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Naming More of What We Know: Critical Memoirs & the Ecological Metaphor as a Threshold Concept in Writing

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NAMING MORE OF WHAT WE KNOW:
CRITICAL MEMOIRS & THE ECOLOGICAL METAPHOR
AS A THRESHOLD CONCEPT IN WRITING

by

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ABSTRACT

"Naming More of What We Know: Critical Memoirs & the Ecological Metaphor as a Threshold Concept in Writing" contributes to the work begun by Adler-Kassner and Wardle to gather and name Writing Studies' body of disciplinary knowledge as "threshold concepts." This thesis answers their call to engage in the ongoing development of threshold concepts by offering an additional critical construct: Writing as ecological. To explicitly acknowledge that writing is ecological is an essential addition to the content of our knowledge because it (1) meets the threshold-concept criteria adapted from Meyer and Land (2003), (2) establishes a codified, embodied, 3-dimensional system of knowledge management which corrects many flattened metaphors Writing Studies currently employs, and is (3) already ubiquitous in our scholarship. The exigence for this argument is established in two ways: (a) Through an analysis of that ubiquity and the ecological metaphor's origins from 1980 to present; and (b) through an autoethnographic illustration of ecological embodiment through memoir. Though framed through the disciplinary frameworks with which I am best versed, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy Studies, this project's implications address all Writing Studies factions. Written in two major parts, this work first establishes a theoretical foundation for threshold concepts, for the ecological metaphor, and for personal narrative as an embodied means of expression worthy of analysis. The latter half is delivered as a series of memoir vignettes, each exemplifying through storytelling some of the many ways in which writing is ecological. Ultimately, this project hopes to establish a symbiotic relationship between threshold concepts and the ecological metaphor. Through this symbiosis, naming and teaching writing ecologies as a threshold concept negotiates an explicit corrective to linear habits of thought and our often problematic boundary-creating tendencies through a deeper understanding of the ways in which writing is *fluid*, *complex*, and *networked*.

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INTRODUCTION

<u>Drawlers, Open Racists, & Tobacco Chewers</u>

Sitting across from my sister, Lacey, at a rickety bar table in South Boston, Virginia, I was reminded of my language heritage and how my discursive resources have detoured from hers over years of separation. It was the first road trip I'd been able to afford in years, and Lacey was eager to get us away from the kids and out on the town with her friends for a proper brother/sister reunion. For a while, now, I'd been growing roots and raising my children in the picturesque county seat of a Central Florida town, rubbing elbows with a mix of gentrified would-be socialites, rich college kids, and tolerable locals. I kept the doors to my echo chamber unlocked, but that's because I lived in a nice town. Soon, though, I soon found myself in uncomfortably unfamiliar territory.

I milled about outside the bar as everyone stepped out for a smoke break, glad to be with my sister, and glad to be somewhere other than home. With my hands in my pockets to remedy the evening chill (which no one else seemed to notice), I idly struck up conversation with a young Black man who I'd earlier noticed sitting with a couple friends in a back corner, obviously segregated from the lively mass of white bodies in blue jeans and trucker caps. At 15, he worked at a local tobacco farm,[1] curing the raw crops in a specialized silo, which I found at least slightly more interesting than what the other crowd had to say. But his eyes darted over the other patrons nervously as he spoke, so I left and made my way back to a table with my sister's party.

In this place of merriment, I found myself surrounded by Southern drawlers, open racists, and tobacco chewers. Lacey seemed right at home despite the fact that she's educated and not outrightly any of the above. She's a country girl, and we're from Maine, originally, where "country"

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[1] For information on the abuse of child labor in the U.S. tobacco industry, see, Ramos, A. K. (2018). Child labor in global tobacco production: A human rights approach to an enduring dilemma. *Health and human rights*, *20*(2), 235–248. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6293346/

plays a complicated role in day-to-day existence. "Country," in Maine, is not synonymous with "Redneck," as it often is in the South, but rather, with boot-straps work ethics and stoic morality. But in the South, Lacey made good at playing the part, keeping to conversation about horses and hunting, fitting in with the salt-of-the-earth crowd. Me, not so much. Here, a decade, an education, and 1500 miles away from home, my tight jeans and button-down shirt might as well have been a clown costume.

And the way I spoke! I swear, I tried to fit in, but after two or three "jokes" about the laziness of "the colored" and a few sexual innuendos directed toward my sister, someone asked me if I was some kind of bigshot, all dressed up the way I was. Much to Lacey's horror, I responded: "Yeah, I'm feeling a little conspicuous, here" I said with a little laugh. I saw a flash of worry cross her face, and though I truly believed I was being gracious, all things considered, I had committed a cardinal sin—I uttered (out loud!) a four-syllable word! As her friends drifted off to grab another round, Lacey leaned toward me in all seriousness and whispered in a concerned voice, "You ain't at college, Loren. You can't talk fancy like that here, or there's gonna be trouble!"

This was far from the first time my habits of language had singled me out in strange surroundings, but it was a poignant reminder that, as Paul Matsuda (2016) prompts, people "from distinct sociolinguistic contexts (i.e., regional, socioeconomic, ethnic) often come with noticeably different language features in their heads" (p. 69). The language experiences that form my writerly identity spill over the edge of the page to innumerable speech acts, paralinguistic communications, and the audience roles I've played, and each of them abrades epithelial traces of the language practices of countless others with whom I've come into linguistic contact. Johns (2017) reminds us that "individuals often affiliate with several communities at the same time, with varying levels of

involvement and interest" (p. 323), and Lu (2004) explains that "users of English seldom work with identical discursive resources, in identical contexts, and for identical purposes" (p. 37).

Throughout this work, I borrow Matsuda's (2016) rhetorical focus on "the negotiation of *language* as an integral part of all writing activities" (emphasis added; p. 69). In other words, though I may alternately refer to environments in which we live, work, and play as writing ecologies or rhetorical ecologies, it should be kept in mind that these terms encompass all of human communication and the ways they are fluidly and complexly networked. No doubt, it's been my affiliation with varied discourse communities, the contributions from innumerable literacy sponsors, and my brushes with vagrant discursive resources, contexts, and purposes that have formed the way I speak, the way I write, and the way I understand language today. And this holds true for all of us. I include this narrative vignette to prepare my reader for the memoir-styled prose of my final chapter, to link my own prior knowledge and language experience to the ecologies through which we all traverse with every syllable written or uttered, and to confess a few of my stranger stories because, ultimately, I believe that only through storytelling can knowledge and meaning be shared.

<u>On Threshold Concepts in Writing, the Ecological Metaphor,</u>
<u>& Narrative Embodiment</u>

This thesis agues for the metaphor that writing is ecological and continues the work begun by scholars such as Marilyn Cooper (1986), Jenny Edbauer (2005), Kristie Fleckenstein, et. al, (2008), and Collin Brooke (2009); it explicitly forwards the notion that an understanding of writing ecologies and the common ecological metaphor are critically entwined with any approach to understanding our discipline and its knowledge. Further, I contend that this metaphor deserves recognition within the body of our disciplinary knowledge which some have begun referring to as

the "threshold concepts" of Writing Studies.[2] Though I've framed this project through the disciplinary frameworks with which I am best versed, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy Studies, its implications are meant for all Writing Studies factions. And although the latter chapters, after a theoretical foundation has been established, are delivered in narrative form as a series of memoir vignettes, the theoretical, pedagogical, disciplinary, and practical argument I make here is plain. In fact, once stated, it likely seems obvious, perhaps too obvious for such a lengthy project. And yet, implicit understanding falls short, so we must make it explicit: Writing is ecological.

Meyer and Land (2003) first developed threshold concepts as a way for any discipline to define their disciplinary content. They identified threshold concepts as "portals," ideas which require comprehension for one to move forward within a discipline, ideas which are *troublesome*, *liminal*, *integrative* and *transformative*, and often *irreversible* (Meyer & Land, 2003, pp. 1, 4). Meyer and Land's definitions and conceptions of these terms regarding threshold concepts, as well as those since adopted and adapted for use in Writing Studies theory, provide the foundation from which I draw the exigence for this project (Meyer & Land, 2003; White, Olsen, & Schumann, 2016; Land, Meyer, & Flanagan, 2016; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; among others). That exigence, as argued here, is the necessity for a singular, familiar, and positive metaphor to describe the fluid, complex, and networked nature of writing ecologies, a metaphor which qualifies as and might best be understood and accepted as a threshold concept of Writing Studies.

I could have just written narratives about ecologies and called it quits—so why the threshold concepts? Threshold concepts are crucial to this thesis for three reasons; with no particular

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[2] For clarity, I refer to "our discipline" under the umbrella term, "Writing Studies," and its subdisciplines specifically by name with the exception of when naming it "English" is prudent, such as when discussing English departments or degrees. It should be noted that this decision does not intend to define disciplinary borders. Though it may be a point of contention for some, a rhetorical choice must be made to move forward productively.

hierarchy of importance, those reasons are disciplinarity, promotion, and qualification.

As a graduate student and FYC instructor with everything at stake in the distribution of our discipline's labor in the coming years, the concerted efforts to establish some consensus among our field as to the content of our knowledge holds answers to questions which range from economic to existential. These are questions with which I have struggled, with which I have seen and heard others coming up in the field struggle. Those in the field with nothing at stake may disagree. Some may know what the future of Writing Studies looks like—*for them*—and they may be unlikely to support any disciplinary movement at all. Those happy tenured or tenure-track scholars who until now have chosen silence in response to the encroachment of corporatism on the discipline, the loss of tenured positions, the commodification of students, and the adjunctification of faculty must begin considering the ways in which their silence contributes to the problem—and maybe some embodied narrative might help convince them. Others may perceive the boundary-creating potential of threshold concepts as a threat, a threat to their intellectual sovereignty or to the eminence of their faction in academia. However, for threshold concepts of Writing Studies, though the movement has been characterized in this fashion (and holds a few positions which problematize the issue, such as the focus on united disciplinarity and usage of boundary metaphor), this was never the intent.

A funny thing happened on the way to this thesis. I labored over the title early in the research process and was excited to forward "Naming More of What We Know" as the natural contributive response to Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know*. Then, as I neared the point of no return for the project, I learned of the soon-to-be-released companion book, titled to my chagrin, *(Re)Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy* (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, Dec. 2019). You might imagine my panic as it occurred to me

that months of work may become immediately irrelevant or redundant. But I ordered a copy, and as it turns out, *(Re)Considering* positions itself as a thoughtful guidebook for threshold-concept practitioners, and it attempts to put the matters of disciplinarity and boundaries to rest. To start, the editor's introduction to the book begins by acknowledging that they "were cognizant of the extent to which virtually everyone who writes—which is to say virtually everyone—considers writing to be 'their business' and of the agency experience affords people to generate everything from opinions to policy about writing" (p. 3). The introduction goes on to lay out a "central point" to the collection:

> The threshold concepts framework itself creates certain boundaries that include and exclude particular ideas—and this, too, is a fruitful subject for exploration. While we think it is important to name the rules of the game or ways of thinking and practicing in a discipline so newcomers can get a clearer sense of the landscape, we should at no time use those mapping and naming exercises to suggest there is one coherent narrative of our (or any) discipline—or that what are named as common ways of thinking and practicing are the only important ideas in a given discipline. (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2019, p. 9)

Instead, threshold concepts are meant to represent an opportunity for inclusion. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2019) further define threshold concepts as "articulations of established and widely agreed upon knowledge/ideas/orientations in bounded spaces… They are central ideas most people working in the field would not question or perhaps even think about consciously" (p. 23). It is those "bounded spaces" which rhetorical ecologies hope to address, as by the authors' own admission, threshold concepts are not meant to be rigid and immovable but an ongoing, fluid conversation that names out loud what writing means to each of us—in short, a general yet embodied consensus that bestows on us the political clout of accord while also demystifying the

complex, networked work we do for our students and our knowledge production.

In its potential for symbiosis, the ecological metaphor may just be the perfect next candidate in the ongoing naming of what we know. As Yancey (2004) reminds us, "The metaphors we use to describe also construct" (p. 321). But it's important to remember that the rhetorical choices we make to construct also by their very nature exclude. Lerner (2015) contributes that "writers and readers come to writing in their disciplines with histories, intentions, and expectations, all shaping the disciplines themselves and, in turn, shaping the writing that members of those disciplines do" (p. 41). While that sentiment makes the proposal of consensus one fraught with political implications, the ecological metaphor makes those problematic disciplinary boundaries permeable. Ecologies allow for, no, *depend upon* the open flow among and between multiplicitous avenues of production. Within ecologies, consensus does not imply permanence. Arguing for a more flexible approach, Barton (2007) agrees that the ecological metaphor provides one which "examines the social and mental embeddedness of human activities in a way which allows change" (p. 32). Rhetorical ecologies, are, then, the gatekeepers that keep gates open.

Then, in return, rhetorical ecologies benefit from the platform of threshold concepts. When taught and practiced as a threshold concept, the ecological metaphor moves forward in our consciousness. No longer will "ecology" be a word we thoughtlessly tack onto anything we wish to represent as fluid, complex, and networked, but it will be a point of thought provocation, an opportunity for creating and relating deeper meaning. Less often will newcomers struggle to fit complex writing situations into simplified writing metaphors, "complexities that we must admit are so diverse and divergent that we may never be able to fully account for all of the facets and functions of writing, particularly as writing endlessly fluctuates as a system" (Dobrin, 2012). Instead,

recognizing rhetorical ecologies as Downs (2107) explains, lays bare the complex network and "blurred boundaries among various rhetorical agents, showing us how an interaction is shaped not by a single reader but by many, and the shape of the resulting text or discourse depends on… the exact interplay among those agents" (p. 468). Edbauer (2005) describes how an ecological framework "recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes […as] a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (p. 9). The breadth of expertise in the field urging us to consider the ecological metaphor, as well as the metaphor's ubiquity in our scholarship, as discussed later, should prompt its explicit inclusion in the content of our knowledge[3].

Finally, the ecological metaphor deserves to be considered a threshold concept of Writing Studies because it qualifies. The takeaway from the corpus of existing scholarship on the topic of ecologies is that those who have considered it in any depth at all have found it *troublesome*, *liminal*, *transformative*, *integrative*, and often *irreversible* (Meyer & Land, 2003). It is troublesome in the ways it challenges our conceptions of age-old rhetorical traditions as well as the ways we conceptualize the work we do and the spaces in which we do it. It is liminal in that it *exists in* and *defines* that indefinable space around the work we do. It shows us how the fluid pathways of knowledge and meaning connect each to all, but it also invokes the liminal spaces in which learners cross thresholds from unknowing to knowing. It's integrative in that it provides a fluid, complex, and networked space in which inclusivity is key and seemingly contradictory notions find compatibility. And for those who seek to explicitly employ and promote ecological thinking, it is most definitely irreversible. Borrowing Downs' (2017) words, the ecological metaphor should be considered "because it invokes a sense of *a place defined by a network of myriad interconnecting and almost inseparable*

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[3] In fact, though I intended to divide my secondary research into three camps (threshold-concept theory, ecological theory, and narrative theory), nearly every source I referenced addressed writing in ecological terms, often explicitly. See Lunsford, 1976b; Brandt, 1998; Bowen, 2012; Buck, 2012; Eyman, 2015; Anson & Moore, 2017, among many others.

elements that all shape the rhetorical interaction and meaning that emerges from them" (orig. emphasis; pp. 465-466). By the current definition of threshold concepts, that writing is ecological is already one.

For me, that writing is ecological was a threshold concept before I knew what threshold concepts were. As a grad student absorbing as much rhetorical theory as possible while attending to life's complexities, Jenny Edbauer's 2005 work, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies," captured my attention. It is one I cite often here. I first grew an affinity for the idea as a research method—to trace the complex and obscure roots and proliferation of a simple, relatively mundane bumper-sticker slogan through its reification and material and ideological networks swept me. That something so simple could be so complex and that such complexity could be so readily displayed through ecological metaphor immediately changed the way I looked at the work I was doing at the time. And then I crossed an irreversible threshold. Writing *is* ecological, and what's more, most everything in life is, as well!

For those who find this argument too obvious, the proverbial light bulb was probably lit years ago by the likes of Marilyn Cooper (1986), Jenny Edbauer (2005), Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, and Papper (2008) or Collin Brooke (2009). You may need no further convincing that writing's ecological character necessitates any new recognition among our body of disciplinary knowledge, though you may need convincing that it is a threshold concept. For others, those who find it troublesome, convincing may take some demonstration. However, that is often the nature of threshold concepts.

Threshold concepts stand as one of three theoretical frameworks which guide this project. The chapters which follow establish the other two theoretical frameworks and are followed by third in which I conduct a narrative experiment. First, I devote a large chapter to establishing a broad and

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detailed view of the ecological metaphor, its history, it alternatives, its misuses, and its usefulness as a threshold concept. I define the ecological metaphor as a ubiquitous, unifying concept which presents a threshold moment of learning when explicitly understood and, therefore, should be explicitly taught as an integral unit of our disciplinary body of knowledge. The final, brief, theoretical chapter presents a theory of narrative which lays the procedural foundation for the final chapter—vignettes written in mixed-mode narrative/critical theory. These personal narrative vignettes are drawn from a variety of rhetorical ecologies of my own experience, ecologies which are academic, social, professional, institutional, digital, and personal. My hope, in the end, is to illustrate the *fluid*, *complex*, and *networked* nature of writing ecologies through embodied, first-hand experiences, rather than simply to argue for the ecological metaphor as a threshold concept in writing.

THE ECOLOGICAL METAPHOR

The threshold concepts in Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know* begin the work of recognizing the complex, fluid, and networked nature of our work and, thus, the ecological nature of our scholarly identity, but they lack (as most do without explicit attention drawn to it) a commonly agreed upon metaphor for discussing the work we do in all its fluid, complex, and networked contexts. This project intends to *explicitly* establish the ecological metaphor as that missing piece of the threshold-concept puzzle. Ecologies provide that commonly agreed upon metaphor which, if taught explicitly as a threshold concept of writing, delivers an adaptive accounting for the trans/interdisciplinarity of our field. Rhetorical ecologies call for *a fluid, complex, and networked reconception of our knowledge that makes permeable the borders of our work.*

Throughout, this thesis identifies "writing ecologies" and "rhetorical ecologies" as a commonly agreed upon metaphor which may act as a unifying concept. Though the use of the two terms, "writing ecologies" and "rhetorical ecologies," are somewhat interchangeable, my intent is to use each judiciously, "writing ecologies" when speaking specifically of textual communication or artifacts and "rhetorical ecologies" when expanding the notion to include all communication, practical application, and pedagogy.

The importance of identifying a commonly agreed upon metaphor to account for the nuanced complexities, the fluidity, and our work's networked qualities lies in the nature of language itself, just as the importance of stating it explicitly lies in our politics. Because language is imprecise and often lacks specificity, we always need metaphor to simplify the complex, and we naturally fall back on metaphor to express the unknown or unknowable. Wittgenstein describes this as a function of language, saying, "When we have difficulty with the grammar of our language we take certain

primitive schemas and try to give them wider application than is possible" (Ambrose, 1979, p. 119).

Others claim that metaphor, at least such metaphors as we discuss here, are "cases of concept

definitions" which are used as "a re-categorization resource," and that "Everyday language never

was, and cannot be, devoid of metaphors" (Gurgel, 2016, p. 158, 159; Nyíri, 2011, p. 110). As

Barton (2007) articulates, "We need metaphors for talking about things which are not concrete.

Words are situated within the structures of other words.… We need these organizing principles to

help us make sense of the complex world we live in" (pp. 17, 18). These metaphors, these means of

organizing our thoughts, both individually and collectively have great import to the way we

understand our discipline. As Fleckenstein et al. (2008) explain, "The metaphors by which

researchers orient themselves to the object of study affect the research methods they choose and the

nature of the knowledge they create" (pp. 388-389). They urge us to strive for a metaphoric

harmony: "a resonance among the metaphors that undergird our conceptualization of the

phenomenon of study, our methods of study, and our enactment of those methods" (Fleckenstein

et al., 2008, p. 389). And the metaphor they borrow from the sciences and conclude offers "a

harmonious way of thinking about, of imagining, writing research on the cusp of the twenty-first

century" is the ecological metaphor (p. 389).

Ecologies, in many ways, can be identified in like manner to our currently popular writing

metaphors: genres, the rhetorical situation, discourse communities, communities of practice; all

those abstract sites where fluid, complex and networked texts, individuals, groups, and institutions

cohere with a sense of identity and purpose. However, writing ecologies differ from how we *use*

other metaphors. Our canon of metaphor, if you will, may be broadly defined as ways to build

borders around patterns, to identify and examine homogeneity. However, though they are

inarguably useful, these tools we use to build homogenous sites of rhetoric or populations of

subjects, themselves stand at odds with our heterogenous, diverse, and infinitely multifaceted stances on how human communication actually works—in short, that it, and we, are rhetorical.

For instance, to draw from my earlier examples of common metaphors, consider genres. Genres can be considered metaphors because of the highly abstract and subjective ways we use them to categorize patterns. We use genres to define many things, from the recognizable and repeated forms of common texts such as professional emails or wedding invitations, to our bodies of disciplinary knowledge such as lab reports and scholarly articles, and thus, they even help define the populations who utilize them (Miller, 1984; Lerner, 2015). As Carolyn Miller (1984) argues, "The urge to classify is fundamental, and… classification is necessary to language and learning" (p. 151). Neal Lerner (2015) adds that "any disciplinary genre speaks to the processes by which members of a discipline shape, make distinct, and value its forms and practices of knowledge creation and communication" (p. 41). So, it would seem that genres, the undeniably popular and useful metaphor for teaching and recognizing writing, are hopelessly entangled in boundedness—and yet, also in the unbounded process of shaping identity.

Still, genres have caveats that lack an equal and positive metaphor. The teaching of genre theory in the FYC classroom inevitably pairs with some instruction that genres are not templates for texts but are subjectively recognized patterns of "typified rhetorical action" (Miller, 1984, p. 151). Looking specifically at the literary genres with which our students are most often already aware, we might take, for example, the recent trend among millennial Atheists of placing bibles in the fiction section in bookstores (fig. 1), or the tongue-in-cheek yet fervent Sci-Fi rivalry between Star Trek and Star Wars fans who often both overlap and compete in ideologies and rhetorical stance. Yancey (2004) draws upon the fluid, complex, and networked nature of genres when she claims,

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Figure 1: Holy Bible Placed in Fiction Section
Source: Unknown

[W]e *already* inhabit a model of communication practices incorporating multiple genres

related to each other, those multiple genres remediated across contexts of time and space,

linked one to the next, circulating across and around rhetorical situations both inside and

outside school. This is composition—*and* this is the *content* of composition (p. 308).

So, we're left to question how we account for the somewhat subjective, abstract, and contested

borders of genres even as we employ them as tools in scholarly and pedagogical pursuits.

As mentioned earlier, the "rhetorical situation" is another common metaphor with

troublesome implications (fig. 2). Edbauer (2005) identifies this terminological issue as an

unrecognized (or undiscussed) contradiction—an oxymoron. She claims we speak simultaneously of

rhetoric as a verb (we *do* rhetoric) and a noun (a situation), implying that writing is at once fluid,

decentered, and networked (rhetorical) while still occupying a discrete and fixed location (*in situ*).

Of course, we balance its situatedness with its contextuality. There is friction between the notion

that writing is situated and the notion that writing is contextual. The situation implies borders while

the context implies fluidity. Yet, we understand that whatever we call a "situation" can never be

exhaustively defined due to its contexts—the innumerable and potentially invisible influences upon

any rhetorical situation wrought by prior experience, free will, psychology, and environment.

Figure 2: Classical Rhetor & Audience
Source: Clip art, Eveleen, Shutterstock.com

Rhetoric is imbued with permeable boundaries between multiplicitous situations and networked connections, between multiplicitous rhetors and chains of signifiers, between multiplicitous prior experiences, while situations are bound with contextual specificity. To speak of rhetoric as an object, a place where communication happens between a rhetor and audience in situ and within constraints and for a particular exigence is useful in many ways, as can be attested by the decades of productive pedagogy that have leaned on the rhetorical situation since Lloyd Bitzer (1968). However, despite every obligatory caveat that it doesn't, it also implies that rhetoric happens in a vacuum, in a static state within concrete boundaries—a definable location. So, like genres, rhetorical situations prove too valuable for identifying patterns to set aside yet too bounded to account for all that contributes to our rhetorical identities. We butt up against these issues of boundaries when we watch our students struggle to find (or stop finding!) the essential components of whichever metaphor we happen to be teaching.

These few examples demonstrate the ways our most used disciplinary tools are flawed metaphors, and how they often require extended explanations to ameliorate perceived inconsistencies, but there is a simpler way. Spinuzzi and Zachary (2000) are among the first to

collapse such lengthy descriptions into a concise metaphor: "In genre *ecologies*," they say, "multiple genres and constituent subtasks coexist in a lively interplay as people grapple with information technologies" (p. 172). With this simple metaphor, we grasp that genres are both useful boundary-forming tools of classification and, simultaneously, fluid, complex, and networked concepts that defy rigid definition—because the shape of our metaphors are not concrete but depend on a lively interplay between people and contexts which are fluid, complex, and networked.

Were our models of communicative activity to more accurately represent the interconnected and fluidly diverse ways writing happens in real contexts, they might appear more like those in Figure 3, tracing the social media usage of "#Brexit" on Twitter. The image represents one form of ecological map, one with complex roots whose growth can be traced over time, whereas the red
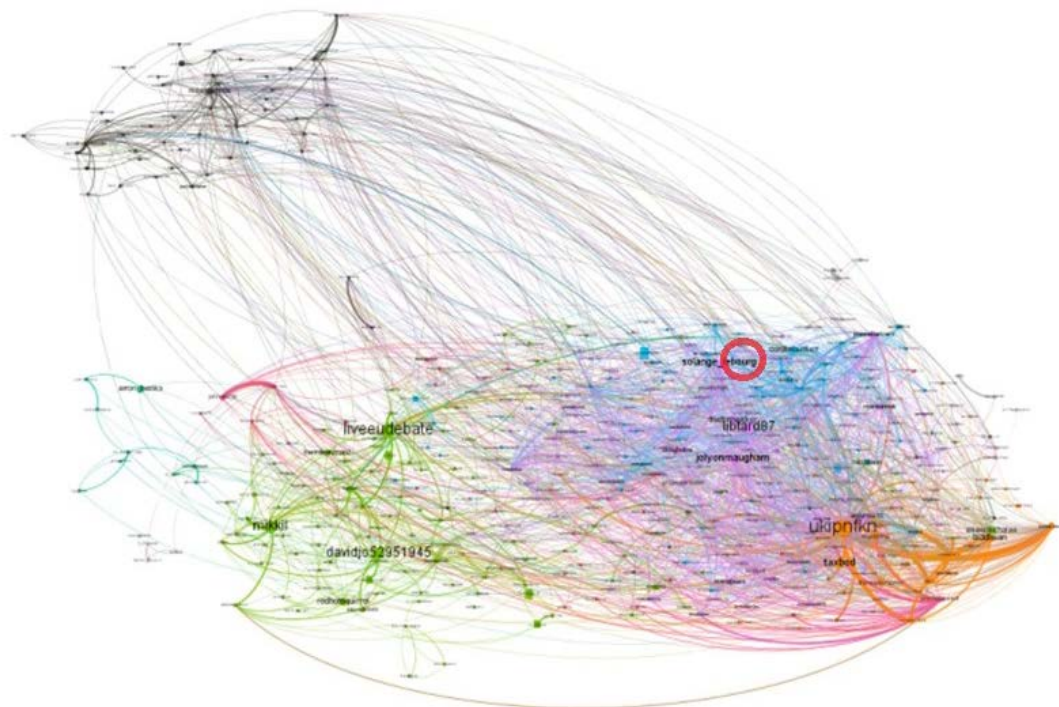
Figure 3: Interactive Map of #Brexit Tweets in U.K.
Source: McDermott, S. (2017, April 03). #Brexit 2017. Retrieved June 29, 2020, from
https://snacda.com/2017/04/03/brexit-2017/

circle within it may also represent a rhetorical ecology, or perhaps a discourse community. You

might, for the sake of study or argument, even narrow a number of constraints (the circle) down to

a simple rhetorical situation or unit of activity theory with easily definable rhetors and audiences, but

the borders of that rhetorical situation still bleed through the edges of that red circle through its

multiplicitous fluid and complex connections to the greater rhetorical ecology at play. In this way, its

premises of networked environments with permeable borders provides a systemic point of access

for discussing inclusivity and recognizing the complexities of writing that sometimes dumbfound us.

Like genres, rhetorical situations, and our other common metaphors, threshold concepts are

unlikely to be embraced without an understanding of their duality—of their power to classify but

also their resistance to rigid boundaries. In *Naming What We Know*, Yancey (2015) claims that

"threshold concepts are neither acontextual nor arhetorical, but are specific to a discipline and

community of practice; they often function as a kind of boundary object in dialogue with local

Figure 4: Ecological View of Rhetors & Audiences
Source: Clip Art, Youth Voice Live, 2017

situations and/or other frameworks" (p. xxviii). And yet, despite their propensity for boundary-

marking, she goes on to explain that "threshold concepts aren't fixed but are rather contingent and

flexible" (p. xxviii). In the same volume, Lerner (2015) explains, "Of course, disciplinary boundaries

can sometimes be quite fluid rather than fixed and stable. Such fluidity offers further evidence that disciplinary knowledge making is a social process and subject to changing norms, practices, and technologies" (p. 41). To demystify these persistent caveats, these often contrasting narratives about the bounded nature of rhetoric, of rhetorical process, of threshold concepts, and of disciplinary identity, it becomes apparent that we should explicitly embrace a *positive* metaphor, one which allows us to clearly state the role and function of threshold concepts without the constant need for backpedaling to account for their infinite variables. This may be accomplished by explicitly acknowledging the fluid, complex, and networked nature of human communication through the common and positive metaphor of rhetorical ecologies.

A Brief History of the Ecological Argument

It must be noted that if the ecological metaphor proposed by this project is to qualify as a transformative threshold concept in Writing Studies, it must also be recognized as open to some interpretation. After surveying the scholarship concerning non-biological ecologies as well as its pervasive usage without explicit definition, a distilled set of the ecological metaphor's constituent components becomes clear: *Rhetorical ecologies are fluid, complex, and networked*. These three elements seem to encompass every variant definition. However, these elements are necessarily tied not only to the examination of specific ecologies but also the metaphor itself; the usefulness of a metaphor designed to permeate borders disappears if borders are constructed around its definition and use. In essence, the value of the ecological metaphor depends upon the application of these same distilled characteristics—that *rhetorical ecologies are fluid, complex, and networked*—a distillation made only to achieve some consensus on its commonness, usefulness, and ease of consumption. Arguments for additional components[4], even those peripherally examined here, such as that rhetorical ecologies are

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[4] See Brooke (2009), Cooper (1986), Dobrin (2012), Downs (2017), Eyman (2015), & Edbauer (2005), among others.

embodied and diverse, will necessarily arise but may only ever add to the complexity, fluidity, and networked nature of writing ecologies.

An understanding of how scholars have theorized ecologies up until now may best illustrate how a simplified, three-part definition can be useful while still retaining comprehensivity. In *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language,* Barton (2007) traces the ecological metaphor back to its roots in biology, saying,

> Ecology is the study of the interrelationship of an organism and its environment. When applied to humans, it is the interrelationship of an area of human activity and its environment. It is concerned with how the activity – literacy in this case – is part of the environment and at the same time influences and is influenced by the environment. An ecological approach takes as its starting point this interaction between individuals and their environments. (p. 29)

From this biological foundation, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari may have been the first to build upon ecologies as a useful non-biological metaphor. The foreword to Guattari's (trans. 2000) *The Three Ecologies* asserts that humans are perpetually "captured" by their surroundings, by their "environment, by ideas, tastes, models, ways of being, the images that are constantly injected into them" (p. 8). The argument to be made from this assertion is that our myriad modes and connections of human communication leave rigidly prescriptive methods of knowledge management incomplete and easily corruptible. From this foundation, Guattari builds the argument that hierarchical, dualistic, and centered epistemologies are inherently insufficient, and instead, we must recognize three laterally interconnected "ecological registers": a "social ecology, mental ecology and environmental ecology" (pp. 28, 41).

While *The Three Ecologies* offers an early framework for understanding ecological theory as it pertains to any other than biological, some of their other works better render the image of ecological writing proposed by this project. For instance, in *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari (trans. 1987) codify rhizomic theory and are accredited most often with its proliferation as a postmodern conceptual framework. In nature, the rhizome (fig. 5) often appears in botany as root systems. To illustrate, they present an individual node of crab grass which may sprout blades along

Figure 5: Surface Rhizomes of German Iris
Source: Nicholson, G. (1884).The illustrated dictionary of gardening, div.
VI. London, England: L. Upcott Gill

any horizontal surface, which sprout matrices of roots in every lateral direction, and which live and "die" over any length of time, united with—yet independent of—the complex, acentered, refracting, non-hierarchal matrix of interconnected nodes that continue to cultivate just under the surface. "Defined only by their state at a given moment… without a central agency," Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome stands at odds with models of hierarchy and linearity (p. 21). They claim that "even some animals are [rhizomes], in their pack form… in all their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout" (pp. 6-7). From a node of iris (fig. 5), to an ant hill or wolf pack, we begin to see how a rhizomic perspective explains movement in numbers, perhaps hierarchical at

any given moment, but devoid of a system of hierarchy over time, through networked seasons, fluid migrations, and complex lifetimes.

Guattari's mental ecology begins to intersect with writing when it achieves the "capacity to recognize discursive chains at the point when they break with meaning" (p. 55). Deleuze and Guattari shift further to argue that all literature is a product of assemblage, that the assemblage of traditional literary work is hierarchical, and that new, non-taxonomic modes of understanding meaning are necessary. Ultimately, the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari seeks an intellectual unification of social consciousness and a conscious consensus of ecological thought. This theme spans decades and pervades their many works in many forms as they argue for a recognition of disciplinarity, the environment, socialization, and all life on Earth as destabilized, decentered, non-hierarchical, and non-discrete systems.

Though Deleuze and Guattari were the first to engage with the ecological metaphor in depth[5], others since then have worked to bring the metaphor to light more squarely within Writing Studies discourses. However, each explicit contribution (again, far outnumbered by implicit associations) brings with it a new distillation, a new definition of what it means to be "ecological." Marilyn Cooper (1986), among the first to advocate for the ecological model in Writing Studies[6], likened the model to "that of a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole" (p. 370). Nearly a decade later, Jenny Edbauer (2005) proposed the ecological metaphor as a remedy to "the terministic lens of conglomerated elements" by which we define rhetorical situations and defined a "framework of *affective* ecologies that recontextualizes

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[5] One reference arose to Gregory Bateson's (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (University of Chicago Press) which precedes Deleuze and Guattari's (trans. 1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, the latter seems to be the more significant early contribution in terms of distribution, access, and influence.
[6] Richard Coe's (1975) "Eco-Logic for the Composition Classroom" precedes Cooper but veers toward ecocomposition.

rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes" (p. 9). Fleckenstein et al. (2008) offer several defining passages, arguing that "writing consists of a complex web of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms," that "to write ecologically is to be immersed in a multileveled, multifaceted environment," that ecological research methods are necessarily "complex, diffuse, and messy," and finally that writing ecologies have three defining characteristics—that they are "interdependent, diverse, and responsive to feedback" (pp. 393, 395, 389, 390). Each article-length work of scholarship addresses rhetorical ecologies in terms that concede the framework's complexity, fluidity, and networked nature.

Three recent full-length books which use the ecological metaphor as their primary frameworks bear consideration for their contribution to the definition, as well. In *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media*, Collin Brooke (2009) achieves a level of comprehensivity that deserves closer attention later in this text. He distills the definitions of ecologies down to "vast, hybrid systems of intertwined elements, systems where small changes can have unforeseen consequences that ripple far beyond their immediate implications" (Brooke, 2009, p. 28). Likewise, Sidney Dobrin (2012), in *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media: Writing Ecology,* uses the ecological metaphor as a framework for developing a responsive Composition theory that acknowledges our interdisciplinary strengths. Though his work sometimes veers toward "ecocomposition," a term I will later disambiguate from rhetorical ecologies, his definition of the writing ecology as a "spatial, relational, and complex" study in dynamics which necessitates "complex theories in order to attempt to understand its intricacies, functions, and possibilities," stands alongside Brooke for its expansive scope and ambitious attempt to unify a fracturing field (Dobrin, 2012). Most recently, and perhaps most saliently as I write this during the international protests against police brutality following the death of George Floyd and countless other Black men and women in America, Asao

Inoue (2015) writes of rhetorical ecologies as a means to enable anti-racist pedagogies in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future.* By explicitly understanding the classroom as an ecology, as "a complex system made up of several interconnected elements," he argues, "a conscientious writing teacher" can "understand and engage in her classroom writing assessments as an antiracist project with her locally diverse students" (Inoue, 2015, p. 9). Stressing the need to make such definitions explicit, Inoue defines ecological thinking as a broad comprehension of "a quality of *more than*, interconnectedness among everything and everyone in the ecology, and an explicit racial politics that students must engage with" (orig. emphasis; p. 9).

Inoue's argument for explicit instruction of ecological thinking echoes that of Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) on threshold concepts and will prove further relevant in the final chapter where we discuss racial ecologies. First, however, it may be prudent to address a few alternative theories to ecologies and look a little closer at some of the finer details.

A Brief Comparison to Ecological Predecessors

Metaphors for rhetoric and writing are nearly inevitably spatial metaphors. Because of this tendency of equating rhetorical work with objects which hold dimensions of mass, volume, distance, length, and movement, we often (almost always) rely on terminology borrowed from the sciences. I've chosen "ecology," implying fluid, complex, and networked environments, but even my defining terms are borrowed: fluid (involving volume, mass, and movement), complex (entailing multiple connected parts), and networked (comprised of multiple elements with interconnected pathways for movement). Open any Writing Studies article with an eye for metaphor borrowed from the sciences, and one is immediately met with references to reproduction, dissemination or distribution, diversity and evolution, cycles, circulation and recursivity, or zones, territories, frontiers, places, areas,

borders, or boundaries. Each implies systems of growth, movement, demarcation, or proliferation which extend beyond the limits of the metaphor. And each of the metaphors we use (and thus the ways in which we organize our knowledge and understand our discipline) are unequivocally ecological in nature. However, we don't have to look too far into our disciplinary past to find ways of thinking which grate against the inclusive and expansive ecological model.

On Autonomy & Ideology

Barton (2007) taunts that "There is a whole cluster of ideas which hang together and which provide an alternative to the ecological view of literacy… This alternative has been termed an autonomous view of literacy by Brian Street (1984)" (p. 118). That "autonomous" model of literacy identified by Street forwarded that much of composition operates under the assumption that writing and writing instruction happen separate from any context (Barton, 2007, p. 118). Sixteen years after his first proposal, Street (2000) published a definition of the autonomous model and contends that, for all its faults, the model persists:

> The 'autonomous' model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself – autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. The model, however, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal ... The alternative, ideological model of literacy ... offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model – it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill ... It is about knowledge: The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. (pp.7-8)

We've begun to recognize in the years since then that autonomous models foster narrow and exclusive pedagogies. Street's "ideological model" begins to sound ecological in comparison. We've come to realize, as a discipline, that the "great divide between literate and nonliterate," once believed to hold "cognitive consequences" at both "the individual level and cultural level," is not only a myth but a naive one at best (and a bigoted one at worst) (Barton, 2007, pp. 118-119).

On Systems & Inclusivity

Barton (2007) tackles the autonomous model which still manages to creep its way into our pedagogies in his treatise on ecologies, recounting how "The idea was that any example of language lay on a continuum from written to spoken language," and that "a continuum has the idea of a straight line drawn between two points" (p. 91). To illustrate how this works in comparison to an ecological model, we'll visit an example borrowed from the sciences: The autismal spectrum. Prior
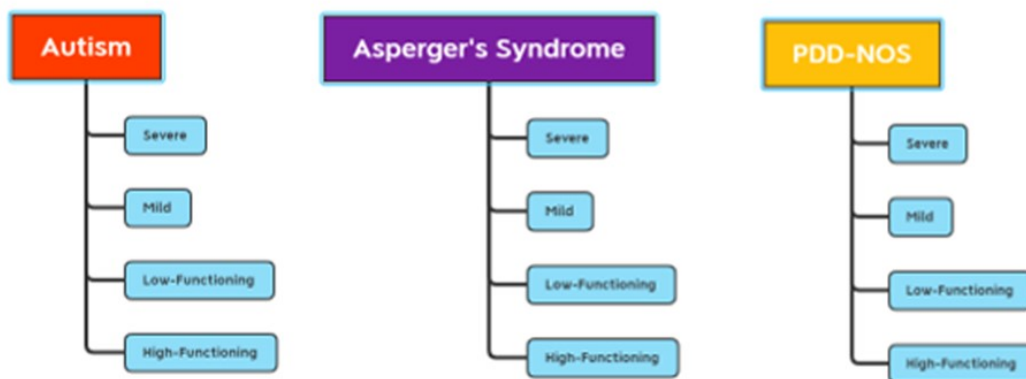
Figure 6: Autonomous Model of Autism Diagnoses
Source: Created with MindX

to the 2013 release of the DSM-IV (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth ed.), autism and several other disorders held discrete diagnoses with separate indications of severity, the best known of which are Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder

(PDD-NOS) (NIMH, 2018). Figure 6 is my amateur representation of how that model of diagnoses worked. We might compare this to Street's (1984) autonomous model. Each diagnosis for each disorder falls easily and discretely within a continuum stretched between two points, from healthy to severely disabled. However, with the release of the DSM-IV, a new, more inclusive, more complex model appeared—the "autism spectrum" (NIMH, 2018).

As popularly conceived, this model should allow for a variety of diagnoses to be placed under a single "umbrella," destigmatizing autism and all its related maladies at all its differing severities. However, even this metaphor implies exclusions to gradient degrees—the closer one is located to the lower edge of an umbrella, the wetter they get in the storm. In other words, those farthest from the "center," the norm, receive the smallest share or least protection, and we're left with that most fraught question: Who, then, can justly determine the norm? Furthermore, the spectral model conjures colorful images socially constructed to symbolize love and inclusivity, something like we see in Figure 7. But, the nature of hierarchical thinking leaves diagnoses and stigma alike more accurately still perceived as a centered, vertical model such as seen in Figure 8.
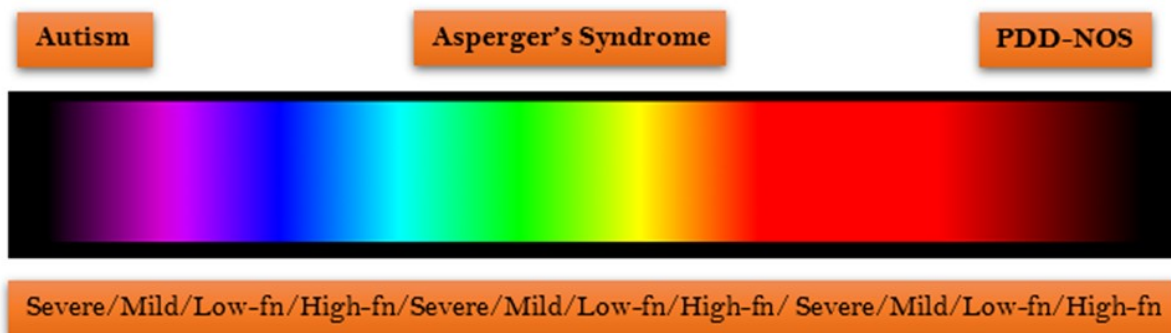
Figure 7: The "Autism Spectrum" as Popularly Conceived
Source: Created with MS Word
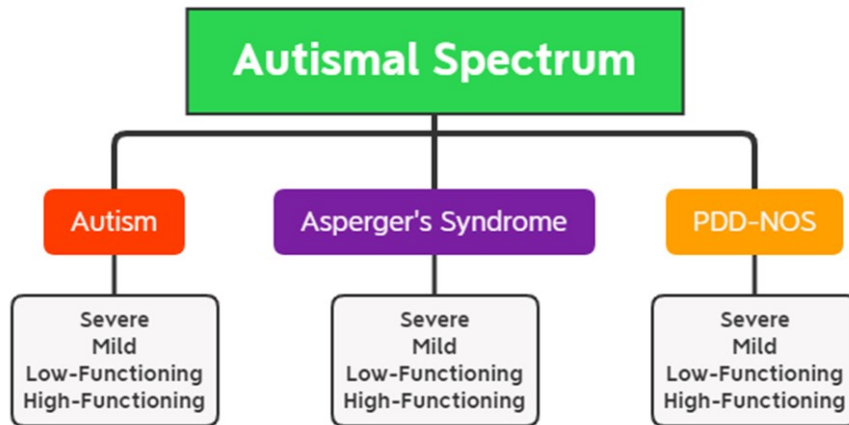
Figure 8: The "Autism Spectrum" in Practice
Source: Created with MindX

So, repositioning autismal diagnoses in the form of a "spectrum" does little to alleviate its hierarchical functions—because a spectrum is, at its core, a continuum. This exercise yields the same results when applied to many other societal spectra. The gender spectrum does little to accommodate those with birth abnormalities or complex, fluid identifications that neither fall squarely between two continuous points of "male" and "female" nor stand still. Placing race on a spectrum does little to account for those with genetic, pigmentation, or melanin disorders, or the diverse lived experiences of those with various skin tones, and worse yet, it flattens the representation of potentially marginalized individuals who each have unique blends of ethnicity and life experience. Yet, we, as rhetors, as a discipline, and as a society, seem to irresistibly fall back on the colorful continuum in our attempts to develop more inclusive systems of organizing knowledge.

Recognizing that these systems are socially constituted is the first step to moving beyond models of linearity just as Marilyn Cooper (1986) proposed with her "ecological model of writing" (p. 367). The fundamental tenet of her model proposes "that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (Cooper, 1986, p. 367).

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Enumerating these systems and defining each, she asserts that "The systems reflect the various ways writers connect with one another through writing: Through systems of *ideas*, of *purposes*, of *interpersonal interactions*, of *cultural norms*, of *textual forms*" (Cooper, 1986, p. 369). By employing a systems approach, Cooper complicates notions of literacy, moves beyond binary structures of knowledge management, and further opens opportunities for borrowing metaphors from the sciences.

For instance, Figure 9 demonstrates how Chemistry represents the movement (or immobility) of energy and matter between different types of systems. Such systems-approach visuals can assist in our understanding of how knowledge, meaning, and interpretation are influenced through interaction with individuals, culture, and textual norms, wherein an autonomous model might appear as an *isolated system*, and a continuous or spectral model might appear as a *closed system*. However, the approach "through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems", as described by Cooper (1986), might resemble an *open system* (p. 367).
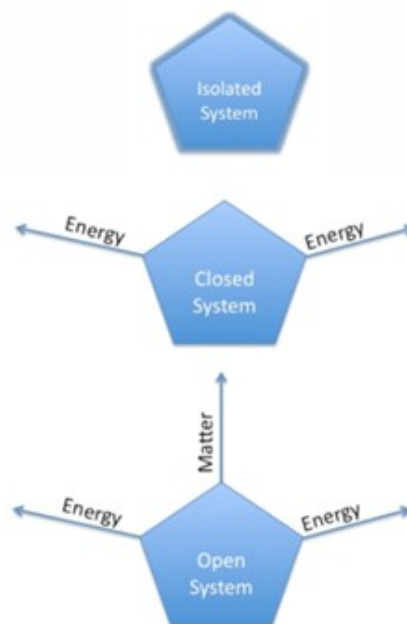
Figure 9: A Systems Approach in Chemistry
Source: Adapa Images Archive, "Systems"

Asserting that "we do not want to end up with a closed taxonomy of literacies," Barton (2007) furthers Cooper's systems approach, advocating for not only open systems, but *complex systems* (p. 38). "Complex systems," he explains,

> …are made up of many elements which interact with each other repeatedly. Over time, these processes of interaction lead to what is called the emergence of new patterns, features and structures, which are generated from the constitutive elements of the system but cannot be reduced to them. In the natural sciences, ideas of emergence have been used to explain how complicated and intricate structures such as wasps' nests, ant colonies or slime moulds, can arise from the ongoing interaction of very simple processes. (Barton, 2007, p. 31)

The complex and intricate dimensions created by sedimented, fluid accretion of otherwise simple processes, when added to Cooper's open systems, allows for more complex, fluid metaphors, metaphors which better account for the networked ways in which the interaction of agents and environments create meaning.

For instance, without moves like Cooper's away from linear models, we might not have Prior and Shipka's (2003) "chronotopic laminations," which they define as "the dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action, the ways multiple activity footings are simultaneously held and managed" (p. 181). Influential advances in metaphoric knowledge management such as chronotopic laminations, in turn, begin to afford us an increasingly three-dimensional vision of rhetorical movement. It is important to note, from the passage from Barton (2007) above, that the product, or output of such systems, whether concrete or abstract, "cannot be reduced" to the elements which make them in concert with one

another—they are ecological products (p. 31). If we return to the autismal-spectrum analogy with this in mind, we find the model in Figure 10 suddenly accounts for more complex, highly individualized, blended, and overlapping circumstances. We begin to see how a map of disorders,

Figure 10: A Complex-Systems Approach
Source: Made with Canva

comorbidities, and extrinsic factors such as identity and environment affect real, embodied individuals with autism spectrum disorder, real people with real struggles. We begin to see how each of these factors may be more or less important in an individual diagnoses, and how those factors may change over time. However, though complex systems and chronotopic laminations permit an enhanced way of conceptualizing the fluid and complex accrual of rhetorical situations which account for the work we do, the models still have deficiencies.

One of the greatest deficiencies to complex-system models is their highly abstract nature requiring lengthy definitions. This presents a twofold problem: How to relate the metaphor to

inexpert audiences such as our students, and how to investigate and report on such phenomena with any degree of validity. In the first case, the average Writing Studies scholar is unlikely to feel comfortable dropping the term "chronotopic laminations" in casual conversation over drinks with friends not in the field. Those who do not hesitate at such pretense are unlikely to be invited for drinks again. More importantly, these metaphors fall just short of the ecological metaphor, and thus, their greatest deficiency—they present a flattened, still-too-two-dimensional representation in their already complicated abstractness. They do more to complicate meaning, but they grapple with complexity and fluidity with too heavy a hand and miss an entire dimension of the networked nature of writing for their efforts—embodiment. Where are the people? People live in ecologies.

Writing ecologies add an easily visualizable third dimension in terms nearly everyone is familiar with. When you evoke "ecologies" as a metaphor, the audience may feel a sense of connectedness to the Earth, of lush green, and replenishing cycles, and abounding life. The uniqueness of an ecology, its unique properties and constituents, hardly calls for an explanation— ecologies are already perceived as complex systems in which the relationships between its inhabitants and environments are vital to its function. As Cooper (1986) argues, ecologies are

Figure 11: World Environment Day Logo
Source: Clip Art

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concrete structures; "They are structures that can be investigated, described, altered; they are not postulated mental entities, not generalizations. Every individual writer is necessarily involved in these systems" (p. 369). For this reason, the ecological model of researching, theorizing, and teaching writing is the next logical step, and one we must embrace. Through the ecological metaphor, we are able to flip our research paradigms to see their three-dimensionality (fig. 12), and we're able to discuss the details of our research in relatively simplified ways as we trace the intricacies of whatever rhetorical phenomenon we endeavor to understand through their delicately entwined matrices of roots and relationships.

Rather than drawing arbitrary, artificial borders around our topics of study, our research, lecture topics, and even assessment attain a more expansive, inclusive, and holistic perspective when we conceptualize writing ecologies as Cooper (1986) argues when she says,
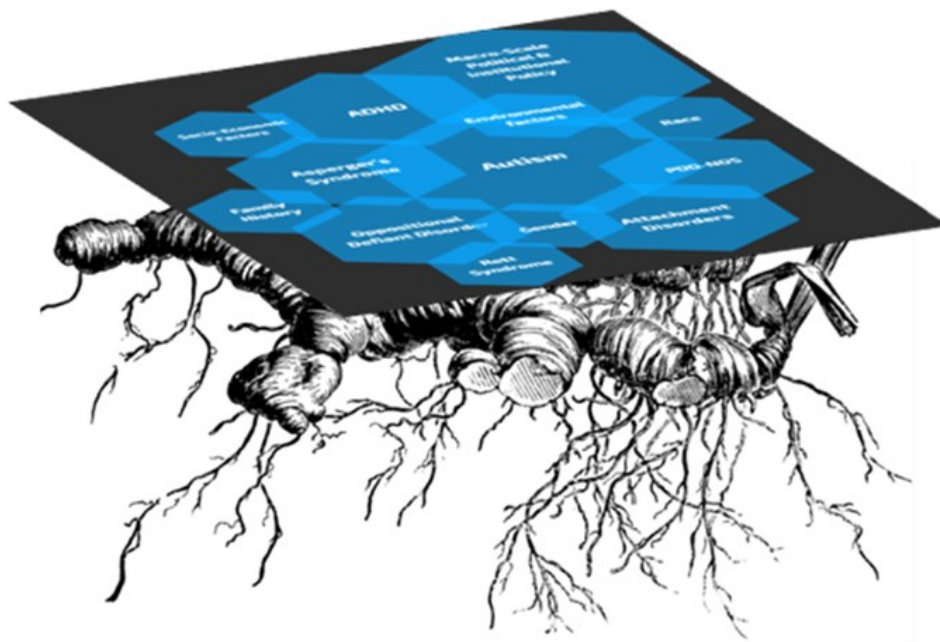
Figure 12: A Flipped Complex-Systems Model Exposing Rhizomic Root Matrices
Source: Made with Canva & MS Paint

An ecology of writing encompasses much more than the individual writer and her immediate context. An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: All the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems. An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing, limited only by parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time. (p. 368)

Still, though ecological thinking and the ecological metaphor further our ability to conceptualize and relate our disciplinary content, dangers do exist whenever we attempt to borrow terminology or apply metaphor too broadly. It behooves us to dig just a bit deeper into the implications of such broad application before explicitly recognizing the ecological metaphor as a threshold concept in Writing Studies.

<center>A Caution on Ecologies</center>

On Literalism, Ecocomposition, & the Psychosocial Use of Ecologies

As Brooke (2009) acknowledges, "Variations on the ecological model have appeared with increasing frequency in the past few years" (p. 40). However, this is not the first surge in the term's popularity in writing scholarship, and literalism has done the ecological metaphor more harm than good. For example, while deciding how to organize and lay bare the essential features of the ecological model for this project, I first considered drawing parallels between biological terminology and writing phenomena. Images swirled in my mind of memoir vignettes focusing on birth and extinction, evolution and competition, water cycles and food pyramids. As Barton (2007) ponders, if

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we wished, we could rely on the ecological metaphor to produce "a whole set of terms which can provide a framework for discussions of literacy. Terms like **ecological niches**, **ecosystem**, **ecological balance**, **diversity** and **sustainability** can all be applied to the human activity of using reading and writing" (orig. bold; p. 31). However, such literalism endangers the usefulness of the metaphor as it carries with it signification issues and ideological baggage. For example, for some, invoking comparisons to "evolution" also invokes the fraught ideologies of early eugenicists associated with Darwinism. For others, to invoke "evolution" carries religious implications. For still others, such focus on a one-to-one vocabulary heist will lead only to a new entrenchment of the sort witnessed in the 1990s.

Dobrin (2012) reminds us of the first wave of ecological writers when, "in the late 1990s, a small number of composition scholars began to import ecological methodologies into composition, the culminating efforts of which was dubbed ecocomposition, a term meant to signify the intersection between ecology and composition." However, as theories of complexity tend to be watered down when not framed through a solid platform (such as threshold concepts), ecocomposition quickly filtered through personal agendas and amounted to "little more than opportunities to bring examinations of nature writing and other environmentalist topics into composition classrooms" (Dobrin, 2012). Guattari (trans. 2000) references this in *The Three Ecologies*, as well, admonishing that "Ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority." Usefully, and ironically closer to Cooper's original intent with the introduction of writing ecologies, Psychology adopted the term to render a holistic corrective to diagnostic procedure by assessing "ecological validity" with which "Researchers use the term to question whether experimental studies of psychological activity are valid reflections of natural everyday contexts" (Barton, 2007, p. 30). Rather than attempting to make literal comparisons between

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biological and rhetorical ecologies, and rather than squandering the ecological metaphor by relegating it to a niche subdiscipline, we must take a cue from Psychology's use of the term and utilize the immense potential of the ecological metaphor as a guide to understanding those natural everyday contexts which are invariably fluid, complex, and networked.

On a Change in Priorities, Inclusivity, & Embracing Ambiguity

Attaining a true ecological perspective requires of us a shift in modes of thought, an eschewal of binary and linear tendencies, and a willingness to question much of what we've come to know and do—in other words, though these are values we've long espoused, we still have homework to do. Dobrin (2012) cites how Cooper's argument was most fruitfully adopted, that it was "specifically the 'social components' with which composition studies became enamored; it was Cooper's social epistemic, not her ecology, that would shape the dominant voice of composition scholarship." It is clearly evident that, since the 1980s, Writing Studies has moved in earnest toward inclusive pedagogies, ones which account for the personal, racial, sexed, political, familial, professional, and digital ways in which rhetoric moves, ways which require adaptability. So, thankfully, it seems that much of the necessary change in priorities and habits of thought are already underway; but the shift to an ecological mode of thought requires something our minds, prone to categorization, are not inclined to do—that we accept the unknown and embrace ambiguity.

It may also seem that this ecological homework is somehow distant from the humanistic goals listed above, but when we think ecologically, we must question those modes of thought and knowledge organization that erase lived experience, and that task includes many of our tried-and-true rhetorical models. If we consider again, with a new view towards ecological thought, the linearity of the rhetorical situation, or the two-dimensionality of Activity Theory's triangles (fig. 13), we begin to see rhetors and subjects and audiences and objects and all manner of flattened

SECOND GENERATION ACTIVITY THEORY MODEL

TOOLS

SUBJECT OBJECT

OUTCOME

RULES DIVISION OF LABOUR

COMMUNITY
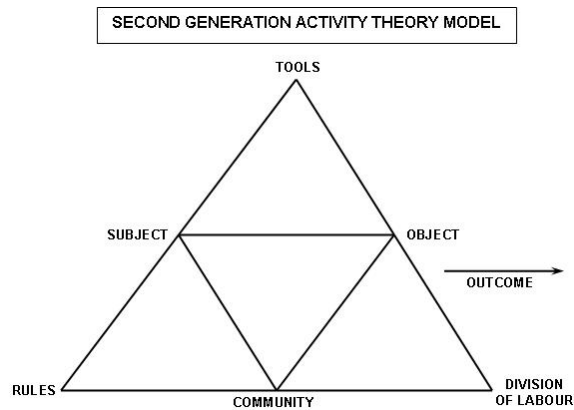
Figure 13: The 2-Dimensional Activity Theory Model
Source: The University of British Columbia, etec.ctit.ubc.ca

disembodiment, so much so that it becomes far too easy to miss the fundamental humanness of the work we do. This is not to say that Activity Theory, like the rhetorical situation, aren't immensely useful or often well-used, but when we flatten our subjects, where do the Black academics and the female theorists go? Where are the Native American blue-collar workers and the Hispanic professionals? How do we justify the long, difficult, rhetorical fight for transgender rights as "output"? The answer is simple: We do so out of a desire for epistemic stability. Our minds thirst for a terminal end to the quest for knowledge. We want answers, and we want them to stick.

Though this thesis leans on the proposal that ecological thinking may act as a corrective to this yearn for equilibrium, proponents of the ecological metaphor agree across the board that there is no one-size-fits-all silver bullet to the complexities we face. Brooke (2009) probably said it best when he urges us to embrace ambiguity because "no single model is likely to prove capable of returning the sorts of stability that are implied (if imperfectly accomplished) by communication triangles or rhetorical situations, and thus we need to begin thinking about goals other than stability (p. 28). And yet, though he advocates the adoption of the ecological metaphor, Brooke still succumbs to that pesky desire to categorize, repackaging the "contemporary version of the trivium"

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(grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic/logic) as "ecologies of *code*, *practice*, and *culture*" (orig. emphasis; p. 47). For Brooke, ecologies provide a way to view rhetoric through complex "communicative and expressive resources," fluid and "conscious, directed activity… to produce a particular discursive effect," and networked "range[s] of scales, from interpersonal relationships and local discourse communities" (pp. 48-49). This makes grammatical sense, he relates, when one acknowledges that "the word *terrorist* (code) to describe someone (practice) carries heavily charged ideological implications (culture) at this point in our history" (p. 52). However, even though Brooke's definitions of these ecologies are beautifully articulated and grammatically useful, they engage in the dangerous pursuit of simplified categorization which can and will subvert a true ecological habit of thought. In essence, by defining these three categories of ecology (code, practice, culture), Brooke limits the usefulness of the metaphor, and many less-critical readers will simply use the concept as another niche mode of identifying grammatical constructs. It can be much more.

An ecological model for writing must itself operate within its own ecological tenets, embracing its own complexity, fluidity, and networks of relations. This troublesome recursive-redoubling effect may finally be what best qualifies the ecological metaphor as a threshold concept. Though the model, as all others, will likely remain flawed, as a threshold concept, ecologies may assist us in remembering that "all the elements an interaction involves – people, events, circumstances, material objects, history, time, place, and space – form a network by which every element touches or influences and ultimately emerges from every other element" (Downs, 2017, p. 451). As Doug Downs (2017) exhorts, "This idea of ecology can help us understand rhetorical interchanges which seem *un*situated or multi-situated," but it can also help to monitor our internal and external models which may, if we drop our guard, slip back into autonomous, binary, linear, hierarchical, or centered modes of knowledge management at any moment.

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Another potential drawback to the ecological metaphor is that, without explicitly acknowledging it as a threshold concept, without codifying the metaphor as an integral aspect of our disciplinary knowledge, it wallows in the back rooms of our collective consciousness and only appears when we have an express need for a metaphor which requires little explanation (I am aware of the irony of promoting a metaphor which needs little explanation through a 100+ page thesis). To wit, Cooper's ecological treatise has simmered for 34 years with wide effect but limited explicit acknowledgement, and those who follow, from Barton to Brooke and Edbauer to Fleckenstein et.al (and countless others more implicitly), each make amazing contributions. There is a rising din cheering the concept on, but the point is this: What the ecological metaphor needs at this time, at the time threshold concepts are gaining ground in and beyond Writing Studies, is a marketing campaign.

By designating writing ecologies as a threshold concept, we may acknowledge its existing ubiquity in our theory and have at easy hand the metaphor which best coheres the messier elements of our discipline—elements which tend to beg for explanation at the most inopportune times "because what is effective at one scale or location within an ecology may fail utterly in another context (Brooke, 2009, p. 49). At the very least, I believe that an ecological understanding of our discipline and its content may help us come to terms with our permeable borders as we continue our scholarly quests for knowledge and meaning. As literacy scholars have come to recognize since Shirly Brice Heath (1972) brought ethnographic methodologies to our attention, empirical data goes only so far without its embodied colleague to hold it accountable, *lived experience*.

METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE:
A BRIEF TREATISE ON NARRATIVE THEORY & EMBODIMENT

This project, *Naming More of What We Know,* does not attempt to draw scientific conclusions from empirical data. Instead, it draws from stories of life.

Concluding the chapters dedicated to the project's theoretical underpinnings, it is important that I take a moment to briefly justify the shift that follows to mix-mode academic narrative. Embodiment is a crucial element to the ecological theory of writing because it is through these narrative vignettes that I can justly represent the real, lived experience of those moments of ecological literacies that constitute the basis for my argument. An ecosystem does not exist within impermeable borders independent of its constituents—it exists for and within the interactions between its constituents, so to represent those interactions, I feel compelled to represent those constituents. The following narrative vignettes are portals through which we can better view how these ecological interactions of communication are always playing out in the fluid, complex, and networked experiences of life as a conscious being on this Earth. As Prior and Shipka (2003) relate,

> Literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world, forms of life. It is about histories (multiple, complexly interanimating trajectories and domains of activity), about the (re)formation of persons and social worlds, about affect and emotion, will and attention. It is about representational practices, complex, multifarious chains of transformations in and across representational states and media. It is especially about the ways we not only come to inhabit made-worlds, but constantly make our worlds—the ways we select from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds we inhabit. (pp. 181-182)

Those ways in which we mold and form our material and social worlds have a name—storytelling. As Lance Strate (2014) urges, "The term storytelling as a synonym for narrative serves as a reminder that stories were first and foremost tales that were *told*" (p. 9). As a uniquely human activity, storytelling is inextricable linked to the ways we form our identities; "We are brought up with stories," Strate continues, "receive them as part of our cultural heritage, and are guided by them" (p. 7). Downs (2017) concurs on the importance of embodiment, and he ties storytelling to the work we do and the ecologies in which we do them through his description of embodied rhetoric: "Rhetoric begins in the biology of how sentient bodies experience information and interaction via signals and symbols… Rhetoric always involves symbolic acts, in which meaning is made when one idea or object stands for another" (p. 461). In other words, this is what we do as scholars—we tell stories.

In *Narration as knowledge: Tales of the teaching life*, Joseph Trimmer (1997) compiles the stories of teachers in much the same way as Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) compiled contributions of theory that became a different kind of story—threshold concepts. Though I only cite the introduction, Trimmer's compilation exemplifies the sort of embodied work I hope to accomplish here. As Trimmer explains, storytelling was once an honored tradition through which all outside life was portrayed: "Stories could not *intensify* life unless they *enacted* it. No verbs, no action. No action, no life" (orig. emphasis; p. ix). Tragically, he goes on, we lost our esteem for storytelling; "as we worked our way into our professional lives, we slowly, almost imperceptibly, changed our attitude toward stories. We lived in a world that did not trust them. Stories were not true. Stories were not reliable" (Trimmer, 1997, p. x). As species seeking ways to categorize, to organize, to taxonomize, storytelling gave way to science.

Storytelling became the term we use to describe sharing information with children, and the stories we tell ourselves became facts and evidence. "If we wanted to keep stories in our lives" Trimmer (1997) explains, "we had to convert them into something else. Something more serious. More scientific" (p. x). However, separating storytelling from scientific exploration has always been a sort of self-delusion. Edbauer (2005) reminds us that "our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field" (p. 10). Even the most tightly controlled, triple-blind experimentation is imminently wrapped up in rhetoricality—the science was motivated by multiple ecologically entwined concerns, situated in history and human contexts, and results are disseminated and interpreted by rhetorical choices made by rhetors and audience alike. We cannot, in actuality, separate our scholarly work from our embodiment, even in the sciences, and any attempt to do so only refuses to acknowledge the implicit biases that inform every rhetorical move. It is therefore up to the rhetoricians of Writing Studies to explicitly maintain that every word we put to paper is the ecologically entwined product of a lifetime of fluid, complex, and networked experiences with motivated language and human interaction.

In *Creep: A Life, a Theory, an Apology*, Jonathan Alexander (2017) explains, in much the way I hope to, how theory and narrative may be seen as two parts of a whole:

> Theory – plotting out, thematizing, making schematic, and abstracting a set of experiences into some general impression of a way of being in the world – has been one way I have tried to survive myself. Making something abstract is a way to understand it, and understanding brings, if not control, at least coping. The impulse to theorize caters to the desire to organize the mess. It's a powerful form of pattern recognition. It's our need for truth. (p. 73)

By recognizing the theory in his story and the story in his theory, Alexander beautifully exemplifies an ecological approach to abstraction and reification—the merging of Rhetoric's science with its

humanity. Narrative is one way we might control for bias by exploring bias, we might find the real by exploring the ephemeral. As Strate (2014) asserts on the ecological use of narrative to control abstraction, narrative helps us "to make order out of the chaos of the outer world, to impose a comprehensible and predictable structure and a sense of continuity on a series of events. This is what we, as human beings, do as meaning-makers, in the way that we relate to and relay our experiences" (p. 8). Fleckenstein et al. (2008) concurs, saying, "Creating knowledge necessitates arguing for stories about the things-in-themselves in ways that others find persuasive, useful, and widely applicable" (p. 404). In essence, we humans may be able to identify empirical fact—but we cannot relate it without storytelling.

This isn't to say that narrative is the only way to learn, to teach, to study—just that unembodied Theory is a purely academic pursuit, and that finding ways to recognize the embodiment of our research only strengthens its persuasive appeal because, as Downs (2017) puts it, "Rhetoric begins with this very basic element of sentient (self-aware) embodiment (p. 461); or as Fleckenstein et al. (2008) put it, "Rhetoric is immersed in the material reality of lived experiences" (p. 404); or as Trimmer (1997) put it, "Rather than abstract our teaching into empirical research or bury it in ethnographic studies, we need to face 'the real moments' we encounter each day. And we need to trust our stories of those moments. To narrate is to know" (p. xv). Our rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy benefit from an accurate representation of embodied, ecological rhetorical activity, and our discipline benefits from an ecological understanding of how its content, its processes, and its methodologies are constituted.

The following chapter employs concepts from both rhetorical and narrative theory. "Moving from studies of narrative to accounts of voice and self," Glynda Hull and Mira-Lisa Katz (2006) maintain, "acknowledge[s] the reproductive powers of discourse while simultaneously

allowing a space for self-determination" (p. 4). My short personal narratives provide an embodied

account of the ways an ecological view of rhetoric and threshold concepts of writing change

perceptions in real-life situations. The narratives should, if I've done my job correctly, portray the

ways narrative embodies theory, the ways rhetoric in intractably ecological, and the reasons why the

ecological metaphor deserves to be explicitly taught as a threshold concept of Writing Studies. My

part of the augmentation of current threshold concepts, to use Edbauer's (2005) term, must take the

mixed-mode narrative/theory form that is my milieu. It's what I have to offer, and I only hope to

prove it a valid way to showcase rhetorical ecologies through fluid, complex, and networked

embodiment—my lived experience.

CONFESSIONS:
MEMOIR VIGNETTES OF A LITERATE LIFE

The series of memoir-styled, theory-infused, narrative vignettes that follow are not entirely as initially conceived for this project. As though to prove how writing ecologies are influenced by innumerable and unforeseeable networks of complex, fluid factors, I find myself finishing this project in the midst of the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, international protests against police brutality sparked by the death of George Floyd, and the worst U.S. unemployment crisis since the Great Depression[7]. My friends are fearful, grieving, distant, protesting, and trying to make ends meet; my colleagues are frantically sorting out plans for future employment; my international students are fighting for their right to remain in the country, my faculty advisors are overwhelmed with plotting newer, safer courses for the university; and the academy's infrastructure moves like cool molasses. The literate lives of the U.S. populace are far from stalled, but the status quo has been upset. One day, I'm certain I will write about these days of tribulation, but I relate this situation now because I believe that to place this thesis in its temporal, personal, and geopolitical contexts only strengthens the need for an ecological habit of thought. Writing does not happen in a vacuum—it happens in an ecology.

Therefore, as one way to embody rhetorical ecologies, the following samples of writing in a variety of contextual ecologies come from my own portfolio. Limiting the stories to my preexisting body of narrative rather than incorporating the work of colleagues, friends, students, and experts (a possibility to which I lent a great deal of thought) helps to make the case that any piece of writing or communication may be traced through its ecological connections in meaningful ways. Each of the following narrative vignettes (or pairs) is preceded by a short, narrative introduction for context.

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[7] For more on the unemployment crisis, see Kelly, J. (2020, May 08). U.S. unemployment is at its highest rate since the Great Depression. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/05/08/us-unemployment-is-at-its-highest-rate-since-the-great-depression-at-147-with-205-million-more-jobs-lost-in-april/

Additionally, within the vignettes, many incorporate preexisting aspects of ecological theory explicitly while others require a brief analysis after the vignette.

I invite you to feel the ecological flow of this final chapter as it meanders between theory and narrative, as it pauses for explanation and picks up on another story. I urge you to consider, as you read my confessions, the ways each piece connects with others in a fluid, complex chain of networks spanning time, space, and writing ecologies which are familial, professional, racial, academic, digital, political, and institutional. Consider how passages change in tone or vary due to the variety of influences in my life or the specific temporal contexts for the writing. Consider the value of these artifacts as non-binary, non-hierarchical, acentered, non-linear, now-digital, networked, cyclical, and diverse of nature in excess of the typified rhetorical situation. Consider a new, embodied way to identify threshold concepts, contextualizing those "substances" of the field Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) discuss by laying bare the *lived experiences* of true threshold moments in writing (p. xxix). These are all ecological considerations.

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Digital Villages & Enclave Migration:
A Case for Social-Media Research Immersion

The call is out (and has been for some time) for Writing Studies to take a proactive role, to engage more fully in defining the trajectory of digital literacies. I wrote the following vignette in the spring of 2017. Its intent was to extend the nascent body of rhetorical research into the meaningful dynamics of social-media community building, migratory functions, and identity formation within the digital chora—specifically, on social media. In it, I align an ethnographic examination of a digital community with which I was (and am) associated through its genesis, evolution, and migration across digital platforms. In future versions, I hope it will contribute toward adapting Writing Studies theory and practice to the vast, complexly networked, and viciously fluid digital spaces with which all of us participate.

Although the early days of the blogosphere proved fertile grounds for social, personal, and even professional growth, it did not last in its original form for long, not for anyone. For a variety of reasons ranging from interpersonal relationships to interface utility, the digital enclaves of Myspace blog writers who formed the original study community weakened and broke, and a slow migration across digital platforms began, changing the shape of our digital ecologies, and thus affecting a variety of points across each of our lives. This digital migrant community which relocated from Myspace to Facebook between 2007 and 2010 provided the site for an ethnographic examination of migration across social-media platforms. The scope of this project covered 13 years of online interaction with only a few weeks' ethnographic data hoarding, exhibiting the wealth of data collection possible through even a limited study. In fact, the final draft of this project held over 20 pages of single-spaced, reduced, and coded data in the appendices.

Consider, if you will, as you read this excerpt from "Digital Villages and Enclave Migration: A Case for Social-Media Research Immersion," the impossibly complex ways these study participants lives influenced one another over vast distances and years of association, the fluid dynamics of millions of thoughts transmitted into one another's homes and places of work, and the ways the networks of love and support, and even heartbreak and deceit, influenced identities and decisions through ecologies of literate activity on corporately managed writing platforms. For its vastness and undeniably personal, familial, and digital ecologies, "Digital Villages and Enclave Migration" is our first vignette.

Digital Villages & Enclave Migration:
A Case for Social-Media Research Immersion

I imagine we were digital refugees. Disheveled and displaced, we wandered for a bit. We formed enclaves and alliances and held hands to form a chain, lost internaughts, connecting through the inevitable dispersal of migration. Some just disappeared. What had begun as acts of pure, individualistic escapism in the Wild West of online social networking became, for a while, a source of nourishment, and then a source of fracture. We didn't know we were a community then. Not yet. Those of us who now make up what we lovingly refer to as the "E-Fam" either migrated together or eventually reconnected through a variety of shared links across the Web. But for a few years around the mid-2000s, our community took shape and shaped our identities in the blogosphere of our digital youths.

[*paragraphs deleted on formation of community, creative writing blogs, and purpose of study*]

The Great Facebook Migration

As early as 2007, the E-Fam began migrating to Facebook for a variety of reasons. By 2010, MSAC had become Bluntcard, and the E-Fam was defunct. A few left due to family issues that either drove them away from Myspace or toward Facebook, while some made the leap
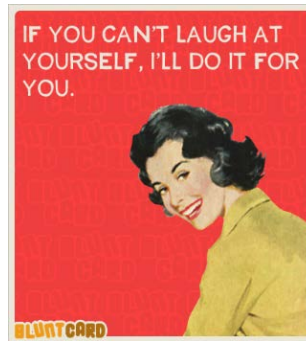
Figure 14: E-Fam
Source: Bluntcard.com

because of a flourish of toxic behavior, gaming saturation, and politics witnessed on the site. Others migrated in response to frustratingly persistent policy and interface updates, while still more left because, like myself, they had held out until there was little social value left—I was one of the last to leave, and I missed my friends. The willingness to migrate together is evidenced by survey respondents who all indicate interaction with one another on digital platforms besides Facebook and Myspace during the move. Bridgemoof, currently raising sheep on a farm in West Virginia, explains that her E-Fam began forming even before Myspace when she met Camevil and a few others on a paranormal community message board called ghostvillage, and the relationships grew and were enriched on networking sites like fetlife. Billium,[8] now 27 and the youngest member of the E-Fam, explains:

> You were all, to put it frankly, strange to me. You were different than most of the adults I'd encountered in my life. (Most of you, at least. Some of you are regular bitches) … When we slowly migrated to Facebook, abandoning everything we had created on Myspace together, some of us realized how much that meant to us. I have continued to stay in contact with some and unfortunately lost touch with others. But boy did Myspace do some good for me.

Discussion: Villages and Identities

While interviewing SpicySeniorita and ScandalousCombo, two women who maintained only peripheral association with the greater E-Fam but a strong platonic pair-bonding, it occurred

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[8] Billium, 14 at the time the E-Fam formed, originally lied about his age to gain acceptance with the group. When he eventually came clean on his 21st birthday, we all had a good laugh about it. Eventually, his E-Fam core group were the first people to whom he came out about his sexual orientation.

to me that there was at least one other similarly bonded pair, Bridgemoof and Camevil. Like the rest of the E-Fam, these pairs met on social media and formed strong bonds of friendship that have shaped their lives, but the bonded nature of their friendships also set them apart, slightly distanced from the rest of the group in a smaller community enclave of two. Furthermore, after some participants suggested that I add missing members to the group with whom I had never reconnected on Facebook, I conducted I began searching the "mutual friends" feature, and it became clear that, although all were in agreement that we were members of one another's E-Fam, each individual maintains relations with a uniquely comprised E-Fam enclave within their friends list. The make-up of no two individual "E-Fams" were identical. This prompted me to consider the elements of any physical community, with its larger population, smaller, intersecting neighborhoods or blocks, and its fringe dwellers—in short, the E-Fam can be conceived through the analogy of a literal, geographically located village.

Resuming the village analogy, of the overall 36 citizens who reside in my greater enclave, there are nine who I consider close neighbors, those with whom I communicate nearly daily and can discuss anything. Of the remaining 28, four are involved in exclusive blocks, and seven have minimal ties beyond to me and might be considered fringe. Dich (2016) writes of social media users, "They perceive themselves in these overlapping spaces and they write to these overlapping audiences, which underscores how identities are never contained in one space and for one audience" (p. 94). Diva explains,

> When I think of my participation on MySpace and my early interactions with the E-Fam, I think of all the ways that I just laid it all out there on my blog.… I felt at ease expressing myself. It helped me in so many ways. I'd like to think that when I commented on someone's blog, at least the more serious ones, that I had posted something of value and meaning in their lives. And hopefully, it offered some comfort and guidance.

Indeed, through the rhetorical and material reality of shared writing experience, social-media users experience the reciprocal nature of identities that form communities and communities that form identities. As Doug Eyman (2015) posits in *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, and*

Practice, the "formation of digital identities," and the "potential for building social communities" are two of the defining characteristics of Digital Rhetoric (p. 44).

In a vacuum, digital communities might avoid material consequences, but life cannot exist in a vacuum.[9] Just as in any physical community, some relationships within digital communities are stable, some are unhealthy; some communications are productive, others may be toxic; and expressions of identity are not discrete and not without drama. In fact, some of the strongest influencers of identity formation happened in and around the E-Fam enclave. Just L, a single mom from North Carolina, explains how she began to reinvent herself in the midst of divorce: "I stumbled upon MSAC and met y'all through that. I didn't ever add people I knew in person online, and becoming friends with y'all was the single greatest thing that helped me find my voice again."

Figure 15: Drama Shield Activated
Source: Myspace Awards Center
(deactivated)

[*paragraphs deleted*]

However, not every identity-forming event was philanthropic in nature, and many were not pleasant. Several participants confess falling into abusive relationships with people they met on Myspace. Another half dozen admit to relationships that started online being at least partially responsible for serious marital repercussions including divorce. And still another found their current partner on Myspace. Participants have traveled the country in leisure or romance for these connections and grieved together over the loss of members who have

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[9] With the exception of the tardigrade. Read more about tardigrades in space, [here](#).

passed in death or simply disappeared. Diva explains, "We've 'watched' our children grow, families extend, family members pass on, achieve school and career goals, achieve personal growth, etc. I think we have all invested time in one another to where we feel like a close knit community." With real, life-changing stakes this high, research in social-media communities holds intense implications for the theory, pedagogy, and practice of Rhetoric.

As our comprehension of identity and community formation within digital ecologies grows, the impetus to ground more field work and explore new methods within the villages of social-media becomes irresistible. Several of the E-Fam identify the migration from Myspace to Facebook as instrumental in forming their identities and their communities. Motherlovebone thinks it has something to do with "Gen Xers having figured out our first adult relationships without the influence of the internet." She continues, MySpace was a whole other level of reality where I was someone else. Or some shinier version of myself. I felt myself wanting to escape the drudgery of caring for small children at home by logging on and becoming Motherlovebone." Sporkbutt agrees, clarifying, "I've become a lot closer with people since migrating to Facebook… I think people hid behind a persona on Myspace. … They share more of themselves on Facebook. Myspace was a blast, but Facebook seems to be more about connecting." Baconseed muses on our bonds that help her "when the world seems so crazy" and takes "comfort in the notion that I'm not on this ride alone," while SpicySenorita reminds us that, regardless of where your village is situated, be it physical or digital, when "relationships span from 9-14 years," you can't help but remember "that 'bond' that we all had from the MySpace days."

Contextualizing "Digital Villages"

"Digital Villages & Enclave Migration" contends that, beyond the incorporation of old methods and the design of new methodologies, we must also validate digital ecologies for what they are—the complex, networked spaces in which real communities form through rich rhetorical bonding and the nigh unexplored final frontier of contemporary Rhetoric. It's of vital importance, however, to recognize that these ecologies are never discrete. To categorize this narrative as an example of "digital ecologies" would be disingenuous, even if acknowledged as complex and

networked. Passages which might solely or best exemplify "complexity" disavow how they are also fluid and networked or how other passages are equally complex when scrutinized. Attempts to categorize the passage as solely "digital" denies diverse prior experiences of each individual, the social consequences of digital escapades which bled over into "real life," and the corporate platforms which regulate every word of the E-Fam's networked production. Keeping a heuristic of ecological thinking in mind[10], it is important to remember that, as a framework which eschews rigid categorization and embraces ambiguity, writing ecologies and their elements of fluid, complex networks are equally applicable to a shopping list as they are this narrative.

My interaction with this chosen family spans time and crossed many borders, blurring the edges between digital and social ecologies beyond recognition and making permeable even the boundaries of my familial ecologies, my home. Nearly daily for more than 15 years, I've invited people into my closest circles, people who share their lives with me through writing. Cooper (1986) reminds us that "People move from group to group, bringing along with them different complexes of ideas, purposes, and norms, different ways of interacting, different interpersonal roles and textual forms (p. 373); and Dobrin (2012) agrees, adding how "digital ecologies connect to both cultural and physical ecologies in more open-ended or aleatory ways than current approaches to digital publics can account for." As seen in this vignette, our writing intimately ties our interactions with both people and interfaces to our identities in fluid, complex, and networked ways, and the ecological approach makes tracing those ways more accessible, more 3-dimensional. Years before online environments came to be called the "Web," Cooper (1986) exhorted us to recognize the ways in which "anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole" (p. 370).

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[10] One example of an ecological heuristic can be found in the conclusion (fig. 17).

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<u>Linguistic Gymnastics &</u>
<u>Dear White People</u>

With hidden literacies, astounding talents, aching hearts, and hands held in unity, the following short excerpts relay two of my early encounters with African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The first, written for a low-stakes graduate writing assignment in 2019, entails a cultural experience for which I was neither linguistically nor culturally prepared, but one I'll never forget. Its contexts are detailed in its first paragraph. The second passage involves a friend whose personal, academic, professional, and digital ecologies overlapped mine in many ways as we became friends over four years of working together. His frustration at dealing with his White brother-in-law's comments on a social media post led to revelations which have ever since informed my minority allyship. Together, the two examples create an entirely-too-brief account of the complex, fluid, and networked ways race influences literate activity through the interplay of family traditions, racial divides, and systemic deficiencies in racial equality. Countering racism is a journey, not a destination.

On that note, one thing is plain to me now which was not when I wrote the second passage as a discussion response: This excerpt is a gross example of virtue signaling, the practice, even unintentionally, of White "allies" who present their allyship to others in hopes of gaining approval. The Facebook response and the discussion post themselves hold no great revelations. They are simple, rudimentary versions of the language with which allies are now becoming a little better versed. However, confessing my naivete, calling out my own virtue signaling, publicly holding myself accountable for my communicative deficiencies, in this case, may also serve as a small example of some of the racial complexities involved in networked ecologies.

Linguistic Gymnastics

For much of my life, I've been accustomed to rhetorical situations where I might worry that I'm too verbose, or that I assert my discursive resources more strongly than I mean to. I'm always wary of being "that guy," you know the one. The White guy in the room who thinks his loud opinions are more important than others' voices. I've been largely unaccustomed to language experiences that truly made me feel like a novice to the English language. But one unlikely experience, long before entering the academy, did just that, and it gave me an eye-opening glimpse of how language is "linked to identity," how it's "informed by prior experience," and how "all writers have more to learn" (Roozen, 2016a, p. 50; Lunsford, 2016a, p. 54; Rose, 2016, p. 59).

I met Katira Jones in Southern California. Katira was half Black and half Apache, she liked to wear black leather and red velvet, and she might still be the coolest person I've ever met. We dated briefly, but it was like dating a wild horse with no bridle, and I couldn't match her energy as her interests bounded about with alacrity. I was leaving California anyway, so we made plans to meet in New Orleans, the city of her birth, and parted ways as friends. A year later, we met at her family home in the 9th Ward just before Mardi Gras, and after a day of celebrating, decorating floats for the parade, and eating like never before, I began to notice patterns of what Lu (2004) identifies as "code-switching, code-mixing, style shifting, and borrowing" as her family, with rich linguistic personas unfamiliar to me, turned from speaking among one another to me (p. 23).

Later in the evening, I found myself in a sitting room with Katira and four or five relatives of about the same age when they started to cipher. My eyes were wide, and my ears quite literally tingled as the verbal interplay passed back and forth between kin, extemporaneously rapping, signifyin', and performing what can only be described as some next-level linguistic gymnastics. Gates (2001) says that "To rap is to use the vernacular with great dexterity" (p. 1569), and this complex, unpremeditated use of rhyme, meter, humor, and beat left me speechless—quite literally, unfortunately.

As the turns made their way around the room according to rules of play I could not fathom, the cousins eventually gestured to me, signaling that it was my turn, and silence fell. I shook my head, mind blank of all but panic and awe. Lu (2004) explains how all users of English

actively structure their discursive resources at the moment of its iteration in "relation to other englishes [sic], and the relations of peoples invested in the competing englishes" (p. 25-26), and Looker (2016) describes how language varies both "*situationally*" and "*from person to person* for a wide range of reasons including geographical location, race, socioeconomic class, [and] language learning history (orig. emphasis; pp. 181-182). I felt this acutely in this moment, sitting in that room. My inability to meet their verbal expectations was at once humbling and inspiring as I realized that there were whole linguistic worlds to which I had not been given access based in part on differing identities and prior experience. I truly had more to learn.

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Dear White People

On Monday, September 25, 2017, at 12:53am , I received a text with a snapshot of a comment I had made on a friend's Facebook post the evening before. The text simply read, "YES THIS THANK YOU LOR YAAAAASSSS." The image requires a little backstory.

Figure 16: Text from "Adam"
Source: Anonymous

My friend, who I'll call "Adam," is active with the #blacklivesmatter movement, and through many long and racially charged debates with him, I honed some understanding of U.S. race relations. Adam is a towering, bi-sexual, Black man, as wide as he is tall. His wife is White, and I grew up in a small town in Maine with almost no racial diversity and where race was seldom discussed at all, so between us, we had a wealth of differing perspectives from which to learn, and we talked about all manner of things nearly every day for years. One of many things he had taught was that, as a White, male, would-be ally, deciding to support my friends of color is not a one-time proposition—it requires work because the institutionalized nature of racism in America means that every day and every decision holds a potential ethical dilemma. I may have to choose, in a multitude of micro and macro ways, to use my privilege or deny it, to assist or ignore a delicate situation, to dominate a conversation, add to a conversation, or just listen to a conversation. Another thing I learned from Adam is that it is my Black friend's responsibility neither to teach me better allyship nor learn from me. Eventually, and it wasn't easy, I came to understand that, when we were together, his voice was the only voice of authority on racism. My jobs were to listen and to teach White people.

On the evening in question, Adam posted an eloquent tirade about the latest travesty of justice committed against a Black man. Alton Sterling had been shot dead at close range while in police custody several months earlier, and we had just learned that his killers would not be charged. However, rather than focus on the fact that Black men and women are routinely killed by police in the U.S. with no repercussions, what mattered most to some was that Adam titled his Facebook post, "Dear White People."

The conversation quickly turned to conflict when a well-meaning member of Adam's wife's family broke into what was meant to be a cathartic discussion amongst his peers, a slow-boiling grief at the hopelessness, a wanting to just be seen as worthy of life. He bluntly offered some healthy White advice: "If you want people to listen to you, maybe you shouldn't start by saying, 'Dear White People'."

Grief became rage.

Despite reassurances that he's truly an ally and only trying to help Adam reach a broader audience (in a White-friendly way, of course), everyone piled onto him. The prevailing

sentiment was nuanced and varied and sounded something like "How dare you tell Adam how to speak?! How dare you in this moment?!"

Using skills I had developed through association with Adam, I was thoughtful to only chime in to support existing sentiments or translate (with deference) their points for the man in our White-man vernacular. All the common threads of such discussions were covered, from explaining the vanity of P.O.C. attempts to conform in speech and behavior to explaining the sovereignty of cultural identity. But despite a full spectrum of anger and cynicism directed at the man, it became apparent that this crowd was truly invested in both educating him and setting a public example of how such conversations should go.

The interloper's resolve never wavered, but his tone softened. He insisted he was only trying to help and could not understand why anyone would turn away the olive branch with which he was beating them over the head. He couldn't see that the communication barrier was his.

Here are my final words and the only surviving snippet of the now-deleted conversation:

> Greg, I've been where you are. It wasn't even that long ago, really. You want to help, but there's a little thing that hasn't clicked yet. A little rhetorical fault that keeps you from communicating in just the right language. As a White man in a thread where I should be learning and not talking, I'm trying not to say too much, but it's also my responsibility. So here I am to tell you that we do NOT need to moderate this conversation. We need to support, educate other White voices at different places on the continuum of ignorance (I'm on it; you're on it, too), and just keep listening until it soaks in.

> Every time you or I make an innocent suggestion about how Black people should behave or speak, we do the opposite of what we intend. We take the conversation backwards and subvert our support. We assert dominance. It's time to just absorb. It's our turn. And it's for our own good, too. I hope I haven't overspoken, and I invite criticism if this doesn't sound right.

> Love to all. <3"

He just said, "Maybe," and that was the end of my participation in the conversation. I doubt I convinced him; he couldn't see that his perspective bore the fault of never having lived a day in their shoes. I do know, however, that even if he took to heart every word from every participant, it will be tested every day. I believe he truly wants to be an ally, but complex and fluid elements of his identification with dominant power structures will always act as constraints. At least, maybe I relieved some little bit of the cynicism that weighed on the other participants, but they'll always have that cynicism reinforced through those same identifications. Maybe we planted a seed, though, in him, or in others witnessing the conversation.

Contextualizing "Linguistic Gymnastics" & "Dear White People"

The deeply cultural ecologies detailed in these two passages make stark the effects of transgenerational linguistic ecologies which were structurally inhibited from interaction through centuries of slavery, segregation, and racism. The closest parallel I could draw between my youthful rhetorical ecologies and Katira's finely honed rhetorical skills would be a family tradition of poetry recitation. With no intent to assign value, those scripted, practiced events which were saved for special occasions in my family seem a weak comparison. Though unknown to me until that time, Katira's linguistic inheritance informed that cipher, filtering and evolving through generations of literacies that evolved as a means of protest, of resistance (Gates, 2001).

Similarly, when Adam, through his writing and through our discussions, opened a point of access for me to witness the similarities between his discourse and his Black peers, a traditionally restricted ecological network formed, and I came to better understand my place and the place of many others who would be allies with uniquely American racial ecologies. Roozen (2016) explains how "our identities are the ongoing, continually under-construction product of our participation in a number of engagements, including those from our near and distant pasts and our potential futures"

(p. 51). As we continually reconceive our language identities and reposition our place in the many discursive ecologies with which we interact, we might understand, as Black (1998) says, how "that 'thing' that was my knowledge [is] constantly being socially constructed" (p. 18).

According to Gates (2001), the rhetorical game Katira's family played and the rhetorical techniques of Adam's pursuit for solidarity each stems from a complex, fluid discourse in which power over one's own language has been one of few avenues for retaining power. Inoue (2015) reminds us that "references to race… are really references to power, references to particular groups' relations to power, to the hegemonic, to whiteness, to a white racial *habitus* (orig. emphasis; p. 293). But Cooper (1986) argues that an additional "value of the ecological model" lies in its ability "to diagnose and analyze such situations, and it encourages us to direct our corrective energies away from the characteristics of the individual writer and toward imbalances in social systems that prevent good writing" (p. 373). Furthermore, Fleckenstein, et. al (2008) argue that our individual disciplinary activities benefit from an ecological "focus on a wide array of contexts, from the bodies of individual writers to classrooms, workplaces, clubs, churches, neighborhoods, virtual environments, and historical moments" (p. 401). Living and writing during one such historical moment prompted the retelling of these stories, that their fluid and complex impact may not stop with me.

Although neither of the two passages in this vignette occur in the classroom, they contribute to the linguistic diversity that we, as educators, must remain vigilantly aware of if we are to maintain progressive, inclusive, and anti-racist classrooms for our students. We must teach the next generation to acknowledge and appreciate the intricate tapestries of language that compose the ecologies of our lives, that affect policy and public opinion, that hold influence at every level to accept or upset the status quo.

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<u>Headstands & Smoke Ceilings &</u>
<u>The Aberrancies of Raven: A Narrative on the Clashing Literacies of an Outlier</u>

The two passages in this vignette are unavoidably the most personal and confessional included in this project. Unavoidable, I say, because they delve deep into the familial ecologies that wrote my early literacies. However, they begin in adulthood. I enrolled in college in 2008 at 32 years of age, and like so many students, my first ENC1101 writing assignment was a narrative. Some years later, it became "Headstands & Smoke Ceilings." The assignment was simple: "Tell me a story." My father was a storyteller. Estranged from him for more than a decade, I yearned to write of my childhood memories of him—a complicated matter since I'd spent so many years trying to forget the family who left me behind. I felt I had no memories left from which to draw. However, as I put ink to paper, I found that each word facilitated the next, and each memory drew out a dozen more. Soon, the fluid and networked nature of the human mind allowed memories to flow with greater ease. I remembered the smell of his flannel and the sound of the brilliantly plumed game birds he kept in huge outdoor pens as we fed them on misty Maine mornings. I remembered the feeling of icy wind on my chapped 3-year-old face as his snowmobile flew across a frozen lake.

What evolved from this reflective exercise was so much more to me than a product. I enrolled in a nonfiction class a few years later and negotiated with my professor, rather than to write the standard literary analyses assigned the other students, to attempt writing in the style of each author on the reading list. Some were more difficult than others, such as the pondering journalistic style of McCarthy's *On the Road* or the poetic militancy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. The piece I've excerpted below, the one I revised from that first narrative assignment and have revised many times since then is styled after my all-time favorite nonfiction novel, Jeannette Walls', *The Glass Castle*. Though this vignette is less explicitly about literacy, it represents a living document that has since

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undergone many revisions and helped bridge our relationship when I presented to my father on our reunion. I am told that he cried upon reading it.

The second passage in this vignette pairs well with the first for its blatant love affair with storytelling, its adaptation of narrative writing assignments, and its focus on familial ecologies. Tasked with writing another narrative, this time in grad school, and this time a literacy narrative, "The Aberrancies of Raven: A Narrative on the Clashing Literacies of an Outlier" draws heavily in both style and purpose from Catherine Prendergast's (2013), "Or You Don't: Talents, Tendencies, and the Pooka of Literacy." Prendergast forwards that the sponsoring power of historical "macro-factors account for what language we speak, what schools we attend, whether we will write our stories with a quill or computer." In preface to her own "bad" literacy narrative, Prendergast claims that literacy narratives are the "anti-biographies" which expose "the forces of class, race, geography, and historical events." Her wild-card "pooka" concept of literacies describes the "pooka" as household spirits who derail more traditional, linear concepts of literacy acquisition and invariably buck the prevailing order of literacy movements through the unexplainable quirks of individuality. Prendergast's mischief-making "pooka" inform and theoretically align the concept of literacy's Ravens found in the second vignette of this section.

The Ravens I speak of require a little explanation. The Raven of Native American mythology brought light to the universe and fire to mankind through bungled acts of petty thievery (AMNH; Nichols). Raven is both trickster household spirit and creator-destroyer of universal scale. Raven may scandalize and disrupt or amuse and bestow the most personally meaningful gifts, yet Raven also transforms the world as we know it "in bizarre and outrageous ways" (AMNH). As an allegory of literacy, the Ravens show us how literacy acts both universally and individually on the landscape

of our identities as waves of sponsorship act in plurality over our lives—yet sharing space with chance and free will; Ravens loom at those sites where literacies are gained or lost in the mix.

The Ravens I write of soar between Selfe and Hawisher's (2004) macro, medial, and micro-level literacy gateways and sing of Deborah Brandt's (2001) "complex, sometimes cacophonous mix of fading and ascending materials, practices, and ideologies" in which "literacy is always in flux" (p. 657; p. 666). Ravens nest within Prior and Shipka's (2003) "chronotopic laminations" where "the dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts … are simultaneously held and managed," and they effortlessly fly across Brandt's (2001) "borders between tradition and change" to "adapt and improvise and amalgamate" (p. 181; p. 660). They take us to those unexplainable yet pivotal moments where literacy's trajectory becomes unpredictable. No mere household gremlin, Ravens merge macro-level institutional and sociopolitical forces with the peculiar.

Though written at different times in my life, for different purposes, and with different personal implications, each of the following passages demonstrate the fluid complexity of my familial ecologies, and each bear confessions.

Headstands & Smoke Ceilings

Mom always made excuses for The Man—that was her way. Alcohol abuse leveraged their divorce when I was three. He quit drinking too late; I was fifteen, and Lacey, my kid sis, was thirteen. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for a short while, the two of us quietly following him into the back rooms of churches and VFW halls where a dropped-ceiling of cigarette smoke hung lazily over our heads. We could reach into it if we jumped, like giants gathering low-hanging stratus clouds. "He's not an alcoholic," Mom would say of The Man, "he just never could say 'no' to his friends." It was never much of an excuse, even to my young mind. I was angry. In a fit one day, I told him he was no fun since he quit drinking, but it was comforting to think that stigmatic labels like "Drunk" couldn't stick to his flannel-and-leather personality. That's how I thought of him, rugged and weather beaten,

safe and warm, made to endure harsh climates. But those earlier years, before he went to prison, before his mother's death sobered him, those are the days I long for.

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Mom caught him riding my rocking horse in the front yard with wild, childish abandon, larger than life in his own head, yelling "Giddy-up! Heeyaw!" One hand flew in the air, the other yanked on the reins, his hair whipping the sun-lit air like a Comanche going to battle. He wore his hair in a long, dark ponytail then. It made him look fierce and wild like an Indian brave—his mother, my grandmother, was half Algonquin and Mic Mac Indian. He could build anything, starting with the house where I was born. The kitchen walls were warmly stained, honey-colored, tongue-and-groove pine with an enormous bay window that framed the rising sun over the gently rolling wooded hills of Central Maine. He raised game fowl, and long, brilliantly colored feathers hung like Chinese fans from random crevices and rough-hewn beams throughout the house. A Golden Creel fighting cock followed The Man everywhere, sometimes perched on his shoulder sipping Budweiser from his palm, sometimes kicking gravel around his combat boots in the driveway. I loved feeding the colorful pheasants and peacocks in the wooded pens on misty summer mornings, the strange calls of exotic birds and the morning fog stratified to a mystical ceiling like the cigarette smoke of alcoholics. The Man's world filters through a toddler's lens of nostalgia like an old, tattered Polaroid, sunlight bathing every memory in familiar warmth and aged comfort.

[*paragraphs deleted*]

Five steel-tipped hunting arrows adorn the top corner of the kitchen wall nearest the bay window. How I love to hear the story of the night those arrows found their way into the wallboards. To an eight year old, they've been there forever. But they were just a feathered byline, target practice, the last tangible evidence that The Man once led his band of surly Vietnam vets, bikers, and truck drivers into battle against a gang of Hell's Angels after an altercation in a local bar. He has the soul of a storyteller, and this is just one of the fantastic adventures he often repeats around the huge, hand-made table in the center of the kitchen under a fluorescent light that always hums softly when I pull its cord. He ritually romanticized versions of going AWOL from the 82nd Airborne under that light, close encounters with police and game wardens around that table, and near-death experiences with wild beasts and deadly weather in the great Northern woods in the shadow of those arrows.

Earlier in the evenings, before the beer, vodka, and coffee brandy turn wild stories into wilder stunts and brawls, I sidle up to him at the table or sit on the counter-top with my heels banging softly against the wooden cupboard doors. I savor the smell of happy men and women, the sweat, the booze, and the cigarettes. I silently pass a joint from one inebriate to the next, only interrupting to correct The Man's story if the fish isn't as big, the rutting moose isn't as mean, or the wound isn't as bloody as the last time he told the tale. "Now don't think you can tell my stories just because you rolled off my dink!" he says. They always laugh, and The Man always winks at me and grins; they'd heard these stories before, and besides, there's always a witness in the crowd to corroborate even the most suspect facts.

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In a small, rural town where everyone has known one another for generations, The Man's house is the place to be on a Friday or Saturday (or Tuesday) night. That Lacey and I were there every other weekend might have dissuaded the average family's drunken parties, but not this lot; it's the perfect excuse for moms to join the party too. Sometimes as many as eight or nine kids stretch out in army surplus sleeping bags across the living room floor. Whispering, excited, fearful. Dozens of mounted hunting trophies—owls, bear, white-tail deer, fish great and small, so many dead animals—they stare back at us in the dark. But mostly, we listen to the rising din from the other room. Invariably, one or more of us wake to the weight of a stumbling adult making for an empty spot, searching for a place to pass out. We awake to vomit in our hair and broken dishes strewn across the floor, but it isn't a sign of violence, or at least, not of anger. Not to us.

If you ever dare to ask The Man about a morning's chaotic crime-scene, he always has a perfectly rational explanation for what is obviously perfectly normal human interaction. *Life-lessons 101*: New, fist-sized holes appear in the ceiling one morning. The Man's over-grown childhood friends are just "helping install a skylight! Never be too proud to accept a helpin' hand." The ancient, orange, wall-mounted rotary telephone, the size of an unabridged dictionary bristles with thrown hunting knives and hatchets one morning, like a porcupine ready for war. "Well, that happens when you call a man after 10." The air-rifle he gave me for my seventh birthday lay on the floor amidst sleeping bodies one morning. Dozens of lead pellets strong enough to kill a coon decorate the kitchen door, accentuated by the occasional hunting knife. One should never tell The Man he can't hit a burning cigarette

from a man's mouth while standing on his head. "Doin' things while standin' on your head is a valuable life-skill." He taught me how to do many things while standing on my head. "Eating, drinking, fucking, whatever ya gotta do, I can do it on my head." He grins ironically. This is fun for him.

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His woodsy morality and campy rationalization are no protection against the Law. On one night in my tenth summer, I hear The Man talking to Mom downstairs in our city duplex: "That son-of-a-whore sheriff and his ride-along cunt-bag pulled us over for a taillight," he tells her, continuing with an account of unprovoked police brutality and subsequent self-defense. Of course, to him, self-defense means swinging a bumper-jack on top of a police cruiser and breaking a man's jaw. He spares no detail in telling the events that would ultimately put him in prison for the next five years. I'm not supposed to hear this.
He seems different on the rare occasions when I visit him at Thomaston State Pen. Quieter. Humbler. I was different too. My teen years need a father. I'm bitter, ashamed, angry. Mom said it wasn't The Man's fault; he'd had no father, and didn't know how to be one. I'll be different one day.

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It's a Thursday night in September, 1991. I'm fifteen. "We're goin' upcountry!" The Man says as he pulls up in his two-tone brown Chevy pickup truck late in the evening. He and Liz, his loud, bleach-blond, coke-head, half-his-age, Def Leppard-listening-to girlfriend, knocked a few back and packed the truck for a weekend getaway. I'm fond of Liz. Three hours later, we're rumbling down old tote roads that only ever see four-wheel drive traffic, singing to the radio and laughing at each other. The Man and Liz are blitzed.
I've had a few gulps of coffee brandy, a contact high, and half a pack of strawberry *Hubba Bubba* when I yell that it's time for a "piss stop." He says "Where?" I point to the left, and without missing a beat, he launches us over the embankment. The truck lodges on a granite boulder in a copse of alder. The wheels still spinning in the air, he jumps out and jauntily runs into the woods like the bear hunter in *Jeremiah Johnson*, yelling back, "I gotta go too!" Half an hour later, he's prying the front end of the truck up for traction with a six-foot crowbar as I winch the truck slowly off its stony perch with a steel come-along. He looks at me with a weathered face and a beard not unlike my own, now. His grin glows in the red

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taillights and swirls with exhaust as he says, "Boy, there's no one in the world I'd rather have out here with me right now." I grin back and keep winching.

Back on the winding tote roads not an hour later, The Man slows the truck for an old cow moose grazing at the edge of the gravel. Fifty miles from the nearest town, he says, "Want to see how retahded a moose is?" This was a rhetorical question; he's already edging toward the beast and slowly picking up speed. Mildred, as we later came to call her, turns her mournful eyes and pendulous muzzle toward us once before making her move.

A little known fact about moose: They always look for the path of least resistance. In this case, that means trotting down the open road instead of veering off into the safety of the woods. She's nearly at a full gallop, pushing 30 mph when The Man asks a "retahded" question: "Do you wanna take her home?" I say "Yes!" out of naiveté and excitement; Liz screams "Hit her!" out of drunken stupor; Lacey braces her feet tight against the dashboard, puts her head down, and whimpers, "No, no, no."

When Mildred's hind end makes connection with the grill, the front end of the truck buckles halfway to the windshield. Mildred's forelegs buckle too, and she rolls forward, headfirst, under the truck. Moose have long legs which often cause them to go over a vehicle rather than under it. We're lucky to be alive. The truck is done. Mildred, however, still has a little fight left in her. As we approach the 1600 pound animal, she pants, and with one last push, takes almost to her feet and lunges into the ditch. There she lay, heaving, bloody, dazed but very much alive, with her feet curled beneath her in the brush, looking directly into my eyes. Her gaze transfixes me for a moment. I back up a step, eyes wide, before looking away. I have to focus, to be there for The Man. He ambles around her as I toss him a four-inch jackknife from my pocket and watch anxiously as he snatches it from the air with a flannelled swish. The blade is ridiculously small, and this wounded behemoth could easily crush the life out of even him with one panicked lurch. Forcing her muzzle to his chest from behind, he cuts a jagged slash through the thick hide of her neck. Aortic blood sputters and splashes on his boots with her last breath. Mildred is dead.

We spent the rest of the night quartering the big girl with the jackknife and a flashlight, loading her into the truck bed. It was noon the next day before someone came along to tow us to the nearest town. I'm not sure if Lacey ever quite felt the same about The Man after that night. He quit drinking later that year when his mother died of lung cancer, and to my

knowledge, has never tasted alcohol since. He never said, but I got the impression he'd made her a promise, a promise to change his life, and he was nothing if not a man of his word.

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It's been fifteen years since I've seen The Man. We talk occasionally—not often enough. It's not that I don't love him, that I harbor any resentment for his failings; it's just how we are, how he is. He'll never leave those woods, and I may never go back. Nearly seventy now, he lives a quiet life in a new house he built with his own hands. I haven't seen it, but somehow I feel like I'm there with him at times. Somehow I believe he does too. Somewhere in the back woods of Maine, some piece of me will always be that boy with the cracked lip and a jackknife in his pocket, waiting, ready for the next adventure. But that was my part, a child's role to play. I still don't know what drove him, what force guided his choices. I'm a father now. I've experienced the grief of divorce and separation from my children. I've felt the temptation to drown in vice, the urge to run away, to be fierce and solitary where obligations play second fiddle to nature, and whims seem practical. I didn't heed that call, but I imagine it's the same voice that he heard, that he followed. He admitted his shame to me once, a crack in his rugged ethos. As I struggled to remain a part of my own children's lives against near insurmountable odds, he told me he was proud of me. "I wish, well, I should have been more like you. I couldn't do it." The Man became human to me then, the God stepped off his pedestal. Until that moment, I feared as much as hoped becoming like him. I'm not. I stayed. I'm not like him, but I'm not out of the woods yet. I'm not sure I want to be. Part of me thinks that he could be no other way, that his strength is defiance. Maybe Mom isn't the only one that makes excuses for him. Maybe I make excuses for him too. But somewhere there is proof that I was there, that I was defiant and wild, that there's a place for me in that world that I left behind so many years ago. Somewhere in a little pocket of the wild, in a cracked old picture album covered in dust, there's a picture of The Man and a boy of about five, drinking a root beer and a beer side-by-side in a bar, atop the bar table, while standing on their heads.

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Figure 17: Literacy's Ravens
Source: Original adaptation

The Aberrancies of Raven:
A Narrative on the Clashing Literacies of an Outlier

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" she asked, letting a Lewis Carrol book droop lazily in her hands. My mother was a reader. No, not just "a reader." My mother was and still is the best-read woman I've ever known. She couldn't enter a bookstore without taking a trophy, nor could she pass a yard sale or a "free books" table without avidly sifting through stacks and rows until they yielded their fruit. My sister and I spent countless hours of our childhood nestled softly into stony back corners of the Andrew Carnegie public library in our Central Maine hometown. All the librarians knew us by name. The dowdy director once even let us camp out on the Gilded-Age rooftop to watch the attic bats make their twilight egression. My mother read every word of classic lit on the library's shelves, the non-fiction, do-it-yourself books, and religious texts of all sorts, but her true loves, her favorite Ravens, were found in the dog-eared pages of cheap paperback novels.

On sunny days, when I was quite young, the three of us walked miles, each carrying a paperback over the Kennebec river on the rickety Two-Penny Bridge to read all afternoon on a high grassy knoll overlooking the town. Mom usually carried a spare in her purse. At home, murder mysteries, adventure, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, and even westerns lined the walls of every room, and when the bookcases filled, they towered high in crooked piles on the floor, in the corners, on stairs—on any relatively flat surface. Occasionally, she'd sit on a short stool and attempt to sort the chaos, but then some gem would shine from the bottom of a dusty stack. A glint settled in her eye as Ravens called her to leaf through pages like

browsing a deli case of fine cheeses. She'd press the spine open against her knee, turn to the last page, and sipping from the river Lethe, I'd watch her resolve dissipate. Any desire for activity that day would fade away. Never turning her eyes from the page, she'd draw the blackout curtains tight, light a solitary, dim, reading bulb, and nestle into her old cast-iron bed, not to be seen again until the deep belly of addiction had been sated.

No, my mother was not just "a reader"—she was a hoarder of texts. She had an unhealthy relationship with her literacies, and especially with her books. Burdened with mental illness that sometimes kept her bedridden for days, my mother accumulated immense loss over her life. By the time I was three, she had divorced my father, been shunned by her family and her religion, and was living on welfare in the "projects." She worked full-time and slowly put herself through college while caring for two children and haunted by the memory of a stillborn third. She was the first in our family history to earn a degree, but the effort took its toll, and paperback novels became the primary coping mechanism for a life that seemed too noisy. She embraced and nurtured her mental illness with a willful blindness, to shield her consciousness from a reality riddled with taboo. She didn't see it that way, of course. To her, one might never do another thing of value, but if they were well-read and a nice person, their life had culture and purpose. She always read the last page first. She said it was the only way to know if a novel was worth reading, but in truth, no book ever failed that test. When the walls closed in, she needed a fix. She loved her Ravens. Still, for all the fault in a life of isolation, my mother passed much of her affinity for literacy on to me.

My "literacy affinity," which Lauren Marshall Bowen (2011) describes as "an enduring attraction toward literacy, expressed and reinforced by affective and bodily experience," wasn't tied exclusively to traditional concepts of literacy (pp. 591-592). It wasn't just the literacy practice of novel reading, a writer's ambition, or even the lure of escapism that held my attention. It was all that and the sociomateriality of the books themselves. Books bind us to each other. They connect us to a community of readers and a web of universes beyond our own. The allure was all-encompassing. It drove my visions for my future and shaped my daily life. In books lie the quest for a universe in which the written word holds some innate, tangible power, where "the 'magic' of writing… can overshadow, the 'reason' of writing" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 21). They also tethered me to a mother who otherwise defied connection—through books, I could visit her universe.

I didn't attain a standard literacy in school. My affinity wasn't bequeathed to me from some cold, draconian institute—those were Ravens I habitually resisted. I bought wholesale Harvey Graff's (1979) "literacy myth," believed in the "opportunity to use literacy for liberation" and in the usefulness of literacy "for developing the scholar–gentlemen" (p. 211). My early literacies were influenced through a blend of sponsorship more cultural and familial than institutional. On their first date, my parents saw *My Fair Lady* (1964) on the silver screen, a lifelong favorite rags-to-riches story where literacy holds the key to socioeconomic ascendancy. Before my age hit double digits, I was hooked on my mother's fantasy collections by Piers Anthony and Anne McCaffrey. In my teens, I feigned illness, so I could stay home to read Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, dreaming of one day becoming slick P.I. or an adventurous ace reporter. Through the support Lauren Marshall Bowen (2011) calls "positive affective connections" (p. 595) and Selfe and Hawisher's (2004) "complex web" of "specific cultural, material, educational, and familial contexts" (pp. 644, 642), I learned to see myself as a literate person with a literate history and rich literate traditions. If I were to leave any legacy, it would be born of literacy.

Contextualizing "Headstands" & "The Aberrancies of Raven"

That writing is an epistemic, social, and rhetorical activity can be seen clearly in this vignette, and in many of the same ways, it is inarguably ecological (Roozen, 2016b; Estrem, 2016; Lunsford, 2016b, p. 44). In the ENC1101 classroom while writing "Headstands & Smoke Ceilings," I discussed writing strategies with my professor and peers that shaped how I re-experienced these long-past events I thought forgotten, leveraging my academic ecologies to prompt memories of my familial ecologies. Then, coursing the fluid transmission of knowledge back through my familial ecology, I called on my mother and sister to verify any remaining points of which I was unsure, to fill in the blanks in my story. Through the social, rhetorical, and knowledge-making performance of writing "Headstands," I also found a talent and a love for nonfiction writing, for storytelling, that tends to infuse even my most academic essays, one which I am sure leaves traces in my students'

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writing ecologies.

Accessing recursive pathways of memory reconnects us to our past in ways that confirm what Lunsford (2016b) tells us, that "writing does not simply record thought or knowledge, but rather, that writing has the capacity to actually produce thought and knowledge" (p. 44). Through the writing of the highly confessional literacy memoir, "The Aberrancies of Raven," I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for the ways literacy pervades every ecology through which I've travelled. I developed a concept of how literacy's tricksters have impacted my life in significant ways, and I wished to share that concept, leaving traces of my experience through other people's ecologies, so they might consider their own unique quirks of literacy acquisition.

The Ravens I wrote of soar between Selfe and Hawisher's (2004) macro, medial, and micro-level literacy gateways and sing of Deborah Brandt's (2001) "complex, sometimes cacophonous mix of fading and ascending materials, practices, and ideologies" in which "literacy is always in flux" (p. 657; p. 666). Ravens nest within Prior and Shipka's (2003) "chronotopic laminations" where "the dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts … are simultaneously held and managed," and they effortlessly fly across Brandt's (2001) "borders between tradition and change" to "adapt and improvise and amalgamate" (p. 181; p. 660). However, though the similarities to the allegory of Raven and the ecological metaphor may be readily apparent, the concept of literacy's Ravens will never be more than a thought experiment. It will never be the easily at-hand and commonly understood metaphor that both unites contradictory notions and permits the permeable borders of transdisciplinarity. The passage is dear to my heart, but it will never hold the universal appeal of the ecological metaphor. Yet still, I hope you enjoyed.

It is important to recognize that each story told always entails every aspect of the ecological metaphor at once, though the theoretical focus of analysis may shift between fluidity, complexity,

and networks, as well as important contributing concepts like diversity, embodiment, and locale. As Fleckenstein, et. al (2008) put it, "The greater the options for framing discourse within an ecosystem—the greater the discursive diversity—the greater the options for linking with a messy, complicated, multifaceted reality" (p. 410). Many of the passages in this chapter still retain remnants of theoretical frameworks I used when I wrote them such as Rumsey's (2009) "heritage literacy" which may be "mitigated by one's community, faith, and family" and exposes the "interdependence [of literacies] between generations" (p. 578), or such as Brandt's (1998) "literacy sponsors" which caused me to consider the institutional ecologies at play in my literacies, or Prendergast's (2013) "Pooka of literacy" which once informed the development of my conscious literate identity. However, these framework remnants neither obscure nor distract from the ecologies in and about which these vignettes were written; rather, they only add to the rich texture of literate activity that pervades writing ecologies. Rhetorical ecologies easily embrace the vast variety of theoretical, practical, and pedagogical positions forwarded in our field because each, from great to small, from abstract to concrete, from grand theories of unification to tips for classroom management, happen within unique rhetorical ecologies.

The following vignette picks up where this excerpt leaves off, with a shift in "The Aberrancies of Raven" from familial to more worldly ecologies

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<u>The Aberrancies of Raven: Continued</u>

Though continued from "Aberrancies of Raven," this vignette deserves a short introduction as it shifts fluidly between my networks of familial ecologies and institutional, and then, finally, between familial, institutional, professional, academic, and digital ecologies in ways that may remind us of the ecological rhizome in Figure 12. Though inseparable in some ways, the way my mother and I read novels for pleasure or escape differed from the way we read for our religion, and both impacted my literacies as I moved out into the world. The vignette in this section details a turbulent time in my life during which the move from one ecology to another was an act of violence.

God Is My Sponsor

All wrapped up in my mother's relationships with literacy was her relationship with God. Listed among "the most controversial religious groups to spring up on the fertile American soil" by the *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, our family religion is a fundamentalist, evangelist, literalist, millennialist branch of Protestantism with equally active practices of proselytization, shunning—and publishing (Melton, 1986, p. 62). Much of my mother's weary disposition stemmed from the trauma of being shunned, from the religion and from her family, when I was only a toddler. Then, one sunny, summer morning in my tenth year, men from the church knocked on our door in the projects, and I answered. The front men for a multinational publishing corporation disguised as the hand of God, the elders spoke in tones as soft and reassuring as their sweater vests. They nobly proffered what Brandt (1998) calls "Literacy's materiel"—i.e., Literacy's military equipment—and graciously offered to shepherd me back to the open arms of the Lord (p. 168). So, for a time, my relationships with literacy were also all wrapped up in my relationship with God.

Mere months after my father was convicted of assaulting an officer and sentenced to seven years in prison, the solemn, paternal attention of these men garnered attentive interest from a ten-year-old boy in love with the written word. Normally, any "brother" or "sister" could conduct weekly home bible studies, but my mother's shunned status meant we were dangerous consorts, and only elders could safely enter our home. I eagerly took up these

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studies, at least partially in hopes of repairing the familial void in my mother's psyche. She was a third-generation cult member, and the attentions of these elders signaled to her a chance for redemption and to reunite with her family. For me, the elders offered a wealth of new literacy opportunities.

 "The Society," as members refer to their governing body, produces tens of millions of books and well over a billion magazines every year, written in 700 languages in 239 countries; they also print their own version of the Holy Bible (WTBTS of Pennsylvania, 2017). Worship consists of five meetings every week, and each begins with unscripted prayers and hymnal singing. We met for Sunday public sermons followed by publication-based Q&A's, a Thursday-night "Theocratic Ministry School" and "Service Meeting," and smaller Tuesday-night bible studies held in an elder's home. All meetings were devoted to church doctrine and required audience participation with prior reading preparation and scriptural cross-referencing. Convention halls were booked for quarterly circuit, yearly district, and quadrennial international conventions. The most scripturally literate were applauded to participate on every stage.

In addition to the bustling, structured, literacy-ridden activities of daily worship, brothers and sisters of all ages were expected to write and deliver sermons, or "talks," in front of the congregation. My mother helped me, at first, to study the Society's literature to support my scriptural analysis, but I was soon on my own. Members were also coerced through public shaming and peer-pressure to participate in monthly door-to-door evangelism, or "service." Detailed records were kept by all, with maps of territories, notes on interactions at every address, and full accounts of literature "placed" with "householders." The sales pitches given to residents with whom we hoped to leave literature (for a small donation, of course) were developed at home as a family and then shared, practiced, and collectively refined before we set out in groups of three or four with bags full of God's paper.

This was a period of deeply institutional literacy sponsorship in my life, but Ravens scavenge human weakness, our quirks, and the fallibility of free will. My brothers and sisters in faith never convinced me that we were family. Their atmosphere of uniformity, with their dress and grooming codes and tenacious behavioral modifications, did much to glaze a veneer of acceptance and unity, but they couldn't sustain, for me, any sense of belonging. The strongest emotional tie I formed was literary. The rhetorical adaptation of scripture intrigued

me. As Shirley Brice Heath (1972) explains, "Certain discourse forms, such as the parable or proverb, are formulaic uses of language which convey meaning without direct explication. Thus, truth lies in experience and is verified by the experience of the listener" (p. 443). To obtain obscure truths through discourse was a near inexorable lure for a lonely child who saw literacy as a righteous quest.

However, despite the powerful influence of "ruling institutions [that] control literacy and use literacy to control the population," this publishing corporation could not isolate me from an accumulation of overlapping and conflicting literacies (Brandt, 2001, p. 654). Their mandates restricting familiar association with "worldly" people, those doomed for their lack of faith, lacked the empathy and respect for life I had come to value through liberal fiction reading. Literacy products not produced by the Society were deemed corruptive, or in some cases, even demonic, but I had found them edifying. Although "choices about literacy… are mitigated by one's community, faith, and family," and the "stakes of maintaining literate heritage are raised in a context that asserts assimilation pressure," for me, psychological influences countered heavily (Rumsey, 2009, p. 578; Lorimer Leonard, 2017, p. 44). The assimilation tactics meant to dissuade converts from involvement in worldly affairs felt too confining, and Ravens intervened.

The Society relaxed its stance on higher education the year that I graduated high school, just in time for my sister, Lacey, to take advantage. Two years my junior, Lacey always did everything by the book. Unlike me, she was not intensely engaged with her literacies beyond an easy affection for stories about horses, but she moved fluently within the confines of institutional structures. She easily excelled through high school, enrolled at a reputable business college, and moved directly into a life-long career with IBM. Lacey abided by the rules of institutional literacies, and her Ravens bestowed institutional fire upon a mortal and enabled her success—My sister also walked quietly away from the Society, never shunned or accused of sin.

At 18, I graduated, got immediately engaged as was often the custom, and was then shunned for engaging in intimacy with my fiancé. I met with three elders, each with stacks of Society books to justify their treason. In a small study room as dimly lit as my mother's bedroom, they used the word of God to prove I was a sinner. In effect, they used my own literacy, those skills I had spent my childhood acquiring, to strip me of my family, my friends, and my

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faith. As it had been with my mother, shunning meant complete disassociation, and with that, nearly all my childhood sponsors, institutional and familial, microlevel to macrolevel, disowned me at once. Prendergast believes that "every literacy narrative documents sins—a little drinking, a little stealing, a little drug use—something that complicates, even threatens the accumulation of literacy." My loss of sponsorship signified the onset of a period of lonely experimentation that could only be seen by those childhood sponsors as "sin." Traumatized, those few who did not disown me, I disowned, and I left the state. Through a prolonged period of self-destruction, I experimented with drugs, sex, and counterculture, listened to "devil music" and associated with Pagans. Among the first of my sins, though, was literacy misappropriation.

Sin

Misappropriation, Brandt (1998) tells us, "is always possible at the scene of literacy transmission," and that point of transmission is where Ravens operate (p. 179). She defines literacy misappropriation as "the potential of the sponsored to divert sponsors' resources toward ulterior projects"—in my case, the project was survival (p. 179). With no place to go and few life skills, I joined a traveling sales crew, crossing the country and into Mexico to sell, of all things, door-to-door magazine subscriptions. The literate skills I thought were abandoned with the Society became my mainstay. Ravens had taken my sponsors but gifted new avenues for my old literacies. In a bizarre twist, these literacies worked as fluidly among addicts, the promiscuous, and the violent as they had for the pious. Life on the road put those childhood literacies to work in neighborhoods where drugs were more likely to be peddled than God, where my knock was met with a gun nearly as often as a smile, and where evenings were anything but bible study.

Over the next decade, often depending on Ravens' whims, I exercised my literacies more like the distant men in my family than my mother. My father, uncles, and cousins are all listless wanderers situated at the edge of societal norms and engaged in the "real-life" practical literacies of blue-collared men who jump from job to job for survival. I inherited my mother's affinity for a life of learning, but the bitterness of being shunned and denied educational opportunity led to angry years in which higher education seemed wholly alien. I worked retail because that was what I could do and honed a slew of professional literacies with no real attraction beyond a paycheck. But in a vacuum, none of these literacies held

meaning or validity. My literacies were dead ends which lacked any reflection. It wasn't until I could relay my literacies that I found a purpose worthy of acknowledging them.

My spiritual literacies lay dormant by the time I met the mother of my children. We sat on a filthy sidewalk outside a 7-11 and discussed Dostoyevsky until my break ended. Two years later, our first child was born, and formal schooling once again became important to me. I needed my children to experience the security and stability of institutional and academic literacies as my sister had. But Selfe and Hawisher describe how "specific literacies emerge; they overlap and compete with pre-existing forms; they accumulate, especially, perhaps, in periods of transition" (665). After years of listlessly wandering my own literacy paths, parenthood and the Ravens hand in large-scale economic events began to shape the trajectory of my literacy.

Greater Forces

Prophetically, Brandt describes how "recession, relocation, immigration, technological change, [and] government retreat all can—and do—condition the course by which literate potential develops" ("Sponsors of Literacy" 173). By 2004, the country was at war, I was selling furniture in a retail store, and the once booming Florida housing market collapsed. Foreclosed homeowners do not buy furniture. Within a year, our second child was born, and my professional literacies could no longer provide sustenance. My youngest son was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, and my wife left. The divorce put me in a homeless shelter where I remained, with my children, for two years. I filed bankruptcy, and unable to retain an attorney under the onslaught of court proceedings, I spent long hours in the local law library, honing a new literacy— Brandt's "'legalistic' form of literacy, [that of] an 'advanced contractarian society'" where the court's "jungle of rules and regulations" endangered my children ("Sponsors of Literacy" 176-177). Mastering this new literacy meant facing my Ravens.

Friends from online writing groups—another new, overlapping, and influential literacy—helped to revise court documents adapted from existing examples found in the library. They urged me to consider returning to school, a notion easily dismissed at first. Education reminded me of loss and left a sour taste in my mouth. Prendergast warns that "literacy brings family fissures," that "those who acquire advanced literacy are often the ones who can't go home again," but going home wasn't an option anyway, and I tired of struggling.

Higher education, it finally seemed, was an option. Entering my second phase of highly institutionalized literacy, I enrolled at the local community college on a pre-law track, and it wasn't long before my old affinities returned. I switched my major to English, rediscovered my love for literature, and soon began tutoring in the college writing center. This time, I did my homework, and my literate attentions turned toward ELL students, putting me enthusiastically on track to become one of what Brandt calls the "conflicted brokers between literacy's buyers and sellers" ("Sponsors of Literacy" 183).

Ravens gave a 10-year-old boy biblical literacies that set him apart from his secular peers and gave him secular and spiritual literacies that set him apart from his family. They pried him from a life of normalcy and shoehorned him into ill-fitted professions. They drove wedges deep into personal relationships and propped wide doors of opportunity. Ravens both tied him to his roots and drove him from his home, on more than one occasion, in ways that prove that Literacy has its Trickster God. I would love to say that I have levied some reconciliation and now live with my Ravens in harmony, but this, too, is an incremental endeavor.

The loss of sponsorship leaves indelible marks, and each new literacy we accumulate bears its own tricksters. Context, after all, is paramount when any theory of linear progression fails to account for Literacy's practical fluidity, for life's "messy, connected, agentive movement of literate practices" (Lorimer Leonard 61).

Contextualizing More of "The Aberrancies of Raven"

The detritus one carries along with them from one ecology to another makes clear how permeable the borders between ecologies are. Life within our multiple ecologies endows each of us with both experience and baggage that affect our perception, performance, and identities as we interact with other ecologies. As time moves me between familial and institutional ecologies, and later, still more institutional and professional ecologies, we are reminded of how Rumsey (2009) explains that our accumulation of literacies need not be "a direct superseding of one form of literacy to another" (p. 577). There is no logical order to this. There is no hierarchy. Everyone's ecological map is unique and traceable—and these qualities have important disciplinary implications.

Tracing my ecologies in "Aberrancies," tracing my story, moved my consciousness closer to understanding overwhelming number of factors that shape who I am as a writer, as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a human being. Overlapping, highly structured, and didactic literacies fed to me by my family religion, couldn't stop me from traversing multiple, alternative, discursive, and often conflicting literate ecologies developed in the quiet of my room. My father's incarceration at the age of 10 was the catalyst for one. In response to his absence, I researched and romanticized his Native American ancestry through any available source, read histories, nonfiction, and historical fiction, and rented any movie that touched on our cultural and spiritual ecologies. I sometimes walked in the woods and prayed to spirit animals. I attended peyote beading classes, a functional literacy I later used to decorate buckskins for my father's fourth marriage in the same multimodal tradition of "codified sign systems" employed in my ancestry for centuries (Rumsey, 2009, p. 576). These historical, spiritual ecologies were strictly taboo to my immediate family, and they became my point of access to forms of resistant literacies.

By my teen years, my literacies had already moved into extra-familial ecologies. I had institutional sponsorship through the family religion and taboo sponsorship through my heritage, and to my young mind, this left no room for formal education. Brandt (2001) speaks of "resistant strains of literate practice," and though I loved reading, resistance quintessentially defined my reaction to formal K-12 schooling (p. 655). I absorbed secular, bookish knowledge with no practical application. I saturated my existence in reading with no academic end. By high school, I would skip weeks of class at a time to hide in my room, reading everything within reach. During my sophomore winter, I consumed most of our 1986 *World Book Encyclopedia* collection. I loved my English textbooks and read them all cover-to-cover but never opened them for assignments. I failed freshman year for truancy and by senior year was placed in an alternative-school program for at-risk

students. Formal secular learning was irrelevant.

These resistant ecologies were not endorsed by the family religion which goes by "The Society" to its members. In fact, many were warned against as "worldly distractions" or even expressly forbidden. The Society, at the time of my schooling, did not recognize education as a valuable endeavor. They struck fear into the hearts of parents that any association with non-believers would corrupt fragile young souls, so many children were homeschooled to limit their ecological interactions. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians was our mantra: "Do not be misled. Bad associations spoil useful habits" (New World Trans. 15.33). Extracurricular activities were forbidden and college strongly discouraged. What was the point of school, they argued, when Christ would surely destroy Earth any day now? Education was simply a thing one does to fit in under "Caesar's rule," and for setting ourselves so visibly apart, public school became a site of bitter ridicule and religious oppression. Torn by the conflict between two towering agencies of literacy, The State and God, each transcending any one ecology but influencing all within their reach. I was caught in a zero-sum game between two juggernauts; to appease either's literacy standards meant betrayal and failure to the other.

The fluidity afforded by ecologies which forever ebb and flow always allow for change, eventually. As I age, my ecologies only grow more complex and my networks grow to find more fertile ground. To recognize one's own Ravens exposes the networked nature of our literacies. They reveal the fundamentally unique interconnectedness of emerging, receding, competing, overlapping, and sometimes clashing personal literacies, those adopted, adapted, and alienated, those taken from us, nurtured within us, and those we choose or have forced upon us. They perform in broad daylight in ways you'd never think to question until the day you realize your literate destination could never have been anticipated. However, though the similarities to the allegory of Raven and the ecological

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metaphor may be readily apparent, the concept of literacy's Ravens will never be more than a thought experiment. It will never be the easily at-hand and commonly understood metaphor that both unites contradictory notions and permits the permeable borders of transdisciplinarity. The passage is dear to my heart, but it will never hold the universal appeal of the ecological metaphor. Yet still, I hope you enjoyed.

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<u>Going Global: The ELL Writer & the Peer-Tutor Connection</u>

The narrative which comprises this vignette is situated within my decade in writing-center work. It derives from a nine-month, grant-funded research project at Stetson University in the summer and fall of 2013. The project was set to determine the specific role of the Writing Center at Stetson in identifying and mending any marginalization of Stetson's English Language Learner (ELL) population. "Going Global: The ELL Writer & the Peer-tutor Connection" utilized a blend of qualitative and quantitative Writing Center assessment, demographic research, writing-center records, and narrative to establish a framework of continuing assessment of the writing center's responsibility in serving ELL populations. However, though the project was lengthy, the product was large, and the implications meaningful, this vignette only gives but a tiny, narrow view of the lively interplay of endless ecologies overlapping and influencing one another on every college campus.

Going Global: The ELL Writer & the Peer-Tutor Connection

Julie first entered the Writing Center during Freshman Orientation with a self-reflective demeanor that seemed to say, "I don't belong here." It was the same demeanor she carried everywhere around campus with an air of submissive resignation. My first tutoring sessions with her were quiet ones in which I softly read her paper aloud as she sat forward in her seat, her head down and her hands clasped between her knees. She rarely looked up, and only nodded briefly or, occasionally, emitted a shy "Yes" when asked if I was speaking clearly enough or if she understood the reasons why I would mark certain patterns of errors. The quiet acquiescence to whatever I said was rarely broken in those first weeks. When asked later in an interview for this study, Julie relates her nervousness in approaching a group of strangers on that first visit. Her lack of confidence seemed a palpable wall between Julie and her education—really, between Julie and everything. The frustration felt as a tutor, not

knowing if I was helping, if I *could* help, was overshadowed by the sense that this was a young woman who felt utterly alien and alone in a world that was not hers.

However, Julie continued to come to the Writing Center day after day, assignment after assignment, until one day in her third week, I decided to try a new tactic. Her Freshman Seminar (FSEM) professor instructed her to write a reflective piece about who she is as a student and why she came to Stetson University. Julie's paper only hinted at the sort of metacognition obviously, to me, called for in the assignment prompt. Instead, she spoke at length in hesitating, heavily accented English of her parents' expectations of her and of the standards imposed upon her by her high school in her native Hong Kong. I soon realized that, in this case, to grant her request to focus on "grammar" would not avail her any real gains from our time together. The first paragraph of her personal narrative made it clear to me that if I served a more vital capacity than just teaching proper preposition and article usage, the result may be, for her, a truly valuable relationship with the Writing Center. The first paragraph of her reflection (a later draft) reads:

> I am a Chinese student, who took a nine thousand mile flight from Hong Kong to the United States. I have been here for three years and had a very happy time during my high school years; I made a lot of friends […]. But this year is different, now I am a college student in Stetson University. I came to Deland by my own; new people, new school, new place to live, everything is different. Just as the first year I came to United States, the whole living method is different, and it is hard for me to accommodate. In the first day of school, I was aware other people are not isolated; people always have friends walking with them or eating with them. Therefore, when I was eating on my own, I asked myself, "Am I isolated?"

It was now my turn to be nervous—nervous about overstepping the social norms of her culture and nervous about stepping into a new role as a peer-tutor. Hesitantly, I pushed Julie's paper aside, thought for a moment about my approach, and then asked her to tell me how she felt about her parents' decision to send her to a foreign university. This was not what she expected of a writing tutorial. What ensued, very slowly at first, was a frank discussion about the academic and social isolation bearing on her in a setting which she felt was a sort of punishment for not living up to the expectations of her home and family. She

was unused to the teaching styles of her professors and culturally prohibited to ask for clarification. Julie came to me academically overwhelmed and socially dispirited, truly believing she would never excel or make friends on campus with her limited grasp of the English language.

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Katie, a junior in her second semester with us, explains, "I didn't know how much the student knew and how much they didn't. I didn't want to have them not understand something and be too afraid to ask me what I meant. But I also didn't want to undermine their intelligence by thoroughly explaining a concept they already knew about." This continues on and on in discussion and in survey responses. Another tutor describes the crux of the issue, explaining that "there is an ambiguity about how much direction is appropriate. The tutor must gauge the student's abilities and provide constructive advice, without undermining or overestimating them," and further shows how concerned tutors are in effectively working with ELL students without committing cultural taboo: "I feel nervous when I have difficulty gauging what students already know. I don't want to waste time going over rules that they already understand, or be condescending in any way."

This concern is not without warrant; when an interview with Julie hit upon one particularly moving account of a time when a high school teacher caused her to feel embarrassed and marginalized, I asked her if she had experienced any similar situation in college. She didn't want to answer at first, saying that she would like to think about it. I asked Julie if she would write a short paragraph to elaborate. Her response details a writing center session in which a male tutor used a red pen to circle mistakes, eventually appearing to become exasperated with continual patterns of mechanical errors. She tells how he kept repeating the same questions about her use of "is," and he asked her over and over how to fix the problem without telling her how. Those of us trained in writing tutor ethos may identify with this tutor's quandary; how do we lead a student to the correct answer without being too directive when they do not seem to know the answer? Julie's response is disheartening:

> [H]is face started to change after the first paragraph because I made too much mistakes, and my paper turned to red. [...] Then, He asked me a question, "This is

not correct, can you fix it?" I read the sentences and tried to figure out what I can fix to make it correct. However, I did not know how to fix it, so I shook my head. He looked at me and took a deep breath.[…] I did not know how to answer this question because when I wrote the paper I thought that should be correct and that was why I wrote it like that. However, he did not seem like he understood my situation as an international student. When he was waiting for my answer, I cried because I knew that I made very simple and basic mistakes. [He] made me felt like he just want to humiliate me and did not respect me as an adult. For this reason, after that day, I was so afraid I would meet that tutor again. So, when I have to go to the writing center again, I would walk around the hallway and make sure he was not there before I step into the room.

The marginalized plight of the ELL may begin before they ever set foot on a university campus and may follow them even into the classroom. They come to us from a complicated array of backgrounds and for a complicated number of reasons for which we could never expect to fully account. Certainly not a typical story but typical of the unexpected ways in which ELLs come to American universities, Julie relates her college origin story:

We have a test in Hong Kong, like the SAT, and then I got a really bad, terrible grade. So, I can't go to college in Hong Kong, but I had a few ways to go: Maybe I just come here, or I just work in McDonalds or something. Because my grade is terrible. Or just find other college in Hong Kong, like, a really bad college. So, my mom asked me to come here.

For Julie, attending this university, a small private university I could have only dreamed of for most of my life, was a punishment. As we might imagine when we learn of stories such as Julie's, studies conducted on the marginalization of ELL college students (Bokser, 2005; Crowley, 2001; Gramm, 2001; Harris, 1997) show that those learning in foreign environments often feel as though they do not belong. Even with years of English study, ELLs may not share the feelings of inclusion and community involvement American universities attempt to foster. Julie shares her insight on the complex palette of reasons that beset this marginalized mentality in the second paragraph of her FSEM reflection paper:

During the Focus Orientation, I talked with some of the people in the group but after a little chat, we would stop talking because we don't have a common topic with each other. I think this might be because we have a different culture and background; culture makes us interested in things in a different way. For this reason, we don't have a common topic; as result, we just turn and start doing our own work. In addition, I don't speak English well so I am so shy to talk with people. On the other hand, people might not have that much patience to talk with me based on my language. Thus, Asian people can give me a friendly feeling, so I like to make friends with Asian. Maybe they are not from my country, but we have a similar culture and background, we are easier to be friends. Unfortunately, at Stetson I didn't meet any international students from Asian countries.

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When pressed for what services she would most like to find on campus, Julie mentions several times her difficulty with taking notes, saying in response to a survey question, "taking lecture notes might be the most frustrating or difficult about the college learning experience." She elaborates on her difficulties with note taking and its impact when interviewed:

> I have a class, that, we have to take notes, because the teacher talks so fast, so, we have a notes taker in my class. I asked her, and she said I can get the notes from the Success Center, but she said you have to have some kind of learning disability, but I said I don't have. Can I get it as just an International student with English as second language? She said no.

> It's not really like I don't want to take notes in class, it's I can't, I don't understand what he's talking about. There are so many words. If I take notes, you know, maybe "schizophrenia is a mental disorder," then I don't know how to spell schizophrenia. I just underline it, and write it is a mental disorder. But when I study, […] I just don't know what it is so I have to skip that answer. Sometimes I hate, I don't want to keep asking the professor how to spell something.

Something as simple as not knowing how to phonetically jot down some item of terminology can inspire feelings of anxiety and frustration, and implementing a program similar those offered by Disability Services would seem an obvious fix until one considers the difficulty in providing note-takers for 156 International students and still denying access to the greater ELL population….

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Julie returned to the Writing Center recently for one more session with me, my last before I leave with my baccalaureate degree. A junior now, she still struggles with her English acquisition, but her work has improved dramatically. Moreover, Julie walked into the Writing Center with an air of confidence that neither of us thought possible just a few semesters ago. She has made friends on campus as well—not many, but enough.

Contextualizing "Going Global"

To write this thesis-length piece, I had to navigate a number of ecologies: Interpersonal, academic, and institutional ecologies defined my interactions with ELL students and other tutors who I interviewed; my research on the habits and policies of the several offices and departments which provided services to ELL and international students involved a variety of institutional ecologies[11]; and I also negotiated my own academic, professional, and institutional ecologies to produce and publish "Going Global." Though my ecological influences may be explained here, they are only implicitly evident in the narrative, above. However, for Julie, my showcased participant, plainly seen complex, fluid, and networked interpersonal, familial, academic, and institutional ecologies played out with international and irreversible impact on her life. In a similar fashion to the ways in which I traced some of my own literate roots in earlier vignettes, part of this project traced Julies'. From Hong Kong to Stetson University and then back again, complex cultural and institutional factors fluidly occupied the work Julie did. Social boundaries and institutional policy

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[11] One of the lasting achievements of "Going Global" was a change in university policy that promoted increased transparency and interaction between these several offices.

surrounded her efforts to improve her writing. However, through academic networks and a quiet

sense of determination that defines her personal ecologies, she persevered. Julie and I occasionally

catch up on social media. She graduated Stetson with honors in 2015 and returned to Hong Kong to

begin her new life. She was recently married and tells me she is very happy.

OUTRO:
WRITING ECOLOGIES AS THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

This project tweaks such constraints as have been placed upon the discourse of threshold concepts. By introducing the ecological metaphor to threshold concepts, we may even challenge the ways we view constraints in general, shifting ever so slightly more away from any view of them as restrictive boundaries, such as a dam which controls a river's flow, and toward responsive guidance, like the ever-eroding sandy banks of a mighty river, constraints which reconfigure to accommodate the ebbs and flows of powerfully fluid discourses. The ecological metaphor assists us in remembering that threshold concepts are always-already in a state of flux, an intentionally and perpetually ongoing conversation had among rhetorical practitioners who believe that knowing the content of knowledge helps us to know who we are and gives us the political tools we need to further the discipline's health and growth.

Threshold concepts, rhetorical ecologies, and embodiment: These the three concepts entered this project as separate entities, at least conceptually, but they emerge entwined, thicker, and stronger for their association. I could have chosen any number of frameworks for this project, but the complementary quality of these three matters in important ways—they called to one another. Embodiment is essential to the argument made here for the simple fact that embodiment should always be a prime consideration when forwarding theory. Theory and research without embodied representation pose the risk of ending up a purely academic exercise, having no practical application, or worse, bolstering an unresponsive status quo or regressive exclusivities. "At the core of researching rhetorically," Fleckenstein et al. (2008) remind us, "is a belief in the possibility of both a coherent story of reality and multiple coherent stories" (p. 390). Dobrin (2012) adds that because "words and writing technologies are experienced as part of our brains and bodies, writing is always

an ongoing process of interaction with other beings and objects." Though there are doubtless many

different ways to embody theory, I opted for memoir narratives because I believe in the power of

storytelling to capture the imagination and to portray the complexities of real, lived experiences.

An Ecological Heuristic

- In what ways is the matter at hand fluid? Will its meaning or usage remain the same across people, contexts, & time?
- In what ways is the matter complex? Is it oversimplified? Is it comprised of multiple, interconnected factors?
- In what ways is the matter networked? Do influences on the matter extend beyond those accounted for? Do ulterior motives influence a false-binary?
- Are linear or continuous models for the matter sufficient? Accurate? Inclusive? Comprehensive?
- Is the current representation of the matter embodied enough to be accurate? Does it represent lived experienced or a flattened reality?
- How is the matter embodied? Who or what does it exclude?
- How could the matter be better represented to justly reflect the fluid, complex, & networked lived experiences of all those involved?
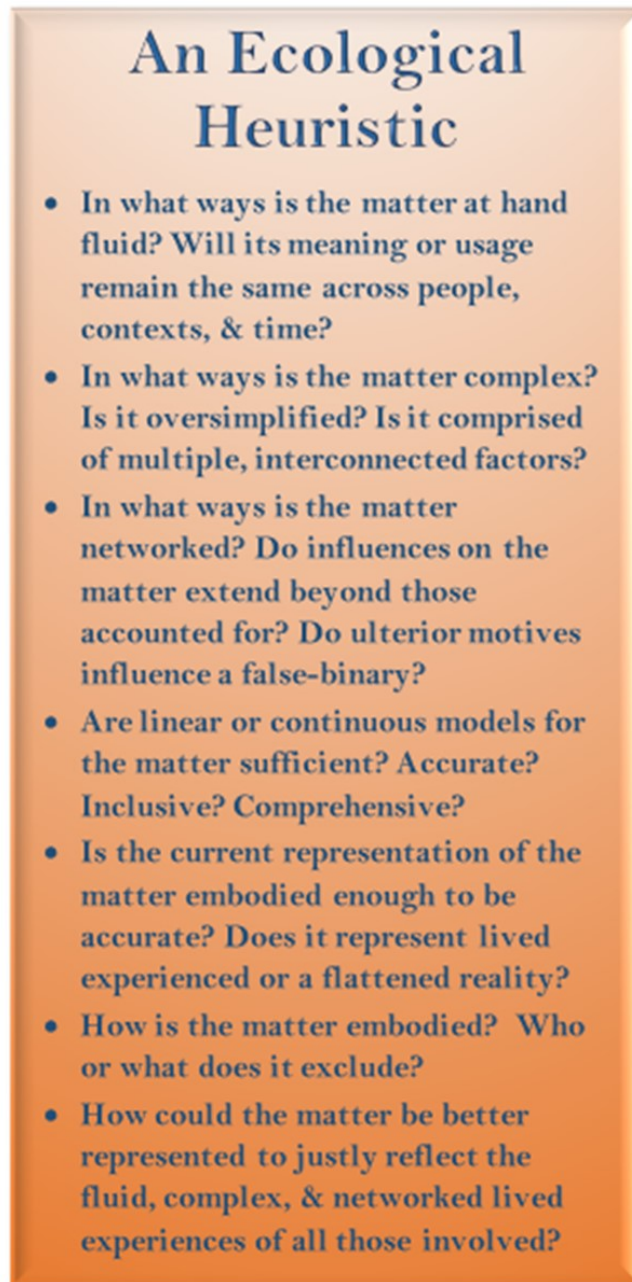
Figure 18: An Ecological Heuristic
Note: An ecological heuristic may help us develop a habit of thought in which we consider the fluid, complex, and networked ways in which writing, as well as many other matters, occurs in diverse, embodied reality.
Source: Made with MS Word

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For some, the argument made here for the ecological metaphor will be *troublesome*. It was troublesome for me in many ways once I identified its ubiquity in our scholarship. It challenged my preexisting notions about the situatedness of rhetors and their audiences, and it challenged my notions of scholarly identity. The metaphor nags namelessly at the back of our minds when we discuss writing's contextuality: Where does writing begin or end? It prompts questions of scale and scope when we describe a literacy event: What or who does it include, and what or who does it exclude? The quizzical moment lingers when we describe a rhetorical situation to our students, fully knowing the metaphor will fall apart when that one student inevitably raises their hand and asks, "But, what about X?" It complicates our genres and our activity systems when we admit that personal identity and prior experience extend all human communications beyond the categories or geometric shapes we draw around them. Whether discussing assignment prompts or defining generic conventions, the constraints we enumerate are motivated by the contexts we assign to them, and those constraints can always be tweaked to expand or collapse the reach of any particular discourse, almost indefinitely.

What I argue here invokes Meyer and Land's (2003) *liminality* in multiple ways: As a threshold concept, it exists in liminal academic spaces, between knowing and unknowing, novice and expert, at the tip of our tongue when we try to explain the complexities of human communication, and in the back of our minds when we attempt to embrace ambiguity. Liminality itself can be an elusive concept to comprehend, though, ironically, we often use the term to express other concepts we find elusive. Land, Meyer, and Flanagan (2016) describe how liminality "remains to some extent the 'black box' of thresholds research, given the evident intractability of attempting to access or represent this individual state in any reliable or accurate fashion" (p. xvii). However, outwardly, the liminality of the ecological metaphor will become evident as it crosses exactly what

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Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) explain to be the definition of the liminal—a threshold (p. ix). We must, in this sense, cross the *threshold* of liminality to grasp the *threshold concept* of liminality. Meanwhile, within the ecological concept itself, liminal spaces represent the permeable borders between multiplicitous writing ecologies and the rhetors within them, as perpetually innumerable, fluidly mobile, interconnected ecologies we traverse in every act of communication with another human being. Liminality is the quality of a writing ecology which allows for the fluid transmission of prior experience, environment, temperament, technology, and psychology to exert their forces on a writing situation. Liminality is, then, not a state at all, but a fleeting space for transition between states, and a necessary component of any ecology. The liminal is the passageway*, that indefinable point which connects networked rhetors, situations, and ecologies.*

The argument made here is inevitably *integrative* because writing ecologies rely on connections. Through a common metaphor, ecologies help make sense of the ways in which all existing threshold concepts are interrelated—it provides a fluid space, a networked environment for us to understand how, why, and where writing happens, and a clear explanation for how those complex shared spaces overlap and are intertwined with one another. Moreso, the metaphor has already been integrated into rhetorical theory to the point of ubiquity. However, it is important to note that, though writing ecologies are commonly called upon as a metaphor for the spaces in which writing happens, they are rarely *acknowledged* as a codified system of knowledge management[12] as have the rhetorical situation or, more recently, activity systems. Recognizing the metaphor as a threshold concept remedies that oversight.

The argument made here can be *transformative* for the individual, as should be all threshold

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[12] For exceptions, see Cooper, 1986; Edbauer, 2005; Barton, 2007; Fleckenstein et. al, 2008; Brooke, 2009; Dobrin, 2012; and Downs, 2017

concepts, but it's also transformative in important ways for how we think of threshold concepts in Writing Studies as a discipline comprised of many factions. Personally, the metaphor was transformative for me as it fundamentally changed how I recognize and contend with binary or linear thought patterns on the almost daily occasions when I encounter them—I have yet to encounter a social or academic binary, a continuum, or even a spectrum which would not be better conceptualized as an ecology. Our older, more linear models of literacy acquisition, for example, already benefit from full-court scrutiny of the complex ways in which learning happens, and with that scrutiny, we have finally begun to lay the monolingualist silo models to rest (Duffy, et. al, 2013, pp. 114-115). The "rhetorical situation" has been revised a number of times to encompass more than Bitzer's (1968) original elements. Even the spectral metaphors for gender or autism are better conceived of as fluid, complex, and networked systems of categorizing human qualities which resist being placed on a rigid scale (see figs. 5-9). Ecologies embrace outliers in ways that continua and spectra cannot—as existing within a sphere of likeness simultaneously acknowledging links to others within and beyond the sphere.

Finally, this change, for me at least, is *irreversible* in that once it is known, it cannot be unknown. I hope, once voiced, that it will be irreversible for others as well. An explicit understanding of the ecological metaphor forces us to see connections rather than borders. Once the networked nature of writing becomes our default mode of thought, both the teaching and act of writing become more inclusive, empathetic, and comprehensive. I hope that, whether obvious or not, the argument I make here will prove troublesome, liminal, integrative and transformative, and irreversible in ways that contribute to our disciplinary content, to our many roles in the academy, and to how we understand our complex relationships with writing and with one another. Many of us intuitively write with this intention, and many of us struggle to succinctly pass this on to others, but

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the use of the common ecological metaphor can do much of that work for us.

Just like the rhizome, writing, also, is "reducible neither to the One nor the multiple... comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion" (Deleuze & Guattari, trans. 1987, p. 21). Each act of the trillions of acts of human communication that happen every day connects the singular individual in motion with the network of singularities we call society in a complex, fluid, acentered, non-linear, non-hierarchic activity at once at play with every prior experience, every other rhetor, and every other environment. In short, writing is ecological. I find that astounding.

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