

PREFACE

“One can probably never know all the sources influential in the process of writing a book . . .”

– George Hillocks, Jr., *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*

Very often when I read acknowledgments, I feel overcome. Especially when reading something like Donna Qualley’s final note in her acknowledgments for *Turns of Thought*: “Finally, I want to acknowledge the important, complex, and at times disconcerting influence of my Grandmother Qualley. From her I learned how reading and writing are processes we can use to try to make sense of our worlds and ourselves. Twenty-five years after her death, I am still using reading and writing to make sense of her legacy to me” (xi). Qualley blends literacies with feeling, family, identity, loss and its aftereffects. I learn something about what drives her when I read this acknowledgment, something inaccessible in the rest of the book. Likewise, familiar texts that have become my thinking pals over the years, like Qualley’s, surprised me as I got to know them differently, reading not for their main arguments but for their paratexts. When reading the stories about writing itself, I found that the worlds around texts frequently came into full bloom.

The most pleasurable part of writing this book was the time it granted me to read attentively the framing texts of others’ books. In prefaces, introductions, dedications, and acknowledgments I have learned about writers’ troubles, preoccupations, musical tastes, relationships, challenges, eating habits, animal companions, exercise routines, best friends, personal losses, and much more. Sometimes I found myself enjoying the frames more than the work they border (examples withheld), a feeling I suspect others share, as acknowledgments show us how writing gets made, or, not necessarily the same thing, how writers narrate the creation of writing. We also catch glimpses of how writers position themselves in relation to everything that surrounds and sprawls across writing. Here’s Anne Ruggles Gere: “Cindy and Sam tolerated my long sessions with the computer but insisted that I keep up with their regular routines and join them for bike rides and skiing” (xiv). Lester Faigley’s family gave him “the greatest support” and “space to finish the project” that became *Fragments of Rationality* despite misgivings about its content (xiii). John Schilb describes himself as “one of those writers, more numerous than you may think, who need music playing while they sit at the computer keyboard. Indeed, it is fair to say that many composers and performers have contributed to the making of this book, albeit

indirectly” (ix). I can only hope that my rendering of writers’ acknowledgments throughout this book does not squeeze the life out of these frequently extraordinary profiles of writers writing.

One effect of reading acknowledgments attentively, with intent to write about them, is a heightened consciousness of the genre, its surprises and riches, as well as its codified patterns of attribution. That consciousness, for me, has resulted in an avoidance of writing my own acknowledgments in this book for fear that my attempt will land with a resounding thud, a major disappointment given the attention I pay to this marginal genre in the following pages. In lieu of a separate acknowledgments section, which feels like too much pressure, my debts are threaded throughout the remainder of this preface.

Despite my own claims in this book about dispersed origins for any writing project, I couldn’t resist trying to pinpoint when this project began. To do that, I looked back through my computer files and found one called “MMLAspecial-sessionproposal.” This proposal for the 2012 MMLA, which was themed around the concept of “debt” and convened in my home city of Cincinnati, Ohio, is one starting point for this book. Several graduate students and I decided that we couldn’t pass up the opportunity to attend this local conference. Our proposed session was approved; the abstract reads as follows:

This session theorizes writing as an economy of indebtedness. We are interested in the following sorts of questions: How is writing mediated by the words of others? How do critical and creative writers implicitly and explicitly acknowledge the presence of others in their work? What’s the relationship between influence and indebtedness? What role does affect play in acknowledging or refusing debts? Is indebtedness inherently backward-looking; is it possible to feel both indebted and to forge radical new directions? How can writing instruction benefit from an understanding of writing as entangled with indebtedness without mirroring novice writers in the long shadow of what’s come before?

Rereading this, I notice how we defer making claims and instead pose a series of questions, confirming that, perhaps like many proposal writers, we were inventing a topic on the spot rather than creating a panel that coalesced around what we already knew. If it weren’t for the conference and panel, titled “Writing and Indebtedness,” I’m not sure that I would have written this book. While I wrote my portion of the panel from a place of some ambivalence—“Is this anything?” is for me a nagging question that plagues most of my scholarly writing—hearing the contributions from Allison Carr, Christina LaVecchia, Jason Nemeč,

and Hannah Rule planted a seed, made me realize we had stumbled into some very rich content worth mining more substantially. So, big gratitude to each of them for being inspiring, willing partners.

There were moments along the way when I thought I should abandon this project, got discouraged by skeptical feedback, or succumbed to nagging doubts about the value of yet another academic book out in the world. These concerns were in the back of my mind when I presented a portion of what became chapter four at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference on “Animacy” in 2014. Facing an audience of skeptics, I stumbled. And then I began doubting the project. That experience, as it turns out, was a productive one for me, as the questions and comments helped me reenvision the framing of chapter four. Sometimes trouble helps, I guess, though I fully admit that sometimes it hurts in breathtaking ways. Anyway, thanks to the folks in Milwaukee, my graduate school stomping grounds, for taking the work seriously (despite its limitations), and especially to Alice Gillam, host and mentor extraordinaire.

This book demanded soundtracks. Writing’s rhythms and percussive keyboarding can be, for me, stifling. Great music helped me get lost. I would have been excruciatingly lonely without the sonic awesomeness of The National, Waxahatchee, Sharon Van Etten, Andrew Bryant, Courtney Barnett, The Antlers, and so many others. Sometimes I imagined being in these and other bands . . . a fantasy release from writing. If I were a rock star, I wouldn’t have to sit here hour after hour working out my thinking in slow motion . . . No, actually, I probably would.

I benefited from the company of others, including kitty companions Peanut (RIP; tears my heart out), Tiny (RIP), Oscar, Morrissey, and Pearly (RIP). Meows all around.

Students in the interdisciplinary dissertation workshop class that I taught during the summers of 2013-2016 were incredibly positive influences. We met for five hours a day for ten days to write together, taking breaks to talk, share, stretch, and eat. I wrote the book proposal and chapter one in the 2013 workshop, chapter two in 2014, chapter three in 2015, and am now revising the whole book in 2016.

I am grateful for permission from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to reprint excerpts from “Writing Material,” originally published in *College English*, throughout this book. The article was part of a special issue on Reimagining the Social Turn, guest edited by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander. J & J = dream team editors and aspirational colleagues. Thanks to them for seeing potential in that piece and including it alongside such great work.

Though I don't address the role of children in composing within these pages, I wrote this book with children near much of the time and wouldn't have it any other way. I'll always associate this book with Giovanni's guitar playing and Lou's soccer ball smacking the downstairs wall. Great music to write by. Also on the home front, I'm extremely grateful to Gary Weissman for his steady support, advice, amazing food, and near constant, welcome hilarity. When I thought I was done, he gently told me that I had to reorganize the first two chapters. This took the wind out of my sails, but I knew he was right and am thankful for his honesty. His expert reading and exacting feedback helped me clarify just about every sentence in here, or at least made me question what struck me as self-evident, hopefully producing better thinking, better prose. Gary and I have been writing together for almost 20 years now; it seems to be working out!

Without the willing participants who completed my survey and contributed photos and narratives to the Facebook group, "Composing with Animals," chapter four would not have been possible in its present form. Big thanks for the time, care, and energy of all of my respondents, especially in this age of seemingly constant surveying. Likewise, participants at the 2014 Dartmouth Summer Seminar on Composition Research, especially Christiane Donahue, Neal Lerner, Chuck Bazerman, and Mya Poe, offered excellent advice and suggestions that directly shaped my research design and analysis. I'm so grateful for that humbling re-education in research methods and the supportive, smart community at Dartmouth.

External reviewers provided astonishingly generous and useful advice for creating a more coherent manuscript that progressively develops chapter-by-chapter. I don't know how I would have managed to make this book without their guidance. Editors Susan McLeod and Michael Palmquist offered productive commentary that helped me frame the book, unpack buried assumptions that informed my claims, and generally think more critically about audience expectations. Thanks for your belief and patience (all told, this project took three years). Thanks, too, to colleagues and students at Kansas State University and Ohio University, where I presented early versions of chapter three and gained insightful feedback that aided my subsequent drafting and revising. Special shout-out to Cydney Alexis and Mara Holt who organized those visits and offered smart feedback and excellent company.

A Taft Summer Research Fellowship in 2013 and a University Research Council Summer Research Fellowship in 2014, both through the University of Cincinnati, were hugely significant to my progress on this manuscript. Thanks to the dedicated faculty members who serve on those committees and who saw fit to support my work so generously.

Need I say that, even in the presence of many partners, all of this, finally, is

my fault and my burden?

USAGE NOTE

I use “acknowledgments” rather than “acknowledgements” throughout this book, except when citing the latter usage in a direct quotation or a title. *Merriam-Webster’s* allows for both variations; I chose the slightly shorter version for aesthetic reasons.