CHAPTER 10.

THE AFTERLIFE OF UNFINISHED WRITING

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In my office, there is a cheap metal cart that is an unencumbered 4-foot roll from my desk. Each drawer in the cart holds the drafts of unfinished writing projects. Specifically, this cart is for writing that has a material history traceable through conference presentations, journal submissions, seminar papers, and similar occasions when writing gets "finished" for a spell before further development. This cart is for writing that has been iterated and shaped but still needs attention; it's been temporarily suspended; it needs time to marinate. These drawers aren't for failed or abandoned writing. As Stephen King would call them, these are trunk projects—manuscripts you put aside until the time is right to complete them.

Composition instructors are trained to understand that writers develop by learning to navigate the processes through which writing itself develops. Writers-writing move through recursive processes of drafting, revising, and editing. Flip open a stack of English Language Arts or First-Year Writing textbooks, and you'll likely see a variety of conceptual models that enact the "writing is a process" dictum. Prewrite, write, rewrite. Brainstorm, outline, draft, revise, edit. Freewrite, excavate, situate. One single pedagogical resource for legal writers incorporates these four different acronyms to explain the writing process: RAFT, MEAL, ARMS, CUPS (Sneddon, 2020). I don't know what these mean.

So some process curriculums are acronymed, some rhyme, some are hard to describe. Most process curriculums try too hard.

Some of my unfinished writing is stored in digital files. Many I keep on a third-party server "in" the cloud. Other files I keep on my devices, which themselves are backed up in (or is it on?) the cloud. Bruno Latour (2011) helped me understand that whether paper or pixels, the material traces of writing are, in fact, material even if we give infrastructure airy names. So, while not physically within reach, these files have a material significance, a material *weight*, even if I can't feel their materiality. These folders store writing projects I've started but haven't articulated to the extent I have those cart manuscripts. A lot of writing in these folders are single, one-page documents with only a few lines of notes.

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These one-offers have an excess of ellipses, like I'm signaling to myself that these ideas can be developed later. All that matters is securing a basic mold of the thing before the weather gets it.

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When I say process curriculums try too hard, what I really mean is that they are too presumptive about the life cycle of a writing project. Specifically, they presume the conception and delivery of *something* more or less *finished*. There is a presumed finality, that is, an ending. While I've vacillated in my own definitions and representations of the writing process, I've lately grown more interested in coming to terms with something most writing teachers never talk about, probably because they were never taught how to talk about it even though most of us are intimately familiar with it: all the writing we start but never finish.

Some unfinished writing I keep bundled in a tattered file folder that I've sorted through each time I've moved offices. These are projects I've abandoned but still feel the need to possess in their final unfinished forms. I don't have plans to return to these manuscripts, but obviously, they hold value to me. One is a seminar paper from grad school that offers what I still think is a novel rhetorical interpretation of Margery Kempe's penchant for crying. But I can't imagine returning to this manuscript, but neither can I imagine throwing it out. These manuscripts are material evidence of labor that I don't want lost.

I get it, though. From a programmatic perspective, can writing programs practically accommodate the presence of unfinished writing? Composition courses are, by default, shaped around synthetic writing experiences complete with predesigned exigencies, constraints, and assessments. But as a writer myself, I've learned that I can't finish every writing project I start. Sometimes work or family demands take priority. Sometimes, I lose interest. Sometimes, the reason is much simpler: I can't finish. Chalk it up to writer's block or any of its related aphorisms (*the well's run dry*, *you hit a wall*), but these trials are more complicated than that. Sometimes, self-doubt has something to do with it, a felt sense of inability or lack of preparedness. But mostly, I simply hit the limits of what I know/can articulate. To put this another way, I get to a point when I don't know how to get the piece where it needs to go, and that's if I know where it's going, which isn't always the case.

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While I've happily abandoned some projects, others have proven much harder to give up. They have a claim on my thinking. But isn't this true of all writers? That's why I'm writing this now: to give myself the space to consider how to account for all this unfinished writing. As a writing professor, however, I must admit I

hope this inquiry proves useful pedagogically. I'm not interested in building a pedagogy for unfinished writing; I simply want to put voice to the presence of something that we should talk about more publicly, more often.

By the way, I've written at least five different versions of this essay. I considered including a list of all the writing I haven't finished, but the list kept growing. That I'm having trouble finishing this piece—the topic of which is unfinished writing—is an irony I'd rather not take as artifice. But here we are.

If I had to frame this essay like I would a more conventional academic piece, I'd begin with a grammatically strong but conceptually abstract claim, something like *All writing has an afterlife*. Then I'd explain when I publish an article, for example, that piece of writing takes on a life as others read it, think about it, reference it. It lives as lines on my CV, a record in a yearly report, and as a thing that I can share with others. Some of my writing has had a quieter afterlife, like the paper I wrote that won "Co-Third Place" in an essay competition during my junior year of college. But what about all the writing we start but don't finish, writing that we *want* to finish but can't, writing that compels us with its potentiality? What about writing that wants to be written, that is? This writing has an afterlife too. In fact, I'd wager that for some writers, their unfinished writing is more imminent than the writing they've finished.

"There has never been a scholar who really, as a scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts—nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality," notes Jaques Derrida (2006, p. 12). I'm not sure about this. If we consider the specter of unfinished writing, what scholars lack are sanctioned spaces to embrace these ghosts as ghosts. Hauntology, Derrida's territory here, "does not ask 'to be or not to be'; it claims instead the simultaneous playfulness of 'to be and not to be'" (Rahimi, 2021, p. 4). Unfinished writing is and is not.

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But finished writing is and is not, too, depending on the context. As John Gallegher (2020) observes, "While print writers have in some ways always dealt with the afterlife of their texts, such as novelists going on book tours or journalists going on television to discuss an article, the internet, and social media have greatly intensified this afterlife, as well as made the activities of this afterlife extremely heterogeneous" (p. 4), a point he makes in reference to the ways writers can and do update their writing after it has already gone public. But I share Gallegher's point because the technological affordances writers increasingly have at their disposal make it harder to forget about or otherwise discard writing they won't finish.

It can be gauche, but sometimes I like it when writers talk about their writing as if it has a life of its own. I get it. Sometimes, it's helpful to hold up our writing
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at a remove, especially the writing we haven't finished, and treat it like it's something foreign or inexplicable. Such a method can help us think about the place we have let this unfinished writing occupy in our attention. That's why I think we have to live with our not-yet-writing, walk around with it, carry it upstairs each night, and put it to sleep. But this not-yet-writing might also turn into the always-writing or, more accurately, the always-not-writing you're doing.

As someone who grew up in religious circles, I can't not channel the proverbial wisdom from Ecclesiastes about the ubiquity of change. For every writing there is a season of loving and hating, killing and healing, rending and sowing. There is a season for birth, for renewal, and there is a season for death, for letting go.

Indeed, some unfinished writing haunts us from the grave. Such unfinished writing is both a burden and a blessing for the ones on whom the responsibility for its care now rests. I'm thinking of a former student, Mattie, and the stack of papers she cradled in her lap. She was in my office to discuss how to finish the novel her daughter started before she died. Mattie was auditing the course, she explained, to gain confidence. "I have to finish Sasha's book," Mattie said.

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Sometimes, I tell my students that writing can't be learned; it can only be practiced. It's an aphorism that applies to any disciplined activity, of course, but I like this claim because procedural knowledge rarely translates into incorporated knowledge—the knowledge that grows from lived experience. Experience is what tells me unfinished writing can be no less real and no less immediate than the writing we've finished. Experience is what tells me unfinished writing is stubborn in its insistence that the potential of the thing is worth the burden of writing it.

What is the value of coming to terms with our unfinished writing? For me at least, it matters that there are things we can always return to if we choose, even if this returning is a chimera, a useful fiction we deploy to convince ourselves that the well isn't dry, that writing is, really and truly, a process.

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