

## CHAPTER 3.

# WHEN EVERYONE WAS WRITING ABOUT READING (AND WRITING)

Postprocess emerged in a sporadic and discontinuous fashion. Eventually, its three central tenets—writing is interpretive; writing is public; and writing is situated—coalesced into a reasonably coherent conceptual formation, a “three-part mantra” with “poster-ready brevity” (Lynch, *After Pedagogy* 32). Before that convergence, though, the three principles circulated through different branches of composition and/or writing research, relatively independent of one another. In this chapter, I explore 1980s scholarship on what might now be called the *interpretive* dimensions of writing but which were, at the time, more commonly called its *interactive* and/or *transactive* dimensions.

In the Introduction to *Post-Process Theory*, Thomas Kent argues that “to interpret means to enter into a relation of understanding with other language users. So, understood in this way, interpretation enters into both the reception and the production of discourse” (2). Postprocess “interpretation” is, in short, the conceptual space in which theories of reading converge with and/or inform theories of writing. In his review of Kent’s *Paralogic Rhetoric*, Reed Way Dasenbrock effectively elucidates this point. By Dasenbrock’s account, “Kent’s theories move in two directions simultaneously.” At the level of pedagogy and/or writing program administration, they point toward writing in the disciplines. On a conceptual plane, they advocate “a greater integration of reading and writing, since the hermeneutic act of interpretation is central to finding the available means of persuasion” (“Forum” 103). In retrospect, one can see some of Kent’s texts in the early-to-mid 1980s as trending toward paralogic hermeneutics and communicative interaction inasmuch as they focus on the textual means by which authors and readers negotiate meanings. At the same time, many other scholars were also considering this integration of reading and writing, the inevitable hermeneutics of communication, although few would arrive at precisely the same implications. Even during its own time, what came to be called postprocess (paralogic hermeneutic) writing instruction was certainly not the only and not necessarily the best approach to certain intellectual questions. It may have had the best branding, though, and thus the most extensive afterlife.

To demonstrate just how prevalent this *writing is interpretive* notion was during the 1980s, I will focus on the works of Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Martin Nystrand, both of whom claimed a synecdochal relationship to scholars

of composition, and by extension writing, and by extension communication as a whole. That is, they rightly presented themselves as representative examples, engaged in a common intellectual task, not as solitary geniuses. Although their works are undoubtedly impressive in terms of rigor and depth, the subject matter of their investigations was hardly unusual. While discussing Nystrand and Phelps, I'll focus primarily on how they re-integrated reading and writing research. Still, I hope the reader will notice how many other common postprocess themes they also endorsed: questioning the viability of generalized models of The Writing Process; emphasizing situational and/or contextual dynamics of text-production; criticizing the non-interactive qualities of much "academic writing"; advocating discipline-specific forms of writing instruction. And yet, despite these strong conceptual overlaps, neither Nystrand's nor Phelps' scholarship has been assimilated into or absorbed by postprocess discourse. Thus, an important corollary follows: the more you read, the less dramatic, radical, or revolutionary postprocess seems to be. To write an honest history, not a hagiography, is to admit as much.

During the period before postprocess coalesced, no term or category existed that might have summoned its disparate elements—its theoretical tenets, its pedagogical principles, its insights toward writing program administration—into a unified constellation. But, the ideas that came to be associated with postprocess predated that naming. And so, it's important to affirm that scholars developing (proto-)postprocess tenets did not understand their work to be contributing to such an endeavor, *per se*. To borrow a line from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, they "wrote [their] way out" of one thing without knowing what, precisely, they were writing their way into (Miranda, "Hurricane"). This last claim may strike some readers as overly obvious, hardly worth stating; however, I am not simply engaging in hypotheticals. Although John Trimbur is commonly credited with introducing the term *post-process* into composition scholarship in 1994, the term had been employed a full decade prior. Phelps was aware of that usage (c.f., *Composition* 80). But, although she opposed the status of *process* as the central term or metaphor for the field, she did not advocate replacing it with *post-process* or any other single term.

In *Networked Process*, Helen Foster characterizes postprocess as a particular "sensibility, one that inexplicably yearns for rupture" from Process (180). She also argues, "Not only was there no break with process during [the 1980s], there was also never a serious suggestion that there ought to be. No such suggestion was seriously made until the 1990s" (38). In contrast to Foster's first point: I believe this yearning for rupture was explicable and even justifiable, and I hope this chapter many demonstrate why. Regarding the second: in my estimation, the historical record proves otherwise.

At least four scholars that I will consider in this book—Marilyn Cooper, James Reither, Judith Langer, and Phelps—overtly called for reforming Process theories and/or rejecting Process as the primary model for writing during the 1980s. From their perspective, understanding writing solely or even primarily *as a process*, rather than associating it with a broader set of terms or ideas, was producing intellectually deleterious effects. As Cooper noted at the time, “Theoretical models even as they stimulate new insights blind us to some aspects of the phenomena we are studying”; each one, invariably “projects an ideal image” and thus “influences our attitudes and the attitudes of our students toward writing” (“Ecology” 365). By her account, the “dominant model,” built on the assumption that *writing is a process* had “become too confining” (366). Imagining writing as an *ecology*, rather than a *process*, would allow for a more expansive view and enable interesting, new research trajectories.

In his 1985 article “Writing and Knowing,” Reither demonstrates a “tendency in composition studies to think of writing as a process which begins with an impulse to put words on paper” and asks whether “our thinking is not being severely limited by a concept of process that explains only the cognitive processes that occur as people write” (“Writing and Knowing” 621). By his account, scholarship on writing processes had “bewitched and beguiled” scholars “into thinking of writing as a self-contained process that evolves essentially out of a relationship between writers and their emerging texts (622). Thus, he suggests, “The ‘micro-theory’ of process now current in composition studies needs to be expanded into a ‘macro-theory’ encompassing activities, processes, and kinds of knowing that come into play long before the impulse to write is even possible” (623).

Of course, under one viewpoint, Reither and Cooper did not reject Process *per se* so much as the dominant, narrow instantiation of it. According to Hannah Rule, they “do not turn away from processes as much as they make much, much bigger” by employing “the language of infinite extension” in their work (*Situating* 59-60). I find this argument apt when applied to Reither’s work but less so when applied to Cooper’s. In “The Ecology of Writing,” Cooper repeatedly stresses that models shape and/or distort the phenomena they purportedly represent (365-70). Models are, she reasons, “ways of thinking about, or ways of seeing, complex situations” (370). To conceive of writing *as a process* is to circumscribe the boundaries of what writing is, what it does, and what it conceivably could do. To conceive of it *as an ecology* would not offer a more complete or correct perspective, precisely. But, it would nonetheless allow scholars to “reformulate” their research questions “in a way that helps us to find new answers” (370). Thus, I believe Paul Lynch is correct in affirming that “Cooper explicitly offers ecology as a replacement for process” (*After Pedagogy* 85). As we shall see,

Langer and Phelps presented similar arguments. By their account, the scale of the process was not the primary problem with conceiving of writing as one. Rather, from their perspective, the binary opposition between Process and Product had too narrowly defined what each could mean. Phelps would extend this logic farther still, faulting the conceptual constriction that occurs when writing is equated with *any* single term.

When they took over the editorship of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee began to include a brief editor's introduction at the start of each issue, which they called "Musings." The two, and particularly Langer, seem to have been disturbed by the focus or scope of the Process movement, and to a lesser extent by the connection between research on writing processes and purportedly Process-based pedagogy. Conventional disciplinary histories suggest that scholars in the Process Movement shifted their focus from the products of writing toward the process(es) involved in the act(s) of writing. Langer and Applebee support this assessment, noting that "such a shift was necessary to correct previous imbalances"; however, they hasten to add, "The pendulum may have swung too far." They argue, in short, that processes are oriented toward producing products; they are purpose-driven. Therefore, to study one (i.e., process) without the other (i.e., product) "may severely limit our understanding of both" (6).

In the following (May 1984) issue, Langer picks up and extends this argument. In particular, she presents *process versus product* as an "unproductive" binary or a "false dualism." Focusing on process had caused some scholars to "los[e] sight of the enterprise in which the process is engaged." While Langer understood that new research often defines itself in opposition to older research by rejecting central tenets and/or objects of inquiry, she suggests that exploring a new idea would eventually cause scholars to see "not only its strengths but also its limitations" (117). The strengths of Process had been numerous and obvious, but its limitations were "beginning to be clear" (118). Whether considering "reading, writing, or spoken language," separating process from product had produced negative effects. In dividing the two, Langer suggests, "we lose the essence of the process itself. Process does not consist of isolated behaviors that operate willy-nilly, but of purposeful activities that lead toward some end for the person who has chosen to engage in them." From her viewpoint as the editor of a major venue, Langer therefore cautions that "process studies in both reading and writing are approaching a theoretical dead-end" (118).

Because process models could no longer answer the questions that needed to be asked of them, Langer imagined a "post-process paradigm . . . one in which process models were built and process activities examined with explicit intent to relate the processes observed to the resulting products." In this post-process

paradigm, scholars would reject generalized notions of good or bad reading and writing behaviors in favor of situationally contingent definitions. Without such a post-process turn, Langer worried that some actions might come to be “regarded as generally ‘helpful’ or ‘unproductive’” and that (supposedly) process-oriented pedagogy might promote “a range of activities never examined in terms of their usefulness toward *particular* instructional ends.” That is, something like *the* writing process (or even several acceptable writing processes or approaches) might be reified through scholarship. In contrast, to construct genuinely useful classroom activities and/or exercises, instructors would need “a clear sense of the purposes in which we are enlisting them, and of the complexities attendant upon those purposes.” Ultimately, a new vision of process that might also attend to products would be one in which “all processing behaviors” would “be looked at interactively” (118).

As we shall see, Phelps advocated reintegrating a focus on products into Process approaches well before Langer’s post-process proclamation. For now, though, let us turn briefly to her arguments against conceptualizing writing solely or primarily as a *process*. In her 1982 “The Dance of Discourse” Phelps argues that “terminology” offers “a point of entry to any conceptual framework”: “any nomenclature, whether deliberately chosen or spontaneous, acts as a ‘terministic screen’ through which reality is selectively perceived” (31). Thus, both perceptions of the phenomena under investigation—say, writing—and subsequent analyses of it are shaped and directed by the words one uses to describe and discuss it. In her 1985 “Dialectics of Coherence,” Phelps picks up on this logic. She begins her work by heralding *Process*, as both a movement and a term. In line with Susanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*, Phelps identifies it as one of those “great generative ideas that periodically arise to transform our intellectual enterprises by changing the very terms in which we frame our questions and conceive our purposes.” However, she argues, because such key terms “possess” or transfix us, they are not immediately critiqued or questioned. One only arrives at the “critical distance” necessary to “refine and correct” such key terms over time, “as a paradigm matures” (12). *Process* had offered just such a key change, presenting and/or enabling many notable advances. Even so, she writes, “In the next stage of our development as a discipline, we need to take up a more critical attitude toward process theory, to probe its limits and to articulate and address some of the conceptual problems it leaves unresolved” (12). One such limit of Process is its (relative) inability to “account for the role of texts in discourse events”—that is, in the emplaced and temporally specific interactions between readers and writers via texts. In other words, because Process (the movement itself, but also the term as employed within the movement) had been “constituted initially by a contrastive opposition between composing (dynamic process) and

texts (inert product),” scholars within the movement tended to avoid studying texts themselves directly (12). The mantra *study process, not product* entailed a way of not-seeing particular phenomena: the products themselves. As Phelps acknowledges, this was a “‘logological’ problem, a consequence of the terms in which the key concept was originally framed.” The primary issue to be addressed in subsequent research, then, was “the conceptual reach or stretch of the language of process”—whether or not it could be re-oriented to accommodate a more robust, interactive vision of writing (13). Notably, even while admitting the problems with doing so, Phelps would continue to employ a writing-as-process vocabulary throughout the late 1980s. However, as we shall see, she changed course by the start of the 1990s, making use of a broader set of concepts while interrogating the utility of each as a metaphor or model for writing.

### RELEGATED REPRESENTATIVES: PHELPS AND NYSTRAND AS UNDER-EXAMINED SCHOLARLY SYNECDOCHES

In “Written Text as Social Interaction” (1984), Nystrand and his co-author Margaret Himley allow that “interactive views of language and meaning are by no means universal and are indeed uncommon in writing research” (198). Even so, they present a numbered list of scholars in other domains who have examined the “joint ‘contract’ between producer and receiver,” including psycholinguists and co-authors Herbert H. Clark and Susan E. Haveland, philosopher H. Paul Grice, psychologists (but not co-authors) Ragnar Rommetveit and Lev Vygotsky, linguist M. A. K. Halliday, and social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (199). A few years later, Nystrand opens *The Structure of Written Communication* (1986) by noting, “In the last decade, writing and reading researchers have increasingly drawn closer together” and later states, “Since 1970 writing and reading researchers have increasingly echoed each other” (ix, 13). During the “Social 1980s,” he would explain in a 2006 retrospective, “Increasingly the nature of writing, like all language, was viewed as inherently social and interactive. Each act of writing began to be viewed as an episode of interaction, a dialogic utterance, ideally exhibiting intertextuality within a particular scholarly community or discipline” (“Social and Historical Context” 20-21). Thus, per Nystrand’s evolving accounts, interactive approaches gradually entered and then attained centrality within writing research.

To understand how Nystrand conceptualized his own disciplinary positioning, one benefits from examining a history that he himself wrote. In “Where Did Composition Studies Come From?” (1992), he and his co-authors, Stuart Greene and Jeffrey Wiemelt, knock earlier histories by Faigley and Bizzell for treating various phases in the discipline’s history (e.g., the shift from “text to

individual/cognitive to social”) as independent or unrelated phenomena, instead of demonstrating their connections to one another and to their “general intellectual context” (271-72). Notably, for our purposes, Nystrand et al. suggest that “the story of composition studies has a much broader and more penetrating scope than has heretofore been examined,” but when they want to justify their own approach to historical narration, they turn to Phelps’ work (272).

They had good reason to do so.

In the preface to her book *Composition as a Human Science*, Phelps states, “Theory is autobiography” and acknowledges the “reciprocity of biographies—myself and field” that animates her work (vii, ix). Ever attentive to widespread shifts in disciplinary thinking, though, she positions herself as “a synecdoche for the ways composition theorists have encountered the limits of their concepts and attempted to revise and surpass them (“Audience” 172). While positioning her own growth within an evolving academic field, she also positions the field’s evolution as a function of changing material conditions. Rejecting the solitary author and dissolving the boundary between audience and writer are “not just the abstruse speculations of theorists,” she argues. Instead, concepts and theories were forced to evolve “under the pressure of new social and technological conditions,” including novel forms of collaboration, the affordances of hypertext and multi-media textuality, and various copying technologies (“photocopying, facsimile, and videotaping”) that would “allow anyone to reproduce anything regardless of copyright” (162).

To summarize: Nystrand and Phelps positioned themselves within a circulatory ecology of other ideas, texts, and scholars. They understood their own ideas to spring from this ecology, rather than from anything innate within their own free-floating minds. These are, to be sure, prototypically postprocess gestures. But, postprocess did not invent them. In addition, judging from the subsequent circulation of their own work, neither Nystrand’s nor Phelps’ made a direct or appreciable impact on scholarship in quote/unquote “High Postprocess Theory”—though, I would argue, for almost exactly opposite reasons.

I suspect that Nystrand’s scholarship—given its positioning within literacy studies and English education—has remained isolated from the spheres that postprocess theorists tend to frequent. Of course, there’s nothing insidious about this distancing. Given the insularity of academic niches, the scholars who read and publish in *Written Communication* and *Research in the Teaching of English* are not always those who also read *JAC* or *Enculturation*, and vice versa. However, I also imagine that Nystrand’s work has also been dismissed out-of-hand by many postprocess theorists as a-theoretical, as having nothing at all to say to (purportedly) “more theoretical” work in the field. Of course, from the viewpoint of many theorists, there is a fate worse than conducting a-theoretical re-

search—doing *empirical* work. And, as Charles Schuster notes in his review of *The Structure of Written Communication*, within Nystrand’s book “control and experimental groups abound, chi square tests worm their way into arguments, graphs and tables appear with alarming frequency” (89). Though he allows that Nystrand’s “heavily parallel style . . . thick with nominalism . . . is itself a form of argument,” Schuster still concludes that “its ultimate effect is to alienate many of the readers who most need to share in his knowledge” (91). To state the obvious, I imagine that this alienation has indeed occurred. Although, in fairness to Nystrand, Stephen P. Witte and David Elias, two considerably more sympathetic readers, would call *The Structure* “an excitingly ambitious attempt—perhaps the most exciting and the most ambitious to appear to date” to discuss “the complex interactions among the textual, contextual, and ideational components” that allow for written communication (“Review” 676). One person’s utter lack of “theory” is another person’s theoretical bombshell.

Phelps’ work, in contrast, seems to have suffered the fate of many other purportedly “theoretical” texts both within composition studies and abroad. As Daniel Smith notes, “One of the most common criticisms leveled against ‘postmodern theory’ is that its often hard-to-read and jargon-laden prose functions to hide the vacuity of its ideas or to imbue the author’s writing with an air of importance and substance that it does not have” (“Ethics” 525). And these seem to have been the unfair—Smith might even suggest *unethical*—objections to Phelps’ work. Even in a *College Composition and Communication* review that begins, “Every serious scholar in the field of composition must read Louise Phelps’s *Composition as a Human Science*,” Jasper Neel still characterizes Phelps as “utterly, militantly theoretical throughout” (94). Neel also presents a series of common anti-theory arguments, some of which seem to conflict with one another: the book tries to achieve too much; it moves too quickly and yet it also gets bogged down in minutiae; it presents a “dead-earnest seriousness” without sufficient “play or humor or lightheartedness or joy” (94-95). The end result of all of this, he suggests, is that “Phelps has written a book that most composition professionals will have to work very hard to read” (96). Reading Neel’s review in the early 2020s, I cannot help but remark on its gendered aspects: he criticizes Phelps for writing too much like Derrida and Chomsky and not enough like Mina Shaughnessy. Women are commonly expected to perform emotional labor in ways that men aren’t, and Phelps isn’t working hard enough to make her reader happy; *she needs to smile more*. And, of the two major reviews of *Composition as a Human Science*, Neel’s is the less theory-antagonistic. (I won’t repeat any phrases from John Schillb’s review in *Rhetoric Review*, which seems oddly gleeful in denouncing the alleged difficulty of Phelps’ vocabulary.)

All of this is quite ironic. *Composition as a Human Science* was one of the earliest texts to diagnose the “strong undertow of anti-intellectual feeling” that resides “deep in the disciplinary unconscious” of composition and “that resists the dominance of theory in every institutional context of the field” (*Composition* 206). And, furthermore, Phelps actively formulated a “context-sensitive form of application” that might bypass an all-too-common but false dilemma: to either “naively accept” theory or “reject it as impractical, overly abstract, and irrelevant” (220). She presented theory “as plastic, not an indigestible lump but a heterogeneous, multiplistic text or open system of meanings capable of entering into a communicative relation with other knowledge systems” (214). That is, she understood that her ideas were complex and that they wouldn’t appeal or apply to all teacher-scholars equally, and she tried to preemptively account for possible resistances.

Determining the fate of Phelps’ articles is obviously harder than accounting for the reception of her book, of course, given that there’s no equivalent of the book review for articles. However, she herself has commented directly on the after-life of “The Dance of Discourse.” In the collection *Pre/Text: The First Decade*, she acknowledges the irony of her task: “Writing a retrospective on ‘Dance’—an essay on how readers and disciplines intersubjectively create textual and institutional meanings over time—in the absence of substantive response from the composition community” (59). This statement is not self-pitying hyperbole; according to the Google Scholar citation tracker, “The Dance of Discourse” was cited six times during its first decade in print (1982–1992)—with Phelps herself accounting for two of those citations.

## **AN ALLEGEDLY A-THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVE: NYSTRAND’S INTERACTIVE APPROACH**

Martin Nystrand has had an extremely prolific career as an instructor, an academic author, and an editor. He helped to found the Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and he served as an editor of *Written Communication* from 1994–2002. In addition, he is the author or co-author of more than seventy-five peer-reviewed journal articles and the author, editor, or co-editor of eight books (Nystrand Personal Webpage). According to Google Scholar, his works have been cited more than 7,000 times. All of this is to say: within certain branches of composition and/or writing studies, the idea that he might need an introduction would seem ridiculous. And yet, his work has remained largely invisible from the scholarly conversation(s) surrounding postprocess. He isn’t cited at all in Kent’s *Paralogic Rhetoric* (1994), Dobrin’s *Constructing Knowledges* (1997), McComiskey’s *Teaching Composition as a So-*

*cial Process* (2000), Foster's *Networked Process* (2007), Hawk's *A Counter-History of Composition* (2007), Dobrin's *Postcomposition* (2011), Arroyo's *Participatory Composition* (2013), Lynch's *After Pedagogy* (2013), Jensen's *Reimagining Process* (2015), or in any of the chapters of the *Beyond Postprocess* collection (2011). Helen Rothschild Ewald cites one of his co-authored pieces in her contribution to *Post-Process Theory* (1999). But, that's it. Now, as I hope should be obvious, I don't mention Nystrand's absence to shame these prior scholars, upon whose work I am entirely reliant. I only mention it to show just how distant his work has been from postprocess in citational terms even as it brushes against postprocess conceptually. Nystrand and Kent, in particular, pursued a very similar scholarly trajectory along a very similar timeline, even though the two rarely cite one another.

Much like Kent, Nystrand distinguishes between Social approaches to writing instruction and clearly differentiates the social constructionism of Bizzell, Bruffee, Faigley, et al. from his own "social interactionist" approach. By Nystrand's account, social constructionists focus on "the large-scale processes of writers and readers as members of discourse and interpretive communities" and emphasize the normative and shared elements of discourse. In contrast, he presents himself as interested in "the dyadic interactions of particular writers and readers," understanding discourse to be "ordinarily varied and heteroglossic" ("Sharing Words" 4, 9). Whereas social constructionists' approach is "top-down," focused on the canon, his own is "bottom-up," focused on individual texts (8). Because this is the place where Nystrand's work most resembles Kent's, I'd like to dwell on their respective approaches to social interaction(ism).

Throughout the 1980s, Kent frequently examined how readers interact with texts, most notably in his first book, *Interpretation and Genre*. But, during this same period, he also analyzed writer-reader interactions in his texts on writing instruction. In the first of his eponymous "Six Suggestions for Teaching Paragraph Cohesion" (1983) Kent advises instructors to "stress the reader's role in the communication process" (270). His 1984 article "Paragraph Production and the Given-New Contract" extends Grice's cooperative principle, "the dictum that speakers and listeners must cooperate with one another in the quantity, quality, relation, and manner of their communications" (46). Likewise, he begins his 1987 "Schema Theory and Technical Communication" by defining writing as "a communicative *process* where writer and reader work together" (244). In his closing remarks to that text, Kent suggests that instructional guidelines for writing might be better defined as "descriptions of how readers read" and he suggests that "writers must continually seek out the common ground, the contracts, the cooperative agreements, the mental representations shared between writer and reader" (249). In a separate article published that same year, Kent argues

that both reading *and writing* proceed “generically”: the elements that a writer chooses to include in her text should correspond to “expectations that both the reader and writer hold in common” (“Genre Theory” 237). Kent, of course, draws many of his terms from Donald Davidson: triangulation, prior and passing theories, the principle of charity. Because Nystrand does not derive his own concepts from Davidson, he tends to use different terms, which, of course, have different inflections. Even so, his insistence on communicative interaction between writers and readers is abundantly clear.

In a 1984 article Nystrand and his co-author Margaret Himley outline their sense of interaction: “Language generally is interactive,” they write, “in the sense that all discourse presumes a joint ‘contract’ between producer and receiver, both of whom must abide by its terms if they are to understand one another” (199). The key term in this contract is a “reciprocity principle”—akin to the principle of charity—in which the communicants pre-suppose that they can and will understand one another (200). The authors then outline two crucial moments in textual production when reciprocity is threatened—at the outset and whenever new (i.e., un-shared) information is inserted—and they explain authorial strategies and textual means by which reciprocity can be maintained (200-201).

In his 1986 *The Structure of Written Communication*, Nystrand elaborates on reciprocity, noting that it “is not knowledge at all” but instead “the principle that governs how people share knowledge” (53). For Kent, the principle of charity “constitutes the opening move in all communication,” one that conceives of “communicative interaction as a public act and not as a subjective private act of the mind” (*Paralogic Rhetoric* 107). Along these lines, Nystrand argues, “Without a contract between writer and reader, both meaning and purpose are unfathomable at best and untenable at worst” (*Structure* 48). Furthermore, once they have established reciprocity, those who wish to communicate must still act accordingly, negotiating a shared understanding. As a result, “all elements of a text” should be designed to balance the writer’s “expressive needs” against the reader’s “comprehension needs” (47).

Nystrand understood this interactive conception of writing to have profound ramifications. Unlike the scholars mentioned at the outset of this chapter, he did not (so far as I know) directly suggest that scholars move away from *Process* as a metaphor or model of writing, but he did present an alternative model in its place. In “A Social-Interactive Model of Writing” (1989), he states, “If we conceptualize writing *not as the process of translating writing purpose and meaning into text* but rather as *the writer’s negotiation of meaning between herself and her reader*, we radically alter our conceptions of writing, text, and text meaning, and of the relationship of the composing process to the text” (76; emphasis added). By his estimation, the framing of Process versus Product—what Phelps had called their

“contrastive opposition”—had led scholars to see written texts as solely as “the result of composing” (75). To be fair, that is, of course, one thing that texts are. But, within Nystrand’s negotiated, social-interactive approach, the text would also be recognized as “a medium of communication mediating the respective purposes of the writer and reader.” Therefore, it would only be credited with having meaning to the extent that its “potential for meaning is realized by the reader.” Meaning, in other words, would be construed “not in terms of the text’s *semantic content* but rather in terms of its *semantic potential*” (76). And, as an important corollary, this negotiated conception of meaning would demonstrate “that more than writer variables—notably the reader and the text—figure integrally and not just ancillary into the composing process” (82). That is, even at the point of textual creation (i.e., invention), writers do not solely act; they are also acted upon.

Whatever disagreements they may have, most postprocess scholars strenuously deny the existence of The Writing Process a singular or generalizable entity, and they agree that writing is not a masterable ability that transfers unproblematically from situation to situation. Nystrand supports very similar positions. Because he conceives of communication—even in written form—as being inexorably interactive, he sets himself apart from those scholars “interested almost exclusively in the composing process in some generic sense” (“Social-Interactive” 67). Indeed, he argues that any “decontextualized” or “exemplar Composing Process,” inevitably elides the “very character of writing as a language system” (*Structure* 26). Therefore, Nystrand contends, “Writing is not a straightforward skill like eating or swimming or typing,” and “no one learns to write fluently once and for all” (18). Writing is simply too variegated, too situation dependent. The skills a writer learns in one instance *may* prove useful in some others, but those skills cannot guarantee success in all cases. Near the end of a chapter entitled “Notes toward a Reciprocity-Based Text Grammar,” Nystrand states,

It might seem . . . that certainly there are no descriptive rules or principles which might be said to characterize, if not govern, the matter of generating and elaborating text; that indeed composing is a new enterprise every time, always requiring the writer to find appropriate forms to fit given occasions, subjects, and individual purposes. (*Structure* 71)

In all of this, to be sure, he sounds very much like a postprocess theorist. However, at the moment he seems closest to Kent, he immediately departs—though perhaps not so very far. “But,” Nystrand asserts, despite the joys of iconoclasm, the foregoing analysis is not quite true: “Every written text is not wholly idiosyncratic.” He therefore frames his purpose as a researcher in terms of salvaging order amid chaos, much like Paul Lynch has done in *After Pedagogy* and Rule has done in

*Situating Writing Processes*. At minimum, he writes, “The constant in the equation of discourse is reciprocity, the underlying premise that the text generated must result in shared knowledge between writer and reader” (*Structure* 71).

The foregoing paragraphs should, I hope, demonstrate that Nystrand conceived of writing as an interpretive or interactive phenomenon; however, his ideas also align with those later endorsed by postprocess scholars in subtler ways. So far as I know, Nystrand never frames his own work as being *paralogic* and his references to *hermeneutics* are infrequent. Even so, he clearly applies a (semantic) externalist framework. He draws from Hilary Putnam to suggest that a term’s reference is established in and through use, rather than existing as some “unequivocal aspect of reality” (*Structure* 44). Similarly, he argues that “the resources of discourse are not ancillary to cognition but actually shape the possibilities for and hence the conduct of discourse itself” (“Rhetoric’s ‘Audience’” 7). He also gestures toward a conception of the extended mind (i.e., vehicle externalism) in his suggestion that “writing systems assist and extend the limits of natural memory” (16). Nystrand commonly cites Bakhtin and Vygotsky; unsurprisingly, then, he conceives of writing as a form of *activity* and understands textual meaning to be *negotiated* between reader and writer.

When Nystrand explains the practical implications of his theoretical positions, these also resemble the approaches endorsed by self-identified postprocess thinkers, who frame writing as an activity oriented toward practical ends. As a pragmatist, he defines language as “an activity motivated by users’ needs to make things known in particular ways for particular purposes and to establish and maintain common understandings with other conversants.” For him, then, language is as valuable for what it can accomplish (in a functional sense) as what it can express. Nystrand also understands the formal (generic) features of texts to arise as much from their functions as their contents (“Rhetoric’s ‘Audience’” 10). A genre, from that perspective, is defined by what it accomplishes within an activity system. In all of this, he sounds quite a lot like David R. Russell and Joseph Petraglia, among others.

Like Russell and Petraglia, Nystrand understands writing to be fundamentally interactive—except in one peculiar instance. “Aside from school writing,” he argues, “writers and readers meet each other more or less half way—each bringing her respective purposes to bear on the text and each proceeding in terms of what she assumes about the other” (“Sharing Words” 8). Unsurprisingly, then, he condemns what Petraglia would call pseudo-transactional academic genres, stating, “Writing in the absence of a rhetorical context is not really discourse; it is the bloodless, academic exercise of essay-making, dummy runs and pedagogical artifacts such as the five-paragraph theme—in short, a degeneration of rhetoric” (“Rhetoric’s ‘Audience’” 5).

## TRANSACTIVE MODIFICATIONS: PHELPS' GENERATIVE TERMS FOR COMPOSITION

For those interested in postprocess, I suspect that Louise Wetherbee Phelps may require less introduction than Nystrand. She was the founding director of the stand-alone Writing Program at Syracuse University, whose doctorate in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric was the first rhet/comp Ph.D. in the United States offered outside of an English department. She also co-founded the graduate consortium of Doctoral Programs in Composition and Rhetoric. More to the point: while reflecting an uncommonly, even shockingly broad knowledge base, her work often engages with the sorts of (continental philosophy) texts that are commonly considered *to be theoretical*. She solo-authored one book and co-edited several more. She has published more than twenty book chapters and at least twenty peer-reviewed articles, many of which appear in the most “mainstream” of composition journals: *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, *JAC*, and so on down the line (Rodrigue, “Portrait”).

As I noted earlier, the first known usage of the term *post-process* in composition and/or writing studies scholarship arises in a brief 1984 text by Judith Langer. For Langer, current-traditionalism represented a focus on the “products” of writing (i.e., static, finished texts) and Process represented an alternate focus on the dynamic acts that might bring written products into being. In the forthcoming “post-process paradigm,” though, Langer believed that scholars would eschew the “false binary” of product versus process. She also believed that scholars would stop searching for the features of (generically) Good Writing or the generalizable strategies and methods that might lead writers to produce it. Instead, they would investigate the particular, situated processes employed to produce specific texts for practical functions.

Phelps was aware of Langer’s arguments, and she is one of the very few scholars to cite the particular “Musing” in which the word *post-process* appears. More importantly, though, Phelps had begun reintegrating product and process well before Langer issued her own call for scholars to do so. While proving that case here, I also want to demonstrate two central points. First, much like Nystrand, Phelps developed an interpretive (and/or interactive or transactive) vision of writing during the 1980s, and she consistently affirmed her placement alongside other scholars engaged in a shared project. But, despite the simultaneity and conceptual overlap of her work and Kent’s, her work has not been assimilated under the rubric of postprocess. Second, in my estimation, Phelps presents the strongest and clearest and most sustained case against presenting any single term (*Process* or *postprocess* or any other) as a central metaphor for writing research. In discussing Phelps, I’ll primarily address three of her articles, which she would retrospectively figure as

a sort of trilogy: “The Dance of Discourse” (1982), “Dialectics of Coherence” (1985) and “Audience and Authorship: The Disappearing Boundary” (1990). I’d also like to examine her book *Composition as a Human Science* (1988), which would re-configure and/or re-present portions of the first two of those articles.

In the last of these texts, “Audience and Authorship,” Phelps acknowledges her prolonged efforts “to surpass a process/product dichotomy” by “modify[ing] the concept of process . . . to refer more inclusively to the cooperative enterprise whereby writers and readers construct meaning together” (154). The textual record clearly evidences this sustained preoccupation. Phelps had begun the work of (re-)integrating process and product as early as 1976. In her master’s thesis from Cleveland State University, *The Development of a Discourse Model for Composition*, she writes,

In the theory I outline below, there are elements of, on the one hand, the progressive emphasis on expression, the composing process, and affective values; on the other, of the traditional interest in the rhetorical nature of language, the interaction of writer and audience, the structure of discourse, convention and form, and cognitive values. It is my purpose to reconcile these elements in a view of composition as an organic whole of process and product. (27)

Here, to an astonishing degree, Phelps places the major pre-occupations of 1970s composition scholarship (the composing process, expression, rhetoric) alongside what would come to be the field’s central pre-occupations for the next several decades (cognition, interaction, affect). And, of course, she also suggests reconciling product and process.

Phelps hoped to (re-)integrate studies of process and product(s) and thereby “to build up a unified theory of composition,” and she believed that it could be achieved through a “relatively simple step” (“Dialectics” 14). Her solution: “to extend the dynamic of meaning-construction from the composing process to the interpretive acts of readers.” Phelps’ efforts here appear deconstructive to me, inasmuch as she would not simply invert the terms of the binary but attempt to reinscribe them in an altogether different economy of meaning. She writes, therefore,

What this means is that the process/product relations change and each acquires new reference. Before, “process” referred to the writer’s act of composing written thought and “product” to the text encapsulating that meaning. Now, the overarching “process” is the cooperative enterprise whereby writers and readers construct meanings together, through the dialectical

tension between their interactive and interdependent processes. . . . In this view the composing and reading processes are no longer distinct. The reader's perspective is bound up in the writing process itself. (14)

While Phelps would admit having "limited" goals for her article, she maintained that "articulating a working vocabulary in which to formulate questions and carry out observations" might "lay a foundation for studying actual processes of coherent discourse in context" (15).

In Phelps' account, a (re-)integrated, cooperative vision of the meaning-making process would produce "momentous consequences because it changes the root metaphor of composition from that of creation to one of symbolic interaction" (14). Inasmuch as *Paralogic Rhetoric* (subtitled *A Theory of Communicative Interaction*) would likewise advocate such a reintegration, and likewise prophesy its discipline-shaking impact, it seems to me that Phelps anticipates Kent here. She argues that reinscribing *process* and *product* according to her stipulations would move beyond a simple accounting for "writing as social action," and instead recognize that "written thought—thought which emerges through writing into situational contexts—is radically social and intersubjective through its very constitution as a discourse" (14). In other words, just as Kent would eventually adopt the term *public* to indicate a form of sociality more social than that which had come to be called *social* (constructionism), Phelps seems to drive sociality not merely into writing as *action* but into writing as *thinking*.

Despite their discipline-shaking potential, though, Phelps would not claim these insights as her own or attempt to take credit for discovering them. Instead, she frames them as a collective achievement. She writes, "This metaphoric shift toward a more intersubjective and deeply contextualized view of written language is, I think, the point of convergence toward which much important work in the profession is moving, from very different initial perspectives, sources, and modes of inquiry" (14). Or, stated differently, a large portion of the field had already begun to see the limit(ation)s of one view of writing as *process* and had moved toward a different set of metaphors. Writing in 1986, Phelps would note that "this transactionalist perspective dominates the May, 1983, issue of *Language Arts* devoted to reading and writing relationships," highlighting works by Robert J. Tierney and P. David Pearson. She would also name eight other scholars—plus herself—as people engaged in similar work ("Domain" 193).

To this point, I have focused on the middle text in Phelps' article trilogy. But, in examining the opening and closing texts, one sees her prolonged efforts to dissolve many of the binaries—not merely process/product—on which Process theories had depended. In "The Dance of Discourse," she argues that "the

dualism itself” is the problem, not “the way the [product/process] polarity is construed” (58, 35). She sought, therefore, to displace a Cartesian-Newtonian ontology with an Einsteinian one that would “merg[e] subject and object, structure and process,” offering “an interactive conception of the relation between ourselves and reality (36, 44). Though she doesn’t use the same language here, Phelps advocates externalist, anti-Cartesian principles. Thus, it’s worth recalling Kent’s stated purpose in writing *Paralogic Rhetoric*: to interrogate and ultimately displace “the ubiquitous influence of Cartesianism or . . . *internalism* on certain contemporary accounts of reading and writing” (“Response” 106, 105). To achieve a similar end, Phelps would reverse the tendency to privilege linguistic system (*langue*) over discourse event (*parole*) (46). Although “emphatically” avoiding any effort “to prescribe practice or even give advice,” Phelps would ultimately posit a “reconstruction” of discourse as “essentially dance, event, or pattern of symbolic energies in which the discourses participant, ordered or structure with the aid of cues laid down by the writer in the text for himself and the reader (54-55).

By 1990, Phelps was no longer trying to dissolve the subject-object distinction; instead, she would present that dissolution as a *fait accompli*. She opens “Audience and Authorship” by noting that “theory and research,” as well as composition pedagogy were already “carrying us beyond the concept of ‘dialogic interaction’ between writer and reader” by “break[ing] down the barriers and boundaries that allowed us to distinguish audience from writer, text, and context” (154). To the extent that a disciplinary shift had occurred, though, Phelps saw “process theory generat[ing] its own critique,” shifting away from “isolated writing process studies” in order “to reconnect writing to reading within a transactive discourse act” (154, 155). At the same time, though, Phelps acknowledged the limitations of recent studies on audience. “They don’t go far enough,” she would write, characterizing them as “radically incomplete if taken to account comprehensively for the social dimensions of writing,” insofar as they did not “collapse” the distinction between audience and author (156, 158).

Before proceeding, some terminological clarification may be in order. In instances that I’ve quoted above, Phelps sometimes refers to her scholarship as being *interactionist* and other times as *transactionalist*. Importantly, though, she did not consider *interaction* and *transaction* to be synonyms. Rather, following Louise Rosenblatt, she understood *interaction* to indicate “the impact of separate, already-defined entities acting on one another” (Rosenblatt, “Transaction vs. Interaction” 97). In contrast, in a *transaction*, “instead of breaking the subject matter into fragments in advance of inquiry, the observer, the observing, and the observed were to be seen as aspects of a total situation” (98).

In this light, then, one can better understand Phelps' proclamation that conceptions of dialogic interaction would be replaced by more thoroughgoing models of transactionality. She prophesies

the imminent replacement of dialogic interaction (an exclusive, cooperative relation between writer and reader, mediated by text) with a more fully contextualized, polyphonic, contentious model of transactionality that encompasses multiple participants and voices along with situation, setting, institutions, and language itself—and finds it hard to maintain firm boundaries between self and other. (“Audience and Authorship” 156)

By 1990, Phelps had concluded, it would no longer be sufficient to conceptualize a dialogue between author and reader, mediated by text. Nor would it be enough to consider the text as dialogic, a pastiche. To do so would be to imply that each element was (or could be) separated out from the others. Instead, in a transactional model, all elements would be seen as mutually implicated: author, reader, text, context. In this light, the author might be considered a construction or composite, no longer “distinct from reader and other voices of the intertext (158, 161). With the disintegration of “every boundary that formerly separated (however permeably) mind from mind, mind from text, mind from material world, text from other text, text from talk . . . and so on,” scholars might re-direct their attention. Under such conditions, Phelps argues, “Audience is no longer the problem, but the given . . . It is authorship we cannot take for granted” (163). Of course, inasmuch as composition “teach[es] authoring,” this new view of authorship posed problems. She would therefore formulate a theoretically rigorous approach that might still “account for the fact that we do experience ourselves as authors” (163). To do so, she would turn to Bakhtin, a “thoroughly contextualist theorist” who still “preserves heuristic”—that is, “simplified and limited” but also useful—“boundaries between authorship and audience” (170, 169, 165).

Phelps' work presents a strong and abiding sense of a scholar (and, synecdochally, a scholarly field) continuously wrestling with the relations between subject and object, reading and writing, writer and audience. By 1990, Phelps sounded very much like an externalist. But, then again, so did she in 1982. The difference: by 1990 a sizable group of “composition theorists [had] now begun to argue various broader notions of the social element in composing . . . (as political ideology, as ecology, as genre)” (161).

In the foregoing paragraphs, I have focused primarily on Phelps' article trilogy, which critiques the Process movement forcefully and presents a fairly radical reimagining of it. By 1990 she would distinguish between “isolated writing pro-

cess studies” and a “modification of process theory” that “reconnect[ed] writing to reading within a transactive discourse act” (“Audience” 155). Even so, she would continue to refer to a *process* approach or movement within those works, despite acknowledging the logological problems incumbent in doing so. In the terms of continental philosophers, she used the term *under erasure*. However, she presents a different approach in *Composition as a Human Science*.

In *Composition*, Phelps seems perfectly willing to eschew the term *process*, though at once hesitant to adopt any other, single term (or “totalizing mechanism”) to take its place (46, 52). She suggests that *process* is “too frail” to continue supporting serious scholarly investigations. It is, she argues, “deeply flawed, being burdened by scientism, psychologism, dichotomization, severely restricted scope, and ecological blindness” (45-46). She even wonders whether it ought to be “rule[d] out . . . as a generative term for composition” because “it just carries too much baggage that needs to be cleared away before we can perceive the contextualist possibilities [that] it evokes only partially and distortedly” (46). I’ll have more to say about those contextualist possibilities in a moment. Here, though, I would note Phelps’ longing for a “productive abstraction,” a term or concept that scholars might “treat . . . as trope,” so as to “exploit the associations evoked” by it. This productive abstraction, she suggests, would “not simply designate phenomena but describe them,” enabling scholars to “reconceiv[e] facts in fresh and surprising ways” and “assign negotiable meanings to vague but important terms like audience, coherence,” and so on (47).

Phelps admits that, for the sake of the discipline she would prefer to inhabit, several terms might be preferable to *process*, including “event, act, activity, interaction, transaction, open system, relation, ecology” (46). At the same time, she concludes that each is, in its own way, both “too powerful” and “too unspecific” to be a “generative term for composition.” In her estimation, whatever term(s) might replace *process* would need to “spring directly from our subject matter,” and scholars would do well to “proliferate what Peirce calls ‘interpretants’—signs that refigure and resymbolize the key term in a process of ‘unlimited semiosis’” (46). Ultimately, she also recognizes the “personal nature of such [terminological and conceptual] choices,” and so she admits that others would need to be extended the right to (and would *need* to) champion their own “values and attitudes.” At the same time, this proliferation of perspectives would offer one further benefit: other compositionists’ “copresent values” would “criticize and limit” her own, and hers would do the same to theirs in turn (52).

Throughout Part One of her book, Phelps refers to what she calls “the process decades” using past tense verbs (47; c.f. 42-46). Though she doesn’t directly state as much, she subtly implies that the Process movement may have already reached its limit, even if scholars hadn’t yet come to terms with that terminus.

Thus, it would need to be reconfigured or revitalized. Importantly, though, she figures Process as “pluralistic” and “not really a theory at all, but the common ground among many theories and practices that encompasses highly diverse and frequently conflicting emphases, beliefs, values, and treatments of texts” (161). She also criticizes Maxine Hairston for claiming that Process represented an “emerging paradigm” or a sort of “scholarly consensus.” To her mind, any generalized “agreement [concerning Process] depends on not trying to go beyond a list of features, which conceals profound conflicts and leaves open the question of how these principles might be coherently related” (180). That is, Process was internally diverse, even if that diversity was commonly ignored—even by its proponents. Given its variegated nature, then, one could not dismiss the whole formation simply by dismissing one of its components. And yet, Phelps genuinely did see faults with Process—both the term and the movement.

Although Phelps refuses to dismiss or directly replace the term *Process* with any other, single term, she does signal her preference for a particular conception of writing instruction: a contextualist one, which might join together and/or operate through that aforementioned string of concepts: “event, act, activity, interaction, transaction, open system, relation, ecology.” Crucially, contextualism is understood here as the Quantum Relativistic (i.e., Einsteinian) form of process that Phelps had addressed in “The Dance” (43). But, whereas her comparison between a Newtonian-Cartesian process and a Quantum Relativistic one would seem to imply that the former preceded the latter historically, Phelps denies this suggestion. Instead, she argues that “contextualist themes are latent in the very origins of process,” even if the Newtonian model “dominated conceptions of process” in its early stages (44). She comes dangerously close to suggesting that contextualism has overtaken its “linear, deterministic” opponent in the 1980s, but she stops just short. Rather than trumpet the intrinsic superiority of one approach to another, she historicizes. Contextualism, she suggests, “shares, or perhaps comprehensively articulates, the peculiar reflexivity of postmodern thought” (32). Therefore, it is valuable to compositionists to the extent that it adds to Process “a dimension . . . that clarifies certain radical possibilities in postmodern themes” (30).

This appraisal aligns with (what I take to be) Phelps’ overall purpose in *Composition*. Throughout her book, but particularly in its opening pages, she places rhetoric at the point of convergence of “the positive directions of postmodern culture” and argues that composition is uniquely suited to help “articulate and realize this paradigm,” insofar as it provides a site for working in/out/through the relations between theory and praxis (6). Or, stated in the simplest terms I can offer, Phelps believes that a lot of smart people in a lot of disciplines—including composition—are coming to recognize the inseparability of subjects

(e.g., people) and their environments. She admits that conceptual overlaps may be difficult to see, but she affirms that composition provides as good a place as any in which to see them. She thinks that composition has been, is, and will increasingly be *contextualist*.

Phelps borrows her notion of contextualism from Stephen Pepper's *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (1942). To simplify Pepper's work heavily: any given philosophical system will intertwine with a "world hypothesis" or worldview, which will itself rely upon a "root metaphor" that provides an explanatory key or interpretive frame (akin to a Burkean terministic screen) and also a "truth criterion" through which one makes sense of the world. For Pepper, the root metaphor for contextualism is difficult to define "even to a first approximation by well-known common-sense concepts." But, he allows that the best available term "is probably the historic event"—an event that he defines as "alive in its present," and which he calls a "dynamic dramatic active event" (Pepper 232). The event in this sense is an act—one that is best described by "us[ing] only verbs." The event happens in time (i.e., it is *historical*) but it is also ongoing; it reverberates, and it is probably better figured in terms of *change* than *growth* (which is central to a separate worldview: organicism). Furthermore, the event must be understood as "an act in and with its setting, an act in its context." In this way, contextualism opposes convenient or simple dichotomies. It focuses on both the quality of an event—its "intuited wholeness or total character"—and also to its texture, "the details and reactions which make up that character or quality" (238). Importantly, though, it denies that either quality or texture is an "absolute element," apart from the other. It does not allow for the common conception of a whole as merely the sum of its parts, nor does it allow that a whole might be "a sort of added part like a clamp that holds together a number of blocks." Rather, the whole is "immanent in an event" and thus Pepper calls contextualism "the only theory that takes fusion seriously" (238, 245). Fusion, within this framework, implies that "the qualities of the [purportedly individual] details are completely merged in the quality of the whole," and in this sense it does amount to a form of "sheering" or "qualitative simplification and organization" (243-44, 249). Unlike any other philosophical system, contextualism provides fusion with a "cosmic dignity" (245).

Finally, for our purposes, contextualist analysis differs from other varieties in that it never bottoms-out or arrives at definitive answers: "there is no final or complete analysis of anything" (249, 250). For any given event, one might always analyze different textures (i.e., elements), even pulling at the "strands" of those textures, and thereby arriving at different conclusions (250). Any meaningful analysis must therefore be conducted "in reference to the end" in sight—that is, for and in acknowledgment of its practical or pragmatic purposes (250-51). Parsing this point in a parenthetical aside, Phelps notes, "Relativism is not

construed as pernicious; ‘pluralism’ conveys more accurately the idea that reality is too complex to be encompassed by any single truth or perspective on it” (32).

Phelps’ work consistently aims to (re-)integrate reading and writing to construe each as inseparable from the other. She implies that the “dominant” Process approach to composition separated them unnecessarily and for reasons related to its terminology and/or its root metaphor(s). But, in arguing for this reintegration, she does not discard *process* but instead simultaneously redefines it—as “the cooperative enterprise whereby writers and reader construct their meanings together”—and places it within an alternate network of terms (“Dialectics” 14). In so doing, she “changes” (or, at least, hopes to change) “the root metaphor of composition from that of creation to one of symbolic interaction” (14). Again—and at the risk of redundancy—this symbolic interaction is contextualist and thus, in some senses, transactionalist. In defining her terms by proliferating terms, Phelps states,

Context (also system, field, whole, ecology, relation) refers to the total set of relationships from which particular entities and qualities derive. . . . A contextualist theory is one in which all parts are not only interdependent but mutually defining and transactive. . . . This premise holds for the system in general, and specifically for the relationships between subject and object, observer and observed. Neither is fixed; the line between the two is neither sharp nor stable, because each is derived from and defined by the constantly new relationships in which it participates. (*Composition* 32-33)

In this light, writers (those who might otherwise be called “human individuals”) are considered to be “multidimensional systems not clearly distinguishable from their social and physical environment” (34).

Of course, Phelps’ arguments here will sound familiar to contemporary compositionists and writing studies scholars, given the current, collective fascination with writing ecologies and/or the ambience of rhetoric. And, as I have indicated but not yet commented upon, the term *ecology* pops up quite often in Phelps’ discussions of symbolic interaction and contextualism. In fact, though Marilyn Cooper is often credited with introducing an ecological approach into composition studies with her April 1986 “The Ecology of Composition,” Phelps did so three months earlier, in the January 1986 issue of *Rhetoric Review*. In “The Domain of Composition,” she presents a “very abbreviated sketch of a view of written discourse as interaction.” In this interactive conception, she writes, “Written discourse as symbolic action can only be understood ecologically, in terms of its rich interaction among acts, meanings, and reality, rather than by a reduction of its texture to ideal elements and rules.” This ecological conception, she argues,

would entail “an interpenetration of writing, the mental world of writer and readers, and the life-world in which they live” (185). Inasmuch as I want to conceive of ecological composition as a postprocess approach to rhetorical invention, Phelps’ work here might seem to be postprocess or proto-postprocess. Indeed, in *Composition as a Human Science*, she explicitly critiques Process for “its inadequacy to articulate a comprehensively ecological framework for composition” (41). I will not characterize her scholarship as postprocess, though, given her apparent, prolonged resistance to such labels. Even so, I cannot help but note how it accords with postprocess approaches in other ways.

In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate that Kent’s proto-postprocess theorization often occurred outside the conventional (i.e., first-year) bounds of composition, that *Paralogic Rhetoric* was understood at the time of its publication to imply a movement toward writing in the disciplines (i.e., teaching writing within its relevant activity systems), and that the after-life of postprocess theory has entailed a further movement away from composition and toward writing studies. Consider, then, how Phelps explains the ramifications of her contextualist approach in *Composition as a Human Science*:

If we apply contextualist criteria, there is no principled way to restrict the responsibility for such teaching to a particular age or setting. . . . Thus we have grounds for enlarging the teaching responsibilities of composition to encompass the origins of literacy in cultural experience and its continuing growth and application to practical contexts, such as work or public life, within the individual’s personal history. (71)

For Phelps, contextualism implies (at least) three major shifts: in the age of the learners (a shift to lifelong learning); in terms of who can teach (a shift in favor of those involved in the activity system); and in the setting for education (a shift toward teaching within the activity system itself). In a later elaboration, she states, “The newly vigorous contextualist or ecological orientation to literacy recognizes that the learner lives in a cultural and specifically linguistic world, and thus highlights the interpersonal dimensions of natural literacy learning” and it “emphasizes . . . participating in literacy events” (114). One learns to write by writing in the culturally and linguistically inflected settings in which one finds oneself, alongside others who also appear there.

## **CODA: ON MAPPING THE EDGES OF POSTPROCESS**

In writing a history such as this, one faces unavoidable questions concerning categories. Over and over again, I have been forced to ask, *how far do the edges*

*of postprocess extend?* The answers to this question are always ultimately arbitrary, but also revealing.

There's an old cliché that says, "If it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, well, then, it must be a duck." By this logic, similarities are obvious, and one shouldn't over-think them. But, from my perspective here, a lot hinges on *likeness*, which can always be construed (and, more to the point, *constructed*) broadly or narrowly.

The better you know a thing, the more you care about its fine-grained distinctions. For much of my life, my brother and I were roughly the same height and weight, we had the same hair color, similar eye colors, the same skin tone, and at least some shared facial features. Yet, whenever people would tell my mom that we looked alike, she'd become either insulted or perplexed. She could see that I have her eyes and chin, but my brother has my dad's nose and smile, and so on down the line. Those distinctions *mattered* to her, but they couldn't and didn't to most people who encountered us. And, to some degree, that hurt her.

Now, I am not trying to equate these relatively academic musings with a mother's love for her children. Even so, I imagine, I am writing this book to those willing to make such fine-grained distinctions, some of whom may even have emotional stakes in my depictions.

In quite a few respects, as I hope this chapter has shown, what came to be called postprocess was itself an instance of a broader series of shifts in composition and writing studies research throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Even so, I want to refuse the impulse to subsume Nystrand's and Phelps' research into the history of postprocess simply as interesting or odd examples of it—one considered to be "not theoretical enough" and the other surprisingly considered to be "too theoretical." To do so would be to privilege that which one can name—because a name has been pre-given—at the expense of that which is not yet named. One could just as easily say that Kent's proto-postprocess work is an instance of whatever Nystrand was doing at the time or whatever Phelps was doing at the time. Likewise, of course, one could create some new category—one can *always* create a new category—and subsume Nystrand and Phelps and postprocess into it. Such a gesture would present certain merits. I take Nietzsche to be correct in identifying concept-formation (that is, categorization) as the fundamental move toward knowledge-making. But, I also follow him in lamenting whatever is lost, stripped away, cast aside in order to produce a semblance of likeness. The gain always implies a loss, and so one is forced to ask: is the gain worth it, and to whom?

In this light, when asked the question, *how far do the edges of postprocess extend?* I have attempted to answer: just far enough, and no farther.