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WRITING AS A WAY OF BEING

Focus long enough on the text and the student disappears.
—Richard Haswell

Here's what I think happens when I am writing—or at least what is happening right now as I write.

I sit at my desk in my home or my campus office or perhaps at a table in a favorite coffee shop and I type words into a file using a word-processing program on my computer. In physical terms, what I am doing is tapping a computer keyboard with my fingers while looking alternately at the screen and the keyboard. (On the rare occasions that I use a pen or pencil and paper, I sit with my right hand resting on the surface of the desk or table and use my hand to push the point of the pen across the paper lying on that same surface; my eyes are focused on the paper.) Rarely do I look at anything other than the screen (or the paper). In a sense, my writing tool (the computer or pen) becomes an extension of my hands and, to push things a bit further, my self.

That's what seems to happen physically when I write.

Psychologically (or mentally or cognitively—these terms become difficult to pin down, in part because this experience defies linguistic description, as I explained in Chapter 3), I become preoccupied with the intellectual task

of writing, and my attention focuses almost exclusively on that task. I become so engrossed in my effort to use written language to create some kind of text (such as this book) that I am largely, although not entirely, unaware of my physical surroundings and what is happening around me. Those surroundings and activities partially recede, although only temporarily, from my awareness, which is consumed by the task of writing, so much so that I may seem not to hear sounds coming from upstairs in my home or from the counter in the coffee shop. Somewhere in my consciousness I remain aware of those sounds and activities, but I pay little attention to them; they become a kind of white noise, always there but, for the moment, irrelevant.¹ Of course I am aware that I am sitting at a desk or table, but that awareness is pushed to the back of my consciousness by my focus on the words I am typing onto my computer screen. In a sense, that screen becomes a kind of partial display of my consciousness as I type; significantly, however, that screen—and the text it displays—captures only a very small part of what I am thinking and experiencing, and it reflects little or nothing of my awareness of my *self* at that moment.

At *this* moment, for example, as I sit before my computer at my desk in my home, typing these words onto the screen, I am writing this sentence (which means considering words and phrases and perhaps matters of convention as I try to articulate this idea) while at the same time imagining an editor who is considering my proposal for this book; I am trying to anticipate his response to these words as well as the responses of the reviewers he will ask to evaluate my manuscript. I am also remembering (or perhaps “imagining” is the better word) the coffee shop where I often write, visualizing in my “mind’s eye” the chairs and small round tables arranged haphazardly around the cramped, asymmetrical space; the counter, where a few people stand waiting for their coffee, looking over pastries and bags of coffee for sale or reading the descriptions of the day’s brews on the chalkboard behind the counter; the shelves adjacent to the counter, with coffee and other items for sale; the tile floor. I can also “hear” (i.e., I am remembering) the familiar noises of the espresso machine and the voices of the baristas and customers, the hard scratch of a chair leg on the tile floor, the thump of the rest room door—noises that, when I am writing there, I vaguely hear but that remain at the rear of my attention, which, as now, stays focused on these words I am writing. I am also thinking at this moment about the “shape” of the book I am writing and whether or not some of what I expect to include in this chapter really belongs here or should be part of the next chapter or the previous one or perhaps be eliminated from the book altogether. These are rhetorical concerns that probably arise because of my years of experience as a writer and my training in rhetorical theory, but somehow they are similar in effect to my remembering the coffee shop. That is, both my memories of the coffee shop and my concerns about the structure of this text keep my

attention focused on this writing; as I craft this sentence, they occupy my awareness and shape my consciousness right now.

At the same time, I am thinking of what I think about as I write, because that is what I am trying to describe in words right now. And I am wondering whether this description makes any sense—especially given what I wrote in Chapter 3 about the limited capacity of language to capture or represent our experience at any given moment. And suddenly, just now as I write this, I find myself also wondering how the description I am writing at this moment compares to the thinking captured by the think-aloud protocols that writing researchers Linda Flower and John Hayes made famous in the late 1970s and early 1980s as they explored the cognitive dimensions of writing. And at this very same instant I have just remembered an assignment I was given as a graduate student to participate in a think-aloud protocol, and I am now remembering the fellow graduate student who took notes during the session, remembering the small office we used for that session, with its tiny rectangle of a window up near the high ceiling in that old building, remembering even some of what I said then, more than twenty years ago. Simultaneously (I think) I am right now wondering to what extent Flower's think-aloud protocols resemble the "thinking" I am trying to describe right now. (And I worry about how I am defining "thinking" in this context.) As I am writing, I am beginning to develop an answer to that question (I think!), but the answer I have is still nebulous, as if it is floating in my head until I can pin it down with these words on my computer screen, which I can never quite seem to do. I am wondering how that editor and those reviewers and other potential readers might define "thinking" and what expectations they will have about my efforts to do so. And just now I noticed that the sun is shining through the small basement window that overlooks my desk.

I have just described a small part of what is happening as I write these words right now.

There is much more to it, of course—much more to what seems to be happening psychologically ("intellectually"; "mentally") as I write than I have represented here with these words you are reading. But the most important point is that I am *at this moment* thoroughly engrossed in this task of writing such that it becomes almost synonymous with my consciousness at this moment and profoundly shapes my awareness of myself *as my self*, a self existing *both separate from and part of* what is around me, both physically and metaphorically. Significantly, in this act of writing I am more intimately connected to this moment and to the physical location where it is occurring in the sense that I am intensely in the here and now while I write, and at the same time I am also connected to something larger that is not here and now—something that includes that editor and those reviewers and the professional field in which I work (which in turn encompasses both the

intellectual work and the persons of Flower and Hayes, whom I mentioned a moment ago, and others in the field as well as the theories and ideas that characterize the field and the actual people who talk about those theories and ideas at conferences and write and read about them in journals and online discussions); and more: the history of this field and of writing itself and the many others who have written about writing; not to mention my own past and all the previous moments of writing that might somehow be part of this moment right now. All of this is somehow folded into this moment of writing here and now.

As I write, I *am*—but not *because* of the writing; rather, the writing intensifies my awareness of myself, my sense of being, which is prior to but, right now, coterminous with this act of writing. And if I attend to my awareness—if I become aware of that awareness, as it were; if I focus my attention on my attention during this act of writing, as I am doing right now—it is not my sense of self as a separate, thinking being that is intensified but my sense of self as existing in this moment and at the same time “inhabiting” the physical place where I am sitting as well as the scene in the coffee shop that I am imagining and trying to describe, a scene removed from me in time and space at *this* moment; thus, I am connected to this moment and those other moments I have been trying to describe and indeed to all those other selves I’ve mentioned and many I have not mentioned and the things around me now and those that were around me then and even you, the reader I am imagining who will, I think, at some point, really *be* a reader of this text and thus be connected to me as well in a very real way through your act of reading at some future date, which means that this moment of writing right now somehow encompasses that future moment, too.

It is in this sense that I *am* as I am writing. The *writing* does not create me, but in the *act* of writing I *am*; by writing I reaffirm and proclaim my being in the here and now. The act of writing, in this sense, is a way of being; it is an ontological act.

This sense of being that I am describing here is, I think, more than an understanding of (or belief in) a connectedness of the self to something else but rather a sense of my being as defined by this connectedness, which is made visible, in a sense, by the act of writing. What I am describing here is more than the inherently social nature of meaning-making through text that scholars like Deborah Brandt have illuminated in their attempts to challenge what Brandt has called the “strong text” theory of writing, in which meaning in a text is understood to be stable, portable, and autonomous (13). The theoretical formulations of Brandt and like-minded scholars focus on the text as a vehicle for meaning and on writing as a social process of meaning-making *through* the text, rather than on writing as an act or expression of being in the world in the here-and-now. In other words, although these scholars challenge the strong-text theory of writing as asocial, their socially

mind theories remain text-based; to the extent that they illuminate the experience of writing, they do so as a way to understand how the writer produces a text or how a text “means.” But such a focus on the text offers an inadequate account of what happens *as a writer writes*; furthermore, it neglects the effect of the act of writing on the writer’s sense of being in the moment and over time. Whatever happens to a text *after* it is written does not affect what is happening to (or *in*) the writer *as she or he is writing that text*. Whatever happens to *this* text that I am composing right now after I have written it will not change what is happening right now *as I write it*. It is this experience that current theory fails to explain.

At this moment *I am more keenly aware of my self* than if I were just thinking about these same ideas or that scene in the coffee shop—thinking while driving my car, for instance, or while sitting on a bus or a park bench or even in that same coffee shop. In writing I am also more deeply aware of my self than if I were describing the coffee shop scene to someone orally. Many of the details of the scene, for example, are somehow more vivid, more available to my consciousness as I am writing right now than if I were simply remembering them as I sit on a park bench or saying them aloud to a listener. As I write right now, I can “see” the colors of the logos on the coffee bags, the dim light making dull yellow circles on the walls of the shop, the white apron of the barista, the glare of the afternoon light through the large windows at the front of the shop, the glint of light on the display case that contains the pastries, the people sitting in different positions on the chairs scattered about the shop. It is true that I can “see” all these things by simply trying to remember them, but writing, which happens more slowly than talking or listening or remembering, focuses my awareness more deliberately, more intensely, more fully, on these details, these things, even though they are not physically present at this moment (since at this moment I am writing in my home); until *this* act of writing, at this very second, those details have been outside my awareness. Yet at this moment, as I am writing, they are present. And *I* am present in the same moment. And so are you, whoever you are.

REPLACING WRITING WITH *WRITING*

In the late 1970s and most of the 1980s, Composition Studies became enamored of the potential of cognitive psychology to help explain what happens when we write and, more important, to provide insight into the struggles of student writers. A major purpose of this research was to understand *thinking* during the writing process in order to help writers overcome their struggles so that they could produce “effective” texts. Flower and her colleagues

at Carnegie Mellon University spearheaded this effort, and their studies of experienced and inexperienced writers, using techniques adapted from cognitive psychology (including the aforementioned think-aloud protocols), led to the development of their well-known cognitive process theory of writing (Flower and Hayes). Flower's was a sustained effort to build a coherent theory of writing that might adequately explain the act of writing and provide a basis not only for further study of writers but also for developing effective writing pedagogies. It was an influential effort in part because of the widespread view that writing is a form of thinking and in part because of the widely held view in mainstream education that learning is largely a cognitive—and, significantly, an individual—process. Not incidentally, these views remain widely held in education circles today and certainly among education policymakers.

The criticisms of Flower's work and that of other "cognitivists," as Berlin labeled them ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 480), that proliferated in the 1980s and early 1990s were based not only on concerns about the apparent ideological implications of a cognitive understanding of writing and teaching (the focus of Berlin's critique), but also on the sense that a cognitive theory of writing focused too narrowly on the individual writer and did not adequately account for the many factors (social, economic, cultural, historical) that seem to play a significant role in shaping what and how a writer writes. Flower responded to these criticisms by adjusting and elaborating on her theoretical model to try to explain these factors as inherently part of any cognitive process (*The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*), but the basis of her theory was still the fundamental assumption that writing is a form of thinking. To a large extent, the field of Composition Studies seems to have lost interest in that theory as compositionists have pursued questions driven by the general view of writing as an inherently social act that is culturally mediated and context-bound; at the same time, Composition Studies was influenced by the insights of poststructuralist theory regarding the power and complexity of discourse and the contingency of meaning-making. As I explained in Chapter 2, however, these competing perspectives on writing all rest on the same Cartesian worldview and on the idea of an autonomous Cartesian self. Many compositionists (including myself) have theorized this self as multifaceted, contingent, inherently social, and constructed within discourse. In other words, the conception of self that informs contemporary theories in composition is a function of language practices that are socially situated and culturally mediated. This is indeed a social self. But for the most part this self remains an *intellectual* and linguistic entity; current theoretical perspectives in the field, therefore, reinforce the Cartesian dualities, especially the mind-body binary, on which the Cartesian conception of self is based. Writing is understood as a product of that intellectual self and the text as an artifact of that self's thought—which, in Cartesian terms, is essentially

identical to the self (“I think; therefore, I am”). In the mainstream Cartesian view of writing, therefore, the text becomes the focus of attention. It is the vehicle for understanding meaning-making, even when meaning-making is assumed to be uncertain and contingent and even when the meaning of a text is assumed to be unstable. The meaning of a text may be unstable in the post-modern era, but the text, as a physical artifact of the autonomous (intellectual) self that exists separately from the world, remains paramount.

But what if we shift our theoretical gaze from the written text to the self writing—from the writer’s writing to the *writer writing*? What if we conceptualize the act of writing not as the self thinking (as in a cognitive view) or communicating (as in a social view) or constructing itself (as in a poststructuralist view), but as the self *being*? What if we focus attention on the *experience* of writing rather than on the text as a product of that experience? What would such a perspective reveal about writing? How might it explain what happens when we write? How might it help explain the implications of writing? And how might it provide an alternative to a Cartesian view of writing that might better explain the effects of writing on the writer and the world of which the writer is inherently a part? These questions are the focus of this chapter.

The account of writing with which I began this chapter foreshadows what an ontology of writing might reveal. But of course my account is inherently incomplete. I cannot capture in writing what happens when I write any more than Crispin Sartwell can capture in language everything contained in a single glance, as I discussed in Chapter 3. Indeed, that’s part of the point, because a theory of writing should account for the limitations of language as well as its capacities and potential. The focus of my discussion in this chapter, however, is on the ways in which an ontological account of writing can foreground aspects of the experience of writing that are minimized, dismissed, ignored, obscured, suppressed, devalued, or invisible in the mainstream Cartesian view of writing, in which the self, as an autonomous intellectual being, asserts itself through the act of writing and the product of that act—the text—is the focus of attention. An ontology of writing focuses not on what that writing self does through or with writing but rather *on the experience of the self in the act of writing*. Moreover, it focuses on what happens *now* rather than what happens later. An ontology of writing allows us to see that the experience of writing has an effect on the writer exclusive of the use of the writer’s text, which is not insignificant but remains subsequent to the act of writing; an ontology of writing enables us to examine that effect instead of focusing only on the text and its impact on a reader, as mainstream writing instruction does. At the same time (and in a seeming paradox), an ontology of writing illuminates the writer’s inherent connection to that reader and indeed to all other writers and readers; it illuminates how those connections affect the experience of writing and thus the writer.

In my attempt to articulate an ontological theory of writing, I explore the experience of writing *at the moment of writing* by examining some accounts of writing in addition to my own experiences while writing. In doing so, I employ a phenomenological methodology, examining the experience of writing as an empirical ground for a theory of writing. According to Dermot Moran,

Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get at the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever happens in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. (4)

As Moran goes on to point out, phenomenology rejects the “representationalist account of knowledge” and assumes that “our experience properly described must acknowledge that it presents itself as the experience of engaging directly with the world” (5–6). Thus, I proceed on the basis of a fundamental assumption of phenomenology, as Couture articulates it: “all essences or truth are located in subjective experience” (64). It is to the experience of the writer writing that we must look to understand writing. On the basis of this examination of experience, I will articulate in the second part of the chapter what I see as the main components of an ontological theory of writing.

THE ONTOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF WRITING

In 1990, I had the opportunity to teach in a prison college-equivalency program.² I was assigned to teach basic writing to inmates in a medium-security prison in a rural section of central Ohio. Early in the fall semester I assigned a short essay whose primary purpose was to give the students practice in descriptive writing and develop their facility with word choice. The assignment, which I adapted from a writing class I had taken as an undergraduate and used in writing classes I taught to mainstream undergraduates, was straightforward—or so I thought. It required the students to describe a familiar place in a way that would make it vivid to someone who had never been there. I am embarrassed to say, all these years later, that I never really considered how the extreme physical limits placed on my students as inmates in that unpleasant place might be a problem for them as they tried to complete the assignment. The point, I thought, was to describe a familiar place whose very familiarity would obscure from their notice details that might stand out to a stranger visiting that place for the first time. Any famil-

iar place would suffice for this exercise: a classroom, a street corner, a favorite diner, an office, an apartment. Even, alas, a cell or a prison yard.

When I gave the assignment at the end of class one evening, the students listened in uncharacteristic silence. These were two dozen mostly hardened men, ranging in age from 18 to 55. All but a few were Black and most hailed from one or another of Ohio's larger cities. They seemed as out of place in the middle of the rolling farmland surrounding that prison as I, a somewhat untested 32-year-old white teacher, did in their midst. I noticed their silence but didn't pay much attention to it. Only a few weeks into the semester, some of them were (understandably enough) still somewhat wary in class, and it would be a few more weeks before we began to enjoy a more relaxed atmosphere during class meetings. But the next week when I asked them to bring out their drafts of the assignment, many of them had nothing to show. That also was uncharacteristic, and this time I did take notice. It always amazed me that these men, working under hideous conditions and lacking even basic amenities that I took for granted—like a quiet space for writing—almost always had their assignments done. So I asked them why they didn't in this instance. That ended the silence, and what poured forth was their frustration, their intense hatred for that prison, and a bit of anger directed at me for asking them to write about it. As they talked, I began to realize how important that writing class was for most of them—not because they were enrolled in a college-equivalency program or because the class replaced some demeaning job they would otherwise have to do while serving their time, but because the class was a genuine escape from that depressing place, a few hours of respite from the inhumanity and degradation they experienced the rest of the week, a few moments when they were treated as students rather than inmates—treated, that is, as human beings. Writing class was a way for them to be human again. And I had asked them to write about the very same inhumane surroundings that they wished to escape.

In a sense, what I asked my students in that prison classroom to do was to experience their hated surroundings more intensely by writing about them. No wonder they resisted. They were basic writers who struggled with the basic conventions of written English, who—some of them—struggled even to write a simple sentence, yet they understood that at some level the act of writing was an intense engagement with whatever they were writing about. Completing my assignment would require them not only to struggle with the conventions of written English but to do so while focusing their attention on a place in which they struggled to maintain their dignity. Listening to them at that moment, I realized what a lousy assignment I had given them. I didn't, however, quite realize why.

As I think about that incident now, I am struck by how much those students, who were defined as remedial writers, seemed to understand intuitively about the experience of writing. As their instructor, my focus was

mostly on their texts, which, given the conventions of academic writing and from the point of view the program they were enrolled in, were problematic in more ways than I could name. I attended to the act of writing as a process of creating texts, as I had been taught to do as a graduate teaching assistant—and even then only to the extent that I believed doing so would help them produce “better” texts. It didn’t occur to me that the *experience* of trying to produce those texts mattered in any significant way—to them or to me. The point of writing, I believed, was to produce writing—ideally, “good” writing. The experience of producing that writing was only marginally of interest to me to the extent that it might provide insight into why these students did not produce acceptable texts (by conventional definitions). But the *experience* of writing *did* matter to those students. And it *does* matter in ways that are obscured by the mainstream Cartesian view of writing that I unconsciously embraced.

We have a few accounts that bring the experience of writing to the fore. Poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, for example, has written compellingly about his own prison experiences. As a young inmate Baca discovered the importance of language to his sense of identity. In his autobiography he tells a harrowing tale about his life in the barrios of a large southwestern American city and his descent into a criminal life, which eventually landed him in jail. His schooling left him with only a limited ability to read, but he was intrigued by the books his fellow inmates were reading. Eventually he began reading on his own, and he found his way into a Latino history that was missing from the mainstream history he was exposed to in school. His story in effect is about how his newfound literacy deepened his sense of identity as a Latino. But when he describes his efforts to *write* while incarcerated, something more than his sense of identity emerges. In the following passage, for instance, he describes the lengthy sessions during which he wrote in an old notebook while in solitary confinement:

Whole afternoons I wrote, unconscious of passing time or whether it was day or night. Sunbursts exploded from the lead tip of my pencil, words that grafted me into awareness of Who I was; peeled back to a burning core of bleak terror, an embryo floating in the image of water, I cracked out of the shell wide-eyed and insane. Trees grew out of the palms of my hands, the threatening otherness of life dissolved, and I became one with the air and sky, the dirt and the iron and concrete. There was no longer any distinction between the other and I. Language made bridges of fire between me and everything I saw. I entered into the blade of grass, the basketball, the con’s eye, and child’s soul. (qtd. in Yagelski, *Literacies and Technologies* 167–68)

I say more later about the sense of connectedness that Baca describes here, the inherent oneness with the world that he experiences through writing;

this, as I read his words, is the experience of nonduality that I describe in Chapter 3. What I wish to emphasize here, however, is Baca's sense of himself as a being-in-the-world that emerges *through and during the act of writing*. You might argue, in poststructuralist terms, that in this passage he is constructing himself through his words. Perhaps. But the physical isolation of his cell and the fact that the writing he did in that cell was never intended for any audience other than himself suggest that such an explanation is insufficient to illuminate the power of that experience for Baca or to explain the nature of his experience of writing *at that moment*. As he wrote, he did not escape his physical surroundings so much as dissolve into them; he felt an intensified sense of himself being at that moment, a sense of being by which he embraced and transcended his surroundings.³ And even if he wrote in anger as a way to resist those surroundings—his cell and his jailors—even if he wrote to rage against them or to proclaim himself free of them in spirit, it would still be his *experience of writing at that moment*, not the writing itself, that would matter most here. For at that moment the act of writing somehow intensified his sense of being-in-the-world. It did not matter whether his writing would be read or by whom, for the reading of it would be subsequent to the experience of writing of it. That experience of writing had some effect on Baca no matter what might subsequently happen to his text.

Baca goes on to describe how his struggles to write in that tiny cell led to his "birth" as a poet:

I was born a poet one noon, gazing at weeds and creosoted grass at the base of a telephone pole outside my grilled cell window. The words I wrote then sailed me out of myself, and I was transported and metamorphosed into the images they made. From the dirty brown blades of grass came bolts of electrical light that jolted loose my old self; through the top of my head that self was released and reshaped in the clump of scrawny grass. Through language I became the grass, speaking its language and feeling its green feelings and black root sensations. Earth was my mother and I bathed in sunshine. Minuscule speckles of sunlight passed through my green skin and metabolized in my blood. (qtd. in Yagelski, *Literacies and Technologies* 169)

Again, his sense of connectedness, of oneness, emerges powerfully in this passage. Again, Baca describes an experience of writing that intensifies his sense of being in the world. I imagine his written words insufficiently convey the power of his experience. But in an important respect, the inadequacy of his words—an inevitable inadequacy, as I explained in Chapter 3—is irrelevant, for the experience of writing them and the effect of that experience on Baca are separate from the meaning we might make of them now.⁴

As I write my own words right now in the same favorite coffee shop that I described earlier in this chapter, the sun is shining on the busy street

outside the shop in this little city in upstate New York. The same sounds of bustle and music that I tried to describe earlier surround me as I type these words on my computer. But what overpowers me is the strong sense of connection I am feeling at this moment to Baca and to those students in my prison class and to the nameless people who are coming in and out of this place and walking along the street or driving by in their cars, of whom I have been vaguely aware as I have been writing but who now move to front of my awareness. I am writing this text to be read by an editor and, I hope, other scholars in my field. I am writing it to you, too. And my writing—both the text and the act of writing—is shaped by the considerations that accompany my sense of my audience. But what matters right now is this writing, this act of being in my writing. What matters is my sense of connection to what is around me and beyond me, a sense deepened by this act of writing. And this feeling is as intense, right now at this moment, as the powerful sense of connectedness and well-being I felt on the mountainside that I described at the beginning of Chapter 3.

TOWARD AN ONTOLOGICAL THEORY OF WRITING

What should we make of this experience? How might we understand the experience of writing as a way of being in the world? In answering those questions, I will develop four main assertions regarding the ontological experience of writing:

1. The act of writing intensifies the writer's awareness of him or herself *at the moment of writing*.
2. This awareness-while-writing seems qualitatively different from other intense moments of self-awareness because of the role of written language.
3. The effect of the experience of writing on our sense of self is cumulative.
4. The context of an act of writing is multifaceted and plays a central role in shaping the experience of writing in the moment.

Awareness of Self in the Moment of Writing

As we write, our engagement in the act somehow affects our awareness of our selves at that moment. This seems to be true whether the writer is ostensibly writing about him or herself or about something altogether different. Baca may have been writing about himself in that cell, but he also was writ-

ing about his surroundings (the cell and the weeds and grass and sunshine he could see through his window). In my own writing experience that I described earlier, I was not writing about myself but about Baca and the idea of writing as an ontological act. Yet the experience of the self-while-writing, a self connected to something else through the act of writing, seems similar in both cases. In other words, even if I am not consciously, actively thinking of my self *as my self* as I write, the act of writing somehow brings a sense of self into focus. Paradoxically, my *self*, at least in terms of my awareness of my self *as my self*, seems to dissolve into the moment of writing—just as Baca’s sense of himself “was released and reshaped in the clump of scrawny grass,” just as my sense of self was defined by my sense of being part of the community of Composition Studies about which I was writing. Perhaps this experience is akin to what Crispin Sartwell describes as the “extraordinary experience of letting-go into the divine, or into the lover, or into death” (4). At the moment of writing I become the *writing* (not the noun but the participle) in some profound sense—not the text but the act of trying to convey meaning through text.

Some of the think-aloud protocols conducted by writing researchers in the 1970s and 1980s capture this intense awareness-while-writing. For example, in her study of Donald Murray’s writing process, Carol Berkenkotter reproduces this excerpt from a think-aloud protocol she conducted with Murray:

Let me take another piece of paper here. Questions, ah ... examples, and ah set up ... situation ... *frustration of writer. Cooks a five course dinner and gets response only to the table setting ... or to the way the napkins are folded* or to the ... *order of the forks*. All right. I can see from the material I have how that’ll go. I’ll weave in. Okay. *Distance in focus. Stand back. Read fast. Question writer. Then order doubles advocate. Then voice. Close in. Read aloud.* Okay, I got a number of different things I can see here that I’m getting to. I’m putting different order because that may be, try to emphasize this one. May want to put the techniques of editing and teaching first and the techniques of the writer second. So I got a one and a two to indicate that. [Italics identify words written down.] (Berkenkotter and Murray 161)

Granting that this transcript is only a partial representation of Murray’s experience of writing, it seems to reveal how deeply engrossed in the task he is at that moment. Certainly the very fact that he is speaking aloud as he writes suggests that he is aware of his physical and rhetorical situation, and his words focus on textual considerations driven by his sense of the task and, implicitly, the larger rhetorical situation. In other words, his concerns with the structure of his text (“I’m putting different order”) reflect an experienced writer’s sense of his audience’s expectations and thus reflect the way

his sense of audience might shape his awareness at that moment. His spoken words also indicate how consumed by the task he is, how much his sense of being is shaped by his engagement in that task—even though, as Murray himself tells us, “I do not assume, and neither did my researcher, that what I said reflected all that was taking place. It did reflect what I was conscious of doing, and a bit more” (170). My guess is that Murray was conscious of much more than this protocol could capture. Nevertheless, Murray’s protocol describes part of his awareness-while-writing, and therefore it describes part of his sense of self at that moment.

This awareness-while-writing seems to encompass something beyond or distinct from cognition or intellection. In her classic essay, “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” Janet Emig tries to describe the qualities of writing that distinguish it from other forms of “linguaging processes” and make it “a unique mode of learning” (123):

Writing is originating and creating a unique verbal construct that is graphically recorded. Reading is creating or re-creating *but not* originating a verbal construct that is graphically recorded. Listening is creating or re-creating but not originating a verbal construct that is *not* graphically recorded. Talking is creating *and* originating a verbal construct that is *not* graphically recorded (except for the circuitous routing of transcribed tape). (124)

Emig’s analysis focuses on how powerfully writing engages the intellect in ways that go beyond other verbal processes, including reading. For Emig, the key to understanding the distinction lies in the notion that when writing we are both creating and originating something in language and recording it graphically all at the same time.⁵

Surely these characteristics of the act of writing contribute to the intensity of engagement and awareness that occur when a writer is writing. Murray’s intense focus is certainly shaped by the fact that he is creating and originating a text and recording it at the same time. But Emig’s analysis, which draws on cognitive psychology, doesn’t fully account for the kind of ontological awareness-of-self that Baca seems to have experienced as he was writing. Cognition is only part of our awareness-while-writing, and psychology goes only so far in helping us understand that awareness. Phenomenology offers a richer framework for understanding that awareness and the experience of the writer while writing.

As Couture notes, phenomenology “rejects a dualistic distinction between the world as it exists and the world as we interpret it,” instead locating truth “in subjective experience through equating the study of being with the study of meaning” (64). To put it somewhat differently, our experience of ourselves in the world and the meaning we make of that experience

are not separate; an act of meaning-making is in effect an act of being. “Furthermore, phenomenology projects human consciousness as *the* agent that gives meaning and shape not only to social ideologies or operational systems that direct and motivate human action, but also to the existence of the world itself”; human experience is thus “the only possible origin of absolute being, truth, and objectivity” (65). Significantly, phenomenology “defines knowledge as a relation between self and other resulting in meaning”; such a philosophy of meaning “implies a relationship between a mind and an other” (65). Quoting Cornelius A. van Peursen, Couture notes that meaning “always implies a relational structure, a reciprocal reference between consciousness and world” (van Peursen 30; qtd. in Couture 65–66).

This reciprocity between consciousness and world helps explain the experience of writing. As we write, we engage in a moment of intensive meaning-making related to the larger, ongoing process of making meaning of our experience of ourselves in the world. This moment of meaning-making—the act of writing—underscores, indeed, *enacts*, the deeper relationship between our consciousness and the world around us. In the act of writing, our consciousness and the world (both in terms of the subject of our writing and the situation within which we are writing) become one; thus, our experience of our self as a being-in-the-world is intensified as we make meaning through the act of writing. If language is “a symbolic medium reflecting a relationship between individuals and their environment that is developed in subjective consciousness” (66), as Couture defines it, then the act of writing, which is an act of meaning-making through written language, is an enactment—physically, intellectually, and ontologically—of that relationship. Writing is thus an expression of our being, both in general and in the moment, since “meaning through which we know of being and being through which we know of meaning are entirely a function of human subjectivity” (66). The act of writing, then, is an expression of the self (as distinct from the more common understanding of writing as self-expression), but more: it is an expression of the self, in reciprocal relationship with the world, as the locus of meaning-making. To write, in this sense, is to *be*.

As a technology for language, writing can be understood as a manifestation of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of speech as embodied thought. Like other phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty rejected the traditional Cartesian dualities of mind–body, self–other, subject–object; accordingly, he also rejected the idea that language represents thought, because he saw no significant distinction between mind (thought) and body (speech). His idea of speech as embodied thought reflects this nondualistic understanding of language in general and of speech—and writing as a technology for speech—in particular. As Couture points out, for Merleau-Ponty writing is not signification in the Derridean sense “but rather a function of consciousness” (81). In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that

thought, in the speaking subject, is not a representation, ... it does not expressly posit objects or relations. The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking. His speech is his thought. (209; emphasis added)

And because thought is a function of lived experience—that is, thought is embodied in the sense that it is inseparable from our physical experience of ourselves in the world—speaking is an act of embodiment and thus of being in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of hearing a speech is similar. Strikingly, his discussion of this dynamic resembles the descriptions of writing—Baca’s, Murray’s, mine—that I shared earlier:

The orator’s “thought” is empty while he is speaking and, when a text is read to us, provided that it is read with expression, we have no thought marginal to the text itself, for *the words fully occupy our mind* and exactly fulfill our expectations, and we feel the necessity of the speech. Although we are unable to predict its course, *we are possessed by it*. The end of the speech or text will be the lifting of a spell. It is at this stage that thoughts on the speech or text will be able to rise. (209; emphasis added)

Although Merleau-Ponty is not specifically referring to the act of writing in this passage, his description can be applied to writing because in his analysis the act of writing is similar to the act of speaking in that both writer and speaker are using language *in the moment*: in writing as in speaking, “the words fully occupy the mind,” which for Merleau-Ponty is coterminous with the world. In writing, as in speaking, we are in and of the world fully at that moment.

Note that for Merleau-Ponty, an act of expression is engrossing in the moment, encompassing the whole of the speaker’s (writer’s) consciousness, which is his or her being, because mind and body do not diverge. In rejecting the traditional idea of language as representation of thought and words as representations of things, Merleau-Ponty insists that “the word or speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become *the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world*” (211; emphasis added). In this sense, writing is an act of becoming more fully present in the world at the moment of writing:

The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience. (212)

Written Language Shapes Awareness of Self

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, the intensified awareness of self that we experience while writing is a function of language. In this regard, this awareness-of-self seems qualitatively different from other intense moments of self-awareness *because of the central role of written language*. The moment of “letting-go into the divine, or into the lover” that Sartwell refers to is, as he puts it, “inarticulate”: It involves no language (4). I have sometimes tried to describe to friends the experience of rock climbing or ice climbing as an extreme sense of existing fully in the moment, when awareness is completely focused on the act of moving on a vertical surface of rock or ice and consciousness is wholly consumed by that act at that moment. I have heard similar descriptions of other physical activities (e.g., surfing) or the engrossing experience of engaging in activities such as woodworking, sewing, painting, or playing music. The experience of writing shares an extreme intensity of focus with such activities, but the role of language makes the experience of writing different. (Because music can be considered a form of language, the experience of playing music might be closer to the experience of writing than these other activities.) The writer at the moment of writing is experiencing him or herself *through language*. The use of language—the effort to articulate something (it doesn’t really matter what) in written language—intensifies the writer’s awareness at that moment. Writing, as an act of meaning-making through language, goes beyond the intensity of focus that characterizes an activity such as climbing; it is an enactment of embodied speech, in Merleau-Ponty’s formulation, in which the writer expresses his or her being in the moment of writing.

Merleau-Ponty offers insight into this dynamic with his idea that the “perceiving mind is an incarnated mind” (“Unpublished Text” 3). For Merleau-Ponty, “the body is much more than an instrument or a means. It is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions” (5). Body and mind are coterminous, and our sense of ourselves as beings-in-the-world is inseparable from our bodily, or perceptual, experience; thus, “the subject capable of this perceptual experience ... obviously will not be a self-transparent thought, absolutely present to itself without the interference of its body and its history” (6). Instead, the subject is a function of that “interference of its body and history”; in other words, our sense of self as subject, as a being-in-the-world, encompasses mind, body, and our experience of the world at that moment as well as prior to that moment. We are aware of ourselves as beings in the world as a result of this interaction among these elements. Writing, as a technology for language that requires physical activity (moving pen across paper or tapping the keys of a computer keyboard), brings this intimate connection between the physical and the intellectual, between mind and body, to the fore; through writing, thought becomes vis-

ible, the intellectual physical. The inseparability of mind and body is encoded in the act of writing itself, and writing becomes an enactment of the unity of mind and body, self and world.

Central to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of language is the inherently social nature of meaning-making. The word, as "a passive shell" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 206), acquires meaning through its use in communication with others, and indeed thought itself, in order to have meaning—to be intelligible, to become knowledge—requires expression, which in turn requires an other: "A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself" (206). Because the word is not a mere sign but a "vehicle of meanings, ... speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but *accomplishes* it" (207; emphasis added). In this sense, thought and speech, as components of the process by which we make meaning of our experience, are always social: "There is, then, a taking up of others' thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts" (208). In this sense, speech, as part of our efforts to make sense of our experience of ourselves as beings-in-the-world, is always an enactment of our inherent connection to all other selves, with whom we make meaning together through expression. Writing is therefore not only an expression of the self as a being-in-the-world but also an act of meaning-making that inherently involves all other selves. In this regard, *the experience of writing is an experience of our being as inherently social*. It is this characteristic of writing, a form of embodied speech, that sets the experience of the self-while-writing apart from other intense moments of awareness-of-self.

The paradox here is that the writer *cannot* articulate all of what he or she is experiencing at the moment or what he or she is writing about at that moment, which may contribute to the intensified awareness of self: that is, the self trying to articulate itself is as aware of what it cannot articulate as it is of what it *can* render into language, which will always be an approximation of the experience at that moment. To put it somewhat differently, the self is more present to itself when writing because the inability to fully "say" (write) its being points to the part of being that cannot be said (written). In this regard, the limits of language to capture our experience of our selves help illuminate our sense of being during the act of writing.

The Cumulative Effect of the Experience of Writing

The effect of the experience of writing on the writer's sense of self as a being in the world is cumulative. For one thing, unlike spoken language, writing, as a technology for language, is not learned intuitively but rather is learned

after spoken language develops; moreover, one's facility with writing develops over time: A six-year-old cannot write in the same way that an experienced adult writer can, for example. I have seen kindergarteners engrossed in an act of writing as intensely as any adult writer can be in the moment, but the nature of the child's experience writing is necessarily different from the adult's, given the child's more limited experience with language and more limited experience of his or her self in the world. In this sense, the nature of the experience of writing evolves over time. The awareness-of-the-self-writing that Baca describes cannot be the same as that of, say, a middle school student writing or a first-year college student writing. Indeed, the regular practice of writing *as a practice* (as distinct from the kinds of writing tasks typically assigned in schools, in which the focus is on the production of a certain kind of text) seems to foster a more conscious awareness-of-the-self-writing.

For example, David Grosskopf, a high school teacher, has described his experience of coming to a heightened awareness of himself through writing—but only after he allowed himself to engage in the practice of writing self-reflexively and regularly over time. In a brief essay that is ostensibly about the importance of encouraging regular writing practice among his students, Grosskopf describes his realization that he never fully shared with his students his insight into the *experience* of writing:

It is writing that has led me to feel most alive. This is the part that students never heard me tell because I misunderstood the secret for so long. It's not merely the production of writing—even good writing, and the satisfaction this brings—that has powered my sense of vitality; it is the act of writing itself.

I don't think Grosskopf's use of the term secret in this context is quite right: He is describing not a secret but a newly acquired insight into and perspective on writing, one that abandons the text-focused obsession with correctness and convention that characterizes school-sponsored writing, in which the experience of writing itself is devalued or ignored. In this passage Grosskopf describes the effect of his experience of writing as a regular practice on his sense of himself as a being in the world.

In the same article, Grosskopf tells the story of a summer wilderness trip he made alone in an effort to reconnect with himself: "The idea was to be myself with myself without any possibility of escape, and I would stay at least three lonely nights to do it." But it isn't until he returns from that trip and begins writing as a daily practice that he realized his goal; in the process, he also comes to understand the crucial role that writing as a practice began to play in his sense of being-in-the-world:

What does it mean to live life well? I know there is a purposefulness to asking the question, and I know the kind of writing that actually experiences the answer as it goes down. Writing is, for a moment at least, manufacturing this good life as it is lived. But I already knew that. What I might also be able to tell them [his students] now, as we study Woolf and Henry David Thoreau, is that over the summer this year, I began to live the poetic life. Here's what I did to do it: every week, almost every day, I made the time to write. And if you try it yourself, even if you're a student about to leave home for the first time, or a worker jammed down by memo wars, or a parent dealing with kids who yell all at the same time, you too may find that you can write yourself awake.

The point here is that Grosskopf's intense experience of self-while-writing and the effects of that experience on his sense of himself as a being in the world do not happen simply as a result of a single act of writing or even many separate acts of writing. Rather, his experience of self-while-writing, his heightened sense of self as a being in the world, emerges as a result of *the regular practice of writing*—of many individual acts of writing engaged in as a practice over time, without the expectation that such practice should necessarily result in a written text—and, significantly, as a result of his own reflection on his practice of writing. In short, the practice of writing, engaged in over time, can shape our sense of self as a being-in-the-world. This effect remains even in the absence of the kind of reflection that Grosskopf engaged in. A writer writing within a Cartesian view of writing, in which the self is conceived as autonomous and fundamentally intellectual, also will experience a cumulative effect of the practice of writing, although its effect will differ from what Grosskopf experienced—in large measure because the rhetorical and conceptual contexts (see later) will differ and thus shape the writer's experiences in different ways. Nevertheless, writers will experience a cumulative effect on their sense of self by engaging in acts of writing over time.

Again, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the incarnated mind provides a framework for understanding this process. As I noted earlier, in Merleau-Ponty's analysis the self is not "a self-transparent thought, absolutely present to itself without the interference of its body and its history" ("Unpublished Text" 6). Mind and body, in other words, do not exist apart from each other; therefore, "[t]he perceiving subject is not this absolute thinker; rather, it functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body" (6). As a result, the perceiving subject, as a being in the world, constantly redefines itself through its ongoing interactions with the world through its body: "Given a perpetually new natural and historical situation to control, the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new" (6).

This process is more than simple learning; rather, it is a process of the self always *becoming*, very much as Freire understood “men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (84). Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty, both self and world, which do not exist apart from one another, are always in a process of becoming:

[T]he perceived world, in its turn, is not a pure object of thought without fissures or lacunae; it is, rather, like a universal style shared in by all perceptual beings. While the world no doubt coordinates these perceptual beings, we can never presume that its work is finished. Our world, as Malabranche said, is an “unfinished task.” (“Unpublished Text” 6)

The perceiving subject, in this formulation, is always engaged in that unfinished task. Writing, as a technology for language, has the capacity both to embody that process and to intensify its effects on our sense of self.

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty uses writing as a metaphor to illuminate this process: “Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written” (6). Both self and world continually change through this process of interaction between self and world over time. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, “the writer is himself [or herself] a kind of new idiom, constructing itself, inventing ways of expression, and diversifying itself according to its own meaning” (8–9). Each act of writing, then, can be part of the process by which we make meaning of our experience of our selves in the world over time. Each act of writing, no matter the task or text produced, is an act of creation of both self and world, an enactment of what Freire called “the dynamic present” (84)—that is, the creating of self and world in each moment. But that act is shaped by all previous acts of writing; the writer engaged in an act of writing (in) the “dynamic present” is shaped by previous moments of writing—that is, by her or his history, as Merleau-Ponty uses that term. In that sense, an individual act of writing is both original, in the sense that it is rooted in the dynamic present, and cumulative, in that it contains the writer’s history and is informed by all previous acts of writing and acts of meaning-making.

The Role of Context in the Experience of Writing

Not all individual acts of writing are the same, and the experience of writing can vary from one act of writing to another. That’s because the context of an act of writing plays a crucial role in shaping the writer’s experience of writing in the moment. The writing experiences described thus far (such as Grosskopf’s, Baca’s, or my own) would seem to suggest that an act of writing always (or usually) fosters (or *should* foster) a sense of connectedness, a

sense of being integrally part of something larger, even if that something is relatively obvious and concrete, such as the identifiable components of the rhetorical situation (e.g., a specific teacher as the intended audience for a classroom assignment). In several important respects, this is true: Even the most self-centered act of writing always implies connectedness, if only to the extent that language itself (and writing as a technology for language) is inherently social, as noted earlier. Because language is inherently social, when we write we experience ourselves as connected to others through language, even if we are not fully aware of that connection at that moment. Moreover, as we saw earlier, meaning-making is always social; an act of writing as an act of meaning-making, therefore, always implies an other and is an act of connectedness.

However, as every student and teacher knows, the experience of writing in the moment can feel alienating and isolating. This is all too often the case with writing in schools. A timed writing test, for example, can be a deeply stressful experience for a student writer, especially for students labeled as struggling or remedial in some way. Indeed, *any* kind of writing assignment can be stressful. A student's effort to write correctly (or at least according to a teacher's instructions) after having experienced "failure" as a writer—for example, in the form of a returned paper splashed with the teacher's red markings indicating errors—can lead to anxiety and even to a sense of isolation if the student is perceived (or perceives him or herself) to be "behind" or less capable than his or her classmates. Trying to complete an assignment or a report under a tight deadline also can cause anxiety and a sense of isolation (and actually can be physically isolating if the writer intentionally removes her or himself from others in order not to be disturbed while writing under deadline); this is true even for writers deemed competent or successful. These examples suggest that an individual act of writing does not necessarily lead to a sense of connectedness and certainly not always to a sense of well-being in the moment.

Listen, for example, to Murray, an accomplished and award-winning writer and teacher of writing, describing his experience of being "protocolled." In this passage, taken from Murray's response to Berkenkotter's study of his writing process, Murray describes his experience of writing on demand for the researcher. Berkenkotter had supplied Murray with an unfamiliar writing task and a deadline for producing a draft, and she recorded Murray's spoken thoughts as he tried to write in response to these demands. The session left Murray frustrated and with little more than a few sentences of writing:

The one-hour protocol was far worse than I had expected. If I had done that first there would have been no other protocols. I have rarely felt so completely trapped and so inadequate. I have gone through other

research experiences, but in this case I felt stronger than I ever had the need to perform. That was nothing that the researcher did. It was a matter of the conditions. I had a desperate desire to please. I thought of that laboratory experiment where subjects would push a button to cause pain to other people. I would have blown up Manhattan to get out of that room. To find equivalent feelings from my past I would have to go back to combat or to public school. I have developed an enormous compassion and respect for those who have performed for Masters and Johnson. (Berkenkotter and Murray 169)

Writing teachers will recognize their own students' frustrations and anxieties in Murray's description, which indicates the extent to which the experience of writing can be affected by what Murray calls the "conditions" of writing. When these conditions are uncomfortable for the writer and the task itself is compulsory—like so much school-sponsored writing and most standardized writing test situations—the experience can be intensely unpleasant for the writer at the moment of writing. Nevertheless, these unpleasant moments of writing are still intense experiences of the self-while-writing; they are experiences of *being* in the world. They share with the more appealing experiences of Baca and Grosskopf an intensity of awareness-while-writing, although in these less pleasant instances the experience of the self in the moment seems qualitatively different from what Baca and Grosskopf have described. Why? The answer, I think, lies in the role of context in every act of writing.

We always experience ourselves as beings in the world in relation to what is around us. We *perceive* ourselves as relating in some way to what is around us, even if only in the sense of physical proximity, and we *conceive* of ourselves as existing or acting within a setting or situation, which may directly involve others, such as when we're writing an essay for a class or a letter to a friend or an entry on a blog. Moreover, we conceive of ourselves as certain kinds of selves on the basis of prior experiences and our efforts to make sense of those experiences. Those efforts are socially mediated, because meaning-making is a social process that always involves an other and the world. In short, our sense of being in the world is context-bound; context, writ large, matters.

Here I need to distinguish among three dimensions of context that are always in place in an act of writing:

1. *Rhetorical context*: the ostensible writing situation, including the intended or assumed audience, the apparent purpose of the writing, the subject matter, the form or genre of the text being produced, and the related conventions of writing, and so on.
2. *Conceptual context*: the writer's conception of the act of writing and of him or herself as writer. This dimension of context includes prior

experiences with writing, writing instruction, and literacy; beliefs and attitudes about writing and about the self as writer that are formed on the basis of those experiences; and cultural practices and values as they relate to writing, literacy, and communication in general.

3. *The medium*: the technology used by the writer. Writing itself is a technology for language, of course, but the specific tools we use for writing affect the experience of writing in concrete ways (such as the feel of a pen on paper or fingers on keyboard) as well as in less visible ways (such as the sense of immediate connection to an audience that might accompany writing a blog entry or a text message).

Context, in these three dimensions, profoundly shapes the experience of writing and the writer's sense of him or herself as a being in the world *during* an act of writing. For *at the moment of writing*, the writer is always writing within a rhetorical context of some kind, the components of which he or she may be intensely aware of at that moment. At the same time, the writer's sense of self *as a self writing* is profoundly influenced by the conceptual context. In the examples I discussed earlier, such as a student taking a timed writing test, the rhetorical context contains elements that are likely to intensify the writer's sense of self in ways that do not foster well-being. For instance, the stakes associated with the test and the time constraints may deeply affect the student's sense of competence as a writer and thus powerfully shape the student's awareness-while-writing and sense of being-in-the-world at that moment. Similarly, the conceptual context will influence the student's experience in the moment of writing. If that student has learned to write in school, he or she is likely to be engaging in that act of writing in a way that reflects the mainstream Cartesian view of writing as a straightforward conduit for already-formed thoughts; his or her sense of self-while-writing is likely to reflect the Cartesian sense of self as an autonomous thinking being struggling to convert those thoughts into written words in "correct" ways. In other words, the student's experience with mainstream writing instruction has resulted in his or her conceiving of himself or herself as a certain kind of self-while-writing. For most students, then, the conceptual context of an act of writing shapes a sense of the self writing such that the writer experiences disconnection and isolation, and the act of writing becomes an enactment of the Cartesian self. Nevertheless, it remains an experience of the self, an awareness of the self as a certain kind of being in the world, intensified through the act of writing.⁶

These three dimensions of context also explain differences in the experience of a writer at different moments or stages in an act of writing. For instance, when editing a text we may not be as likely to experience the kinds of intense revelations Baca experienced as he wrote in his prison cell or the insights that I tried to describe as I sat writing in a coffee shop. In both these

cases (Baca's and mine) the writer's attention was not directed toward the conventions of written English or the nature of the writing task, which may have been more prominent in the writer's awareness at a different moment of writing, depending on the rhetorical context. So although a writer might work on the same text during different moments of writing over a period time, the specific experience of writing can differ from one moment of writing to another, even if the same text (or a different version of the same text) is involved in those moments of writing. Similarly, the medium can affect the experience of writing differently from one act of writing to another. For example, writing on a blog might heighten a sense of self as directly connected to others because of the sense of immediacy between writer and readers within that medium, whereas writing an essay exam with pen and paper may lead to an intensified sense of disconnection. (I say more about the medium for writing later.)

As these examples suggest, the rhetorical and conceptual contexts and the medium interact to shape each individual act of writing at the moment of writing. The conceptual context can profoundly shape how an individual writer understands a given rhetorical task and thus may influence what seems to occupy that writer's awareness regarding the rhetorical situation during an act of writing as well as at different points in the process of creating a text; similarly, the medium might raise the writer's awareness of a specific component of the rhetorical situation at a given moment in an act of writing, and at the same time both those dimensions of context would be influenced by the conceptual context. In short, the dynamics of context in writing are complex, multilayered, and evolving. An act of writing is always an act of being, but the experience of being-in-the-world at the moment of writing will be shaped by the context within which the writer engages in that act.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WRITING

The foregoing discussion raises the issue of the role of technology in the experience of writing. More specifically, given the great deal of attention devoted in the past decade to what is now routinely called "digital literacy" (or sometimes "multimodal literacies"), we might ask to what extent the conception of writing I have proposed in this book applies to what some theorists have argued is a new kind of writing (e.g., Bolter). At the very least, powerful (and increasingly available) new technologies for communications are significantly influencing how and what we write. Given what I have argued about the role of the medium in an act of writing, it is reasonable to assume that these new digital technologies, as writing tools and as new

media for writing, can shape the experience of writing in significant ways. Within the framework I have constructed, in which writing is defined as an ontological act, digital literacy might be explained as a function of the medium for writing—that is, it can be understood in terms of *context* as I have defined it in this chapter. But the emergence of seemingly new literacy practices for which “digital literacy” has now become shorthand, along with the increasingly central role of digital technologies in our lives, makes it necessary to say something more here about how an ontological theory of writing might help us understand writing in digital environments.

First, we should define *digital literacy*. Since the 1980s, scholars have been trying to pin down what it means to be literate in a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies. In 1995, Richard Lanham offered this definition:

To be deeply literate in the digital world means being skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical subtleties of words. Above all, it means being at home in a shifting mix of words, images and sounds. (198, 200)

Lanham’s definition seems to capture what many scholars consider to be the essential elements of digital literacy, especially the integration of image and sound with text. A few years later, in her introduction to a special issue of *Computers and Composition* devoted to digital rhetoric, Carolyn Handa echoed Lanham’s emphasis:

Since the World Wide Web began establishing itself as a major medium of communication, scholars in rhetoric, the humanities, and education have also been calling for our increased attention to a literacy extending beyond words, one including images and sounds, in other words, to a literacy accounting for more than the purely verbal. (3)

Such a literacy, Handa wrote, includes “being able to decipher images semiotically, as well as understanding how to make images integral to an argument and, ultimately, doing so with ease”; it also includes “understanding how images are rhetorical and how rhetorical elements function in digital compositions” as well as understanding the degree to which sounds are rhetorical and can be used as an integral part of digital argumentation” (2). In other words, from the point of view of a writer writing, digital literacy involves the ability to attend to images and sounds as well as text while writing. Some scholars argue that understanding and applying principles of document design is also a critical part of digital literacy (see Kress, *Before Writing* 154), which, to my mind, is similar to considerations regarding the structure of a text when it comes to the writer’s attention at a given moment of writing.

Little in these definitions of digital literacy points to anything that would call into question my argument that writing is fundamentally an experience of the self as a being in the world at the moment of writing. Although the writer's attention to image or sound during writing can certainly affect the writer's experience in the moment in the sense that such considerations occupy the writer's awareness as he or she focuses on the task at hand, attention to such matters does not seem fundamentally to change the writer's awareness-of-self-writing that I have argued is at the heart of an ontological perspective on writing. In this regard, if digital literacy "demands that we draw on our knowledge of rhetoric perhaps even more than our knowledge of HTML, design issues, or graphics software," as Handa argues (2), then it might be understood as part of the rhetorical context of writing, as I have defined rhetorical context in this chapter.⁷

Handa's statement, however, points to another crucial component of digital literacy: the use of powerful new digital *tools* for writing. Those tools obviously include the computer as well as sophisticated software (not only word-processing packages but also multimedia and web-authoring programs) and related technical instruments that a writer can use to create a text. There is little question that tools can significantly affect the experience of writing. For example, compare composing a text with pen and paper to composing with word-processing software on a computer. The physical experience is obviously different but so is the intellectual experience, in part because of the inherent connection between mind and body. In this case, the slower pace of writing with pen and paper can affect the writer's awareness in the moment in ways that differ from writing with a computer.

Some theorists argue that any technology for writing must be understood as more than a tool—that, as James Porter puts it, "computers are not merely instrumental tools of writing, but rather influence the nature of composing and our rhetorical understanding of the composing situation" (384). Porter shares his own history of writing with various tools (pencils, pens, typewriters, computers) to support this position, but he emphasizes that ultimately it is not the tools themselves that shape the composing process so much as what he calls the "pedagogical context ... the training, discipline, and practice that accompanied my use of the pencil [as a young student], along with the ideology (theology, really) that framed that use and provided its *raison d'être*" (384). Accordingly, what makes the computer a revolutionary tool for writing is "the social/rhetorical contexts it creates and the way its use impacts publishing practices," all of which "represents a significant change, of a magnitude that the pencil and typewriter (essentially print-based tools) don't achieve" (384–85).

Porter's argument, which reflects an influential perspective among scholars in the subfield of Composition Studies that we know as Computers and Composition, supports my analysis of the role of context in the writer's

experience while writing. As he notes, the social and rhetorical situations within which writers write shape their uses of technology as tools for writing; what I have called the *conceptual context* encompasses what Porter refers to as the ideology that frames one's learning and use of writing tools. Moreover, he emphasizes the physicality of writing:

The body matters, the material matters. Physicality (for example, of the body) is not secondary to form, or mind, or language (the privileged masculinist focuses of Western thought)—it is, rather, fundamental. (388)

This view is consistent with the phenomenological perspective I have laid out in this chapter and in Chapter 3 in which mind and body do not exist apart from one another. Indeed, Porter's "posthumanist, cyborgian view" focuses on "interrelationships—in a sense, at the interfaces of human experience (humans and machines, humans with each other)" (388). Although this view does not go as far as the nonduality I propose in Chapter 3, it underscores the inherently social nature of all writing and the place of technology in the social matrix within which writers write. It also underscores the role of technology in the *experience* of writing, both in the present and in the writer's past: "The technological past matters. It shapes the writer and writes the body in significant ways—etching itself on the writer's consciousness and body, influencing how the writer learns to compose and how the writer communicates in a social milieu" (389). In other words, the tools we use for writing, understood within the dimensions of context that shape all acts of writing, play a role in the writer's experience of writing, both in the moment and as part of the writer's past experiences writing; they are part of the writer's awareness-of-self-writing. In this sense, writing in a digital environment is like any other act of writing: It is an act of being-in-the-world.

If I were to replace the description of my experience in writing this book that appears in the first few pages of this chapter with a description of my experience writing an e-mail, little of substance would change. The description of writing an e-mail would retain the sense of engagement and heightened awareness-of-self that I described earlier. It would retain as well a sense of the richness of the experience of writing. And it would retain a sense of connectedness to that something more that I described earlier in this chapter. What would be different, I think, is the possibility of a greater sense of immediacy in writing an e-mail, given the speed of the medium and given that the audience for an e-mail message is likely to be much more specific and concrete—and, significantly, known to me as writer—than the audience for a text such as this book. I would expect my intended reader to read my e-mail within minutes or hours or perhaps a few days of my writing it, and I would probably expect a reply within a similar time frame, which fosters

an even greater sense of immediacy. This shorter time between the act of writing an e-mail and the reading of it—as compared with the writing of this book—can make the intended reader seem much more present to the writer as he or she is writing.⁸ To this extent, the capacity of writing, as a technology for language, to overcome the obstacles of time and distance—which is one of the hallmarks of writing in the analyses of Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan—is perhaps more evident in a digital medium such as e-mail than in more conventional print media. In these ways, my experience in writing an e-mail highlights the social nature of the act and the sense of connectedness that I described earlier. In a sense, then, writing an e-mail might be said to make the ontological experience of writing more visible or tangible than the more traditional print-based experience of writing a text for future publication in a book or newspaper or magazine. But the fundamental experience of writing in terms of an intensified awareness-of-self is the same in both instances; there is nothing about the experience of writing an email message that makes that experience fundamentally different from writing a book or college paper or magazine article when it comes to the awareness-of-self-writing. The medium, which is part of the context of that act of writing an e-mail, certainly shapes the experience in discernible ways, making it different from other acts of writing in ways that can matter to the writer, but it doesn't change the ontological nature of the experience.

Other digital media may in fact bring the ontological nature of writing even more clearly into view. Consider blogging, which in less than a decade has become a significant medium for writing that has found its way into our political, professional, cultural, and personal lives more fully than many other newly developed digital technologies. Indeed, for some bloggers, blogging is almost a way of life. And the experience of blogging seems to foreground the ways in which writing can be a way of being in the world. For example, in the following excerpt from a *New York Times Magazine* article, author Emily Gould describes the role of blogging in her personal life. Early in her article, Gould describes a conflict with her boyfriend, Henry, over a post she wrote about their relationship on her blog:

My blog post was ridiculous and petty and small—and, suddenly, incredibly important. At some point I'd grown accustomed to the idea that there was a public place where I would always be allowed to write, without supervision, about how I felt. Even having to take into account someone else's feelings about being written about felt like being stifled in some essential way.

For Gould, the blog became “a public space” where she could *be* through writing; it provided a vehicle for an experience of writing that became a regular part of her life. Her blog posts increased tensions between her and

Henry, but her description of her experience as a blogger suggests that the act of writing her blog, more than any expectation of who might read it or why and more than any sense of its potential impact on readers, became the most important aspect of maintaining her blog:

As Henry and I fought, I kept coming back to the idea that I had a right to say whatever I wanted. I don't think I understood then that I could be right about being free to express myself but wrong about my right to make that self-expression public in a permanent way. I described my feelings in the language of empowerment: I was being creative, and Henry wanted to shut me up. His point of view was just as extreme: I wasn't generously sharing my thoughts; I was compulsively seeking gratification from strangers at the expense of the feelings of someone I actually knew and loved. I told him that *writing, especially writing about myself and my surroundings, was a fundamental part of my personality*, and that if he wanted to remain in my life, he would need to reconcile himself to being part of the world I described. (emphasis added)

Clearly, Gould's experience raises serious questions about the ethical responsibilities of the writer/blogger, especially with respect to the subject of her writing (in this case, Henry and his relationship with Gould) and his right to privacy. Indeed, the capacity of a blog to reach millions of readers instantly can complicate traditional ethical concerns. But such concerns could be part of the writer's experience of writing *any* text, regardless of medium, to the extent that the writer attended to them. What is striking in this instance is that for Gould the blog became an integral component of her daily life, and writing it became central to her way of being in the world. Although this passage from her article describes the impact of her writing on her relationship with Henry, it also conveys the importance of the regular act of writing her blog to her.

From an ontological perspective, it is necessary to ask whether her experience of writing her blog *in the moment* differs in any fundamental way from her experience writing about similar matters in another medium, say, a diary, where a writer might record similar thoughts, feelings, and events. It is quite possible that had Gould written in a private diary rather than on a public blog, her words would not have had the impact on her relationship with Henry that her blog had. But the experience of writing those words in terms of Gould's sense of self would be fundamentally the same. That experience does not seem to be changed by the medium except that the public nature of the blog seems to have mattered to Gould—that is, she seemed to want to describe her relationship with Henry to others. In this regard, her sense of her blog as a public space shaped her experience of writing, since she wrote with the expectation that “strangers” would read her blog entries. But

that expectation does not seem different from similar expectations writers might have when working in print-based media. For example, at this moment I am writing with the expectation that “strangers” will read this text. If I were writing this paragraph on a blog, my experience of myself writing (and my experience of myself being in the world) would be fundamentally the same as the experience I am having right now as I write this text on a computer with the expectation that it will eventually appear in print form, although the medium might shape my attention to specific textual concerns at given moments of writing.

Digital media such as e-mail and blogs and so-called social sites such as Facebook may open up new writing spaces that provide opportunities for connecting with readers in ways that are not available in traditional print media; moreover, the specific nature of the experience of writing—and the experience of the self-while-writing—can be shaped by these new media in identifiable ways. But as an ontological act, writing is fundamentally the same in all these media. Writers writing on a blog and writers writing for print publication, like all writers, experience themselves as beings-in-the-world through writing.

TRUTH-SEEKING AND WRITING AS A WAY OF BEING

I have argued that an ontological theory of writing rests on the basic premise that when we write, we enact a sense of our selves as beings-in-the-world. When we write, we are in the world; we enact our being in specific ways shaped by the context of our writing. Such a theory emphasizes the writer writing and shifts our focus, at least temporarily, away from the writer’s writing. It demands that we attend to the *experience* of writing, in the moment and over time, and it not only places value on that experience but also illuminates it in ways that are not possible within the mainstream Cartesian view of writing. In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the need for such a theory in order to overcome the limitations of the Cartesian view and the problems associated with that view, most importantly the autonomous sense of self and the fundamental disconnection fostered through pedagogies based on that Cartesian view. That sense of self and disconnection, I argued, are implicated in the crisis of sustainability. An ontological theory of writing offers, I submit, a necessary alternative to the mainstream Cartesian view and a step toward a writing pedagogy that is consistent with our best hopes for a just and sustainable future.

An understanding of writing as a way of being can, I believe, help us begin to realize Couture’s vision for a practice of writing as truth-seeking, a practice that “bolsters our sense of worth and sustains our lives in this

world, both as individuals and as members of the common family of humankind” (214). An ontological view of writing enables us to realize this vision in two respects. First, it explains the act of writing as a way of making meaning of our experience of ourselves in the world, so that we better understand the implications of writing as a practice and of our approaches to writing instruction for our ways of being in the world. Second, it places value on the experience of writing so that we can begin to take advantage of the potential impact of that experience on the writer as a being writing—and living—within complex social networks; to understand writing as a way of being is to begin to see the power of writing to reshape our ways of being in the world. In this regard, an ontological theory of writing illuminates the capacity of writing as a vehicle for truth-seeking.

As I noted in Chapter 3, Couture seeks to reclaim rhetoric “as a truth seeking practice” (63); her phenomenological rhetoric “abandons the Western sophistic tradition of arriving at truth through conquering and consensus, and grounds it instead in a conscious commitment to collaboration with others in truth seeking” (4). Within this framework, truth is located in subjective experience and is “an outcome of intersubjective understanding” (64); that is, meaning-making—and truth-seeking—are inherently social and collaborative: “We see purpose ... in participating together in *writing* the world; and it is in doing so that we move together toward writing truth” (83). For Couture,

the goal of our conscious existence is quite simply to make meaning together. It is to continue a conscious expression of what the world means in the hope of touching, reaching, and joining with others to advance a mutual understanding; it is to participate together in writing the truth of our shared world. Through speaking and writing we make an effort to express what is beyond ourselves and to include others; it is through such expression that we create the relation that enables us to reach the truth we share. (92)

Writing is the means by which “we create a relation with others that enables us to reach the truth we share” (94). Couture rejects mainstream theoretical perspectives that assume struggle and resistance to be inevitable; instead, she proposes a phenomenological rhetoric that “functions to establish our engaged relationship with the world,” a rhetoric whose “aim is to move us from alienating resistance to open collaboration” (94).

Couture’s vision rests on a theoretical understanding of the dynamic of meaning-making through “intersubjective understanding” as well as on a practice of rhetorical “profession,” in which the writer “attends to the world with open acceptance ... [and] reconciles the objective world with one’s self assessment of it” (131). Both her theoretical understanding of this dynamic

and her proposed rhetorical practice in turn rest on a kind of introspection or reflection that is based on Edmund Husserl's notion of *phenomenological reduction*, which Couture defines as "a precise method of inner reflection" (88). In this formulation, reflection on our subjective experience of the world in the context of communication with others about our shared experiences is integral to the ongoing process by which we make sense of the world and, ultimately, move toward truth. In other words, truth is available only through a special kind of ongoing reflection by which the writer is open to transformation: "Underlying every expressive act must be genuine understanding gained from reflection upon our lived experience, an open dynamic understanding that overrides, as Husserl has said, 'every judgmental drawing-in of the world as it exists for us' ('Phenomenology' 24)" (95). From this point of view, reflection, by which we make meaning of our experience of the world, and expression, by which we share that meaning and adjust it within a social context, are integral to truth-seeking. As a technology for language and a form of expression, writing thus becomes part of the process of truth-seeking. Writing as truth-seeking encompasses an active, open, sustained reflection on our experience of ourselves in the world; at the same time, it is a vehicle by which we share our reflection with others as we make meaning together of our experience of the world. These two dimensions of writing potentially make it a truly reflective practice.

Couture recognizes that writing, by itself, and the practice of rhetoric more broadly do not inevitably lead to the kind of reflection and openness to change required for genuine truth-seeking. But she believes that a conception of truth as relative, which is the current dominant theoretical view, prevents such a practice from taking hold:

The obstacle to finding truth is not, as the relativists claim, the absence of a truth that is universally valid, but rather the unwillingness of those who seek truth to be changed by language, that is, to view truth seeking as bound up with our very being in the world, and to see the connection of our thoughts with those of others, past, present, and to come, and the development of ourselves as a result of that experience. (91)

Her vision requires "a willingness to change, a willingness to engage with others" (91). That willingness should be encoded in our writing practice, but it also seems to me that the practice of writing itself can foster this willingness if that practice is characterized by attending more closely to the experience of writing. In other words, understanding writing as a way of being in the world illuminates the act of writing so that the possibilities for the kind of reflection and openness to transformation that Couture seeks can emerge. Within an ontological framework, writing can become a practice whereby writers both develop and enact a willingness to change and an openness to

truth. In this way, writing as a way of being in the world can become an expression and enactment of nonduality rather than the proclaiming of the autonomous Cartesian self that mainstream pedagogies promote.

If Couture is right (and obviously I think she is) that “truth is an outcome of introspective understanding of consciousness obtained through the interactive state of being in the world with others” (95) and that rhetoric can be a practice of “attending to and interacting with the world with openness and acceptance” (96), then an ontological perspective on writing can not only help illuminate such a rhetoric but also provide a framework for a practice of writing as a new way of being in the world. Because an ontology of writing focuses attention on the writer’s experience of the self while writing, it can reveal the reflective possibilities of writing much more readily than conventional theories of writing, which focus on the process of producing texts or on the process of meaning-making through text. And as the descriptions of writing included in this chapter suggest, writing, when engaged in over time as a genuinely reflective practice (distinct from the exclusive purpose of creating a specific kind of text), can transform the writer in powerful ways. Indeed, Grosskopf’s description of writing himself “awake” seems similar in important ways to Couture’s “rhetorical reflection,” which she defines as “persistent attention to unfolding experience, openness to diversity of perception as it contributes to total meaning, and engagement in the personal meaning of particular experience” (114). Moreover, this kind of reflection is consistent with the self-awareness that Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy is intended to promote; it is consistent as well with theories of transformative learning, such as Jack Mezirow’s, which posit a kind of trajectory of deepening awareness that is necessary for truly emancipatory education:

Emancipatory education is about more than becoming aware of one’s awareness. Its goal is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing (how they are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, acting—a reflection on process) and beyond this to an awareness of the *reasons* why they experience as they do and to [take] action based upon these insights. (197)

It is possible, I believe, to engage in writing as a practice of truth-seeking that is characterized by this kind of reflection on our experience of ourselves in the world; moreover, it is possible to engage in the practice of writing such that we foster, through our sustained attention to our experience of our selves writing in the moment, a habit of reflection characterized by the openness to change that Couture seeks. Such a practice can move us beyond the entrenched dualities of a Cartesian view of writing and toward a connected sense of self that can become the foundation for imagining and creating more just and sustainable communities.

ENDNOTES

1. Recent psychological research on “multitasking” suggests that humans can perform a limited number of complex mental operations at a given time and can focus conscious attention effectively on only one or two such operations at a time. See Rubenstein, Meyer, and Evans; see also Tugend for an overview of this research. Research in cognitive rehabilitation, which is based on work with brain-damaged patients, suggests that there are different levels of cognitive attention, including “focused attention” and “sustained attention,” which seem similar in some respects to the kind of awareness-while-writing that I describe in this chapter. See Sohlberg and Mateer.
2. I describe other experiences I had in that program in *Literacy Matters*, pp. 43–54.
3. It is possible that the students in my prison class might have had a similar experience by writing about their surroundings, but it’s more likely that my focus on producing a certain kind of text, which was made clear in my assignment instructions, would have shaped their experience of writing such that their experience would be the less pleasant one that they in fact had. Later in this chapter I say more about how context can shape the writer’s experience in the moment.
4. I recognize that there is a difference between Baca’s experience while writing and the published account of that experience. As I noted in Chapter 3, the text is not the thing itself, and Baca must necessarily craft an incomplete account of the experience. What we have access to now is a text that represents a partial reconstruction of that experience. But his account nevertheless reveals something compelling about his experience of *being* in the act of writing; moreover, the text we have access to, no matter how incomplete an account of Baca’s experience that text may be, underscores the power of his experience on his sense of himself as a being in the world. In this sense, his text is a record of the *impact* on him of his experience of writing at that moment, rather than a record of the experience itself.
5. Although many scholars have noted important distinctions between using a pen or pencil to write and using a computer (e.g., see Porter), in both cases the writer is using technology to record his or her words. Emig’s focus in her analysis is on what is happening cognitively as a writer writes, and although the technology can (and almost certainly does) affect cognition during composing (as Porter suggests), for our purposes here the important point is that writing involves some form of recording, in addition to creating and originating, whereas reading, speaking, and listening do not involve recording.
6. An ontology of writing might thus help illuminate the experience of “writing anxiety” as studied in the 1970s. See Daly and Miller, “Empirical Development” and “Further Studies”; see also Daly.
7. I would add here that my own experience writing in hypertext (see Yagelski, “Computers, Literacy, and Being”) suggests how much the writer’s attention in the moment can be shaped by the characteristics of the medium. While composing in hypertext I am intensely concerned with the shape and structure of the document I am composing in ways that seem more noticeable to me than when

I write in more traditional print forms, such as this book. I am also acutely aware of the technical operations that are required to create the web-text I am composing (e.g., coding in HTML). But my experience of my self-while-writing is not fundamentally different from what I describe earlier in this chapter. That is, although at times during the writing of that hypertext my attention is focused on these technical concerns, my awareness of my self as a self writing is not different from that awareness while writing in a print form.

8. The same might be said of newer media such as text messaging, Twitter, and Facebook. However, these media are used for composing and sharing extremely brief texts and therefore do not allow for the kind of extended writing that I am generally discussing here. In media such as text messaging, the possibilities for sustained, deeply engaged writing are limited or nonexistent. As a result, the writer's experience seems more akin to a face-to-face or telephone conversation, albeit through primarily textual media.