CONCLUSION
SITUATING WRITING PROCESSES

Writing about ongoing research back in 1984, Jack Selzer observed the range of detail and insight emerging about the nature of composing processes. Though he found this work illuminating, Selzer warned against impulses that would turn that wealth of observation into "overly prescriptive interventions and modifications" (276) to the way student writers were expected to write. As process research fueled process textbooks, Selzer hoped to see emphasized not just generalized similarities like recursivity, but more importantly, variation in processes. "The books sometimes acknowledge that differences in habits of composing exist among writers," Selzer notes, "but never within a single writer who is confronted with different writing tasks" (279). In the midst of the burgeoning "process movement," Selzer emphasized the *situated differences* of processes, especially those shaped by differing purposes. Not only are processes not uniform *across* writers, they also are not uniformly held by any *single* writer. A writer's process will necessarily differ as shaped by "different writing tasks." Indeed, as Donald Murray declared—and as he viscerally experienced in Berkenkotter's one-hour protocol in that library room—writing processes are always "a matter of the conditions" (Berkenkotter and Murray 169). As I have explored in this book, conditions range—not just as differences in broad contexts or rhetorical situations or an unfamiliar library versus a home study, but also in the tiniest, most immediate of conditions (like bodily movement, hesitations, interruptions, or interactions with tools, glasses of water, dogs, books, and others) and in the most distant and abstract macro-constraints (including genre, audience, historical moment, community discourse, and so on).

Throughout, I've forwarded the (postprocess) claim that when we let these ranging "conditions" into the frame—especially as I've seen them here as embodied and emplaced experience—living composing processes explode the bounds of modeling or repeatable strategies alone. But this insight on its own isn't exactly novel: while we still to some extent prescribe process routinely as part of our curriculums or equate processes with drafts, we also highlight in our process teaching the multiplicity Selzer valued. We recognize that writers are different, that each have their own complex histories, experiences, positionalities, and psychologies around writing, especially in school. We accept that processes are complex, plural, and never fully prescribable (even if, again, we also have writers do one set of prewriting activities or we specify expectations for revision).

We engage student writers in dialogue and reflection about multiple procedures to get writing underway or to revise at the sentence-level. We ask student writers to read professional writers talking about the life of writing and have them perform similar reflections and narratives.

My efforts in this book have been, in part, to ground those constructions of writers' processes in the specifics of bodies and things and writing places. I have urged less focus on processes as steps or "thinking" and more focus on the physical and material life of process—the range of tools we take up and those we have access to, the infinite sites outside of school which engage us in processes of all kinds and configurations, the affective pace and rhythms of writing as a contingent and susceptible life activity which collides and overlaps with countless others. And too, seeing this physical grounding has potential to encourage important environmental mindfulness—the idea that writers should become conscious of and reflective about how they partner with writing places, space, time, and things. Susan Wyche's study comes to mind on this point. Wyche's own prolonged experience of painful writer's block caused her to examine the shaping, and it turns out, inhibiting role of the environmental conditions in which she was attempting to write. Unblocking for Wyche was not a matter of getting control of her planning processes nor of closer study of the genre conventions of a masters' thesis in her discipline. Instead, Wyche gets relief and progress in her writing by virtue of considering her emplacement, by modifying her writing space and rituals. Guided by the effects of her own environmental overhaul, Wyche then describes how she has her own student writers similarly take stock of their spaces and habits in order to adjust them, to ensure that their environments and object-oriented rituals were properly engineered to better secure good, or at least *completed*, writing projects. Practicing awareness of our writing environments and their participatory shaping roles is certainly important to writing work of any kind today. We all could use more discipline in knowing when to turn off the WIFI if we notice ourselves fleeing too regularly to Facebook or Twitter for a distraction (though I note at the same time too, much writing happens *in* these hectic digital contexts). Reflective awareness and mindfulness about writing spaces remains a very important outcome of situating processes in our teaching.

I've noticed too over the years in presenting my research on writer's spaces and objects just how much *looking* at the material surround of writing engages us. The photographs and drawings I show tend to spark animated conversation around the labor of writing that would otherwise go unvoiced or remain invisible. People just *like* talking about—and even more, peering into—writing spaces. As Brian McNely has put it, in short, we seem to just like looking at "what others' desks look like" ("Taking" 49). This fascination reflects more broadly

in culture, too: in our interest in authors' homes; in images of Einstein's or other genius' offices; and in how regularly we share research studies about what a messy desk says about us, our intellect, creativity, or writing talent. I know I share this fascination in looking. Writing in cafés has become a bit of a liability for me if I find myself next to someone who appears to be writing. I'll inevitably watch them. I try to see what kind of writing they might be doing, how fast they seem to be able to go, what's in the document they keep clicking over to, or how many times they've looked out the window or cracked their fingers.

Just as often when I talk about the environmental and physical dimensions of writing processes, people spontaneously confess things to me. They tell me about their own unusual habit or their specific environmental requirements—like absolute silence or taking up writing on their smart phone in the car. They seem to want to know from me: Is this weird or is it normal? They especially want to know: is it good? Implicitly, I feel like with these questions, writers want me to interpret or diagnose their behavior or writing spaces and prescribe some enabling adjustments. What's the *secret* underlying where we write?, many seem to want to know. Where and with what should we be telling our students to do their writing? What have I found about the best environmental configurations that might produce the "best" writing?

As I have worked on this book, these kinds of questions have left me off-kilter, unsure, bothered (in a good way). My first instinct has always been in the moment to think something like, "well, optimization or interpretation isn't the point exactly . . . ." There is, of course, no single optimal environment for writing, or even multiple "best practices" in writing space design. And I don't know how I would know if your habit of needing to write by a window or only with a cup of black tea is "good" or helpful or not. It just *is* a habit—along with countless others, some of which you know as reliable, much of which unrolls without your awareness, and even more which change all the time depending on right where you are when you take to the page or screen or begin that internal monologue.

But if engineering or taking control of the physical situatedness of our processes is far from the point, then what is? If it is not optimization nor interpretation nor relating well-organized environments to well-organized written products, then what *is* the point of observing and rendering situated processes? My inability to give good answers to these questions had me feeling like I was missing something about my own interest in seeing processes this way.

After some time and much thinking, I think now that it is this that I was missing: in the ways writers and writing instruction conceive of them, processes have come to be something each writer *has* and holds on to. We have come to see processes thoroughly as a *"writer's own."* "My" process is unique—that which I've tried out, repeated, ritualized, habituated, reflected upon and refined. Pro-

cess, this entrenched assumption holds, is what *I alone do* when I write. Process is *my* preparation, *my* plan, *my* idiosyncrasies. Processes are snowflakes; no two writers' are alike. Processes, we have assumed—whether we see them as problems to tackle with cognition, conventions to discover in social communities, activities in dynamic physical environments, or all these dimensions simultaneously—are ultimately *ours* alone to fashion. I realize now that this was what gave me pause in those questions about optimization or interpretation: our tacit, implicit allegiance to this sole control mythos.

I came to see this small tyranny of process ownership through these types of responses to my work over the years. I came to this view especially after looking and relooking at those pedagogical documents (Ch. 3) which each reproduce the virtues of process engineering. I came to this view thinking closely about what it means really to dismantle our allegiance to teaching general writing skills. I came to this view puzzling over what to make of postprocess theory. I came to this view after years with my writing students and our joyful conversations about our strange habits and needs around our complex (be)labor(ing) of writing. Ultimately, I came to complicate process ownership by *looking*, by inviting my writing students to look, by reimagining processes through those big metaphorical glass observation boxes.

When we look at processes where they unfold, we see just how much they are not just "*our own*" predetermined habits or familiar spaces. Processes are just as much the unstable, incidental, accidental, tiny, random, susceptible, and varied actions and objects and constraints that operate outside the reach of writerly control or reflective awareness. What "really" happens in writing processes always exceeds whatever we tell ourselves that what we do when and where we write. And most often—or at least much more often than we focus on, I think—writing processes are not fashioned choices but ad-hoc responses, improvisations. Processes are much more accurately on-the-spot reactions to whatever's going on: to circumstances, a new coffee shop or chair, unfamiliar genres, varying audiences, discourse demands or rules, and other infinite and shaping "conditions." Processes are *never just* ours alone. Seeing processes in their physical and material instantiations reveals this clearly.

This disruption in the mythos of process ownership is no small thing. We in composition have told the stories of process for so long and so loudly that process is not just a critical and shaping concept for writing teachers, but also just as much perhaps for writing students. Many or most who write have at least some purchase in this concept—again, as research on transfer has shown: "For several decades, we have been teaching process, and according to our students, they transfer process" (Yancey et al. 28). But the stories of process we seem to keep telling can reinforce the false idea that writing is a *solo act*—one we can

engineer, one we should ably guide with our own strategies, one that happens somehow independently of where we are and what's on hand. And yet, basically all the other stories we try to tell about writing shows a different picture altogether—especially those more recent stories about context and situatedness but also all those oldest ones we keep telling about rhetoric. Our many other stories of writing—of audience awareness and adaptation, of discourse communities and communities of practice, of rhetoric as identification, of language conventions and the policing of "correctness," of writing-in-the-disciplines, of inventing the university or of Burke's parlor, of genre as social action, of jargon and discourse expectations, of the myth of voice or the unified writing subject, of the social turn, of the rhetorical situation, and many more—resoundingly tell us that writing is *never* a matter of the writer alone. Writing is *not ours* ever much more than it is ours alone.

So why would we keep telling it otherwise in our stories of process? And what could happen in our instruction if our main storyline of process *aligned with,* instead of contradicted, these many other stories of writing as a relational, contextual, and contingent team sport?

Complicating process control, or situating writing processes, does not mean that we shouldn't still help writers be mindful, reflective, and environmentally aware. It does not mean that the only thing left to do is emotionally reckon with writing's distributed chaos (Jensen 15). We should still, as I still do with my students, reflect on who we are in our processes and what seems to work for us. But, at the same time, *really looking* at writing as it unfolds casts processes a much more "co-dependent" (Micciche, *Acknowledging* 8) activity than our process teaching has yet to acknowledge. Writing is not ours *and* it is ours. So too are writing processes always already a team sport—with players both human and not, both local and distant, both here and not.

In embracing this realization, I'm reminded of an intermediate writing student who brought a memorable "attitude" to a narrative essay in which I asked students to artfully describe where they write—where they staged their writing processes and what kinds of things participated alongside them. Others described beautifully a "new drafting table" or being "underneath the awning hanging from the café" or in a "small attic room . . . of my rented, century-old house" (I notice, this last student was, or at least she made it seem like she was, writing in a literal garret). But this student, "Jay," seemed to sniff out a lie or impossibility in my very prompt. He wrote,

> I don't really know where I write. . . . I could say the place
> where I write is the rut I wear into the floor from pacing
> around, stumped. I could say that the place where I write is

any random website I call upon to distract me when I cannot focus. I could say that the place where I write is the twilight period between good time management and the night before something is due—the list goes on. Yet, there is not one specific place. They are all places where I write.

I was both irritated and delighted. Irritated because I didn't really see the lie when I wrote the prompt, and he did. Delighted because he was right. We do not wholly own or control writing or its processes. We cannot claim full domain over or fully strategize process. Of course, we can always learn to better guide, move, reflect, attempt, and improvise. But, ultimately, processes reveals themselves to be more responsive and ad-hoc than pro-active and planned. And seeing how differently processes are emplaced across ranging situations shows how situated writing processes are never about the writer all alone. As Emig, Murray, Reynolds, Brodkey, Cooper and others in different ways, and most importantly, as "Jay" has it in his own words—any situated writing process "all really depends on the circumstances."