also addresses the problem of writing as a phenomenon that appears to be marketable—something that can be consumed and commodified. This false pretense is particularly relevant when considering how students approach the act of composition—too often aspiring towards that mythic “professional I” that they think they must have in order to be academic, or even in order to write an “acceptable” work of prose. By using Myles’ poetry with students, they see that they do not need to feign fluency in some formal language; instead, students learn to think about the context they are writing within and the audience they hope to engage, figuring out the best voice to greet both of these. Myles talks about “writing as a form of making a request,” a fitting analogy for this how students respond to fragmented work that asks its reader to learn to ask their own questions.

One particular student, Ma Su Su, was so taken by Myles’ poetry that she opted to focus on one poem, “The Sad Part Is,” for her final research paper and multimedia project. Ma Su Su began her paper by writing,

A poem with a simple language is a huge deviation from the standard expectation of a poem because people always assume that poems are composed with meaningful thoughts
and lessons, as well as difficult vocabularies. Eileen Myles is against that assumption in “The Sad Part Is” by using ordinary words and writing about some of her regular activities. Myles regards that poems can be created with the language used in everyday lives and without any important life lessons.

This assertion marked a shift in the way that Ma Su Su’s thinking about how to write in English. Originally from Myanmar, Ma Su Su left her home country in order to get a college education and had only been in the United States for a few months prior to starting college. I’d been worried about Ma Su Su earlier in the semester because her paper writing was not strong and she never spoke in class. Even in our individual meetings, Ma Su Su was very quiet and reluctant to speak. I was also unsure as to whether or not she understood my comments on her writing. Gradually, I learned that the culture of schooling she was raised in couldn’t be more opposite than what I was asking her to do—she’d never been asked to share her own ideas about a text, and any writing she’d done took the shape of summarizing her teacher’s teachings.

Ma Su Su’s paper continued:

Myles wants her poems easy to read, opposing the idea that only the intellectuals can appreciate the poems. She even wants her mother to be able to read her poems although she knows that her mother would never read poems. Myles also said that a language should not be for a particular class, for every class has its own ‘privilege.’ Therefore, instead of ‘giving birth’ a new language for a specific class, Myles uses the language that is already used by the common people and writes about the activities that everyone has done before.

Ma Su Su’s focus on the way that Myles opposes the idea that poetry is a form for “intellectuals” is significant in that before reading Myles’ work, Ma Su Su admitted to being afraid of American
poetry because she couldn’t understand it. The process of working with and through Myles’
text(s) taught her that there was no right or wrong way to read a poem, or to use language to
convey an idea, as long as the writer was aware of his or her own intention and process.

Ma Su Su’s paper closed with the following:

Sometimes we might be in the wrong place at first, but later we will either invent our own
niche in that wrong place as the way Myles did or look for a place that is suitable for us.
In Myles’ case, she cannot look for a brand new place because the world does not agree
with her, so she has to develop her own world within ‘those institutions’ and find a way
to protect her identity. Therefore, she swims against the current by writing poems using
the common language and creating her own genre of writing to define herself different
from the way the society does.

The way that Myles’ poem caused Ma Su Su to really slow down her own reading process
resulted in a newfound interest in the ways in which writing could simply involve using daily
speech to depict complex thought. The way that Myles wrote “using common language” and
“creating her own genre” effected Ma Su Su’s own approach to composing an academic research
paper. Instead of relying upon summarizing what she thought the poem was supposed to mean,
she looked at the way the words were at work on the page, and how the formal features of the
poem (particularly its line breaks and use of punctuation) created a space of its own.

**Rationale or the Poethics of Text Selection**

In “Iceland,” Eileen Myles asks, “was there ever any language to talk about the thing you
wanted?” College freshman often feel as though they have no language to “talk about the thing
[they] want,” let alone write about “the thing [they] want.” And, we, too often, further limit what
they want through the conventional texts that we ask them to read and the standardized forms we
want them to write. As seen in the examples provided, focusing on works by Anne Waldman,
Audre Lorde, and Eileen Myles, a poethical text is determined and selected based on the interests
and writerly needs of the students in the room. What the works discussed by these writers all
share is writing style that “foreground[s] “our acts of noticing” (TPW 15), while also rooting
itself in “constructively reasoned agency” (TPW 22). What this means is that these are texts that
model the idea of “the essay as wager” in that the writing clearly comes from a place of deep
engagement with the writer’s surroundings (what Retallack calls a “complex awareness”), and
using the form of that writing to enact the idea that language can have the agency to build new
“forms of life” as a way to call attention to a “mode of engaged living in medias mess” (TPW 28).

For the sake of clarity, if one were to reduce these qualities of poethical texts into a
simple checklist it would include questions like: Is there something at stake for the writer and
reader in the composition of the text? Does the text welcome the reader to collaborate in the
making of meaning? Does the text build and encourage new ways of making meaning and
engaging with difficulty? How does the writing challenge the ideas and words we are
accustomed to paying attention to? What kind of “form of life” does the text model and what
might a reader learn from it?

Poethical Papers

Given that the focus of the first-year writing course is to teach students to become
proficient writers and thinkers, formal writing assignments and academic papers are a central
part of the course. In a poethical classroom, the weight placed on this requirement is no different.
Students are expected to write a series of sustained academic essays that investigate an argument or inquiry, and prove it through using evidence and analysis, often by way of close reading specific texts. However, where the poethical classroom diverges is in the ways in which these essays are presented and assigned.

From the start of the semester, students are asked to write regular response papers that can take any form as long as they are rooted in the week’s reading and include some form of engagement with the text at hand. These responses are not graded, are not required to be longer than two typed pages, and can be written “creatively.” In order to create an environment where all student writing is valued, response papers serve as a way to scaffold the larger formal papers. In other words, any piece of writing that a student does can be revised to include in the papers that receive grades. The result of this kind of practice is that students pay attention to everything they write, even if it is not evaluated; they learn the habit of revising and locating connections between seemingly disparate pieces of text, and become conscious of keeping track of their own “archive” of written work.

All assignments, formal or informal, come with the “invisible option,” the option to create one’s own assignment. Early in a semester, students are very reluctant to do this because they do not know what is expected of them and aren’t fully familiar with the conventions of the kinds of academic prose written in the composition course. All assignments provide multiple options for students to choose between or revise to suit their own interests. The process of consistently offering choice in required writing allows for students to become accustomed to finding their “way in” to a variety of different broad topics. Students also learn to locate their own interests within a variety of assignments, and ultimately feel comfortable creating their own inquiry-based research projects.
For example, R.’s first response paper of the semester was a summary of Plato’s “allegory of the cave.” After a number of weeks of writing and reading regularly together in class, and continuing to turn in response papers, he realized that the thread that was connecting all of thinking was the larger idea of education and happiness. R.’s first “formal” paper focused on the assignment mentioned earlier in this dissertation, which asked students to narrate their own ideal blueprint for education. Relying heavily on Plato and Emerson, R. wrote a five-page paper that seemed to be advocating the kind of educational system that felt like prison, because without that kind of discipline, people would never realize what it means to be free. Admittedly confused and surprised by this approach to the topic, R. and I discussed his reading of Plato at length in individual meetings, and he ultimately decided to continue to think through this model of education he was proposing.

R. crafted a number of response papers looking at this same idea from different angles, continuing to use the different texts we were working with. In one response he focused on Audre Lorde’s poem, “Contact Lenses,” and recounted his own personal experience/journey that led him to be in my class that semester. As it turned out, R. had been a journalist in China and decided to come to New York in order to make a better life for himself and his family. R.’s experience in school in China was extremely regimented, but he felt that because of how strict this learning environment was, he was able to make decisions he was proud of once he graduated. The “prison” of school taught R. a lot about discipline, self-motivation, and responsibility. He was admittedly having a hard time in college in the United States, particularly because the structure of schooling was so drastically different, but perhaps even more so because he did not feel comfortable (or supported) writing in English.
R.’s second paper looked at the relationship between happiness and the different ways individuals learn, with particular focus on collaborative learning and the way that humans depend on one another to be happy. This paper was much stronger, but still relied a bit too much on Gilbert’s theoretical ideas. R.’s response papers, on the other hand, were getting more and more interesting, and began to take the shape of short opinion columns. We talked a lot about the difference between his formal papers and his response papers and we began to realize that the topic or line of inquiry on R.’s mind was actually self-expression. R. was struggling with English and writing in English, and that struggle seemed to permeate every paper topic he tried out. For the final research paper of the semester, R. proposed that he work on Audre Lorde’s poem, “A Woman Speaks,” focusing specifically on her history as a feminist writer. When I received R.’s final draft of the paper I was surprised to find that he’d taken a big swerve—the paper was titled “Speak and Be Heard” and focused on the importance of writing and self-expression as a way to interrogate what it means to be forced to be silent or silenced. Rooted in the Occupy Movement (which was in full swing during that semester), R. framed his analysis by looking first at the “passersby” who would watch the Occupy protests, and then at the protesters themselves. He made a distinction between having something to say and just watching; and having something to say and saying it. R.’s process note reflecting on his final essay read:

The poem (“A Woman Speaks”) is about a woman expressing her own thoughts, most importantly, at the end of the poem, it says “I am a woman/ and/not white.” I am impressed by the courage of Lorde to express her identity, which was life threatening. Then I look at the situation right now, I find out that people are safe enough but they do...
remain silent. I want to use Audre Lorde as an example to encourage them to talk. Once I go further, I find out there are reasons why people don’t talk. It’s about the system itself. We need to improve the system to receive and react on the voices. That’s how my essay comes into being.

What’s lurking under the surface in this comment is that this paper signified the moment in the semester when R. drew on the work he’d been doing (in writing) since day one, and finally found the thread that he wanted to react to, an idea that was deeply connected to his own struggles throughout the semester, and an idea that came directly out of an experience standing on a corner taking note of the actions around him.

R.’s process is a model of the kind of arc that a student might experience when engaged in the recursive and fluid self-directed writing process that is central to the poethical classroom. Students write all the time. Students become comfortable reading their own writing out loud and discussing their processes. Students learn to revise and revisit older drafts and learn to look forward to the revision process because there is something at stake on a personal level in their writing. And, finally, students learn how to craft their own inquiries—this means identifying a question to write about, revising that question, and pushing its investigation until a new question unfolds.

The reality of most college curricula is that if a student is not going to major in a Humanities field, he/she will do minimal writing after the first-year composition sequence (unless attending a school with a robust Writing Across the Curriculum Program). There will not be many occasions for students to explore writing in the ways that one can in the composition course, experiencing and experimenting with the many ways of approaching and crafting a text for the many discourse communities one might be writing with and for. Thus, this kind of
sequenced, student-centered approach to writing enables beginning writers to leave the composition classroom knowing how to guide their own academic writing projects.

**Why “Poethics”**

In “The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom” (2015), Patrick Sullivan presents a survey of recent studies that indicate that creativity is now “a foundational aspect of human cognition and intelligence” (6). Sullivan then examines these findings in the context of the first-year writing classroom—what writing teachers can learn from the weight other disciplines place on creativity. He writes,

> There are two key parts of this formulation that are important for writing teachers to consider: First, the suggestion that teachers need to encourage risk taking, creativity, and innovation in all disciplines and across the curriculum, not just in art and creative writing classes. Secondly, and perhaps most tellingly for teachers of writing, the claim that creativity should be considered ‘as important as literacy and treated with the same status.’ (14)

The kinds of writing and reading emphasized in this dissertation all point to the importance of creativity in the context of composition studies, what Sullivan confirms is that by *poethically* pushing students to take risks and engage in multiple unpredictable modes of writing and composing, students develop the “habits of mind” needed to succeed in the world outside of first-year writing.

My project is meant to serve as an introduction to the ever-complex idea of “poethics,” a term that represents a “way of being” with and in language, yet translates into a student-centered, inquiry-based, writing-intensive pedagogy. Over the course of the work this project documents
and investigates, the landscape of education has shifted substantially. For example, in 2011 “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” was published, listing “habits of mind essential for success in college writing.” And, this list includes many of the same words associated with “poethics”: curiosity, engagement, creativity, and responsibility. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), despite its problematic and reductive assessment agenda, does push for increased critical thinking and the exploration of “complex ideas” through writing. The CCSS also includes “Writing Standards” across disciplines, requiring students to write about “historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.” What this demonstrates is that the contemporary moment is one that necessitates a return to the original theories of the writing process movement, placing them in conversation with a poethical practice of being and interacting with our surroundings. As Retallack notes, the importance of the writing classroom lies in the fact that “writing is a process of thinking things through as you went along…a practice of puzzling aloud, in conversation, about real time questions (albeit induced by historical as well as contemporary texts).”

My own position as a teacher of writing has also shifted significantly over the course of this project (2008-2015). When I began to think about “poethics” and its connection to the first-year writing classroom, I was an adjunct (and then a lecturer) at Baruch College, City University of New York. I spent my summers teaching in the Language & Thinking Program under Retallack’s directorship. When Retallack and I first met, it was through poetry—I had read her work and invited her to give a reading as part of a series I curated. A year later I read The Poethical Wager and then applied to teach in the Language & Thinking Program purely because

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91 This document can be found in its entirety here: http://wpacouncil.org/files/framework-for-success-postsecondary-writing.pdf.
92 See http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/WHST/11-12/.
93 From personal correspondence.
I was excited to find another poet who wrote about the teaching of writing (outside of the realm of creative writing pedagogy).

Since then, Retallack and I have been in continuous dialogue. Although I am a practicing poet, my academic work is in the field of composition studies. So, when we engage in discussions about pedagogy I am always beginning from the space of the freshman classroom, while Retallack is rooted in philosophy of language. In 2013, I accepted a job at Bard College as the Associate Director of the Institute for Writing & Thinking, the same Institute that houses the Language & Thinking Program. This job not only gave me access to archives documenting the history of the program from 1981 to the present, but also put me in the unique position of working for the same institution as Retallack herself. Because of this I was able to take the last undergraduate course Retallack taught before retiring (Poetry & Society), and have co-taught with her in various contexts.

However, within this mentorship/friendship, what is most productive is the distance between the way Retallack and I work with “poethics.” Of course, the term is hers (literally), but I’ve adapted and adopted it for use in a way that I’m not sure she fully imagined. The way that we work together through these complex (and often abstract) ideas mirrors the pedagogy of this dissertation. For example, in January 2015, Retallack and I co-taught a workshop for international faculty preparing to teach Language & Thinking. We began our planning by doing some writing together about what we hoped the sessions would enable us (collectively, including the participants) to accomplish. We then began to map out what kinds of writing and what kinds of texts would help us to reach those larger goals. We sometimes decided to teach together, and sometimes one of us took the lead. I facilitated the session modeling working towards the final essay, and Retallack led one of the more generative writing sessions working through texts by...
Etel Adnan and John Cage. These experiences always work as a real exchange, an intertwining of our very different areas of expertise. When I reached an impasse in the writing of this dissertation, I asked Retallack if she’d be willing to do an interview with me, and if I could include it in the final product. Her response was that she would be happy to do so, but it needed to be a real conversation and not just an interview. This willingness to engage actively and reciprocally through writing is emblematic of the way I’ve come to understand “poethics.” What I hope to have done in this dissertation is clearly connect the idea of “poethics” with the potential it represents when enacted in the classroom through the use of writing-based teaching strategies alongside the reading of specific kinds of “difficult” texts.
Plan for “Snakes” by Eileen Myles

**Private Write.** [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** Tell the story of a relationship you had with a poem (or song). Try to describe this in as much detail as possible. And, remember, because this is a story…it can be fact or fiction. [5 Minutes]

**Bracket and Share.**

Turn to “Snakes by Eileen Myles”—Text Rendering

1. Read entire poem out loud (female voice)
2. Read entire poem out loud (male voice)
3. Pause to jot down first thoughts
4. Read poem again, one stanza each—annotate (underline moments that are exciting, circle things that puzzle)
5. Read only the language underlined and circled at random
6. Play recording of Eileen Myles reading the poem: ([https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Myles/1-17-98/Myles-Eileen_04_Snakes_Segue-Series_Ear-Inn_1-17-98.mp3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Myles/1-17-98/Myles-Eileen_04_Snakes_Segue-Series_Ear-Inn_1-17-98.mp3))

**Process Write:** Where is your thinking about the poem now (after hearing it read in so many ways)? What do you think the poem is trying to say or do? Why? How? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket and Share.**

**FFW:** Pick one of the lines you underlined in the poem. This will be the beginning of a new poem that you will write. The poem should be in response to the following prompt: “Be any age and go down the drain with it.” [7 Minutes]

**Stand/Stretch/Perform poems!**

**Process Write:** Where is your thinking now in relation to the poem? Do you feel closer to it? Why? How? [5 Minutes]

**Additional Info on Myles and this poem:**
Plan for Introducing Poetry via Audre Lorde

**FFW:** What is poetry? First thoughts. [3 Minutes]

**FFW:** Tell the story of an early encounter you had with a poem? [7 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share**—two descriptive words and the story for each person. [10 Minutes]

**FFW:** What is poetry used for? What is poetry’s purpose? [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** Write one sentence about anything you want. [2 Minutes]

**FFW:** Write a second sentence that is as different as possible from that first sentence. [4 Minutes]

**FFW:** Connect the two—write as much or as little as you need in order to get from sentence 1 to sentence 2. [7 Minutes]

**Process Write:** What does this exercise have to do with poetry? How does this connect to any of the writing we did earlier around poetry’s purpose? [10 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [10 Minutes]

**Hearing Poetry:**
- **FFW:** What do you do when you listen to a poem? [3 Minutes]
- **Bracket & Share.** (Only hear a few responses) [5 Minutes]
- **FFW:** What do you do when you read a poem (out loud)? [3 Minutes]
- **Bracket & Share.** (Only hear a few responses) [5 Minutes]

**Listening:** what does the poem sound like? What does it feel like to hear a poem read aloud? Can you follow along on the page? Does anyone else want to read the poem aloud? Introduce idea that we all have unique voices. Hear several voices reading same poem.

**Text Rendering:**
With “Good Mirrors are not Cheap” by Audre Lorde
- Read the poem out loud once straight through.
- Read the poem, one line per person.
- Read the poem backwards (one line per person, in any order).

**Process Write:** What did you notice about the poem that you might not have noticed if you hadn’t (a) read or heard the poem out loud; (b) read the poem in multiple ways; or (c) read the poem with a group? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [15 Minutes]
In Small Groups (3-4 students)

- Each group needs to appoint a scribe/note-taker, a timekeeper, and someone responsible for choreographing the group “performance.”

- **Steps/Guidelines/Questions to Discuss:**
  - What would this poem look like if it was not a poem?
  - What writerly techniques can you identify in Lorde’s work that might be of use to you as a write? Why?
  - Create a “position statement” in response to one of Lorde’s essays and use a poem to support your idea. (“Poetry is Not a Luxury” and “The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action”)
  - Turn the position statement into a “performance.”

**Return as a Class. Groups Perform.**

(*Pause to clap between each group—No commentary, we’re just being an attentive audience!*)

**Process Write:** Let’s return to the question we began class with—what is poetry? Respond to it again—what do you notice about how your understanding or perception of poetry has changed? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** (If there’s time…)
Plan: “Poetry is Not a Luxury”
Readings to Discuss:
- from The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader:
  “Why’s/Wise” (480-491)
- Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (handout)
- from The Beat Book:
  Joanne Kyger, “The Maze” (239-242)
  Leonore Kandel, “Poetry is Never Compromise” (275-277)

Writing Due:
Mine the writing you’ve done this semester and write an exploratory draft (Essay #3 Rough Draft) of a longer essay that you believe reflects something you’ve been thinking about and through over the course of our months together. Please refer to at least two of the authors we’ve read.

Private Write [5 Minutes]

Dialectical Response Notebooks (Having a conversation on the page!)
1. Divide a notebook page into 3 columns
2. Write 3 questions you have about these essays (Kandel and Lorde) in the left column of your notebook page (leave plenty of space between questions, no more than 2 per page).
3. Exchange notebook with partner. Respond to each question (try to answer it) in the middle column.
4. Return notebook. Respond to your partner’s response. Write final observations in 3rd column.

Allow this to morph into a discussion of these 2 essays—
- Discuss ideas, but also look at the form of what they wrote—why it is successful?
- What do you want to steal or imitate? [30Minutes]

Text Rendering: Joanne Kyger
Read the poem out loud once straight through.
Read the poem, one line per person.
Read the poem backwards (one line per person, in any order).
Read the poem out loud in the “intended” voice of the author (how do you imagine Kyger would have wanted the poem to sound?) [10 Minutes]

FFW: What is this poem doing? What did you hear it doing? [5 Minutes]
Bracket & Share. Discuss poem/Close reading. [10 Minutes]
Image Explosion with Baraka’s “Why’s/Wise” (480-491)
− Read the poem out loud straight through. [2 Minutes]
− Read the poem backwards. [3 Minutes]
− Ask the participants to skim the poem again on their own, underlining the phrases or lines or words that stand out in some way. [5 Minutes]

Select one of the lines or words that you’ve underlined.

Focus your attention on this phrase and respond to it.
− The underlined passage should begin the writing.
− The writing can be in any mode—generative, word play, analytical, narrative, etc.
− Joan Retallack writes, “It is important to explain that this writing should not attempt to analyze or explain the language. It should be writing that flows out of the language for you.” [10 Minutes]

If time permits: Ask participants to pick a second underlined passage to respond to. Again, ask everyone to write for 10 minutes. Urge students to take a risk this second time around and use a different mode of writing than they used the first time. If you wrote a narrative, try analysis or word play. [10 Minutes]

Appoint a strong reader to read the entire poem out loud. This reader should be instructed to read the poem with determination yet be open to constant interruption. As the reader reads the poem, when someone hears the phrase that they wrote from read out loud, they should interrupt the reader by calling out the phrase and then reading their passage (the reader should do this to his or herself when he or she reads the appropriate passage). When more than one person has written to a particular unit of language, they should determine the order they will read in via silent signals. Stress that this is a group performance that incorporates all the writing everyone has done. Urge participants to avoid explaining what they have written or prefacing their reading by saying “Oh, I wrote to that!” [30 Minutes]


Process Write: How much of your interpretation of the poem is guided by the exercise we just did? [5 Minutes]

Bracket & Share. Discuss. [15 Minutes]
Plan for Paper Writing + Anne Waldman’s *Fast Speaking Woman*

Week Thirteen (5/6) Anne Waldman: *Fast Speaking Woman*

Readings to Discuss:
- from *Fast Speaking Woman*:
  “Invocation”, “Fast Speaking Woman”, and “Fast Speaking Woman and the Dakini Principle” (1-42)

Private Write [5 Minutes]

FFW: First responses to the Waldman? [5 Minutes]

Bracket & Share. [10 Minutes]

Reading around *Fast Speaking Woman*: Jigsaw (with thanks to Mark McBeth)
- Handout Waldman packet.
- Individual reading (4 students per text)
  - “Feminafesto”
  - “Oppositional Poetics” & “My Life as a Book”
  - “Muse”
- Reading process: read your assigned text through on your own. Mark words, lines, or sections that “stick out” for you—that you find important, puzzling, curious, or surprising. Make notes. Annotate!
  - After you finish reading the text, compose the following: one paragraph summarizing what you read, and one paragraph reflecting on what you read. [15 Minutes]
- Group Meeting 1: Locate your group, the people who are working on the same reading as you. Switch responses. Come to some sort of a consensus about what you read. What is the nutshell of the essay that you should report to people who haven’t read it? What primary points of interest/importance does Waldman assert in this piece(s)? How does this reading inform what you’ve read this semester, or even more specifically, what you read for this week? [15 Minutes]
- Group Meeting 2: Regroup into mixed groups, groups of 3 where each person in the group has read something different or is an expert on a different piece by Waldman.
  - Each group member will present the work done in the previous group—i.e. the “nutshell” of the essay.
  - As a group, discuss the overlaps, divergences, similarities, differences, etc. between these pieces of writing by the same writer. What do you notice? How do they interrelate? How do these works help to inform our thinking about *Fast Speaking Woman*?
  - Each group must have a scribe/notetaker, timekeeper/emphasis monitor (makes sure the group considers all 3 works), and a designated reporter
(who will share the group’s findings and conclusions with the larger group. [20 Minutes]

Return together as a class. Share the group’s findings. Discuss. [15 Minutes]

**Text Rendering:** Begin by reading the “Invocation” and notes before “Fast Speaking Woman.” Go around the room, line by line, until we read through Part I. [10 Minutes]

**FFW:** How does this work differ when it is read out loud? Do you experience the work in a different way than when you read alone? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [10 Minutes]

**FFW:** How does this work relate to the other materials we’ve read this semester? Why end with Anne Waldman? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [10 Minutes]

**PAPER TRIAGE:**
Return comments.
Look over what I wrote and begin to revise. Remember, your revision must work in Anne Waldman in some way. And, remember, I am here to help! [30 Minutes]

**Process Write:** What did you accomplish? What still needs to be done? [5 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [10 Minutes]
Plan for Close Reading Joan Retallack

**Private Write.** [5 Minutes]

**FFW:** Tell the story of your experience reading Retallack’s “Essay as Wager.” These can be provisional first thoughts—did you struggle with the piece? How? Why? [7 Minutes]

**Bracket & Share.** [10 Minutes]

**Written Conversation via Annotations** [30 Minutes]
- Handout individual paragraphs from Retallack’s essay (large, on 11 x 17 paper)
- Hear paragraphs out loud one sentence each
  - Pause between readings to annotate—annotate as thoroughly as you can—
    - circle things you feel puzzled by, things/terms/words you may want to look up
    - ask the questions you wish you could have answered (questions that will enable you to come to a full understanding of this segment of text)
    - underline moments you adore/find exciting
    - and, comment on the text (repeat things back in your own words)
  - in other words…annotate in a way that makes explicit your thinking in response to: **what** the text is saying and **how** the text is saying it.
- Make sure your name is on the paper somewhere, and write legibly.

We’re going to exchange annotations by passing to our left—when you receive another person’s paper your job will be to read their annotations, add your own, answer any questions they may have, ask new questions, and respond to any comments.

Repeat 3x.

**Process Write 1:** Where is your thinking now about Retallack’s essay? [5 Minutes]

**Process Write 2:** When revising your own essay, what is one idea you plan to steal from Retallack? In other words, what does Retallack think an essay should do that you want to explore in your own writing? [5 Minutes]

Share both Process Writes. Discuss.
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Paper #3: Be Interested…An Investigation!

For the last paper of the semester, I’d like to encourage every single person in this class to really play with the idea that “everything has the potential to be interesting.” I know that many of you find “poetry” to be perhaps the furthest thing from interesting possible, but now’s your chance to “transform what would otherwise seem mundane and unremarkable into an opportunity for thoughtful reflection.”

**Step One:** Select one specific poem that you either love or feel very interested in.
Some sites you might visit to find poems…

- The Poetry Foundation
- Poets.org
- Electronic Poetry Center
- Pennsound (audio & video recordings)

**Step Two:** You must do some research on your chosen poem. Visit the library, search JSTOR and other databases, find at least one article or source on your poem (or writer). What do these “critical” sources tell you about your topic? What thesis is proven in these sources? Do you agree or disagree with the point of view presented? Why or why not?

**Step Three:** What made you pick the poem you’ve chosen to write about? The answer to this question should help you to formulate a thesis or opinion about the work, an argument that makes an opinionated statement about your chosen subject.

Keep in mind that this assignment is purposely vague—I wanted our last paper of the semester to really give you some room to explore a topic or question of your own choosing. But, please make sure that your paper is specific and opinion-driven. You should think about how to use the research you’ve done in order to support your own ideas.

It is not acceptable to think of a thesis as a statement like: “Anne Waldman is one of the best living poets because her work is strong and powerful.” A more successful thesis might be something like: “Anne Waldman’s *Fast Speaking Woman* is a poem that has stood the test of time, presenting a litany-esque critique of women’s roles (in all their variousness) in society—an open form that is timeless in its assertions of gender equality and a poem that should be a mantra for all women growing up in American society.”

**Cover Letters:** At this point in the semester, I think you know what I expect of cover letters. Each draft must have one. Each cover letter should serve as an opportunity for you to tell the reader what you think you achieved in the paper and what you need help with.

**ROUGH DRAFT DUE:** Monday, April 29 (5-7 pages, bring 3 copies to class)
**INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES:** Wednesday, May 1
**FINAL DRAFT DUE:** Wednesday, May 8 (5-7 pages typed)

I will not accept any papers later than May 8, 2013.
I will not accept this final draft via email.
Final Project Prep:
It is hard to believe that the semester is winding down! I know you might feel a little bit overwhelmed by all the work that is expected of you. If you follow the steps and assignments outlined here, hopefully the process of completing both the digital project and paper 3 will be a breeze.

Preparation # 1/Response Paper 3: Select one poem that you are particularly enthusiastic about and use writing to figure out why. A few questions you might want to think about:
- What is it about this work that you like?
- How does the poet do what he/she does?
- What does the poem accomplish in terms of the response it evokes in you?
- What purpose does a poem serve?
You might want to think about this response as a proposal in which you want to convince me how and why you plan to write about the poem you’ve selected.
Due: Wednesday, April 17 (1-2 pages typed)

Preparation # 2: Please post your plan for the “digital” part of this assignment (i.e. What are you thinking about in terms of the digital essay? What questions do you have?). I’d suggest that you make use of our blog more and more as we near the close of the semester. Any questions or problems you have, your colleagues will probably have as well! Help each other!
Due: Please post to the blog no later than Sunday, April 21, by 12PM.
**Continue to post ideas and questions as your projects develop!!**

Preparation # 3: Reflective Annotated Bibliography (2 SOURCES)
- A bibliography is a list of sources (books, journals, websites, periodicals, etc.) one has used or is considering using in order to research a specific topic.
- An annotation is a summary or evaluation.

Therefore, your annotated bibliography must include the following:
1. Complete bibliographic information about each source (cited correctly following MLA format).
2. A summary of the source. (What are the main arguments? What is the point of this book or article? What topics are covered? If someone asked what this article/book is about, what would you say?)
3. Your thoughts on the source. (Did you find this reference to be helpful? What intrigued you about it? Will you use it? If so, what information will you continue to think about?)

FORMAT:
1. All annotated bibliographies should be typed, single-spaced.
   Bibliographic information should follow MLA format. Please bold the bibliographic information. (see http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/).
2. Your summary of the source should be no longer than two paragraphs.
3. Please italicize your thoughts (or response) on the source. This segment of the bibliography should be no longer than one full paragraph.
Due: Wednesday, April 24
**Preparation #4 (The Rough Draft)**
For Rough Draft #3, please write a letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and address any other concerns that you have. Think of your draft letter as an opportunity to request exactly the kind of feedback you need. All cover letters should be typed and about one page long.

- What are the biggest problems you are having at this point in the writing process?
- What’s the number one question about your essay—its thesis, structure, use of evidence, persuasiveness, style, etc.—that you’d like your readers to answer for you?
- What do you envision your final step towards revision for the Final Draft to look like?

**Due: Monday, April 29** (5-7 pages, bring 3 copies to class)

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**Preparation #5 (Individual Conferences)**
On **Wednesday, May 1**, we will not have a regular class period. Instead, I will meet with you each individually to review the **most recent draft** of your paper and to discuss your **digital project progress**. Please bring your **most recent paper draft and any relevant digital project materials** to our meeting. **My office is VC6-248**.

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**Final Draft #3**
Please bring in your final draft (5-7 pages with a Works Cited page). It must be stapled with your final draft cover letter attached to the front. Also, please include your previous drafts and cover letters. Submit the entire packet bound with a paperclip.

**Paper # 3–Final Draft Cover Letter**
For your Paper #3 Final Draft, please write a letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and address any other concerns that you have. Think of your draft letter as an opportunity to share how you feel you have improved your paper. All cover letters should be typed and about one page long.

- What is your thesis? What are you hoping to achieve in this paper?
- What are some problems you faced when writing and how did you try to or succeed in resolving them?
- What idea or point do you feel you’ve made the most successfully? Least successfully?
- Do you consider this draft to really be your “Final Draft?” Why? Did you do anything while revising that could be described as a “re-seeing” of the paper?
- What grade do you think you deserve on this paper and why?
- How do you imagine this paper connects to and enhances your digital essay?

**Due: Wednesday, May 8** (5-7 pages with a Works Cited page)

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**Reflective Writing Log: Digital Project Process**: Use this blog entry as a space to share your digital essay process. Please describe and reflect on how and why you created what you did. Please feel free to include images and even a slideshow documenting your project’s evolution. Some questions to consider: How did you come to settle on the project you ended up pursuing?
What was the relationship between your digital project and your written essay? Did the two help each other, work in tandem, inform each other, etc.? What do you hope that this digital project accomplishes or shows your audience?

Due: Please post to the blog no later than 12PM on Sunday, May 12.
The DIGITAL Component

OPTION ONE: The Digital Essay

What is a “digital essay”? A digital essay (in the context of this course) is a piece of work that uses audio, video, text, and/or images. Your goal for this project should be to create a short film that essentially illustrates the thesis of your research paper visually. Your digital essay should be two to three minutes long.

How do I do this? I don’t have a camera! I don’t have the right software!

Video Cameras: You may borrow a Hitachi camcorder from the Newman Library. All you need to do is go to the Circulation Desk on the 2nd Floor and request one. You are permitted to borrow it for three days, with the possibility of renewal.

Production Information:
1. As you know, a movie is a short video or film that includes actors and has some semblance of a narrative or plot. To do this successfully you might want to ask some friends to help you out and draft a “script” or choreograph what will happen when and where.
2. Select the tools you will use create, edit, and share your project. We will review these tools in class. The tools that are available are all free and user friendly, so do not worry if this is your first digital project!
3. Make sure to visit the “Digital Project Resources” page on the class site—everything you need to know (regarding “how to”) is there!

Guidelines/Goals:
The purpose of embarking on this “digital essay” project is to give you the chance to explore your thesis statement visually—using images instead of words. Another way of thinking about this might be to try to make something you cannot do or accomplish through paper and print alone. You might want to try to imagine your content—what does this look like visually? What images do you see? What images do you need to depict your main point?

A few examples:
“Unnatural Enemy” (based on a poem by Anne Waldman):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4_UauJaFdU

“Speak and Be Heard” (based on a poem by Audre Lorde):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDltg6xcd50&feature=youtu.be

“Mankind Destroys & Saves the Earth” (based on a poem by Tracy K. Smith):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBZDqJ9rN_A&feature=youtu.be

“We Real Cool” (based on a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o_QI1ZEdWo&feature=player_embedded

“The Barbie Complex”:
http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/ovtw5AtsfyU

When you post your completed digital project, please make sure to also post a reflective process note—let your viewer know how and why you made what you made and what you hoped to accomplish in this visual medium.
OPTION TWO: Making a 3D Object
If you prefer to actually create a “physical” object, and try your hand as producer, instead of making a short film, for the “digital” component of the paper, I invite you to try your hand at creating a physical object that represents the central idea of your essay. You will need to draft a 3D object of your own—this means that you can either create something from “scratch” or use a design you find on a site like “thingiverse” and edit it. You will then need to take screenshots of your process and be prepared to present how and why you made what you made, when your classmates are showing their films.

Depending on how many students opt for the 3D option, we will figure out how to print these objects when the time comes. 3D printing is very time consuming, so is lots of people make 3D objects, not all projects will be able to be printed by the semester’s end.

DUE: All digital projects must be posted to the class blog no later than 9AM on Monday, May 13
Paper #1
The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains by Nicholas Carr
Poem Packet #1

GENRE:
A manifesto is “a public declaration of principles and intentions, often political in nature.” In other words, a manifesto is a statement (oftentimes meant to be read out loud) that outlines one’s opinions about an issue the author feels strongly about. Think back to the excerpts from Cicero’s Rhetorica Ad Herennium that we discussed in class—what does he think is important to a “theory of public speaking”? What parts of “discourse” does he privilege? How might Cicero’s definition of rhetoric and how speech becomes persuasive help you to compose a manifesto? Keep in mind that this will be a text that exists on paper, but will also be “performed” or read out loud to the class.

SUGGESTED FOCUS:
Nicholas Carr’s book has gotten a lot of positive press. Here are some of the key points that the reviewers seem to point to:

- “Carr persuasively — and with great subtlety and beauty — makes the case that it is not only the content of our thoughts that are radically altered by phones and computers, but the structure of our brains — our ability to have certain kinds of thoughts and experiences...I actually changed my life in response to it.” (Jonathan Safran Foer, “The Millions”)
- “We are living through something of a backlash against the frenzy of attention dispersion, a backlash for which Carr’s book will become canonical.” (Todd Gitlin, “The New Republic”)
- “Carr wants us to think deeply about the effects of this new technology on our cultures, our brains, our social lives and our ways of thinking about knowledge. With masterful ease and winning style, he lays out ideas that will encourage readers to do just that ... The Shallows is a book everyone should read.” (Anna Lena Phillips, “American Scientist”)

What do all of these excerpts have in common? What argument do you think they are making about the success of Carr’s text? If we think of Carr’s book as a manifesto, what would its central issue or opinion be? Do you agree or disagree?

The focus of your manifesto should be your response to Carr’s text, your response to these questions. Remember, you must begin by identifying what you think Carr’s strongest argument is, and then figure out what you want your own thesis to be.

Remember, you need to do more than agree or disagree with Carr.

For example, a weak thesis statement would be:

Despite all of the positive advances that technology has brought to our society, the Internet truly does impact the way we think and has made “deep focus” on one task virtually impossible.
A strong thesis statement might be:

Just as John Coletti writes in “Get Up. You Always Do.,” “the digital world/barfed and won a bit.” By assertively announcing the “Internet’s” victory, Coletti asks his reader to imagine what thoughts look like in this “digital world.” They look like nonsequitors—“candy is delicious”—because the web points our focus in every direction and no direction all at once.

Some sample manifestos:

- **Communist Manifesto**
  (full text-- http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/)
- **Dada Manifesto**
  (excerpts-http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html)
- **Surrealist Manifesto**
  (full text-- http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/F98/SurrealistManifesto.htm)

**A few tips:**

- Be clear and concise in your writing. Keep in mind that this is a piece of writing intended to be read, so you want your readers to both understand what you are saying, and to sympathize with your position.
- Read your manifesto out loud ahead of time—do you hear any grammatical mistakes, any places where you seem to stumble over your own words?
- Remember to be as assertive as possible. You want your readers to agree with you by the end of the paper!

**ROUGH DRAFT DUE:** Tuesday, February 28, 2012
(3-5 pages typed, bring 3 COPIES to class)

**FINAL DRAFT DUE:** Tuesday, March 6 (3-5 pages typed)
I Think, Therefore I BLOG

On the course syllabus, you will find two kinds of posts:

Free Choice/Reading Log

- **Free Choice**—This blog entry can be whatever you want it to be! Your main goal should be to explore and play with an idea that interests you (relevant to what we've been working with in class). Try to think of this kind of post as an opportunity to engage an audience (of your peers) in a conversation. You should not worry about the post having a main thesis statement or argument—instead try to ask questions, write to discover, and don’t be afraid to go off on tangents if they interest you!

- If this **free choice** feels a bit too free, you also have the option of writing either a **“Reading Log”** or a **“Travel Log.”** What this means is that for the **Reading Log,** you will begin by stating which of the week's readings you want to focus on, and then record your experience reading the text and the questions/ideas it provoked for you. What was the author trying to say or accomplish? What questions did the text raise for you? Problems? For the **Travel Log,** you will document visually and verbally a walk or journey you took in any part of the city—what did you see? How do your observations compare to the visions of New York we've been reading?

Reflective Writing Log

- **Reflective Writing Log**—Use this blog entry as your opportunity to post your questions, concerns, status, etc. with regards to the paper you are working on. How is your revising going? What are you struggling with? What are you excited about? Ask questions of your audience—we are here to help you write the best paper possible!
Sample Student Process Writing
(in response to Paper #3: Be Interested…An Investigation!)

Notes: Both of these reflective responses were written after the individual conferencing phase of the project. I include these particular responses not because they reveal anything specific about the process of writing about a specific poem, but because they demonstrate a glimpse into the writing processes of these students. In the first piece, the student acknowledges the difficulty he faced when writing a research paper about a poem and reflects on what he did to push past that initial struggle. In the second response, the student begins with “things” he needed to “fix,” but ultimately comes to the understanding that he needed to do more work to actually understand the poem. In both samples we see a moment where the student realizes that despite the fact that the assignment called for research, nothing could replace a solid interest in and understanding of the poem they were each writing about.

Posted on May 11, 2013 by Vanessa

My video project relates more to the poem than my actual paper (that sounds weird). I wanted to make the video a contrast between what is considered to be traditionally beautiful and odd/unusual things that we don't see every day. I attempted this by going to Central Park to find “traditional” beauty in the form of nature, and I went to MoMA to find some awesome art that portrayed unusual/uncommon things. I really enjoyed my experience and I was awed by the things I saw in both in places. Also interesting to note that I found a “You in a park around a stupid old statue.” =D haha

I also wanted to explore beauty itself and observe the reactions people had at the museum toward these strange paintings. I also wanted to see how people would react in the park. In both cases, people were amazed and were taking pictures to immortalize their discoveries. It was super interesting watching them and thinking “Why do people find these things so amazing and/or strange? Can’t we have a woman with a unibrow?” This touches upon Myles’ poem and in particular the part about the tulips being mixed and beautiful.

I incorporated what I thought were the most important lines in her poem, which I also thought connected best to my video. I love that when I collected all the small clips and put them into one video, I could connect one “unusual” painting to the next, especially the ones with women in them. Come to think of it, these painting related directly to my paper because they are poking at the viewer's sense of what a woman should typically look like. I think video is wayyy better than pictures once I saw my finished project. Pictures simply wouldn't have the same effect because with small clips we see movement and what the people are doing in them, so it feels like you're there. With pictures, you may or may not be able to tell what the people are feeling, so videos just make everything more real.

My main purpose with this video is to force the viewer to think about the contrast between “typical beauty” and “unusual beauty.” Why define one as beautiful while the other is ugly or weird? Can't both be beautiful or nothing at all? Can't they just be? Why define them as anything? By the way, I chose “Jimmy Eat World – The Middle” as my song cause it relates directly to the images and my paper. A person trying to fit in, but they don't have to! (That's basically what the song is trying to say.) I definitely feel that my video project enhances my paper or vice versa. Now my paper has a visual depiction and it's awesome! Well, I hope you enjoy my digital essay!

Here It Is!

Note: This response focuses directly on the student’s digital project which accompaniedparalleled the research paper based on falling in love with a poem (see Paper #3 assignment). In this reflection, the writer is describing her process creating the video component of her final project, however, by the end of the response the writer is thinking specifically about the ways in which her digital project helped her to think about her essay. This student focused on Eileen Myles’s “New York Tulips” and the final draft demonstrated a clear analysis of the poem done in so much detail that it read as an image. Working with Myles’ simultaneously minimalist and descriptive poem helped this student to think about ways of analyzing a text with the same level of concision and detail.
Note: This student struggled a tremendous amount with the assignment and her reflective writing demonstrates the process she went through trying to figure out what to do when writing a long paper about a poem. The student even emailed Myles to get some answers to the “deeper” meaning of the poem. Myles responded (which was extremely exciting and important for this student), but in her response she challenged the student to think less about uncovering a hidden truth and more about looking at how the words on the page were working and why. This was a breakthrough for this writer. In many ways, the process of living with this particular poem, and entering into correspondence with the poet herself, taught this student what it means to really close read a poem.
I cannot believe that we are so close to the end of the semester. The time passed so quickly, didn't it? It was a very interesting and challenging semester for me. I remember we discussed in class a few weeks ago what is a good essay. Also, I remember saying that a good essay is when the writer truly cares what she or he writes about. This is what led me to write about Lorde's poem because there are still injustices in our society that people should stand up to fearlessly. For my final essay I picked the poem “Power” by Audre Lorde. For some reason it caught my attention from the very first time I read the poem. I am still in the process of polishing up my final paper. The meaning behind the poem pushed me into thinking about the problems that the society faced at the time when the poem was written, the 1960s.

Overall the final essay was a very challenging, but mostly interesting project. I still have a couple of days to finish the paper and make it as good as possible. To me this paper was challenging because I had to look beyond the meaning of words and sort of read "in between the lines" what the author was trying to say through the poem. Audre Lorde believed that the purpose of her poems in general was to "give name to the nameless so it can be thought". Indeed, the main purpose of any poem is to give a base to contemplate its implicit meaning behind the words. In the poem “Power”, for instance, the author calls people to stand up against abuse of power in the society at the time. Through horrifying examples the author makes the readers face boldly the reality of injustices instead of keeping silent.

I have to admit that it was also a very interesting project because after doing a careful research on the subject matter I saw a couple of different reviews by critics who commonly agreed that the abuse of power ends when people will not settle for silence. Ultimately, it took decades for people to see the clear meaning of Lorde’s poetry. However her goals as an author and civil rights activist were achieved because the public faced the fears of unjust society from the past and refused to remain silent any more. The time to speak for the majority of people began. People realized and learned that with the power in their hands they can only make a difference together.

Note: This piece of writing is the reflective response that accompanies the segment in Chapter Five on Audre Lorde (see pages 187-191), specifically the experience of Marina, whose writing process is discussed on pages 189-191.
Note: This image is the result of an in class conversation around how students believe that their writing is graded. In response to being asked to write an extended essay about a poem of their own choosing, this particular class felt anxious about how they would be evaluated, particularly since everyone would be working on different poems.

Note: After the class generated the map of language around how they thought their papers might be evaluated, we then turned that word bank into the above scaffolding of a kind of rubric. Once we moved from a list of terms that were on our minds to a more organized representation of the categories we think writing is evaluated by (grammar, organization, writing style, thesis), the class began to prioritize certain qualities in their own writing. Most interestingly, creativity was voted as the most important aspect of “writing style.” Despite the somewhat “uncreative” worry that sparked this process of debunking what students were graded on, the result shows that students value creativity and persuasion more than correctness.
PREFACE

Welcome to the Bard College Language and Thinking Workshop! The selections included here will be our working texts for the next three weeks. They have been chosen by Peter Elbow and by the faculty in the Language and Thinking Workshop for use in the text classes: to think about, talk about, write about. If you want to read further in the works from which the selections have been taken (and you probably will), refer to the Table of Contents for bibliographical citations. Most of the texts cited are available in the Bard College Library.

Stuart Levine
Dean of the College
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## SECTION I: The Self

*Editor: Alan Devinish*


SECTION II: The Last Supper

Editors: Burton Hatlen and Virginia Steinhoff


SECTION III: The Idea of Justice

Editors: Joan Bolker and Ellen Solomon


8. The Declaration of Independence.


BOUNDARY CONVERSATIONS

Patricia Hampl, Memory and Imagination

Kristina McGrath, Child Suppers: Bode
Lisa Steinman, In the Midst of, and Tallying

Tomas Transtromer, From March '79
Eva Hoffman, Lost in Translation

Lisa Steinman, Drafting a New Life

Hattie Gossett, Billie Lives! Billie Lives!

Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name

Carol Lee Sanchez, Corn Children

Rita Dove, Crab-Boil

Rosario Morales, I Am What I Am
Celestine Frost (The Eyes Do Not See Objectively)

Lakoff & Johnson, Concepts We Live By

John Ashbery, At North Farm

Nancy Willard, Night Light; Out of War

______, A Hardware Store as Proof of...God
Robert Hass, Natural Theology

Rosemarie Waldrop, Facts

Sydney Lea, Leonora's Kitchen

Louise Erdrich, American Horse

Nancy Willard, In Praise of Unwashed Feet
E.e. cummings, ygUDuh

Canadian Short Short Stories

John Ashbery, The Instruction Manual

Tomaz Salamun, I Have a Horse

Ovid, Metamorphoses (Book One)

Adelia Prado, The Alphabet In the Park

Sharon Olds, Ideographs, Photograph of the Girl

Hannah Arendt, The Public and Private Realm

Afterword, Paul Connolly
Afterword
(The eyes do not see objectively)
but the beauty blooms from them
Celestine Frost

Boundary Conversations, this anthology created by the faculty for the Language and Thinking Workshop, honors beauty that blooms from many eyes and words that see in various ways. It values the variety that is possible in language, and the variety that is possible in lives when there is language to reveal oneself to others. "To live an entirely private life," writes Hannah Arendt at the end of the anthology, "means to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others." The anthology affirms the importance of being heard. And in doing so it affirms a basic goal of the L&T Workshop: To increase the language each of us has to express who we are.

But the anthology also raises a question: If we are so many and so different, how do we live together? How can we talk together? This is an anthology about boundaries: how we live within the bounds of very different lives. But it is also an anthology about conversation: how we live with others whose boundaries touch—or do not touch—our own.

"Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war...where there is no sense of attacking or defending," suggest the authors of Metaphors We Live By. "Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance...and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way." This is a second goal of the Workshop: To imagine how to disagree and argue well. Along with Boundary Conversations, each workshop section will read a cluster of texts presenting multiple perspectives on an issue. What arts do we need to think and write about these clusters; to hear others attentively and yet be heard ourselves; to imagine how to dance?

Teachers of eight sections have agreed to call their cluster "Communities, Fences, and Silence." These sections will read Plessy v. Ferguson, the separate-but-equal Supreme Court case; June Jordan's essay on Black English, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan"; an essay on gang argot, "When You're A Crip (Or a Blood)"; Walt Whitman's "Slang in America"; part of Andrea Nye's Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic; a chapter of Audre Lorde's Zami; a poem by Louise Gluck. More readings reserved in the library--different readings for each section--will sharpen the focus of each section.

Another eight sections will read about "Sexuality: Public and Private Voices," including selections from Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet; chapters from Holland and Eisenhart's Educated in Romance, Andrea Lee's Sarah Phillips, and Andrea Dworkin's Mercy; articles on "Sex on Campus," "The Phantom Epidemic of Sexual Assault," "Feminism and Sexual Harassment," "Professors, Students, and Sex"; and selected poems and fiction. Further readings will again be reserved in the library.

And in nine sections of the Workshop, there will be a small number of common readings but each section will have a unique focus: On television culture v. literate culture (reading Camille Paglia, Neil Postman, Mark Crispin, Stanley Cavell) for example. On censure, censorship, and community values, with particular attention to freedom of speech on campuses and to the cases of Louis Farrakhan and David Duke. On "Visions and Experiences of Rural America." On "Language Differences: Dialects and Bilingualism."

The faculty is testing new readings this summer, seeking texts to provoke thoughtful reflection on issues about which people may disagree deeply but which we still need to decide wisely. The effort to re-imagine how to argue well is our common work this summer. Students are assigned to a section, and therefore to a particular set of readings, but throughout the Workshop there should be time to talk and write well to one another about what we read and think.

Paul Connolly, Director
I: Philosophy and History of Ideas
Ethical Values and the Good Life (separate texts)
John Searle, "Can Computers Think?" (from Minds, Brains, and Science, 1984)
The Euclid Myth (from Davis, P. and Hersh, R., The Mathematical Experience, 1981)

II: Science and Mathematics
Euclid, The Elements
Francis Bacon, The New Organon (Preface)
Galileo Galilei, Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems (1629; excerpt)
Isaac Newton, The Laws of Motion (from the Principia, 1687)
Rudolf v.B. Rucker, "The Fourth Dimension" (from Geometry, Relativity and the Fourth Dimension 1977)
Antonio R. Damasio, "Unpleasantness in Vermont," "Gage's Brain Revealed," and "A Passion for Reasoning" (from Descartes' Error)
Simon Singh, "A Mathematical Disgrace" (from Fermat's Enigma)

III: Poetry and Literature
Tom Stoppard, Arcadia (separate text)
Chinua Achebe, "Girls at War." (1973)
Lydia Davis, "This Condition." (1997)
Pamela Lu, Pamela: A Novel (1998; excerpt)
Raymond Queneau, "A Story as You Like It"
Carolyn Lei-Lanilau, "Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana" (Let the Story be Told)
Anne Carson, Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse (excerpt)
Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."
Howard Nemerov, "Learning the Trees."
Miroslav Holub, "In the Microscope," and "Love in August"
Carol Lucci Wisner, "Stonehenge and the Louvre Were Cool"
Ann Lauterbach, "ON" and "ON (word)"
Marlene Nourbese Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language."
Edwin Torres, "Seeds Sown Long Ago: Are You the Layer?"
Samuel Beckett, Act without Words I
Lois-Ann Yamanaka, "Tita: Boyfriends"
IV: Aphorisms, Maxims, Other Short Forms and Fragments,
Epicurus, "Ancient Collections of Maxims" (from The Epicurus Reader, 1994)
Heracleitus, "The Way of Inquiry," "Universal Flux" (from Wheelwright edition)
Epictetus, Enchiridion (selections)
Sappho: "Alone," "To Eros," "The Blast of Love" (with introduction by Willis Barnstone)
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What does it mean to be human?

Freedom and Constraint

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.
— Jean-Jacques Rousseau

My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I shall go even further: my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.
— Igor Stravinsky

The whole question of imagination in science is often misunderstood by people in other disciplines. ...We can't allow ourselves to seriously imagine things which are obviously in contradiction to the known laws of nature...One has to have the imagination to think of something that has never been seen before, never been heard of before. At the same time the thoughts are restricted in a strait jacket, so to speak, limited by the conditions that come from our knowledge of the way nature really is. The problem of creating something which is new, but which is consistent with everything which has been seen before, is one of extreme difficulty.
— Richard Feynman

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.
— Martin Luther King

Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same.
— Hannah Arendt

...liberation as an intellectual mission... has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages.
— Edward Said

Ultimately our aim should be to create a world free from the displaced, the homeless and the hopeless, a world of which each and every corner is a true sanctuary where the inhabitants will have the freedom and the capacity to live in peace.
— Aung San Suu Kyi
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June 25, 2002

Dear Everyone,

It was a great pleasure to work with you during a June meeting that had all the important elements of the humanist register—gravity, humor, a sense of adventure, smatterings of angst and euphoria. It’s a familiar register for many of us who tend to become involved in collaborative projects with what skeptics might construe as improbable goals.

L&T has always been such a project—idealistic, optimistic, but necessarily leavened by pragmatism—a sort of three week thought experiment trying to outrun what Jacques Lacan called the "revenge of the real." Probably we’re still finding a live filament in certain Enlightenment ideas about the susceptibility of young minds to a passion for reason.

What is certainly true is that lately, something particularly nice has been happening to the way the light curves through the minds of the L&T faculty when we work together. It can’t be denied that what we’re trying to do over the three weeks of L&T is a highly improbable project given the general ethos and culture of education in this country. This makes it all the more important. Calvino writes of “cities too probable to be real.” I think there is education too probable to be real, too lacking in inventiveness and surprise. The complex realism one must cultivate in the face of today’s chaotic world may suggest that any interesting questions about what can be done must shift from innervated probability to high stakes possibility.

With the enclosed texts, Invisible Cities & the L&T 2002 anthology, you will begin charting a course that is not a course in the usual sense implying tightly coherent pedagogical intent within the brackets of a single discipline. L&T is meant to be something of a microcosm of the air one can breathe in an intellectual, creative community of broadly literate people—literate in the liberal and fine arts as well as the sciences and mathematics. Montaigne started writing essays after an old friend—a constant companion and cherished interlocutor—died. Some have speculated that the new form Montaigne invented, the highly conversational essay, was his medium for carrying on a lively intellectual intercourse with absent others.

Our students will have the benefit of others both present and absent with whom to exchange ideas, conjectures, questions—all in medias res of beginning to invent social and intellectual selves as Bard students. There is something unwieldy and astonishing about everything we try to do in August. Chaos theory can be instructive. In every chaotic system (as newly defined within the various complex sciences) there is a constant, dynamic equilibrium between order and disorder. All this is bounded by identifiable patterns that allow us to say, ah yes this is a hurricane or this is a normally functioning brain. But there is always unpredictability in the details, an unpredictability that must be negotiated for use or understanding. You can read about this in Gleick’s "Geometry of Nature." It could be a useful pedagogical model for L&T!

With good cheer and anticipation of seeing you in July (new faculty) and August (everyone)!

[Signature]

John

enclosed: L&T letter to incoming students
TO:         L&T 2002 Faculty
FROM:       Joan
RE:         The Start of L&T

August, 2001

In less than a week, on the night of Friday August 9, we will all be together on the threshold of the real thing—L&T with all its traditions, reinventions, clarity, chaos, exhaustion, exhilaration. (What have I left out?) Please rest as much as possible between now and then, please bring your whole mind and constellation of senses, purposeful and playful intuition and imagination. Think of yourself as entering one of the more interesting worlds Gulliver might come across if he were still on his travels. Or, an invisible city of conversant minds within what some might mistake as a college campus.

Warning: You will not be able to finish dissertations, books, operas, plays, etc. during these three weeks. Your students and the material in the anthology will probably take all the energy you have.

Promise: You will experience the pedagogical stimulus of collaboration and, to nourish yourselves as writers, you can join writing groups to experiment with language in much the way you’ll be encouraging your students to do. I really encourage you to participate in such a group. We will provide sign-up sheets for poetry, fiction, essays, blurred or multi-genres. This could happen, for instance, one evening a week and—if there is sufficient interest—we could schedule a faculty reading (for and by ourselves) toward the end of the three weeks.

Additional Core Info:
We will be screening Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision twice, before and after the Kurgan-Keenan talk on September 11 and plans for Ground Zero. This feature length film, for those of you who don’t know it, goes into the rationale for Lin’s design for the Vietnam memorial and socio-political controversy surrounding the decision to build it. It is quite relevant to many of the questions raised by Huysens as well as to thinking about possibilities for a Ground Zero memorial.

Faculty Changes:
Sharon Hannigan will not be teaching with us. Our distinguished alternate, Bill Mullen, will.

Faculty Mentors:
We are lucky to have Ric Campbell and Nicole Wallack as faculty mentors this summer. They will let you know directly about the many ways in which they will be ready to assist you.

First Week Teaching Plan
On August 9 please bring a plan for your first week which you can work on in your teaching groups over the weekend (we’ll have time for this in our schedule. I suggest that
you think first about your overall goal for the three weeks, e.g., to create a conversation between texts from all the sections of the anthology, and that you have in mind some sort of cumulative advance toward this goal, beginning in a detailed way with the first week. So, the first week’s plan should include not only what you plan to assign for reading, but also the activities, writing practices and assignments for each session and how you intend to move student writing toward the first week’s portfolio. Please think about procedures for helping students proof and edit their work before they submit it. (See below.) We ***[Sheila, can we do this electronically?] have attached a calendar, which you can use as a planning guide. Note that Faculty Teaching Groups meet from 2:00-3:30 on Friday and that Wednesday has only two classes: 9:00-10:30 and 11:00-1:00. Group assignment lists will be distributed at our weekend meeting.

Other things to bring: The two Ground Zero Maps, your copy of the Anthology, Invisible Cities. Also: bright ideas, means for meditative calm, sense of humor—particularly that!

Note on Student Portfolios
It is of utmost importance that you make your expectations for the presentation of work in portfolios clear from the outset. The purpose of the Portfolio is for the work of the L&T workshop to be taken seriously by students as well as teachers. To frame the assignment as “the weekly portfolio” in contrast to simply asking for a bundle of papers is to signal a cumulative process and a special effort given to presentation. Students should be assisted in bringing their work up to the highest quality—edited and proofed—realization of which they are capable. This will necessarily differ from ESL to U.S. honors student with a range between, but I cannot stress enough that if students feel comfortable submitting haphazard messy work in your class, it means they are not taking it seriously. This also means the transition to classes at Bard will have been hindered rather than helped.

I suggest you prepare a detailed sheet of guidelines for the portfolios: e.g., work must be typed, double-spaced (excluding visual poetics of course), spell-checked, cliché swept, grammatically vetted. Grammar is not a trivial afterthought, it’s the logic of the language. All this can be worked on, of course, in pre-submission “editing workshop,” collaboratively in peer groups, with you on hand to help. You might also want to bring a favorite editing manual for your own or even community use.

See you soon!
Joan
The Final Essay in the Humanist Tradition

The Essay in the Humanist Tradition demonstrates inquiry and persuasion, has an autobiographical grounding within a world-view—"these are my ideas and how I interpret them"—and has a logical trajectory to its nature. It announces early on in the essay the idea(s), issue(s) you are exploring, the perspective you're taking, and briefly introduces its (their) complexity. Your perspective is NOT a general statement that cannot be argued. It presents your perspective on an idea or issue and tells us why we ought to be thinking about it (i.e. why it's important). And finally, it evolves throughout the development of the essay, so by the essay's end, you are not just repeating your initiating perspective, but rather, concluding with an idea(s) and perspective that has grown, been challenged, and has evolved and been modified through various modes of thinking and writing. Finally, in the humanist tradition, it follows a trajectory that is much more flexible than a traditional analytic essay: it allows for counter energies, digressions, narrative and digressive structures that illuminate the discussion and are logically grounded in the trajectory of the essay. Like the essay in miniature, it should demonstrate thought in action.

Places to Start: Basing your essay in a question or an idea that we have been exploring in class, the readings, and writings will be productive in helping you come up with a specific topic and your own perspective on that topic.

A) Start with your L&T Notebook

1) Read through your notebook, your mini essay, etc. Ask yourself, “Are there certain ideas, issues, that keep coming up in my writing?” Write those down on another sheet of paper as you read. Also highlight moments in your notebook that jump out at you—that you feel is good writing, strong thinking, etc.

2) Then ask yourself, “Are the writing moments and ideas related? What question(s)/issues do they seem to be addressing?” Write the central questions/issues down.

3) Take two of these issues or questions that are related and write your first thoughts about them—at least a page. Use the writing from your notebook to help you develop your thoughts, preoccupations.

4) Review your first thoughts. What sense of them do you get: what seems to be your initial perspective on them? You may have one or two. Don’t just choose one—write them both down. Do a focused free write on this.

5) Identify moments in two texts we've read that address your idea(s) & perspective(s). Go back through your notebook and find further writing that addresses your topic.

6) Using your perspective as a guide, incorporate your first thoughts, writing from your notebooks, and the moments from the texts into a discovery draft.

B) Start with your Mini Essay

1) Go back to your process write from your peer review. The process write asked you to consider, “If you had time right now where would go next in this writing?” Go there for a next step. Or, re-examine the questions you've asked and re-focus your mini essay using only those questions that seem most
salient or relevant to you: move text around, write more—get more of your thinking about them down on the page.

2). Now, re-read what you have written. Ask yourself, “What seems to be my perspective(s) on these questions/issues? What is my present sense of them and my own writing?” Do a focused free write. Write a half page or a page.

3) Find moments in the texts we’ve read and in your own writing in your notebook that are related to your perspective(s). Write a discovery draft of your essay using all the writing you’ve done thus far (the focused mini essay, your initial perspective(s) and writing from notebook). Incorporate passages from two texts you’ve found.

**C) Start with your Thirteen Point Piece**

1) Review the writing you have done for your Thirteen Point Piece. What’s your present sense of it? What seems to be your perspective(s) on the question you explored? Do a focused free write on this—at least a half a page.

2) Using your half to one page perspective free write, order your thirteen points (i.e. what seems like a logical place to start, etc.? )—include those points that don’t seem to fit into your perspective(s). Ask yourself, “What other point they seem related to?” and put it (them) next to it.

3) Using the writing you did for the Thirteen Points piece and your free write, write a discovery draft in which you include your question and your initiating perspective(s) in the first or second paragraph of the essay. Follow the order you made in step two. If you can’t make all the connections right off, just skip a line in your essay and go onto the next point. Connections, deletions, additions, expansions can be made later. Don’t not include something just because you can’t connect it yet, especially if you sense/know it belongs or is important.

**Start with your Question Log in your L&T Notebook**

1) Choose one or two questions that seem related. Write your first thoughts about them—at least one to two pages. Use some of the writing in your notebook. Don’t worry about connections at this point—if something feels like it should go in, put it in for now. You can make the connections later.

2) Review the writing you’ve done. What seems to be your perspective(s) on these two questions? Ask a friend to read it too if you need to. Do you have more than one perspective? Write these down—don’t choose one yet. Write this as a separate focused free write. Try for a half or one page.

3) Find moments in the texts we’ve read and in your own writing that relate to your perspective(s), question or issue. Mark these or write them on a separate sheet. Read through your L&T notebook again and highlight further writing that relates to your question and perspective(s).

4) Now, write a discovery draft—include your perspective(s), your first thoughts, two texts, etc..

**D) Start with your Extended Believe & Doubt**

1) Review the writing you did in the extended believe and doubt and do a focused free write in which you explore the question, “Which side of your argument feels stronger to you and why?” Write at least a half page—don’t just copy your individual supporting arguments! Reflect on why some seem stronger or more reasonable or right to you.
2) Review your focused free write on your perspective. Find two additional moments in different texts that relate to your perspective and ideas.

3) Using your perspective as a guide, order the points in your extended believe and doubt. Do not just do all the beliefs and then the doubts. Move back and forth. You may not be able to include all your counter or qualifying arguments, but you should use at least three or four.

4) Now, using your perspective and the ordering in step 3, write a discovery draft of an essay.

**Your Early Draft:**

Your early draft should be about connecting ideas, asking questions, pondering concerns that are guided by an initial perspective. This stage is exploratory. Be prepared to work with this material over a few drafts—to focus it, expand it, narrow the topic, or eliminate some of the writing entirely to expand on other parts. Be prepared to be flexible: to allow room for further discovery and thinking.

Bring each step of your process and your discovery draft to our workshop.

**Faculty Note:** In each of these, the early steps can be done in a workshop. I first give students time to go back through all their writing (I announce earlier that they need to have it ALL with them), and then I have them write about one or two options. From this writing, they generally know what they want to use, what their drawn to—the mini essay, the extended believe and doubt, etc. Then they do the early steps in the workshop; thus, everyone will leave the workshop with some writing done towards a first draft of an essay. I also remind them that “texts” means poetry, films, their peers’ writing in their own notebook, etc.. Everything we’ve looked

They then bring all this back to the workshop with a discovery draft. A useful process write to do before a peer revision workshop is: “Right now, what is your present sense of your draft? What works for you, what doesn’t?” This prepares them to listen to what’s said in the peer revision process and helps them to see/hear the difference between a reader’s response and their own understanding of the piece.

**Metacognitive Thinking & Writing:** Each of these approaches to a discovery draft includes students reading their own writing and then reflecting on that writing and thinking. When students allow themselves to observe and reflect on their own thinking and writing; when they explore ideas tentatively in probative language; when they expect to make changes; when they look for meaning and order to emerge from the writing process itself; when they trust that the very act of writing helps them to think and compose; when they hear the process writing of other students and realize they are not alone, students work more easily, creatively — and critically. (Adapted from “Process Writing and Metacognitive Thinking” by Paul Connolly, 1992, Institute for Writing & Thinking.)
Session 2: 4:30PM to 6:00PM:
Wittgenstein, Selections from *Philosophical Investigations* (page 82 in the Anthology)
(taking notes/freewriting as a way of thinking through a text/through writing)

4:30PM Private freewrite. [5 Minutes]

4:35PM Wittgenstein Active Responding & Reading » Imagining an Interspecies Language
  - Read Augustine quote—once out loud, one quietly
  - Underline the words that signify to you what language is supposed to help us do [7 Minutes]
  - FFW: Comment on this as a picture of what language does—was anything left out? In other words, what do you think language is supposed “to do”—what is the work of the word? Does Augustine portray this thoroughly? What is missing? What would you add? [5 Minutes]
  - Bracket and Share [7 Minutes]
  - Read #3 (out loud). Annotate while listening. [3 Minutes]
  (Teaching/Text Notes: The limited scope of Augustine's description of language is compared to a definition of 'game' in terms of moving pieces on a board according to rules. Not all games fit this description, though some do. Similarly, only a narrow part of language conforms to Augustine's description.)
  - FFW: What are the other roles/functions/possibilities/qualities of language that Augustine’s explanation does not cover and that Wittgenstein might have in mind in his critique here? [5 Minutes]
  - Read #19 (out loud). Annotate while listening. [3 Minutes]
  (Teaching/Text Notes: Here Wittgenstein introduces another fundamental expression, by stating that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. The language of section 2. is about giving and taking orders. Another might consist of questions and expressions for answering affirmatively and negatively. Wittgenstein asks whether the call "Slab!" is a word or a sentence. It might be called either, perhaps a degenerate sentence, or a limiting case of a sentence. It is difficult to compare the use of 'Slab!' in the language of sentence 2. with the use of the same sentence in English. In English, we say it means 'Bring me a slab!' But that sentence of English is not meaningful in the simple language.)
  - FFW: If, as Wittgenstein says, “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life,” what kind of form of life does your vision of language create? How does this idea of “language as a form of life” impact all areas of one’s being—the life of the mind, the social life, the life of action, etc.)? [5 Minutes]
  - FFW: What form of life would you like to inhabit? What form of language would you need/require in order to enact it or enable it? Be as specific as possible. [5 Minutes]

5:15PM Group Work: Literally Imagining a Form of Life enabled by Language
  - Divide class into groups of 3. Each group should have a scribe, a reporter, and a timekeeper.
  - Step One: Share the last piece of writing you did—compile a collective description of what “form of life” you would all like to inhabit.
  - Step Two: Now, using only language, build this space—literally try to construct the form of life you want to inhabit—you can think of this as making a blueprint with words, a skit, etc.
  - Step Three: As a group, read Wittgenstein’s proposition #25. Discuss what you think Wittgenstein is saying about animals and language. Do you agree with him? Is there (or should there be) space in your “form of life” for communication outside of how we normally define language? Edit your group space after discussing this proposition to either include, acknowledge, or exclude what Wittgenstein calls “primitive language.”
Step Four: Give your “form of life” a title and decide how you would like to present it to the group. Remember—keep these performances short—2-3 minutes.

5:40PM Share presentations.

5:50PM Introduce Gould & Assignment
- FFW: Is there space for “sex, drugs, and disasters” in these “forms of life”?
- Share quickly.
- For tomorrow:
  - Write (this is a focused free write and you will be asked to share it tomorrow):
    - Is science a form of life?
    - Is science a language?
  - Artifact: Bring in an “artifact” that you encounter—this can be a song, an image, etc. It should be something that relates to the issues that came up during today’s sessions and/or in the reading you are doing. We will make a regular practice of sharing these artifacts several times a week.
  - Review: we will begin to work with De Waal tomorrow, so please review it.
  - Handout: My welcome letter! You will need to compose your own for Wednesday.
Tuesday, August 9

SUPPLIES NEEDED: index cards, chalk, pens, pencils, anthologies, notebooks

Session 1: 9-10:30AM
Gould, “Sex, Drugs, Disasters, and the Extinction of Dinosaurs” (page 120 in the anthology)
Retallack, “What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?” (page 232 in the anthology)
Dickinson, “The reticent volcano keeps” (page 288 in the anthology)

9:00AM Private Freewrite [5 Minutes]

9:05AM Gould — beginning Loop Writing Sequence
- Read out loud (Quaker style)—from beginning to “reaches out” (top of second page) [5 Minutes]
- Loop #1: What does Gould mean when he says “science is a way of knowing”? [5 Minutes]
- Loop #2: Assume for the sake of argument that Gould is right, that science is "a way of knowing", are the other "ways of knowing", and if so, what are they and how do they differ? [5 Minutes]
- Return to FFW done at home. Bracket off anything you wrote that you feel is relevant to these ideas of “knowing” and “science.” Share these excerpts. [10 Minutes]
- Bracket off selections from Loops 1 & 2—let’s hear these. [10 Minutes]

- Let’s turn to Joan Retallack’s essay. Read out loud (Quaker style)—
  - from beginning to “and vice versa as well” [2 Minutes]
  - from “’an examination of the language of relations” to “known only by means of poetry?)” (bottom of page 233 in the anthology) [5 Minutes]
- Loop #3: Immediate first thoughts—this is a quick spurt of writing and can just be a list of associations or ideas. [2 Minutes]
- Loop #4: How might you answer Retallack’s question—“what things can be known only by means of poetry?” [5 Minutes]

- Let’s turn to Dickinson’s poem. Text Rendering:
  - Simple, literal voice—one person reads straight through [5 Minutes]
  - Dramatic, strongly exaggerated voice (one line each)
  - Backwards! (one line each)
  - In the voice of a volcano (one line each)

- Copy Dickinson’s poem into your notebook. Skip a line after each of her lines—respond to the individual lines via association, translation, interpretation…Then, recopy only your lines so you have your own “reticent volcano poem” [10 Minutes]

- Hear poems. [10 Minutes]

- Loop #5: What do you know by means of this poem? [10 Minutes]

- Bracket & Share. Discuss.
Wednesday, August 17, 2011

Session 1: 9-10:30AM

Session 2: 11AM-1PM
Zong! M. NourbeSe Philip
w/ David Buuck’s class, Olin 204

11:00AM Movement Exercise & Introductions
- Go around and just say names
- Ask students to think of a movement they can perform with their bodies that reminds them of the ocean or of water—this should be a movement that signifies feeling—something not obvious (i.e. no waving of hands, etc.)
- Perform movements twice—the first time somewhat slowly, the second rapidly

11:10AM FFW: How does the law tell a story? [5 Minutes]

11:15AM Share. [10 Minutes]

11:25AM FFW: Describe an image that comes to mind when you think of law failing. Use as many sensory details as possible. Think of this as a moment where you are showing a scene or a visual—not recounting or talking about an event. [5 Minutes]

11:30AM Share. [10 Minutes]

11:40AM Zong!
- Read Zong! #’s 2 (p. 253), 3 (p. 254), 9 (p. 257), 26 (p. 261) twice (read all four and then repeat) [5 Minutes]
- FFW: First thoughts. What is happening in these poems? Do not worry about what the poems “mean”—focus instead on your immediate responses to them. [5 Minutes]
- Read excerpts from “Notanda” (p. 265)—first 3 paragraphs
  - Unpack/discuss—
    - Method behind the text
    - Erasure procedures
    - Recombinations
- Read excerpts from Gregson vs. Gilbert (p. 267)—first 2 paragraphs
- Listen to MP3 files of NourbeSe reading. [10 Minutes]
- FFW: Return to the poems we read out loud. Again, jot down thoughts/impressions. What do you notice about these texts now, after reading about the process and the case? How have the poems changed for you? [5 Minutes]
- Share. [10 Minutes]

12:15PM Newspaper Erasure Poems
- Distribute newspaper articles and markers.
- Students will make their own erasure poems—engage with Philip’s process—make sure you read the articles and make conscious and thoughtful erasure choices. Even if you choose words at random, you should at least read the article beforehand in order to know what story you are
distorting (further).

12:30PM  **Process Write:** Reflect on your process. Why did you make the choices that you made? What did you find in your article? What is buried? What stories were permitted to surface through erasure? Can you tell where your article came from?  

12:35PM  **Share.**
- Students present/read their poems and share a bit of their process notes.
- Discuss.
- Create a gallery of these erasure poems—hand ½ on wall in each classroom.

2:30PM Onwards...CONFERENCES!
- Review portfolio
  - Add in Exploratory Draft (write as much as possible!)—aim for at least 5 pages!
  - Cover Letter to go with Draft!

**HW/Reminders!**
7PM — “Killer of Sheep” (Olin Auditorium)
Artifacts for Session One
Read: Goldin, Christian, Foucault
Session 2: 11AM-12:45PM:

11:00AM Private Freewrite. [5 Minutes]

11:05AM **FFW**: What are the first words or associations/things that come to mind when you hear the term “poetry”. [5 Minutes]

11:10AM **Bracket & Share.** Generate a list of things that define poetry (on the board). [5 Minutes]

11:15AM Collective Rendering of “The Difficult Poem”—read Bernstein’s piece together so that each member of both classes reads. [5 Minutes]

11:20AM Watch Bernstein video. [5 Minutes]
http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-What_Makes_a_Poem.html

11:25AM **FFW**: What makes a poem? [5 Minutes]

11:30AM Listen to Stein’s “If I Told Him” [5 Minutes]

11:35AM Read “If I Told Him” out loud—one line per student.

11:40AM **FFW**: Is this a poem? Why or why not? Is it a “Difficult Poem”? Why or why not? [5 Minutes]

11:45AM **Bracket & Share.** Discuss. [10 Minutes]

11:55AM **Grammatical Surgery**: Turn to the person next to you (preferably someone from the other class)—work together to fix Stein’s grammar. Can you turn “If I Told Him” into a tidy prose paragraph? (keep in mind that you do not have long to do this—so work fast—you can change punctuation and word order but you cannot add words or change words.) [10 Minutes]

12:05PM **Share.** (Hear a few of the corrected Stein paragraphs. There will not be time for more than 5-7.) [10 Minutes]

12:15PM **Writing a Difficult Poem:**
Divide classes into 6 groups of 4 students each (ideally 2 from each class). Each group gets a poetry prompt:

**Group One: Homolinguistic Translation**—take Stein’s poem and translate it “English to English” by substituting word for word, phrase for phrase, line for line, or “free” translation as a response to each phrase or sentence.
Group Two: **Dialect/Idiolect**—take Stein’s poem and translate it into a different dialect or idiolect, your own or other. Dialect can include subculture lingo, slang, text messaging shorthand, etc.

Group Three: **Tzara’s Hat**—each person in the group will generate 4 phrases to place into a hat—one of these phrases should be a line from Stein, the others can be anything. Place the phrases (on strips of paper) face down on the floor. Pick up lines at random and use that order to create a poem. Once all phrases have been overturned, sculpt a poem out of them. Remain true to the order of the random selection.

Group Four: **Cut-up Cento**—Write a poem composed entirely of phrases and/or words lifted from the anthology at random. At least two of these must be from Stein. This poem should be no shorter than 20 lines and work to make sure that no one will know the poem is composed of found language!

Group Five: **7-Up…or Down**—Take Stein’s poem and substitute another word for every noun, pronoun, verb, and adjective. Determine the substitute word by looking up the index word (original word in the poem) in the dictionary and going 7 up or down, or one more, until you get a syntactically suitable replacement.

Group Six: **Group Sonnet**—Each group member will write down 3 sentences of 10 words per sentence. Use these lines to shape the body of a sonnet. For the closing couplet, each group member will contribute 6 words, resulting in 2 12-word lines. After the sonnet is compiled, edit as needed—clip the closing couplet down so that it does not feel awkwardly long. Make sure the sonnet possesses qualities associated with traditional sonnets—themes such as love or death (or a parody of either), with a significant shift or turn of events that occurs in the last two lines of the poem.

12:35PM **Poetry Reading**!
If the groups need more time to finish their poems, this reading can occur at the beginning of the next session.

**Wednesday, August 26**
Session 1: 9-10:30AM:

**PW:** What is fiction? [5 minutes]

**Bracket and Share:** [10 minutes]

**Flash Fiction:**
1. Hand out cards—compose a fiction that will fit on one side of an index card
2. **Restraints:** Use one “character” that appears in your humanist essay, use one “term” that has come up over the course of L & T (i.e. natural selection, chaos theory, cyborg, etc) [20 minutes]
3. Split into groups of 3—read each other’s fictions
4. Compose a group fiction out of at least one element from each person’s card
5. Double the groups into 6 and repeat
6. Create a class flash fiction [45 minutes]
PW: How do I think of fiction differently? What can a single paragraph accomplish?
[5 minutes]
What, if anything, does poetry contribute to the most significant conversations of humankind? Conversations about our commonalities and differences—matters of race, class, gender, war and other forms of violence; cultural and political power; social values; responsibilities to fellow human beings as well as to other forms of life on the planet. Does poetry resonate with knowledge and intuition necessary for thinking about such matters but unavailable by other means? Can it be a potent form of agency? These are complex questions we will be examining via specific texts and writing explorations of our own in both essay and poetic forms. We’ll look at the role of poetics in human rights and environmental (ecopoetic) discourses, investigative poetics, ethical thought experiments and more. Texts by Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein, Wallace Stevens, Etel Adnan, Mahmoud Darwish, Raul Zurita, Nourbese Philip, Rachel Zolf, Jonathan Skinner, Juliana Spahr, and Jena Osman, among others are likely to be included. This is a practice-based seminar. You will have the opportunity to experiment with poetic forms, write short essays, and conduct collaborative research in areas of contemporary social concern that interest you. The final assignment will be a combined essay and poetic project. The class is required to attend poetry readings and other events (e.g., Human Rights, and Environmental Policy programming) related to the course during the semester.

SEMINAR RULES: Acquire all Required Books ASAP; 100% Attendance, Preparation, Participation, Completion of Work

Required Books / Texts
*Juliana Spahr, things of each possible relation hashing against one another
*Marlene Nourbese Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, [out of print; handout of excerpts]
*provided in by professor

Jan. 28 – Introduction; Overview. The question of poetic agency: Amichai, Ashbery
Feb. 11 – Poetics. Forms of poetic agency.
Feb. 18 – Poetry & Revolution in Spanish: Raul Zurita; Cesar Vallejo. William Rowe, Professor of Poetics, Univ. of London, visits Class.

Feb. 18 – Required Event: Talk and Reading: Vallejo’s Trilce. Weis Cinema, 5:30pm

Feb. 25 – Film/Video v. Poetry as instrument of agency in questions of racism / slavery 1. Film Title TBA
Mar. 4 – Film/Video v. Poetry, 2. The poetics of Nourbese Philip. She Tries Her Tongue & Zong.
Language Games & Forms of Life
What does this have to do with poetry?

People say again and again that philosophy doesn’t really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But the people who say this don’t understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as there continues to be a verb to be that looks as if it functions in the same way as to eat and to drink, as long as we still have the adjectives identical, true, false, possible, as long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc. etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up.

And what’s more, this satisfies a longing for the transcendent, because in so far as people think they can see the “limits of human understanding”, they believe of course that they can see beyond these. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture & Value, p.15

19. It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.

23….[There are] countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a rough picture of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

132. We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not the order. To this end we shall constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it look as if we saw it as our task to reform language. Such a reform for particular practical purposes, and improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible. But these are not the cases we have to do with. The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.

19-132, Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

There is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity, holding fast to the possibility of what is better. Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, p.25

In response to Theodor Adorno’s despairing sense that after Auschwitz it would no longer be possible to write poetry, Edmond Jabès replied, “I saw that we must write. But we cannot write like before.” Retallack, The Poethical Wager
From: “Rethinking Poetics Log,” 2010, Joan Retallack

8. The case of Lynne Stewart: In 2006, The artist Paul Chan made a piece entitled “Untitled Video on Lynne Stewart and Her Conviction, The Law and Poetry.” At the time, Stewart, a famous/infamous—depending on your point of view—radical human rights lawyer, was awaiting an appeals decision on her conviction for allegedly aiding Islamic terrorism in collusion with her client Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman. At the age of seventy, she was facing the possibility of disbarment and a 30-year jail sentence. Paul Chan’s epigraph for the video is from Langston Hughes’ 1950 poem, *Evil*:

> Looks like what drives me crazy
> Don’t have no effect on you—
> But I’m gonna keep on at it
> Till it drives you crazy too.

During her conversation with Chan, Lynne Stewart talks about the importance of poetry in her life and law practice. “Fear is a definite reality,” she says, “People are afraid and they’re so afraid that they surrender to the government” even when they know the government is wrong. (The charges against Stewart were brought by John Ashcroft of the post-9/11 Bush Administration.) “Poetry reinstills the sense of courage,” says Stewart, “…I would be willing to die for [what I believe]…I’m not willing to disengage.” One’s choices can’t be about being afraid. “It’s not about being afraid…”

The sample we get from the range of poems that give Lynne Stewart a sense of courage is interesting: It includes John Ashbery, William Blake, Evan Boland, Bertolt Brecht. “I use poetry in my work in thinking things

* http://ubu.com/film/chan_stewart.html
through,” she says, and she reads poetry to the jury....”poetry makes others feel.” Stewart picks up Blake’s *On Another’s Sorrow*: “Can I see another’s woe / And not be in sorrow too?” And then Ashbery’s *The Absence of a Noble Presence*: “If it was treason, it was so well handled that it became unimaginable....There is dreaminess and infection in the sum.” Holland Cotter, in his review of Paul Chan’s video, writes that when we hear Stewart reading Blake and Ashbery we’re hearing the music of words charged with the “activism of the soul that poetry is.”
Poethics & Pedagogy

(A Conversation between Erica Kaufman & Joan Retallack)

**Erica Kaufman:** I was hoping we might begin with/in the classroom. I’d love to know more about how you came to teach. What drew you to the classroom? What did those classrooms look like (both literally and in terms of what happened)?

**Joan Retallack:** My first two decades of teaching were circumstantial, extremely varied, intensive in different ways; all part-time while I was doing graduate studies, visual art, writing poetry and essays. Some of that serially, some concurrently. The mix turned out to be unpredictably, often retrospectively synergistic. I learned something from each experience that continued to inform my pedagogical values.

It started with graduate school in the philosophy department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign where I had just finished a double major B.A. in Philosophy and English Literature. I was given the intro course “Ethics and Value Theory,” required for all philosophy majors but also for all School of Education grad students, some of whom took it each semester. The subject of pedagogy never came up, although I agonized over it after my first semester of teaching the course just as I had experienced and loved it as an undergrad the previous year, in lecture format. I wasn’t thinking of the large percentage of disengaged students who were less beguiled by the subject matter. Preparation to begin teaching had been one semester as a T.A, grading papers. It was assumed that since I had been a good student, I would be a good teacher. As you know this was and still is the default mode of teacher training in most academic disciplines.
All philosophy classrooms (with the exception of seminar rooms) were physically the same at that time – large desk or podium on platform before wall-to-wall blackboard, rows of student chairs. Intro classes were a sequence of lectures, short papers, final paper. This was distinct from the advanced undergrad and grad seminars in what was one of the first philosophy departments in this country to be pervasively influenced by Wittgenstein. Graduate seminars were enormously exciting – a matter of “doing” philosophy in round table discussion. But mine was an intro class. The first semester I taught it by writing lecture outlines for each class and “delivering” them from the elevated desk. In the scant class time remaining I would field questions at the board. I think my lectures were pretty good, but, not surprisingly, they tended to pacify the “audience” out of its wits. Questions were sparse, hesitant; real discussions nonexistent.

A few students would stay afterwards to talk about things the structure of the class was excluding. One, a young disabled woman in a wheelchair, said she had taken the course hoping for enlightenment about the meaning of life. I was deeply humbled by this, and appropriately self-critical. I realized that a large part of the meaning of life for me was precisely what the Wittgensteinian and Austinian philosophers in the department called doing philosophy – a simultaneously rigorous and playful practice of puzzling aloud, in conversation, about real time questions (albeit induced and inflected by historical as well as contemporary texts). Writing papers was a process of thinking things through, figuring things out, as you went along, step by step, just as Wittgenstein, J.L. Austen, and others modeled in their work on philosophy of language. That approach was also the heart of the Montaigne essay – which I had encountered
with excitement in a French literature class. I decided to rethink an approach to teaching that was rendering so many students passive and mute.

This was the beginning of my conscious exploration of pedagogy in relation, as it happened, to ethics. In brief, I never taught an exclusively lecture-based class again; invited students to begin each session by posing their own questions before I fully entered the room, a bit of a gimmick borrowed from a philosophy of science professor whose performative energy I admired. After a question or two, I would sweep into the room to respond and then segue into a much more conversational lecture, perforated by many stopping points for responses and more questions. I no longer sat at the desk, moved around the room, used the blackboard. The classroom was now more participatory, more like a thinking laboratory, though many problems remained, e.g., discussion dominated by the voluble few. I failed to give guidance in note taking, and didn’t even consider introducing in-class exploratory writing. (That was a decade and a half down the road.) I kept paper assignments as before because they seemed to be working as a way for students to conduct considered thought experiments in relation to texts. I gave them a lot of discursive feedback as well as grades. Replicating the much appreciated fairness that some of my own teachers modeled, later work was always given more weight in tallying final grades. A major lacuna in all this: I never incorporated a discussion of pedagogy, and the Ed students maintained their own silence on the matter.

**EK:** I’m fascinated by the course that you taught, and by the fact that it was required for graduate students in the School of Education. It is also interesting to hear more about how you “would not enter the room at the start of class before they took some active responsibility, until
at least some of them had posed “opening questions.” We talked about this once when I was struggling with a particularly reticent group of students. What I ended up doing was first trying to not enter the room until they were already in conversation, but that didn’t work (perhaps because they were college freshmen?), so ultimately I did something that at the time felt terrible, but in retrospect was a turning point in our class.

I waited outside until it was about 5 minutes into the class session. I then joined the class and we did a piece of process writing in response to a very loose question of what was at stake in this particular course for them (beyond it being required). We wrote for a while and then I did my usual, ok, look over what you’ve written and bracket off what you’d like to share. As the sharing began, I gradually turned my chair so that my back was facing the class. The class continued, students sharing their writing, responding to each other, ultimately linking to the text at hand. I think a good 30 minutes passed before anyone acknowledged that my chair had been flipped around.

**JR:** That’s amusing and instructive. Much more physically performative than my example, more like something Prof. Agassi (the original model) would have done. I loved the energy of his classes.

**EK:** I know that you’ve done a lot of different kinds of teaching work—at the accelerated high school in DC, at Bard of course, Language & Thinking…What I’m wondering if more of the “origin story” of how you came to be in the classroom—did you always see the classroom as “hybrid” (I just listened to the KWH talk about Alternative Poetries, Alternative Pedagogies)?
JR: I don’t know how I was using “hybrid” at that time, and can’t bear to listen to myself, so I’ll just go with “interdisciplinary” which has been the nature of all my teaching since my experience in philosophy programs. I remained, after a lot of moving around between institutions, and a lot of angst about whether I could be a mono-disciplinary philosopher, an AABD – almost all but dissertation. So eventually my work opened with much less anxiety to the complex reality of a messy interdisciplinary world.

In DC, in the sixties, I was hired as a consultant in social philosophy for a newly established interdisciplinary institute at the Justice Department. It was a “Great Society” initiative at the tail end of the Johnson administration, connected to the continuing social unrest of the decade. Some in the Justice Department were acutely aware that they needed to develop more complex perspectives, more nuanced responses to what was going on. Originally called, if I’m remembering correctly, the Institute for Criminal Justice, it was later constructively renamed the Institute for Social Justice. My approach was to conduct more or less bi-monthly, conversational seminars, sometimes based on “working papers” I wrote to be distributed in advance, sometimes with a visitor, one whose work was explicitly value-based, original, pragmatic. “Revolutionary” is how I thought but didn’t talk about it in that setting. Nonetheless, my contract wasn’t renewed when the Nixon administration took over. This was not so much a situation of teaching as staging what I wanted to be thoughtfully provocative conversations with interdisciplinary range in relation to urgently timely questions. That sense of a necessarily enlarged scope, that kind of procedural rationale became part of everything I did pedagogically thereafter. I’m sure you recognize it as the widening out of inquiry, the underlying interrogative momentum of L&T as I
had redesigned its practices by the time you joined the faculty.

In the early seventies, I taught at The Emerson Institute. (Now called Emerson Preparatory School.) It offered an accelerated high school curriculum for any and all purposes. My students included a 14 year old “certified genius,” already accepted for admission to a major university but in need of a high school degree in order to be processed for admission. Several others were too intellectually precocious for (bored by) the pace of standard curricula. There were GI Bill Vietnam veterans, Nigerian immigrants, students with severe learning disabilities, and “last ditch” cases who had walked out – or been kicked out – of numerous previous schools. I taught two classes there – Composition and Introduction to Philosophy, each five days a week with pretty much the whole school in both classes, and I loved it. There was composition in the philosophy class and vice versa. It was all about reading as thinking as writing as reading . . . . . . ideas that drive Language & Thinking but with a Socratic oral dynamic that gave what we were doing an experience of active puzzling analogous to the collaborative in-class writing dynamics of L&T which did not yet exist. What I have come to realize is how the development of my pedagogy was a steady evolution that in many ways culminated in the engagement with the Peter Elbow’s “writing as a form of thinking” practices. To which I added, among other things, trajectories of interdisciplinary and intertextual inquiry. But that’s jumping ahead.

Other pedagogical experiences, prior to my life-swerving encounter with a Bard Language & Thinking workshop in 1983, were: faculty and consultant with the Johns Hopkins Gifted and Talented Program; consultant and developer of an interdisciplinary Masters in Urban Studies for the University of the District of Columbia; interdisciplinary seminar leader on the faculty of the
Washington School of Psychiatry Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities – all this from the late seventies through the eighties. In 1980 I was hired by the interdisciplinary Honors Program at the University of Maryland, College Park where I taught multi-genre composition workshops and thematic interdisciplinary seminars to a wonderfully diverse student population. During my time there (until 1999 when I was hired full time by Bard), I participated in regularly scheduled informal pedagogy seminars hosted by the co-directors of the Honors Program – John Howarth and Faith Gabelnick, pioneers in rethinking teaching practices. About two dozen faculty from disciplines across the humanities, social, and physical sciences came together once a month for several years. In addition to teaching, I did research on critical thinking studies and in 1983 participated in a University of Chicago critical thinking conference where I joined a breakout workshop on “Believing & Doubting” led by Paul Connolly, then director of the Bard Institute for Writing & Thinking. This led to my joining the L&T faculty the following year and a couple of years later putting together a Ford Foundation sponsored interdisciplinary “Faculty Institute on Literacy in the Liberal Arts” at Maryland. The focus of this institute was “the literate classroom” in core curriculum courses for the economically and ethnically diverse public institution. By that time I was using productive and pleasurable L&T practices, modified or intact, to one degree or another for everything I did. The institute was a success among faculty who participated but was nixed by a new Dean in the 3rd year when the university would have had to take over the funding of it. By that time our sessions would have been close to indistinguishable from an L&T or IWT faculty workshop.

During these pedagogically engaged decades, I was of course also a poet and essayist who had been greatly impacted by Gertrude Stein and John Cage, developing a “poethic” that put
intellectual and imaginative dynamics, ethical and aesthetic and even scientific dimensions into conversation with one another. A good deal of this became inflected by John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality*, and the through-line of Wittgenstein’s “language as a form of life.” An interest (belief!) in the value of “loaded,” expansive conversation (augmented by Richard Rorty as well) has been the heart of my teaching. The compositional spectrum has ranged from philosophical logics to experimental aesthetic logics to mathematical/ scientific logics. Every bit informed by a pervasive ethic of engagement with issues of social justice. I’ve rarely found myself in a teaching situation where most of those factors were not significantly in play. That’s one way of indicating what I mean by a poethical pedagogy in the humanities.

EK: So, a poethical pedagogy is a way of imagining the classroom space (perhaps even regardless of subject and grade level) as an experiential (and experimental) space committed to philosophical and aesthetic inquiries, and fueled by—issues of social justice—a place where inquiry is central and there’s always a lot at stake?

JR: Yes.

EK: I’m thinking a lot about my own teaching practices. I’m not sure if I ever told you the story behind how I came to apply to Language & Thinking. You and I had met when you read for *Belladonna* (in 2004!). A year later, I was beginning my Ph.D. work, intending to focus on poetry and poetics, but finding that the work that was exciting me most was happening in the classroom. I then began to research poets who wrote about teaching and found myself deeply
immersed in *The Poethical Wager*. “Essay as Wager” and “Wager as Essay” seemed to speak directly to what I was thinking about and how I was trying to imagine the potential of the/my classroom. I then noticed that you directed Language & Thinking and researched the program and its description was sort of like an ideal for me—the emphasis on “robust interdisciplinary study” and the clear weight placed on writing, reading difficult texts, and collaboratively investigating ideas felt, again, like exactly what I was looking for. So I applied. And, the weeklong training you led completely changed the way I thought about teaching (and the course of my graduate study).

I’m revisiting this memory because, as I’m thinking about your description of the “development of [your] pedagogy,” I’m also reflecting on my own. Did you have teaching at all in mind as you were writing the essays that comprise *The Poethical Wager*? Perhaps another way to phrase this question is: do you imagine poethics as a kind of pedagogy in itself? (I think you gesture towards this in the KWH remarks, but I’m curious to know more.) I’m wondering this because of the way that my own reading of “poethics” almost organically changed my teaching—and *my* teaching is that of composition, the required first year writing course.

**JR:** Pedagogy concerns a certain kind of activating and nourishing of embodied minds so they can both realize and exceed themselves as they engage with what society implicitly identifies as the most important things. The aim is for students to become participants in the maintenance and development of those important things. This is all built on value assumptions. It’s what is known as culture. The ethical imperative can be coercive – see, e.g., Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* – or it can be liberating and respectful of differences. The latter entails valuing both autonomous
and collaborative critical inquiry. It must also take place in conversation among subjects who are demonstrably respected by equitable distributions of power. It’s my opinion that the essay as wager – as informed, conversational intervention in matters the writer deems most importantly at stake – is, in its relation to respect for, and activation of the reader, directly analogous to the pedagogical relationship with the student.

**EK:** One question that I think about continuously—what is it about poethics that introduces a link between poetics and composition studies—two fields that don’t really talk to each other?

**JR:** Interesting. Among L&T faculty, who have over the years come from both fields, there is animated conversation between poetics and a good deal of what I take to be germane to composition studies. Whether or not those same faculty – apart from you – utilize that overlap in their academic work outside L&T is something your observation makes me curious about. To me the overlap is inextricable. There is, after all, a poetics of composition; there is a poetics of language structured in any genre. If by “poetics” you also mean the writing and reading of poetry, that has to do with important differences in uses of language from what, say, Adorno referred to as “official thought.” That is an ethically critical function – art/poetry can reveal what ideology conceals, as Adorno argues. I think it is the addition of the “h,” adding the ethical, the critical value dimension, to poetics that transforms the matter into what is at stake in our society when we teach young people composition. Not surprisingly, I think of Gertrude Stein’s *Composition as Explanation* here. This is really what it is all about, isn’t it:
The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. (italics mine, JR)

In other words, an appropriately ambitious construing of “composition studies” might be that it has to do with how our students are composing the world in which we all must live. That is the essence of the great circa 15th century humanist realization – we must educate ourselves and our fellow humans to understand the values at stake now that we know it is us, not God, who shape the world in which we have to live for better and for worse.

EK: An aside—the most recent issue of *College Composition and Communication* has an essay by Patrick Sullivan titled, “The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom”—his argument is that, with the recent scholarship on how creativity is central to intellect and critical thinking, the writing classroom (composition class) should now also “encourage risk taking, creativity, and innovation” and that creativity should be “considered as important as literacy and treated with the same status.” How could anyone think of a writing classroom as separate from creativity?

JR: Yikes! For starters, the man clearly hasn’t encountered Montaigne, et al! The essay as “attempt,” “trial” is all about intellectually creative risk taking.

EK: A follow-up question on my mind is one that deals with the kind of writing-based experiential classroom I’ve participated in through you. Is this a kind of teaching you’ve sort of
always done, or is it something that grew once you became involved with L & T? When we emailed about L & T a while ago, you mentioned that you always taught in your own way, but I’m wondering if you might be more specific?

**JR:** If I’m remembering the same conversation, I was referring to the way I taught my L&T classes, and my IWT workshops, from 1984 on, before I became director of the program in 2000. My approach was more inquiry based, interdisciplinary, intellectually challenging than the Elbovian orthodoxy. I used, and tried to introduce contemporary experimental poetry into the textual curriculum. There was a lot of resistance, on the part of many but not all colleagues, to challenging intellectual content. The tone of L&T as Peter Elbow had put it together was one of “non-threatening” (of course one doesn’t want to threaten anyone!) nurturing by means of immediately accessible texts, stories and poetry that, as he put it, was “no big deal.” The chief goal was for students to find their voice (singular). There was nothing other than periodic personal essays, mostly one or two page extensions of free-associative free writing. No culminating intellectual essay in the tradition of Montaigne or Adorno. I approached my L&T teaching with immense gratitude for the in-class, collaborative writing practices and the sense of process. It’s a brilliant workshop structure. But I say that with a lot of caveats that led to my arguing for changes, and openly creating some different sorts of expectations in my own classroom. Many of which had to do with the experiences I described earlier.

**EK:** And, I know that you date the coining of “poethics” as in the late 1980’s—this is fascinating to me because the mid to late 1980’s was the sort of “hey day” of process pedagogy—2 significant texts that came out around then are the Elbow/Belanoff’s *A Community of Writers* and
Ann Berthoff’s *The Sense of Learning*—what I’m getting at is that I’m wondering how much you were reading the composing process movement’s work around this time?

**JR:** I wasn’t very knowledgeable about academic composition theory then, except for a few “foundational” texts L&T faculty were asked to read early on, including of course the early work of Peter Elbow that led to the initial rationale and design of what was then called the L&T “Workshop,” rather than “Program.” It was the practices themselves that were – and still are – transmitted experientially that most impressed me. A few, as I’ve indicated, negatively. My conceptual framework emerged from a very different route – chiefly philosophy and poetics, some Dewey and a lot that resulted from the focus on teaching in the Maryland Honors Program.

The ideas embedded in the word “poethics” – the word itself – came to mind when I was working closely with John Cage. I realized that his life, his life-work embodied both aesthetics and ethics in an inextricable way that – I thought then and still do – Aristotle couldn’t understand at all as a way of being – composing one’s aesthetic work and one’s life in the world with a common set of values. The *Poetics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* had to be separate books. Ironically, or perhaps not, I had the *Ethics* in the foreground of my mind at the time of the coining. Aristotle had an enormous effect on my pedagogical valuing of stretching one’s capacities to the fullest, rising to the occasion of difficult texts. Full activation of capacities is what Aristotle says brings happiness. I entirely agree with that.

**EK:** In the first chapter of my dissertation there’s a section where I parallel the way you discuss and describe “poethics” in “Essay as Wager” with the way people like Elbow, Emig, Berthoff,
etc. describe the rationale behind writing-based teaching (in the composing process movement incarnation). Ultimately, I’m talking about the limits of the process movement and offer the idea of a “poethical classroom” as a way to expand these limits.

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