AUTHORITY TO SPEAK: SITES OF PRODUCTION, MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION, AND THE WILL TO WRITE

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By

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In the composition classroom, authority has historically been yoked to paradigms of the self, subjectivity, and agency. In the wake of Postmodern critical theory’s destabilization of the subject and new media’s transformative effect on writing practices, scholars in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition have worked to articulate classroom practices that reflect and enact these theoretical shifts. However, these practices often revolve around a single paradigm of the writing subject, and in so doing, students develop a narrow version of authority. In this essay, I will argue for what I am calling a “practice of authority,” designed to help students mobilize, negotiate, and deploy the authorizing moves embedded within a particular discourse, genre, or site of production. Authority, as I define it, is perceived credibility. Credibility can be understood as a certain kind of expertise or knowledge within a particular field, but I am more interested in how a writer generates credibility. What forms does credibility take in language practices? What sorts of rhetorical moves make that credibility visible to members of the community with which you chose to communicate? And finally, how can we help our students to recognize, negotiate, and deploy the authorizing moves that are valued within a given form. Investigating recent scholarship in genre criticism and rhetorical ecologies, I argue that a practice of authority can not only help students to enter existing discourses, but through an emphasis on
multimodal composition, it can also help students to become active shapers of what constitutes authority within a given site of production. This essay concludes with a sample set of assignments built to help students develop a practice of authority.
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**Table of Contents**

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I: Author/ity ....................................................................................................... 8

Chapter II: Locating Authority: Genres, Ecologies, and Multimodal Composition..... 29

Chapter III: Practice (of) Authority ............................................................................... 53

Genre Analysis .............................................................................................................. 56

Community Engagement ............................................................................................... 58

Multimodal, Generative Research ................................................................................. 60

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 66

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 71
**INTRODUCTION**

Most writers, particularly when entering uncharted territory, ask themselves whether or not they have the authority to speak on a given topic or within a given medium. In “Composition Now: Standing on One’s Head,” Stephen North reminisces on his doctoral examination with similar preoccupations over authority: “I’m told that one examiner, a little put off by my attempt to include bits and pieces of all the stuff I’d read—from Aristotle to Whately, from Pike to Shaughnessy—characterized my synthesis as a ‘mish-mash’” (177). He goes on to defend his “mish-mash” as an important pedagogical practice when one must teach writing to a diverse range of students. In his essay, he brands himself as an authority on what his examiner called “mish-mash,” and what he would more likely call an arsenal of techniques with which to approach each student writer. And in my own case, authority is a particularly self-reflexive topic for a master’s thesis because these professional milestones always make us ask, “How did I get here? And if there is a ‘here,’ what does this place of writing want from me?”

When I recently read Tim Mayer’s *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, I came across a passage that troubled me. In what is largely a political piece, calling for an alliance between what he perceives as the subjugated fields of Creative Writing and Composition Studies within English departments, he argues that the hierarchy has remained intact because “The issue is territory; who is authorized to say what and under what conditions” (107; emphasis added). So my personal question “How did *I* get here” became something a bit bigger, a bit more nagging: “How did we get here?” This question is not about departmental politics, at least not explicitly or intentionally. It is about the scaffolding that authorizes students into discipline-specific discourses, perhaps at the neglect of a wider range of
writing activities. To be clear, neither disciplinarity, nor the authority of discourse communities is under attack here. They are productive for a certain kind of intellectual labor and have a right to their own rhetoric(s) of authority. Instead, I want to know how one becomes authorized within a particular community’s modes of communication. Authority, as I define it, is perceived credibility. Credibility can be understood as a certain kind of expertise or knowledge within a particular field, but I am more interested in how a writer generates credibility. What forms does credibility take in language practices? What sorts of rhetorical moves make that credibility visible to members of the community with which you chose to communicate? And finally, I want to know how we can help our students to recognize, negotiate and deploy the authorizing moves that are valued within a given form. In investigating these questions, I hope to elucidate the seemingly simple problem implicit in the question “How did I get here?” Namely, when we talk about these moments on the precipice of authority, when we feel out its language and demands, what is the essential relationship between “I” and “here”?

Breaking the question down thus helps us to recall the ways in which authority has historically been yoked to questions of the self, subjectivity, and agency. As the story goes, since Foucault asked “What is an Author?” Barthes called for the “Death of the Author,” and Derrida located the author within his/her “Signature, Event, Context,” the fields of Rhetoric and Composition have been hammering out the implications of these Poststructuralist moves within approaches to teaching writing. In other words, when Postmodernism placed language at the center, it made us ask, “If it is not I who speaks (but the community, or culture, or discourse, etc…) then where does authority reside and how is it mobilized?” At its foundation, the debates that emerged in Composition Studies out of these questions, notably between David Bartholomae
and Peter Elbow in the 1995 issue of CCC, boil down to a question of the nature of the subject, and how she comes to write with authority, presence, and influence. On one side of the debate in Composition Studies are those that argue, in the tradition of David Bartholomae’s seminal text “Inventing the University,” that students are best inducted into postures of authority by entering a discourse community and taking on its language. Those who argue for liberatory pedagogies, such as Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, recognize the power of these discourse communities to reify the language of oppression and dominance. While resisting Postmodernism’s emphasis on a destabilized subject, these liberatory thinkers responded to a different current in Postmodern criticism to dismantle grand narratives, and structures of repression and exclusion. Authority, for the liberatory thinkers, became a linguistic weapon.

And in a similar vein, the expressivists, in the tradition of Peter Elbow’s “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic,” argue that instead of finding authority in discourse communities, pedagogies should seek to cultivate the singularity of the student author and her voice. At the most extreme, such theorists were labeled ‘new romantics,’ who refused to believe that writing could be taught, favoring instead pedagogies that sought to create situations that fostered the mysterious winds of invention (Hawk 17). In *A Counter History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*, Byron Hawk addresses this opposition by pointing out that “unfortunately the binary that is created between problem solving or heuristics, on the one hand, and new romantics, on the other, becomes drastically polarized into those who see invention—and by extension writing—as teachable via heuristics, and those who have no method at all and leave invention up to subjective genius and feeling, seeing it as unsusceptible to being taught” (18). While these polarized debates are largely over, their effects can still be felt today,
particularly as many work to move past Postmodernism. Attempting to signal a departure away from Postmodern paradigms of subjectivity, Richard and Janis Haswell’s recent book *Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession on Potentiality and Singularity* argues for a pedagogy that honors the cohesive, singular student author.

In an attempt to reconcile the debates between those who believed in the authority of discourse communities, on the one hand, and the singular student voice, on the other hand, Byron Hawk argues that these polarized accounts not only reduce the complexity of these scholars’ thinking, but also the complexity of writing more generally (175-176). The Elbow-Bartholomae debates, as paradigmatic of the larger debate about the location of the subject and her authority, need to be revised to take multimodal environments into account wherein language practices cultivate a panoply of subject positions for writers to adopt. Hawk points to new media’s transformative effect on the writing landscape in his history of vitalism, suggesting that “A whole new technological apparatus means that teachers cannot assume students are simply walking into classes as passive consumers of dominant texts. More students produce their own media texts and create their own online contexts and communities” (208). By most accounts, new media offer students (and everyday writers alike) more opportunities to participate in forms of authorship and authority, but fracture the possibility for a cohesive, stable subject. Not only are many new media platforms authored collaboratively or anonymously, but many deploy multimedia interfaces that complicate our traditional conceptions of print-based authority. In other words, writing practices across new media platforms complicate and frustrate the already destabilized author-figure that marks Postmodern critical theory.
But the solution to these “problems,” I suspect, does not lie in pedagogies that (re)create these instabilities in the classroom, so that students can learn how writing “really” operates in the world. Compositionists and rhetoricians alike have responded creatively to the troubling questions posed by Postmodernism. However, many have unfortunately called for pedagogies built around stable paradigms of subjectivity that simply do not hold weight as writers move between or interact within multiple modes, genres, scenes, and domains of writing. Rebecca Moore Howard notes that during her class built around the concept of collaborative writing, under the auspices that all writing is inherently collaborative, she exhibited frustration at her students’ continual resistance. Pushing against the pervasive force in academia of the autonomous author-figure, she remains stunned at the fact that she has “so far found it impossible to persuade all students that all writing is collaborative” (41). While she regrets that her approach may have resulted in “no learning” for her students, especially the particularly resistant ones, we should further consider how effective writing instruction can be when built around stable paradigms of the writing subject (41). In other words, I will argue in this thesis that we should develop what I am calling a “practice of authority” in the composition classroom, built to help students adapt to the demands of different genres and modes, rather than letting one paradigm of subjectivity dictate our learning goals.

In order to develop such a practice of authority, we must think more fluidly and strategically about the relationship between the writing student and her sites of production. Byron Hawk has gone a long way towards advocating for a pedagogical emphasis on the place of writing as an interface. He argues that instead of reducing the complexity of writing/writers to a polarized debate over agency and authority, “teachers need to build smarter environments in which their
students work […] classrooms as ambient interfaces. These environments are constellations of architectures, technologies, texts, bodies, histories, heuristics, enactments, and desires that produce the conditions of possibility for emergence, for invention” (249). And so the relationship between the “here” and the “I” is in this environment, out of which we can build a more robust account of authority, which can be as fluid and dynamic as our classrooms should be. This thesis seeks to imagine a practice of authority built around the goal of equipping students with the skills to be agile maneuverers of the postures of authority asked of them when they move across and through sites of production.

In order to imagine such a practice, I will bridge accounts of sites of production generated by scholars in new media (Rickert 2004; Edbauer 2005; Hawk 2007; Rivers and Weber 2011) with rhetorically-grounded genre criticism (Miller 1984; Slevin 2001; Bawarshi 2003). In a radical (re)invention of genre in his book *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi moves genre away from its characterization as something defined by its very lack of inventiveness, arguing instead that writers are invented as they enter a genre, working through what a genre limits and enables (7). Again, place and a sense of presence become essential in Bawarshi’s account of genre. While genre criticism provides a blueprint for students to navigate what a specific genre asks of them, the criticism as a whole rarely addresses how students interact with genres in multimodal environments, particularly in digital writing cultures, wherein students must handle competing conventions and accounts of authority. Bridging these two conversations will hopefully generate a more savvy account of not only authority, but how to mobilize it strategically in our classrooms. Genre criticism, at least from rhetorical scholars, tends to inform pedagogical practice by illuminating how the genres that populate our classrooms inform the
values and forms of authority that we often unconsciously reinforce. Understanding how sites of production inform authorizing moves will not only help our students develop as writers, but will help us to critically engage the activity of our own classrooms in the ongoing process of pedagogical (re)vision.

Simply put, authority in our profession has been dealt with strangely. As both a necessary evil and the necessary playmate of subjectivity, it has been dragged through the debates ranging from the location of student agency in language to departmental struggles and political calls to disassemble the university’s dominant power structures. I have little intention to weaponize authority in the classroom. Rather, students can learn authority’s operative moves through a site of production’s calls to presence and command. The first chapter, “Author/ity,” will look at how authority has been typically mobilized alongside the conventions and values of authorship in the university. While current-traditionalists and liberatory compositionists held dramatically polarized views about the location and role of authority in the classroom, I will argue that both practices remained committed to authority as an expression of authorship, and therefore, created the same impasses to learning in their classrooms. The second chapter, “Locating Authority: Genres, Ecologies, and Multimodal Composition,” looks at genre criticism’s shift away from genre as taxonomy to genre as rhetorical action. I will argue that rhetorical action provides a more ethical foundation upon which to teach authority. Finally, the third chapter, “Practice (of) Authority,” reflects on a set of assignments built to help students develop a practice of authority. If sites of production inform the contours of rhetorical action, then what kinds of scaffolding can we incorporate into our assignments to help students be more agile with authorizing moves?
CHAPTER I

AUTHOR/ITY

This essay’s interrogation of authority is uniquely bound to the conceptual and institutional history of authorship, not only in the fields of Literary Studies and Rhetoric & Composition, but also within the wider milieu of print and digital cultures. Oftentimes, authority has been spoken of as if it were synonymous with the characteristics of authorship. In other words, to possess the qualities of an author necessarily gives one the authority to speak within a given context. At other times, the relationship between the two is slightly more complicated. For example, the strain of current-traditional rhetoric that dominated composition throughout the twentieth century was predicated on a stable, autonomous author, even if that author was a “mere” student, stumbling over errors in clarity, coherence, and grammar. But, current-traditional rhetoric paradoxically evolved to incorporate David Bartholomae’s theory of authority, which argued that students write themselves into postures of authority by taking on the privileged language of the university. In a strange turn, authorship remains agent-centric, while authority became contextually located in discourse communities. Today, composition courses deploy and reinforce paradigms of authorship and authority in ever increasing complexity and often contradiction. Authorship is simply one source of authority; however, authorship is a particularly potent and powerful source of authority in the university. In order to develop a pedagogical practice of authority, this study will first examine authorship in the teaching of writing.

In a playful response to Barthes’ notion of the “Death of the Author,” Rebecca Moore Howard in “The Binaries of Authorship” searches for the birth of the modern notion of
She notes that the author, as represented through Foucault’s author-function, was “born” in the early modern period with the expansion of print culture, and the subsequent need for an economy of credit. In summation, “The emergence of the modern author was an economic convenience that allowed for orderly profit-making from publishing” (7). While many scholars are beginning to retrace the ways in which even these early staples of modern authorship actually functioned within deeply collaborative networks, the field of Composition, and academic discourse more generally, remains burdened with the figure of the single, autonomous author that emerged during this period of rapid expansion in publishing and mass literacy. When we look at Howard’s history, what becomes less obvious is why this “economic convenience” for the publishing world began to matter in composition classrooms.

To understand this, we must look again at Howard’s history of the author, which details the value system through which the author mobilizes authority. According to her, the author enjoys a degree of cultural weight, because he possesses four qualities: “originality, autonomy, morality, and proprietorship” (1). Howard elaborates on these qualities, asserting that according to cultural wisdom authors “write original works; they write alone, without collaboration, influence, or plagiarism” (1). Students in the composition classroom are rarely treated as having these qualities, despite being held accountable for them when it comes to behaving as their opposite: the plagiarist (10). Thus, composition classrooms have been saddled with something slightly more dubious than the mission of imparting skills or knowledge. They “are expected to fulfill a gatekeeping function: giving grades that certify the students’ shortcomings and accomplishments. According to this cultural calculus, students are neither authors nor writers but applicants for admission to the place where authors and writers operate” (4). This
paradoxical impasse plagues the composition classroom with mixed messages about how we expect our students to perform because they are held to the standards of authorship, while simultaneously being denied its status or even the opportunity to write as authors. In other texts, notably in *Standing in the Shadow of Giants*, Howard simply calls this process the “gatekeeping” function of the composition course (xxii).

Sharon Crowley likewise uses that phrase when she argues that the gatekeeping function corrupts the learning goals in the required introductory composition course so thoroughly that it should be abolished (248). Among her many reasons for coming up with what she later calls her “modest proposal” to abolish the comp requirement in *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, Crowley argues the required introductory course has exercised its gatekeeping function as a way to police, monitor, and correct student subjectivity (8-9, 241). Crowley examines the history of the required composition course, known as Freshman English, through the lens of its political and ideological struggles. Since its inception at Harvard in the 1880s, Freshman English has been tasked with doing a particular kind of cultural labor. Harvard administrators and teachers, aghast that young men from “good” families and the best schools could hardy compose grammatically correct, coherent, and clear pieces of writing, initiated entrance examinations and the required composition course to remedy the “broken” writing that was poisoning the Harvard halls. However, Crowley argues that the standard of evaluation in most subsequent composition courses became the language, values, and taste of precisely these men from good families and the best schools (70). “Correctness,” Crowley insists, is not a universally applicable term, but is rather affiliated with a particular kind of class ethics. The standard of evaluation became the language of white, upper class men, which is a standard that
continues to be exercised in the university’s gatekeeping function (74-76). This value system also helps to explain, according to Crowley, why literature has always held such a prominent role in the teaching of writing. Literature was supposed to impart high morals and what Crowley calls the “pedagogy of taste” (42). The ability to write well, so the story goes, was naturally supposed to follow suit (82). This logic, to Crowley’s horror, remains in effect today.

Crowley goes on to argue that despite the strides made by Composition Studies, and the resurgence of the study of Rhetoric, the required composition course does not in fact serve students’ needs to become “better writers,” but serves the university’s need for a space “wherein student subjectivity can be monitored and disciplined” (8). Crowley refers to this as the “needs discourse,” wherein not only does the academy authorize acceptable forms of student writing, but also “composition teachers’ willingness to speak for their students’ needs entails a suspicious politics of representation” (257, 260-261). Crowley’s description recalls the gatekeeping function:

The continuing function of the required composition course has been to insure the academic community that its entering members are taught the discursive behaviors and traits of character that qualify them to join the community. The course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies. (8-9)

While it may sound as if Crowley’s next sentence would champion expressivist pedagogy, she argues that such liberal programs (to which she is admittedly sympathetic) provide a “recipe for pain” by making students’ identities the very center of instruction, and therefore, a source of ethical frustration for both students and teachers (227). In other words, the teacher as a moral authority is no less problematic than the teacher as an authority in the privileged language of the
university, which is rooted in white, upper class vernacular. In current-traditional rhetoric, the teacher is responsible for ensuring that their students write with clarity and logic, assuming the language and subjectivity of the university. The student in a current-traditional classroom, therefore, can only assume authority by making themselves over in the image of the university. In expressivist, and similarly liberal pedagogies, teachers ask that students place their ideological differences at the center of instruction, problematically tying a student’s writing, and their authority through “voice,” to who they are, what they believe, and where they come from.

Crowley argues that this unlikely similarity between current-traditional rhetoric and liberatory pedagogy partly stems from the fact that process-oriented tactics “[retain] the modernist composing subject of current-traditionalism” (213). In other words, both expressivist and current-traditional strains of teaching rely on and reinforce the paradigm of a stable, autonomous writer. She argues that this paradigm is problematic because it lets us believe that we have transparent access to language and that students can stand outside of their composing contexts, making decisions as independent agents (212-213). But, I am more concerned with the way in which the agent-centric paradigm does little to divorce authorship from authority. As Howard has shown, the paradigm is politically tied to a bourgeois cultural ethic, one that expressivist pedagogy would have liked to overturn. I am not suggesting that authorship, as a version of authority, is entirely toxic to student learning. However, when authorship underlies all writing activity in a composition classroom, students develop a narrowly specific practice of authority, rather than one that helps them to become mobile and agile with language.

Taking Howard and Crowley’s histories together, we emerge with a very interesting portrait of authorship in freshman composition as a privileged source of authority that the academy’s
gatekeeping function denies to students, but simultaneously holds up as the moral standard of evaluation. But the problem still goes deeper. In the introduction to this piece, I posed the following question: “What would it look like to train writers instead of authors?” Ostensibly, Howard’s four characteristics of authorship—originality, autonomy, morality, and proprietorship—represent one source of authority. If authority and authorship have been exercised conterminously in composition classrooms through the gatekeeping function, then how might we open the classroom to wider or more diverse sources of authority? Surely there are other available postures of authority, in which students can participate. As Foucault argues in “What is an Author?” the author-function pertains only to certain kinds of discursive practices, preferably ones tied to higher orders of cultural capital. Arguing for its exclusive status, he notes:

The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is its author,’ shows that this discourse is not ordinary speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.” (211)

What, if any, productive use might we find in the space that Foucault casts outside of the author-function, or the space that he refers to as “everyday speech that merely comes and goes”? In Genre and the Invention of the Writer, Anis Bawarshi cites this same passage to argue that the domain outside the author-function opens the possibility for an organizing principle of language activity that he calls the “genre function” (21-22). Foucault insists that “A private letter may well have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has an editor—but not an author” (211). While Foucault is not interested in the writer’s relationship to a text, precisely
because the author-function is a cultural signifier, Bawarshi argues that invention, or a writer’s ability to produce texts, is a function of genre (Bawarshi 22-23). Once we venture down the path Foucault readily makes available for us, there are a myriad of genre-based forms of writing with their own conventions of authority that are perhaps worth attending to with our students.

I have, however, overlooked one important point here. In an attempt to circumvent the university’s disciplining apparatus, and its mechanism (i.e. the required introductory course) for endowing students with the appropriate values and characteristics of an author, I have ignored a range of ethical problems that emerges when we actively deny authorship to students. Concerned that students are being refused the status of authorship, Amy E. Robillard’s recent scholarship investigates citation practices in Composition Studies with regard to student work. The problem, as Robillard sees it, is twofold. First, scholars in the field fail to represent their students’ works in their own scholarship as they would any other author’s. Often citing students’ works anonymously or by their first name, scholars rarely give academic credit to their students as they would to a colleague or other professionals in the field (254). This practice necessarily excludes students from the privileged sphere of authorship and authority, which Robillard notes, saying, “When we cite one another but leave students nameless or pseudonymous, we perpetuate an author/student binary that works against our liberatory disciplinary ideals” (257). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, compositionists perpetuate the author/student binary in order to gain cultural capital in their fields. Scholars will use “broken” or even good student writing (though supposedly not good enough to be cited with the full status of an author) to launch their own pedagogical developments. Robillard’s exposure of citation practices reminds us that the field of Composition Studies is dangerously based on the rejection of students as authors in their
own right. Arguing thus, she notes that “To analyze student writing for what it demonstrates about a particular pedagogy—this is an authorizing move in the discourse of Composition Studies, perhaps the authorizing move” (256). Robillard is clever here to connect composition scholars’ authorship with their ability to “authorize” themselves in their field. Problematically, however, Robillard sees this move occurring at the expense of students’ ability to be either authors or authorities in their writing (257).

What Robillard points out would make most teachers with “liberatory disciplinary ideals” shudder (257). If the gatekeeping function of the introductory composition course serves the university’s need to monitor and discipline student subjectivity (as Crowley has suggested), and part of what is being monitored is the student’s initiation into the values and characteristics of authorship (as Howard has suggested), then Robillard would contend that compositionists, while often well-meaning, perpetuate this disciplinary mechanism by refusing the status of authorship to students in order to be the heroes of their own scholarship. Kelly Ritter in Who Owns School?: Authority, Students, and Online Discourse makes a similar case arguing that “For many years, composition studies itself has been validating this view—that teachers are mostly concerned with the effectiveness of their own methods as extensions of their teacherly ethos, rather than as a means for understanding how and why students learn both inside and outside the classroom” (165-166). This is quite a bleak portrait, and one that attaches more malice to the discipline than I am willing to perpetuate. However, Crowley’s history of the birth of Freshman English in the 1880s shows us that it emerged out of the metaphor of broken writing; therefore, I would contend that the field of Composition Studies that evolved in its wake sustains itself in part on the image of students as deficient and without authorship or corresponding authority (70).
More than one scholar (Crowley 1998; Hawk 2007) has suggested that we dispense with the required introductory composition course, precisely because the needs discourse that dominates its teaching, administration, and circulating scholarship privileges the university’s need for hegemonic discourse, rather than the students’ own.

If the needs discourse of the university represented a dominant, hegemonic version of authority (as tied to the values of authorship), then process pedagogy and its expressivist branch sought to move the pedagogical center to the students’ needs, and therefore, relocate authority in the classroom. According to its logic, “There are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives” (Murray 6). I am certainly sympathetic to a direct movement that seeks to empower students to have authority in their own writing (i.e. the subject of this thesis); however, as I will show, process pedagogy made some misassumptions about student authority that need to be addressed here. Crowley details process pedagogy’s calculated response to a particular kind of authority in the university: “If nothing else, then, student unrest caused composition teachers to ponder ways in which they might redistribute authority in their classrooms. One way to do this was to reject current-traditional rhetoric, which channeled authority from institution to student” (206). In contrast, process pedagogy promoted peer review, workshops, and drafting as a way to disperse authority in the classroom, with a particular emphasis on the individual student as the chief source of authority in her own writing. In this regard, Crowley argues that current-traditional rhetoric’s model of authority, as a reflection of the university’s privileged discourse, is undesirable; however, by making a student’s ideological center the nexus of instruction, process pedagogy, invented, in Crowley’s view, an equal “recipe for pain” (227). Because process pedagogy was not radical enough to subvert the foundation over which it functioned (i.e. the
required introductory course, rubrics, grading, responsibility to the university, etc.), teachers were backed into a corner, in which they made themselves authorities of subjectivity. Not only is the revision of student identity just as much of a concern in current-traditional rhetoric as it is here in process pedagogy (in opposite directions, albeit), but process pedagogy failed to (or did not care to) question the concept of “the modernist composing subject of current-traditionalism—the subject who is sufficiently discrete from the composing context to stand apart from it” (213). I would argue that this is also problematic because process pedagogy remained tethered to the cultural values embedded in the modern author-figure. This is problematic for developing a robust, diverse practice of authority because in both current-traditionalism and process pedagogy, students are only taught to strive for the version of authority associated with authorship. As a result, they do not get the opportunity to work through different postures of authority, and to recognize how authorizing moves transform across genres, disciplines, or mediums.

I would also add to Crowley’s analysis a few misassumptions commonly made in the discourse surrounding authority. The first is that authority can simply be transferred without radically altering the context in which students operate. For this reason, Crowley argues that process pedagogy was effectively swallowed into the practices of current-traditional rhetoric (212-213). One cannot remained tethered to the gatekeeping function of the university, whether willingly or not, and simply “give authority” to students. Teachers serve as representatives of their disciplines and universities in the classroom, and students perceive teachers to be experts in the authorizing moves accepted by the community to which they seek entrance. While process pedagogy argues that the teacher simply becomes one source of authority in the classroom, on
equal footing with everyone else, students are savvy enough to recognize these gestures for what they are. At best, they are endearing, yet futile, attempts to defy the power of the university and its language. At worst they are a frustrating exercise, in which your subjectivity is as much up for critique as your grammar previously was. As Kelly Ritter puts it “the teacher still must exist—and in many ways, takes on a heightened structural importance in the classroom, as a political voice and organizer of men (and women), rather than simply an instrument of the state (or education system)” (19-20). I strongly agree with Ritter when she argues in this passage, and elsewhere, that we may do more harm than good when we replace our institutional authority for a moral and cultural one (163-164).

Secondly, the discourse of authority suffers from few clear rules for what kind of influence is acceptable and what kind is ethically dubious. As Ritter notes, “My core contention throughout this book is that college and university students do not feel in control of their own education, and consequently resist and reject teacher oversight as they acquire that education, particularly in the highly interpretive and value-laden reading-and-writing-centered classroom” (15). I agree with Ritter that when a student feels as if she has some authority, either in her education more generally or in the assignments of a particular classroom, her learning dramatically improves. However, there is little agreement in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition on what kind of influence is acceptable. Is “teacher oversight,” as Ritter puts it, necessarily ethically compromising? Ostensibly, students enter the university in order to be transformed in some way or another. I leave that verb “be transformed” in the passive tense, precisely because when it comes to conversations on authority, scholars frequently disagree about who the agent is supposed to be. We have yet to determine whether the university and its representative teachers
are supposed be the authority in the classroom, transforming students, or whether students are 
supposed to be authorities over what they want to get out of education, transforming themselves 
in that process. In practice, authority falls somewhere in between, with students frequently 
transforming the discourses, practices, and cultural ideals of the university, as they are 
themselves transformed by them. In reimagining a practice of authority, teachers must consider 
these larger ecologies of the academy through not only the elements we produce (assignments, 
prompts, syllabi, and discussions), but also with the elements we have little control over, such as 
the larger university apparatus and its course requirements, legislation on plagiarism, etc. We 
need to develop smarter strategies for helping students access the rhetoric of authority than 
simply pretending as if we can hand it over or that authority can be internally generated and 
transferred from context to context.

The final point I want to make regarding the common misassumptions about authority will 
take the remainder of this chapter, but in short it involves the relationship between theory and 
practice. I have been arguing that we should develop a practice of authority that helps students 
to work through the range of postures, including those in academic discourses, which they may 
need to adopt throughout their writing careers. The impetus for many of the challenges against 
traditional paradigms of authorship and authority stems from theories generated in the wake of 
Postmodernism and its aftermath. Postmodernism effectively debunked the figure of the stable, 
autonomous subject necessary for the author-figure. But as we have seen, the potency of 
authorship remains just as powerful today in the composition classroom as before 
Postmodernism, which begs serious questions about the relationship between theory and 
practice. We can look to scholarship on plagiarism as a site in which these questions have
become increasingly imperative ones to address as students’ academic integrity is defined by the values of authorship, which many would argue are outdated, particularly within the context of new media. In many ways, the rise in scholarship on plagiarism points to the anxiety that surrounds authorship and serious questions about the autonomy of writers. In other words, legislation and adjudication of plagiarism would remain a relatively unquestioned practice had we not begun to harbor serious suspicions about singular authors, the ability for one to “own” language, and the authority typically attached to one’s claim as an author.

Ritter investigates sites such as online paper mills and book summary/analysis sites, such as PinkMonkey, as direct challenges to the economy of cultural capital in the university. With the growth of copyright laws and citation practices, the university attaches an ever-greater importance to the economy of authorship. The university demonizes online paper mills because they circumvent its gateways to authorship, and more importantly, directly violate the values attached to the authorship ideal. They let someone get away with acting as an authority, without every really being an author. However, Ritter takes a different line of argumentation with regard to paper mills:

No, our classrooms are part of the problem because they are assumed to be the antithesis of the online paper mill sites; the physical classroom space is assumed to be truly dialogic, student-centered and intellectually satisfying for those students who want to engage in it, for the sake of learning. Online student spaces of various formations, and within various venues, are assumed to be the anti-school ‘other’ [...] But what we overlook here is the ways in which academic writing, as an intellectual act and as embodied heavily in the first-year course, continues to elide student agencies altogether, even in liberatory pedagogy-aspiring classrooms. This is because writing, to students, is less about learning than about goal-meeting, future purchasing power, and effective information-centered commerce. (80)
Ritter cautions strongly against incorporating these external sites that challenge the business as usual of the university’s economy of credit because such a practice would decontextualize and colonize spaces in which students perform meaningful cultural labor. Instead, she argues that we should “bring the spirit of the discourse and debate found in those online spaces more strongly to bear on our own systematic pedagogies that currently encourage students to be pupils of rhetoric, but not public rhetoricians in a highly democratic and potentially charged classroom” (169). In other words, we should recognize accounts of authority that directly challenge the university’s commitment to the values of authorship.

Furthermore, by noting the distinction between being “pupils of rhetoric” and “public rhetoricians,” Ritter highlights the generative vs. interpretive divide that has plagued the students, teachers, and administrators involved in cases of plagiarism as it points to the murky process of acquiring and deploying language-based knowledge (169). This ambiguity emerged at least in critical dialogue during Postmodernism when language became less something we owned and more something that owned us. Furthermore, the concept of intertextuality frustrates our ability to maintain paradigms of the single, autonomous author. In her work Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators, Rebecca Moore Howard, one of the leading scholars in the field on plagiarism, recalls a sort of wake-up call she experienced when one-third of her students plagiarized on an assignment. Howard calls the particular kind of plagiarism they were guilty of “patchwriting,” which she defines as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another” (xvii). The problem that patchwriting poses—what is your language and what is someone else’s—should be a familiar question to anyone in the field because Howard does not
assign patchwriting to a particular class of academic dishonesty, but to the development of reading comprehension (xviii). She argues that “Consigning patchwriting to the category of cheating serves liberal culture gatekeeping purposes: it is a means of determining who is already possessed of high literacy” (xxii). All academic professionals patchwrite, only with varying degrees of expertise. What looks like good prose or a well-informed use of someone else’s argument is simply practiced and efficient patchwriting (7). If we take intertextuality to its logical conclusion from a theory to a practice, the single-author/single-text paradigm should no longer hold sway in our classrooms. In other words, the practice of patchwriting, which is technically called plagiarism, gives us a painful reminder of the paper-thin line between someone else’s structures of meaning in language and our own. The further we venture into Postmodern theory, the less we are able to believe in that paper-thin line in the first place.

Howard’s complaint is that many of the current classroom and university practices of authorship belie what we now know (via Postmodernism) about how writing and authorship circulate in the world (7-9). Things like intertextuality and collaborative writing dominate theoretical discussions, but fail to translate readily into our practices, at least without serious pushback from the university’s disciplinary apparatus that forbids these writing practices. Describing a class in which the pedagogical focus was collaborative writing, Howard recalls that collaborative practices seem to run counter to students’ previous preparation in writing and their expectations of authorship:

[…] I have so far found it impossible to persuade all students that all writing is collaborative. Whether that ‘persuasion’ is undertaken directly or indirectly, many students have a lifetime of school that has convinced them otherwise. I have read and heard assertions that some teachers have succeeded in the endeavor, have developed fully collaborative classrooms—but I am not, so far,
one of those teachers. I have found, on the contrary, that pushing an unwilling student too far into intentional collaboration can result in a full-scale revolt, resulting in frustration for me and no learning for her. (41)

This is a puzzling section in Howard’s work, particularly because she so often articulates the need for a deeply contextual understanding of plagiarism. However, she effectively decontextualizes writing practices for the seeming goal of having her students understand how writing “really” operates in the world. For multiple reasons, this practice seems to be a “recipe for pain,” to use Crowley’s expression (227). First, even the most Postmodern among us still behave as if we are autonomous agents, even authorities, over our own writing. Secondly, collaborative writing is frustrating for very practical reasons that have little to do with the theoretical implications of student agency. Students often do not contribute equally, and often the lesson they learn after one student has taken up the bulk of the work, is that little collaboration has occurred at all. And thirdly, Howard sets her students up as passive receptacles for a particular kind of knowledge about how writing works, rather than as active agents working themselves to establish their relationship to a text within a given context.

But perhaps most importantly, Howard seems peculiarly interested in a seamless transition between theory and practice. No one can deny that universities continue to uphold policies on plagiarism that are hardly reasonable or just, especially in the wake of new media’s transformative effect on the way people write and how language circulates. While I share Howard’s desire to redefine plagiarism policies in light of new media’s transformative effect of what authorship means or entails, I am less convinced that meaningful learning can occur for our students when we mobilize a narrow theory of authorship/authority to inform the writing practices of our classrooms. Howard argues for such a streamlined correlation between theory
and practice when she argues that “Authorship is different now than it was a century ago, and pedagogy—in both print and electronic media—must reflect that difference” (151-151). I would strongly argue that this should not necessarily be the case. We should incorporate the new postures of authority into our assignments, but we should hesitate to supplant an older model for a newer one, as both paradigms of authorship suffer the same fault of only constituting a narrow range of writing activity. When our shiny up-to-date pedagogies are not sticking, we should resist blaming ignorant administrators or stubborn students, who are unwilling to learn and fail to see how writing “really” works in the world. Instead, we should pause to recall the goals of writing instruction. In another example from her teaching reflections, Howard herself recognizes the same mistake that I am pointing here. She realizes that when most of her students plagiarized, her “zeal to socialize them into the avowed conventions of academic writing was actually preventing their learning” (xviii). I do not think Howard would be surprised to hear that the same was true during her course based around collaborative writing.

Howard is not far off, however. In Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he explains how paradigm shifts not only inform the way we think about a given topic or problem, but reflect back onto our very methodologies, practices, and modes of inquiry. I am concerned here with the paradigm shift brought about by Postmodernism that destabilized the author and subjectivity. Kuhn notes that “paradigms differ in more than substance, for they are directed not only to nature but also back upon the science that produced them. They are the source of methods, problem-fields, and the standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time. As a result, the reception of a new paradigm often necessitates a redefinition of the corresponding science” (103). Working off Kuhn’s analysis,
paradigm shifts are significant because they change the way we look out at the world; perhaps more importantly, they can generate a whole new array of unforeseen practices that might otherwise lie outside the bounds of a given discipline. Such is also the case with authorship. In Howard’s example, the shift brought on by Postmodernism allowed us to see that all writing is inherently collaborative, but we make the mistake of thinking that this writing remains under the banner of authorship as new practices evolve. The transition from theory to practice is not readily available, nor should it be. While our students continue to write within the university, we need to think more critically about how to use situated writing to help students develop rhetorical postures of authority.

The distinctions between and uses of theory and practice are ongoing debates within the fields of Rhetoric and Composition. While I am not interested in settling the debate, I will argue that in order for students to meaningfully learn how to adopt postures of authority in language or to negotiate its demands, we need to have a more flexible practice of authority in our classrooms. This practice should not be based on indoctrinating students into the newest theory of authority, which could only result narrow learning. A practice of authority should work to posture students within different modes to learn how socially meaningful contexts inform the way we act rhetorically within them. Stanley Fish’s work, in Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies, is particularly useful for thinking through theory and practice. In it, Fish famously claims that theory does not exist. There is no conflict whatsoever between theory and practice because in order for a conflict to take place, the forces in supposed conflict must necessarily exist (27-28). He argues: “I am not denying that theory can have political consequences, merely insisting that those consequences do
not belong by right or nature to theory, but are contingent upon the (rhetorical) role theory plays in the particular circumstances of a historical moment” (28). In order for this argument to make sense, Fish must narrow his definition of theory significantly. In other words, what we typically call theory, Fish calls “theory-talk”—a kind of practice that can in fact have consequences, but these consequences only occur when the language of theory-talk is mobilized within rhetorically meaningful contexts (14). Theory proper does not exist, according to Fish, because nothing is universally applicable regardless of context. If we are to look back on Kuhn’s analysis of paradigm shifts, Fish would argue that the changes do not occur on a theoretical level, but precisely because of the material conditions from which they depart and through the contexts in which they begin to operate. Though Kuhn’s analysis is less concerned with the language of theory and practice, part of his project (similar to Fish’s) involves exposing the way that systems of inquiry are not “natural” or “universal,” but predicate on contextually-motivated frameworks.

In “Theory and Its Practice in Composition Studies,” Kory Lawson Ching furthers Fish’s work by expressing a functional relationship between “theory” and practice. Looking at the “theory wars,” Ching sets aside a moment to discuss what it is that theory does and why we should be hesitant to make practice out of it. Taking up Fish’s work, he argues that “It is hard to argue (at least from my own postmodern sensibilities) against the idea that foundationalist theory must fail at its attempt to transcend practice” (451). While I share Ching’s sensibilities (as do many of the scholars I have discussed thus far), I would contend that the issue is not whether or not we as professors buy into the artificiality of universal laws, but whether or not administrators, legislators, students, or any other influencing bodies on the conditions of our classrooms do. To be clear, Ching’s essay is more concerned with what theory does than what
practice does. Answering this latter concern would necessarily entail working through the 
concerns I have just raised. Because we work within the university’s ecological constraints, a 
practice of authority, as I have imagined it, can help students to recognize authorizing moves in 
social contexts. These contexts include everything from writing within the university’s 
unwavering commitment to universal theories of authorship to blog writing to ghost writing.

Ching does, however, make several points that are essential for developing a practice of 
authority in our classrooms, as opposed to building pedagogical imperatives around theoretical 
models. Working off Fish’s discussion of theory-talk as a practice, Ching argues that we should 
be content to let the practice of theory do its work. Ching observes that our expectations that 
theory will have necessary implications for practice or “drive practice from the top,” lead us to 
believe unfairly “in a hierarchical relationship in which theory takes the privileged position” 
(463). Instead, theory is a practice, privileged no more or less than any other kind of practice. 
Thus, Ching quips that, “My guess is that many postmodern theorists still speak to their students 
as if they were individual subject/authors with an audience to persuade. Does this make them 
ironists? Not necessarily. The fact is that calling the ‘author-function’ into question does not 
have automatic or necessary consequences for classroom practice, nor should we expect it to” 
(455-465). Unfortunately, we have been doing this with authorship and authority in composition. 
We privilege theories of dispersed authorship, blaming the fact that nothing really changes on 
our stubborn students or ignorant administrators, who continue to believe in the power of 
foundationalist theory. In doing so, we privilege theory, which is dangerous because we run the 
risk of making conversion to x or y theory of authority the focal point or unsaid learning goal of 
our classrooms. Instead, we need to return more thoughtfully to the goals of composition
courses, the conditions within which they operate, and in so doing, create a savvier practice of authority, one that prepares students to recognize and mobilize its rhetorical postures.

The point of this brief history has been to indicate that authority has been typically yoked to authorship in often problematic ways. While the goal of this project is to investigate alternatives for a practice of authority for students, we must avoid thinking that these alternatives can be unproblematically realized by simply dispensing with the concept of authorship in favor of another paradigm. There are a host of pedagogical practices that deliberately evade invoking the modern author figure in student assignments. Many of these practices notably come from scholars working on plagiarism (Howard 1999; Robillard 2006; Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007; Ritter 2010), who argue that contemporary writing practices, particularly across new media, are no longer beholden to the concept of the solitary, autonomous author. Therefore, many of them advocate for assignments that do not reinforce a paradigm of authorship that is on its way out of circulation. But, I contend that the goals of theoretical activity and pedagogical activity do not necessarily correlate, as we have seen with Fish and Ching. This is a particularly crucial distinction to make when it comes to authority. Students can perhaps learn more when we help them to develop the skills to recognize what constitutes authority within a given site of production and who finds those moves to be valuable. Instead of framing the activity of our classrooms around one subject position and one version of authority, students can become agile maneuverers of an array of authorizing moves and subject positions.
CHAPTER II
LOCATING AUTHORITY: GENRES, ECOLOGIES, AND MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

Since Carolyn R. Miller’s seminal essay “Genre as Social Action,” scholars in genre criticism have largely moved away from the idea of genre as a neutral descriptor and toward the idea of genre as a language system that informs the practices, behaviors, and goals that make up any rhetorical act. As an added benefit, genre criticism has helped us to rethink the generic activity of our classrooms, and how teachers can think more critically about the practices we often unknowingly promote through our syllabi, writing prompts, and the genres in which we ask our students to work. The academic essay, as the hallmark form in current-traditional rhetoric, is not necessarily fundamentally flawed, as those who argue for situated writing would have us believe. Rather, the academic essay is problematic because teachers often present it as a neutral value form, without helping students to critically assess it as a genre. Doing so would illuminate the disciplinary demands embedded within the academic essay for our students. More importantly, this practice would help students to not only recognize a genre’s authorizing moves, but also who finds those moves to be most valuable and for what reasons. While genre criticism has forwarded important pedagogical advancements over the past several decades, it needs to be read through contemporary work in rhetorical ecologies, particularly with regard to multimodal assignments. When the architecture of a classroom encourages multimodal writing, students become responsible for navigating the disparate demands of different genres, mediums, and interfaces. They have the power to move beyond merely imitating a genre’s conventions and (re)deploying its authorizing moves. I advocate for letting students practice multimodal
communication in ecologies that require them to generate their own blueprints for success. This practice of authority equips them with skills needed to enter current forms, as well as those needed to transform and direct, as authorities, new forms that arise throughout their writing lives.

For all the discussion in the previous chapter of how liberatory pedagogies that seek to empower students can ultimately thwart their own ends, I am certainly sympathetic to their goals. In fact, it is the central premise of this essay that within any given writing scenario students learn more when they write themselves into a position of authority. The central concern of this study, then, becomes how our students acquire authority. This question demands that we understand how authority is located within and deployed through language. There are many forms of authority circulating both within the university and the social institutions that exert cultural power in our world. In James F. Slevin’s “Genre as a Social Institution,” he makes an important observation regarding authority by rereading David Bartholomae’s conception of discourse privilege. Bartholomae’s often quoted statement that students should be “writing their way into a position of privilege” gives Slevin pause. (Bartholomae 157). Slevin argues that “Indeed, their narrow focus on the students’ need to earn the privilege to speak is, for one thing, inconsistent with the way many faculty envision students in their classes. The word ‘privilege,’ in all its current and even obsolete meanings, implies a special advantage over others, an advantage usually awarded (without necessarily being earned) by a superior authority” (23). I can only suggest alongside Slevin that privilege is a limited learning goal, insofar as it has already been awarded to students. As Slevin notes, within the ecology of the classroom, we are already ethically bound to take our students seriously, to read their work as if they were privileged members of a community, because they are privileged members of a community (23). In
practice, which might be all that matters, our students have been awarded positions of privilege by merely walking into the classroom. And that is as it should be.

Therefore, we should not conceive of authority as a decontextualized force, able to be awarded, transferred, or passed on as privilege often is. Instead, students acquire, negotiate, and enact authority in situs. In order to understand how this happens, we need to develop a more robust understanding of location and situation. The conventions of a rhetorical situation, whether organized by a genre, discipline, medium, or interface, contain authorizing moves that reside in specific locations. For example, the topic sentence, despite having perhaps negative associations with current-traditionalism, is an authorizing move housed in a specific location. I would add, briefly, that the concept of location should be elaborated to something more akin to space-time. Some of the greatest advancements in 20th century scientific and philosophical thought have occurred along the fourth dimension, time. Underpinning scientific observation and methods of discovery lies the basic fact that there is no space without time; there is no time without space. In other words, location is meaningless without an accompanying time to complete its dimensions. While scientific thought would be more interested in chronos, the geological underpinnings of time, rhetorical thought focuses on kairos, the qualitative dimension of time or sense of timeliness for performing a rhetorical act. Thomas Rickert, in his essay “In the House of Doing: Rhetoric and the Kairos of Ambience,” argues that “If language as Heidegger claimed, is the House of Being, in which anything that is resides in the word (Language 63), then perhaps we can think of kairos as the ‘House of Doing,’ in which anything that happens resides in the situation” (913). Rickert’s assessment of the function of kairos helps us to realize that we cannot readily assume that proposing better writing locations will be useful
for learning unless we help our students to recognize a location’s historical and social
dimensions. The following analysis, then, will develop a framework for a practice of authority
by examining theories of locational meaning, generated from within both genres studies and
rhetorics of new media.

Held under the domain of literary studies, genre has long functioned primarily as taxonomy.
However, Carolyn Miller’s 1984 essay, “Genre as Social Action” sought to relocate the critical
and interpretive force of genre in rhetorical action. Miller concerns her analysis not with what
genre is, but rather what genre does, or how it is able to accomplish cultural labor. She argues
that “A classifying principle based in rhetorical action seems most clearly to reflect rhetorical
practice (especially since, as I will suggest later, action encompasses both substance and form).
And if genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive, because human action,
whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through
the attributing of motives” (152). The container view of genre appears at first glance to provide
a more promising account of location: genres house cultural work. However, as Miller points
out, that perspective tells us little about how genres inform the composing process. In this vein,
she argues that genre as actionary only occurs “against a context of situation and through the
attributing of motives” (152). In other words, genres are not containers or transparent sites able
to catalog works from a range of times and places, but rather genres “represent typified rhetorical
action” of a “recurrent situation” (151).

Miller’s move away from container applications of genre is astute; however, in an effort to let
go of our reliance on fixed sites for form and meaning, she ultimately ignores all materialist
underpinnings of genre that I will argue are crucial. Miller discusses competing accounts of
situation theory in order to elucidate how genres recur within them. She argues strongly against materialist underpinnings of situation because genres must have recurrence, arguing, “What recurs cannot be a material configuration of objects, events, and people, nor can it be a subjective configuration, a ‘perception,’ for these too, are unique from moment to moment and person to person. Recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood on materialist terms” (156). While Miller’s work is undoubtedly groundbreaking in the advancement of genre studies, and rhetoric’s place in them, it has become increasingly obvious since the time of this article’s publication that the “material configuration” of genre is central to how we recognize it, behave, and compose within it. In Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber’s recent article, “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric,” they promote a “historical and material analytical perspective” in a discussion of advocacy projects, noting that “A more rhetorical analysis acknowledges how such forces operate in and around rhetorical acts” (205). Furthermore, I would build off Rivers and Webers’ work in material rhetoric to argue that for recurrence to be an intersubjective phenomenon, Miller necessarily ignores the material interfaces of genres that inform our ability to compose within them.

Despite her lack of material underpinnings of genre, Miller’s analysis remains useful for considering generic action and authority. So what does Miller’s account of genre and situation tell us about authority? It tells us little explicitly; however, towards her conclusion she raises the educational implications of her arguments. She notes that her proposal “suggests that what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another […]” and so on (165). In other words, a focus on
the rhetorical dimensions of genres shows how they negotiate motive. Authority is peculiarly bound to motive and desire in ways that conjure the ethical dilemmas of agency and autonomy. Autonomy simply means freedom without necessary limits or boundaries. Authority, in its similarity to agency, requires a structure or institution that both limits and enables a set of practices or range of composing techniques. One cannot act or compose as an authority in any situation because authority is not internally generated. Rather, one acquires and deploys authority precisely by working within a specific context wherein motives are successfully negotiated. As Miller notes, “at the level of the genre, motive becomes a conventionalized social purpose, or exigence, within the recurrent situation. In constructing discourse, we deal with purposes at several levels, not just one. We learn to adopt social motives as ways of satisfying private intentions through rhetorical action. This is how recurring situations seem to ‘invite’ discourse of a particularly type” (162). Therefore, when a student must “learn to adopt social motives” as private ones, we run into distinct problems that pit the university’s authority, grounded in its power domain of hegemonic discourse, against the student’s “private intentions,” whether they be for education, for composing, or for preserving an ideological identity separate from the university’s subjectifying force.

James Slevin, in his similarly titled essay “Genre as a Social Institution,” begins to touch on some of these issues by highlighting the institutional framework of genres. He takes up Miller’s oscillation between the writer’s internal motives and the acquisition of motives within a genre by noting in an analysis of the character of Don Quixote that “Instead of his home, he elects to inhabit a discursive institution, a genre, and through him that genre inhabits the world. He wants, in our more modern terms, to be more fully and grandly the author of his own life” (17).
According to Slevin, genres function almost as central access points between subjects and language. Through genres, writers can occupy a new social plane, and in doing so, the genre finds expression in the only way it can be rhetorically meaningful: by becoming part of a social reality. This is why genres cannot be ahistorical categories, but rather are dynamically charged by the social reality they represent and the social realities that are reproduced and made meaningful within them.

As far as the institution of the university is concerned, Slevin contends that our classrooms, often unconsciously, ask our students to enter social institutions discursively through genres, and therefore, offer themselves up to a degree of socialization within that landscape. Early in his essay, Slevin pointedly asks, “What are the ‘kinds’ that we ask our students to learn and inhabit? What are we doing to introduce them to these forms? And what are the ideological dimensions of this process?” (19). According to Slevin, when students inhabit a genre, they inhabit a social institution in the form of a discursive institution. And so, Slevin’s set of questions becomes increasingly important within this framework. I would not be the first to suggest that the “academic essay,” even in its most problematic forms, is not as fundamentally flawed as are our ways of introducing it to students as a transparent, ideologically neutral genre. When we circulate and reproduce this pseudo-genre in such a fashion, we run the risk of masking its social and historical framework.

The institutional nature of genres poses a unique problem for Slevin. Our ability to recognize the social tenor of the genres that circulate in our classrooms places teachers in a better position to induct students into these spaces with a sharper eye toward critically assessing how genres inform the activity of classrooms. However, as Slevin notes, “I think the problem we face rests
in the tension between the metaphor of initiation in which we have become ensnared, and our desire, finally, to provide for students a critical distance that makes the process of joining the academic discourse community quite different from an ‘initiation’” (28). Slevin highlights here the sort of impasse that plagues liberal pedagogy. On the one hand, we cannot wholesale resist the historical and ideological underpinnings of the university that enter our classrooms as genres. Most teachers, no matter how liberatory, would hardly even want to banish academic discourse entirely from their classrooms. The language of the academy is after all, a source of power, no matter how esoteric or gated-off from the rest of the writing world’s activities. Most professors were educated under its terms, and they now stand as representatives of its values and authorities on its disciplinary conventions in the classroom. However, walking students through the social dimensions of a genre, step by step, with all of their historical trappings, places students in the position of passive receptacles for knowledge, which is precisely the practice that liberal pedagogy sought to overturn in the first place (27). And so Slevin argues that

The critical dimension of the students’ encounter with academic genres cannot be deferred; it cannot be seen simply as some later stage of a process that begins as uncritical acquiescence [...] And anyways, it seems to me impossible ever to attain a critical distance on anything unless you can, from the beginning, seek to question its assumptions, examine what it does and does not do for you, and consider what it is doing to you—that is, explain it social and historically. (29)

If the critical interrogation of genres becomes the focal point of the freshman comp course, as Slevin insists, students have a better chance of critically engaging academic genres, in order to acknowledge how to mobilize their authority.

Slevin’s analysis or genre, or rather his proposal for genre analysis in the classroom, has two major implications for thinking through authority in situ. First, by locating genre within social
and institutional landscapes, he adds a temporal dynamic to authority that opens the possibility for student engagement. In other words, if genres have a historical dimension, but can only be reproduced in the world through a writer (speaker, etc…) located within a social context, then students have the power to (re)locate genres every time they mobilize them. Slevin does little to debunk academic genres altogether, but rather insists that we help our students locate, engage, and transform them more critically and effectively (18-19). Secondly, Slevin underpins his proposal with a sentiment that stands at the heart of this essay: namely, that students are better able to adopt postures of authority when they feel as if they are critically and imaginatively in control of the genres circulating in the classroom (31). Whether or not this authority is real or imagined matters very little. The effect remains the same. As Slevin points out, there is an enormous difference between positioning students as passive recipients of generic knowledge and equipping them with the skills to interrogate them, draw on them as sources of power, and manipulate them to their own ends (27).

In effect, Slevin’s emphasis on preparing students to critically engage and manipulate genres furthers Miller’s proposition that genres help us to acquire motive. At first glance, desire appears to have little to do with authority, particularly if we are examining authority in its spatial and temporal configurations. However, at the most basic level, the introductory composition course performs year after year the singular task of instilling the university’s desires and needs as a student’s own. Success in college is partly measured, then, by a student’s ability to mimic the values embedded within the university’s discursive and generic spaces. Meanwhile, the liberal move to empower students based on the premise that they are authorities already, as singular individuals, stages a clash between the students’ desires for developing composition skills and
the desire of the university to reproduce through genres its social and ideological dimension. But more generally, we can understand desire in terms of the conventions of a given language activity. As I have been arguing, authorizing moves reflect a community’s values, which is another way of articulating what that community wants or desires. An academic discipline does not simply desire the generation of knowledge, but wants members of the community to transmit that knowledge through its valued forms, practices, conventions, and genres.

In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi takes up the question of desire by arguing that genres frame our desires or the range of possible choices we might want to make (78-79). His method predicates on a move away from the institutional dimensions of genre to its topography. Bawarshi states that, “In researching and teaching invention, we need to redirect our attention from the writer to the writer’s social and rhetorical location in the world, the habitat in which the writer functions […] we need to return to a more rhetorical theory of invention, in which invention takes place, quite literally, within a place—what classical rhetoricians called the topoi or commonplaces” (111). If we think of invention as internal to the student, his or her authority is likewise decontextualized. Many liberal pedagogies have done precisely this in response to current-traditional rhetoric, perpetuating not only a limited locale for invention, but also placing teachers themselves in the ethically dubious position of grading the *student* instead of the *student’s work* within a topoi. Bawarshi’s pragmatic approach to genre privileges neither the university, nor the identity of the student. Instead, it focuses on the acquisition and more importantly, the *negotiation* of desire within a genre (90). Students are responsible for successfully composing within a genre, based on its rhetorical demands, but they are likewise empowered to make important decisions about how to mobilize or manipulate a genre within a
specific context. Bawarshi’s method of genre analysis is an incredibly useful strategy for
developing a practice of authority because the pedagogy surrounding it is not determined by one
paradigm of authority.

Bawarshi, like Slevin, is less concerned with dispensing with the first year writing course than
other scholars (Crowley 1998; Hawk 2007) with its often problematic portrayal as a battle
ground between the authority of the student and the authority of the university. From an
ecological perspective, Bawarshi argues that “it is perhaps more accurate to say that invention
does not so much begin in the writer or even in some abstract social collective as it begins when
a writer locates himself or herself within the discursive and ideological formation of a genre and
its system of related genres” (72). The key to Bawarshi’s critique lies in his (arguably accurate)
depiction of the “abstract social collective.” More often than not, critiques of the university’s
discursive authority operate on precisely this abstract plane. Bawarshi instead hopes to develop
a more pragmatic approach. His account is pragmatic for two reasons. First, genre analysis is
pragmatic insofar as it seeks to equip students with the skills to recognize, enter, and manipulate
the genres that not only function within the privileged discourse of the university, but also within
the wider sphere of writing activities that students might encounter in their future careers,
personal lives, and so on. The tools with which to take on a genre are applicable to all genres,
regardless of the prestige they hold. Secondly, just as Bawarshi resists privileging certain genres
over others in the composition classroom, he likewise resists privileging the writing student or
the landscape (genre) in which that student writes.

Rather, Bawarshi takes a dialectical approach that enacts a sort of toggling between agent and
environment. For example, Bawarshi’s account of invention depends neither entirely upon the
genre in which a writer operates or the writer’s identity. Rather, he simply states that “Writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres” (7). Within this framework, authority is neither a force internal to the writer, nor a homogeneous or ahistorical aspect of a discursive site, waiting to be picked up by any student willing to socialize themselves into the genre’s language. Authority is acquired and enacted first by entering a location wherein the environment and individual agency negotiate the terms of motive. Bawarshi explains this process saying, “Intention, is, finally, the acquisition, negotiation, and articulation of motive as social practice, motive being the desire within and against which individuals enact their intentions and their agency—their coming into being, their presencings” (90). Bawarshi’s use of the word “presencing” is essential to our analysis of authority, and is a word I will continue to use to describe authorizing moves within a genre. Writers do not simply appear within the locale of a genre and assume its motives. They also make the genre socially meaningful (as opposed to abstract and decontextualized) by presencing it within the particular exigence of its adoption.

As we can see, authority viewed from this perspective involves a delicate balancing act because it entails such a complicated movement of desire. The impasse compositionists often face has to do with our desire to influence students, to help them become better writers, but also our desire for our students to direct their own intellectual development and to exact their own desires. He describes this complicated interplay with a pointed example: “When they write their essays, for example, students are expected to perform a discursive transaction in which they recontextualize the desires embedded in the writing prompt as their own self-sponsored desires in their essays” (115). He later jokes that most professors would be aghast if their students quoted from the prompt in their introductions. While the prompt is the particular exigence for
the student to write on a particular topic, we expect them to rhetorically perform the desires embedded within the prompt as their own. We want them to act as if the prompt never existed, until of course we grade them based on how well they satisfied its requirements. But although the process is complicated, genre analysis represents to Bawarshi a powerful source of authority, should students learn how to use its tools. If we dispense with the notion that invention and authority are forces *a priori* to entering a genre, then students can learn to negotiate more critically the desires, underwritten as conventions, of a genre against their own. Not only can students “resist the ideological pull of genres in certain circumstances,” but they can also “transgress certain genres […] because they have established a certain degree of authority in the sphere in which the genres function coupled with a critical awareness of the genres’ conventions, in particular what habits of mind are underwritten by these conventions and which of these conventions can be transformed to greatest effect” (92).

Bawarshi’s example of the writing prompt as a site that determines what desires students will adopt in their writing reminds us that genres populate our classrooms, and inform the authorizing moves that are both valued and made available to our students. In *Making Writing Matter: Composition in the Engaged University* Ann Feldman argues for moving the exigence for student writing offshore, so to speak. Instead of having the exigence for a writing assignment dictated by the teacher, and made available to students through genres such as the syllabus, prompt, etc…she argues that situated writing places students in contact with a live ecology and live exigencies (41). Thus, she builds on the method of genre analysis proposed by Bawarshi and applies it to the practice of situated writing, deployed in composition courses at an engaged university. Feldman distinguishes strongly between service learning and an engaged university,
for many reasons, but for the purposes of our discussion of desire and authority her contrast of
the writing activity representative of each program is most useful. Feldman takes issue with the
writing assignments of service learning programs that typically (either implicitly or explicitly)
ask students to demonstrate some sort of ethical learning to their professors. Engaged writing
assignments, by contrast, ask students to write for particular exigencies that emerge in an
ecology outside of the university in order to learn “how writing shapes rather than reflects
reality” (115). Usually students are writing in specific genres, drafting things like newsletters or
funding proposals for a nonprofit. She articulates the contrast, arguing that “When students see
writing as a situated performance, they see themselves as agents called to action; writing
becomes something other than a means to demonstrate to the teacher that the student has learned
something” (1). Whether a proposal for a nonprofit to extend its funding, an article detailing last
week’s community development project, or a press release on a given event, these assignments
are not only generically motivated, but demand that students operate as authorities within them.

For our purposes of understanding how authority is negotiated in situ, Feldman’s discussion
of the goals of an engaged university is less pertinent than her discussion of situated writing. To
suggest that the approach of engaged learning that she advocates for is the only way to develop a
practice of student authority would be unfair. However, she makes an important point when she
argues that “Embeddedness is necessary for writing projects in the first-year classroom. Perhaps
if writing projects can be tied to a situation rather than a decontextualized learning strategy,
students will see how writing can be the product of lived experience” (176). Often, authority as
an unspoken or explicit goal of the writing classroom has been approached precisely as a
“decontextualized learning strategy,” to use Feldman’s terms. This decontextualization usually
arises from the misguided belief that authority is internal to subjectivity, and therefore is unmediated by context. Or, in the case of current-traditionalism, teachers circulate the genres of academic discourse without contextualizing their authorizing moves. Current-traditionalism upholds clarity, coherence, logical progression, thesis statements, and topic sentences as transparent, neutral-value markers of “good writing,” regardless of the context in which a piece of writing operates. By contrast to both of these strategies, I am suggesting that authority be addressed as a situationally located force, to be adopted, negotiated, and redeployed in rhetorically meaningful ways. An examination of genre as situated aids in that regard because it better prepares us as teachers to consciously and carefully make choices about the genres that circulate in our classrooms and how we present them to our students.

But to raise this idea of genre as “situated,” is to open up a critique to Bawarshi’s work that will allow us to better understand how genres operate within new media spaces. The critique comes precisely from the study of rhetorical ecologies. Jenny Edbauer’s seminal text “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies” challenges the popular communication models that place exigence, rhetor, and audience as conglomerated, yet distinct, elements in situs. Through an examination of Michael Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” and Steven Shaviro’s Connected, Or What It Means to Live in the Network Society, Edbauer updates the rhetorical situation from discrete, bordered elements to an ecology, characterized by “temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (Edbauer 9). In order to reconceptualize rhetoric in this manner, Edbauer needs to merge space with time. I mentioned earlier that in order to conceive of authority as located in a particular situation or interface, we will have to think not only spatially, but temporally as well. This sort of space-time is crucial
because it resists the kind of border-think that has always been, and continues to be, problematic for student authority. In other words, border-think lets us pretend that writing assignments can be decontextualized or neatly moved to another context as long as its elemental configuration remains intact. More importantly, border-think lets us pretend that the fullest forms of student learning come from assignments that are generated within the classroom and are sustained exclusively by the classroom. Looking back to Bawarshi’s example of the standard writing prompt, the teacher creates the exigence for writing, and a student’s work is evaluated according to how well she reinvented the desires embedded in the prompt as her own. However, as Edbauer points out, student writing becomes more meaningful when we connect it to a lived public in which students can see their texts as participating in rhetorical sites through “social waves” (22).

Like Feldman, the role of a lived public for Edbauer is essential to not only rhetorical thought and action, but to pedagogical practice as well. In her discussion of ecological pedagogies, she notes that students conceive of research as a private activity, leading only later to public distribution in the form of a completed paper. Edbauer hopes to diffuse this myth through a photoblog project, built on what she calls “generative research” (21). She argues that “Emphasizing production should not mean falling into the trap of ‘real vs. artificial’ writing situations, but instead should stress the ways in which rhetorical productions are inseparable from lived encounters of public life” (21). Like Feldman, she hopes to revitalize the public reach of student activity, but on slightly different terms. Feldman argues that inciting “deep participation,” not only with the dynamics of language but with a lived public, “requires that we imagine a geo-rhetorical space that extends across disciplines, and more important, beyond the
university’s intellectual and physical space” (19). While her contention stands to reason, it perhaps would have been more appropriate to suggest a “geo-temporal-rhetorical” space. As Edbauer notes, publicly engaged writing is networked (21). Networks challenge us to see the meaningful ways in which texts do not simply circulate within a location (network as space), but form pathways over time to create what both Feldman and Edbauer hope for: a lived public.

Rereading Bawarshi’s account of generic movement through Edbauer’s work in rhetorical ecologies will help to elucidate how students engage and even contest the authorizing moves demanded by a genre. Bawarshi, while occasionally referring to genres in their ecological or dynamic states, does little to push genre beyond its container-like state (8). This is somewhat unexpected because Bawarshi is working precisely against the practice common in literary studies to apply generic distinctions to texts after they have been written. The container view holds much in common with the logic of taxonomy, which has typically only been helpful for students working to interpret previously written texts as opposed to generating their own. But taxonomy takes on a strange role in Bawarshi’s account. He posits that “writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres” because we behave in a situation based on how we recognize what it desires of us (7). Arguing thus, Bawarshi notes that “A genre conceptually frames what its users generally imagine as possible within a given situation, predisposing them to act in certain ways by rhetorically framing how they come to know and respond to certain situations” (22). While, I do not disagree with Bawarshi’s assessment of generic motivation outright, it is problematic that he merely shifts the governing role of the container function. The logic of taxonomy continues to dictate our initial encounters with genres just as it previously
dictated our interpretation of texts in literary studies. Because these initial moments of analysis form the basis of our identity as writers within them, they take on an elevated importance.

There is, however, a second aspect of generic movement that is no less important to Bawarshi. If we are invented by genres then we also get to (re)invent them as we deploy them in socially meaningful contexts and make choices about how we will use (or consciously misuse) them within any given moment. Bawarshi realizes that critics, particular those of liberal persuasions, will be quick to note that the last thing we want for our students is to merely mime generic conventions. This is certainly true. In order to circumvent this critique, Bawarshi argues that the ability to analyze, interpret, and successfully operate within a genre lays the groundwork for our ability to transform and resist that genre. He argues:

Of course, such resistance—to be recognized and valued as resistance and not misinterpretation, or, worse, ignorance—must be predicated on one’s knowledge of a genre. For example, writers who successfully transgress certain genres often do so because they have established a certain degree of authority in the sphere in which the genres function coupled with a critical awareness of the genres’ conventions, in particular what habits of mind are underwritten by these conventions and which of these conventions can be transformed to greatest effect. (92; emphasis added)

Any liberal minded composition teacher might find Bawarshi’s articulation of authority to be stifling to student creativity and power. Students achieve authority, according to Bawarshi, by mobilizing a genre’s language, by inventing themselves as that genre, in the image of its conventions, its social dimensions, and its values. Furthermore, Bawarshi places the teacher in a precarious position as an evaluator of student work. In his account, teachers must recognize student intent, determining whether or not a successful transgression of a genre is the result of student ignorance (success by accident) or savvy manipulation of a genre’s conventions. Within
Bawarshi’s method, this undesirable situation is perhaps our only option as teachers.

However, returning to Edbauer’s critique of the rhetorical situation helps us to generate a more promising method of how students can develop a practice of authority. The essential problem with Bawarshi’s account is that it is too monolithic—one genre, one way. While he admits that genres intersect with one another, he fails to provide an account of how a student would then begin to make composing choices that meaningfully construct his/her authority in multimodal environments. Furthermore, while Bawarshi argues for a writer’s ability to transform genres, he depicts this resistance as merely shifting the container-function, rather than complicating the ways in which texts, rhetors, and time interact. These complications are the ones Edbauer hopes to develop, as she argues that “Rather than primarily speaking of rhetoric through the terministic lens of conglomerated elements, I look towards a framework of affective ecologies that recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (9).

While up to this point I have been advocating for a practice of authority that equips students with the skills to locate authority (in situs), Edbauer challenges us to open the spatial to a lived network. Building off network theorist Steven Shaviro’s work in *Connected, Or What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, Edbauer argues that “the social does not reside in fixed sites, but rather in a networked space of flows and connections” (9). If authority is socially determined through language then we cannot pretend to be able to access that authority in exclusively spatial terms. Yes, sites of production maintain authority, but when we open up the rhetorical situation, and by extension the rhetorically constructed generic situation, to its public, lived encounters, we give students a wider range of possibility for invention than simply the dictum to conform to the language of the genre, and then potentially resist it once they have established themselves as
authorities. In fact, Bawarshi provides no account for how students can “[establish] a certain degree of authority” within a given genre (92). Presumably, this entails approval by the wider circle of institutionally determined power relations that Slevin discusses.

Turning to Edbauer’s description of her photoblog project, we can see how the blog provides a new locale for students writing, but it also makes possible waves of social interactions through time:

Call it generative research. These encounters can be tracked among (student) users as an example of how representations of place—like Austin—are constructed discursively, visually, affectively, and link-fully. Moreover, because this kind of documentation is public, often open to comments and citation in other blogs and websites, the ‘research’ grows in social waves. The networked nature of blogs puts research into a circulation that becomes linked, put to other uses, transformed. In fact, without such citation and use by others, a blog is as good as dead. After a bit of caveat-ing, we might even dub it an act of ‘open source’ research, exposing the myth of research as a personal process that only later leads to a public texts. The photoblog’s logic turns documentation into a kind of social production in itself. (22)

I mentioned Edbauer’s description at length, here, for several reasons. First, Edbauer resist the temptation that many of us fall into to champion the blog site as a more authentic space for student writing merely because it functions (somewhat) outside the university. Such a reading focuses solely on the spatial environment, and ignores the temporal. Edbauer realizes that if she wants to enact a rhetorical ecology in her assignment then it must connect texts over time through “social waves.” As she notes, without this connectivity in time, the ecology dies.

Pairing Edbauer’s work with that of Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber helps us to emerge with a more temporally activated portrait of sites of production. Students have either been taught that authority is internal to their person (a difficult thing for a teacher to “teach” without probing unnecessarily into a student’s cultural identity) or resides in discursively
constructed institutions of power that feel largely off limits and out of reach. Looking at Edbauer’s piece alongside Rivers and Weber’s “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric,” reveals that helping students to analyze the authoritative cues (as Bawarshi advocates) that reside within any single genre only completes half the process. Rivers and Weber chiefly argue that rhetorical ecologies encourage us to think beyond rhetorical effectiveness within one text or one moment, but rather to see the ways in which multiple (and often mundane) texts interact with one another through time (187-188). They detail a class advocacy assignment that required students to submit several interrelated texts that have to deploy different rhetorical strategies to achieve the same goal. In their discussion of the genres or modes they asked their students to write in, they argue that “These texts deliberately involve multiple genres and media to invoke the multimodal and collaborative aspect of twenty-first century communication” (203).

At this juncture, I would like to make a series of explicit arguments about authority. Bawarshi’s account of genre analysis does much to highlight the symbiotic relationships between writers and genres. However, his method for genre analysis presumes that there exists a right answer out there, imagined here as the genre’s language. The student can either imitate a genre’s language, conventions, and practices (and succeed), or resist these features before she has been anointed as an authority and not an ignorant writer (and fail). I am not arguing here that Bawarshi’s account is necessarily flawed, but only limited. The process of acquiring particular generic knowledge and learning to write in its language, represents only a portion of the activity students are called on to do when they operate within ecologies. Looking at the work of Rivers and Weber, as an extension of Edbauer’s turn to ecological models, we see that students not only need the skills to analyze genres and in turn invent the genre’s desires as their own, but they also
need to navigate an increasingly complex, self-organizing system that is fundamentally multimodal. Multimodal means that students have to encounter, interpret, navigate, and compose within and against the competing accounts of authority that circulate within an ecology’s textual fabric. Ecologies contain many genres that interact complexly over time. Little wonder, then, that authority has been particularly vexing for both students and professors alike. But we shouldn’t be daunted or worried for our students. On the one hand, single genre analysis becomes enormously complicated when we place it in a lived public or a web of interconnected textual relations that house competing practices, values, and interests. But, it also provides more opportunities for students to invent new strategies to deal with the communication problems embedded within an ecology.

Turning to *A Counter-History of Composition*, Hawk provides a blueprint for emergence within complex systems. From the central premise that a study of vitalism can help us to understand “what drives self-organization and development in the world,” Hawk’s essential program is to retrace the history of vitalism in composition, retrieving it from its pejorative associations with mysticism and genius, and placing it instead alongside contemporary complexity theory (4-5). This shift entails moving “from examining characteristics of living beings to examining functions of living systems” (157). The question of “living systems” has become an increasingly imperative one to address after Edbauer’s exposure of texts in their lived fluxes. When we frame communication within an ecology we can reduce the frustration that many students experience over the perceived gap between the writing that we ask them to do and the active communities whose forms, practice, and values they are supposed to implicitly replicate. Furthermore, this is obviously an important question given our analysis of authority
within multimodal environments. Hawk is particularly interested in answering this question by locating the body as the essential interface, “the critical epistemological link between situation and invention” (120). The emphasis here on invention, I would argue, is critical to an account of how students, and everyday writers alike, adopt postures of authority within complex ecological fabrics.

Indeed, Hawk places an absolute premium on invention. Building off Katherine Hayles’ argument from *How We Became Posthuman* that smarter environments lead to smarter inventions, Hawk argues:

[…] a techne, technique, or method for invention must start with the structure of particular constellations and the invention of techniques for and out of those specific occasions; it is thus more attuned to co-responsibility, *kairos*, emergence, and ambience. Composition theorists should be striving to develop methods for situating bodies within ecological contexts in ways that reveal the potential for invention, especially the invention of new techniques, that in turn reveal new models for action within those specific rhetorical ecologies. (206)

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, my argument develops from the fundamental assumption that students are more engaged in their learning and produce more successful writing when they see themselves (whether real or imagined) as sources of authority. The required composition course has complicated this practice because it often asks our students to mimic the authority embedded within a particular genre or discourse, articulating its values and desires as their own. But Hawk’s proposal puts an absolute premium on not only invention, but the invention of “new techniques, that in turn reveal new models for action within those specific rhetorical ecologies” (206). It seems to me that this is the highest hope we could have for our students. If rhetoric is a fundamentally generative art, then we should not be preparing our students to communicate in and replicate static forms. We should, instead, position them to be
active shapers of the practices and values in evolving forms of communication. In short, we should help our students acquire the skills to communicate in a world that we cannot yet imagine.
CHAPTER III

PRACTICE (OF) AUTHORITY

This final chapter reflects on several assignments built to help students develop what I am calling a “practice of authority.” While one of the assignments described below focuses on controversies in authorship, the practices I describe can be adapted to any writing course. No matter what the central “content” of a course is, it can incorporate a practice of authority that helps students to recognize and deploy authorizing moves in their writing. The point of this investigation has not been to show that all introductory composition classes should place questions of authority and authorship at the pedagogical center of instruction. Rather, it encourages teachers to develop scaffolding in our assignments that helps students learn how to make rhetorically savvy decisions about their authoritative presence within a given piece of writing. Many pedagogies perhaps unknowingly reinforce narrow paradigms of authority that limit the spheres of language activity students are prepared to enter. On the one hand, pedagogies in the tradition of Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” seek to reinvent students’ desires as those embedded in the authorizing moves of academic discourse. On the other hand, liberatory pedagogies have sought to weaponize authority, preparing students to dismantle the university’s subjectifying influence. While I am sympathetic to any program that tries to breathe heterogeneity into what has long been a homogenous discourse, I recognize that such an act would be an attempt to have students replicate my political desires for resistance as their own in their writing.

Either end of the pedagogical spectrum unfortunately makes the same error: namely, current-traditional rhetoric and liberatory pedagogy both favor of a narrowly imagined version of
authority, based in a particular subject position, at the expense of a more flexible practice of authority, capable of moving between the demands of rhetorical ecologies. In imagining such a practice, I want to respect what students bring to the classroom, and respect how their desires will transform over time as they move throughout their writing lives. This course works to develop students to be mobile and agile across language activities, and to be able to invent their own techniques to address the transformations in language and communication taking place daily around them. As evidenced in the following assignments, this practice rests on the ability to recognize authorizing moves within a genre, discipline, or medium and to then exercise authoritative presence, or what many would call “voice.” By equipping students with the skills to navigate and negotiate calls to authority in multimodal environments, these practices help students to become active contributors to and shapers of the practices valued by the community with which they chose to communicate.

Like Anis Bawarshi’s blueprint for genre analysis, this course would begin with a similar set of assignments, paying special attention to how genres “underwrite […] subjectivities” (Bawarshi 164). While Richard and Janis Haswell’s recent book *Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession on Potentiality and Singularity* represents precisely the subjectivity-centered approach to authority that I am working against, they offer interesting insights into how authors (what I would more generally call “writers”) make themselves present within a given piece of writing. Reacting adversely to Postmodernism’s emphasis on performance, social context, and textuality, *Authoring* focuses specifically on “the human inner act of making texts” or “how authors experience authoring” (1, 12). Thus, they encourage the study in composition classrooms of an author’s own account of what writing *feels* like. Their focus on inner
subjectivity translates into strategies designed to help students develop their unique voices, which they can modify or make present in varying degrees within different writing modes.

However, despite the fact that the Haswells and I approach the subject of genre from different angles, we are in agreement that genres solicit varying and distinct calls to presence. We both use the word “presence,” although with slightly different connotations. They deplore Postmodernism’s “privileging of the paradigm of language over the paradigm of presence” (198). I would argue, instead, that the paradigm of language and the paradigm of presence are not mutually exclusive categories, and indeed are intricately connected. In writing, presence can only be achieved rhetorically on the level of language. However, they call this act of presencing within a genre an authorial “offering”:

The space that discourse genres designate for authorial offering varies according to genre […] A mistake is to identify authoring offering with the ‘personal.’ Genres that insist on impersonalization can have room for the unique contributions of the writer, in fact many require it. Science reports and historical studies, for instance, usually bear an impersonal style, yet expect that the authors are advancing information that they can call their own because it has not been reported before. (159)

By positing that genres exact certain desires for presence on the writers who occupy them, they suggest that successful composition in a genre rests on a writer’s control of what they would call voice, and what I would call “voice.” Secondly, they argue here that writers have authority, or perhaps are perceived to have authority, when they successfully participate in a genre. Readers can assume that a writer has authority, because genres, as social institutions, perform self-maintenance. As the Haswells put it, readers “expect that the authors are advancing information that they can call their own.” Their emphasis on ownership of information gestures towards the political tensions that arise when authorship becomes synonymous with authority. But if a
practice of authority in the composition classroom can exceed the bounds of authorship, the type of authority privileged within a classroom becomes less important than the techniques students can learn to mobilize it.

**Genre Analysis**

Simply put, we want students to recognize how credibility is constructed rhetorically within the conventions (both visual and verbal) of a genre. This first assignment works to acquaint students with the questions to ask when performing a genre analysis. I ask that they collect samples of a genre, provide written responses to a set of questions, and then present their findings in class. The first few questions work toward a baseline assessment of the genre’s features and how it is composed. Then, the questions help students to identify in what ways the composer is present (or not), and how that presence is achieved rhetorically. Then, they highlight how each sample frames its audience and what it assumes about its audience’s values. Finally, the last question works to develop an evaluative system for successful communication in the genre of their choosing.

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<th>Genre Analysis</th>
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<td>Over the next week I would like for you to collect samples of a genre to present in class.</td>
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<td>The genre can be of your choosing and from any medium, but you should focus on the following questions:</td>
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<td>-What are the recognizable features of this genre? What are its conventions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>-How does the genre communicate a message or convey meaning? What tools does it use (language, images, graphics, etc…)?</td>
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-What sense do you get (if any) of there being an author (or writer/composer?) in each genre sample? Who is communicating to you in this artifact? Is there a recognizable identity?

-How would an audience encounter this genre? In what ways would an audience member interact with it?

-How does the genre posture you as a reader? What kind of subjectivity is it asking you to take on in order to participate in its communication?

-Who is the audience and why might they find these examples to be particularly persuasive or meaningful? What values does the genre assume the audience holds?

-What sorts of criteria might you develop for evaluating examples of this genre? What constitutes a successful work?

Ideally, the genres that students analyze will draw on a variety of discourse communities and language practices. In this diversity, students can see how genres underwrite a variety of subject positions, both within the composer and the reader. The introductory composition class should prepare students to be mobile and agile throughout their writing careers. If this assignment were used in a WID course, one could easily tailor it to highlight disciplinary conventions through genre analysis of the writing activities that are most meaningful in that community. But, to be dexterous with different demands of authoritative presence, students should be exposed to and practice writing within a wide range of subject positions. Anyone trained in critical reading should be able to read a text and discern various qualities about its writer. These qualities are not necessarily personality traits, but instead take the form of preferences, biases, values, etc… From
the other end, writers can learn to control and adapt their subject positions, and how these positions are informed by demands of authority within the mode in which they are writing.

**Community Engagement**

The point of this next assignment is to help students to recognize the way writers use language to establish themselves amongst their peers. As previously indicated at the beginning of this chapter, credibility is a feature of one’s writing that is socially maintained by genres. Asking students to locate movement within a piece of writing, the way it rhetorically gestures towards various communities of thought, will help them to understand these as authorizing moves within a given genre. This assignment would work best when the publications are selected from various genres, disciplines, or even mediums.

**Community Engagement**

In this assignment, I ask that you read the selected articles, highlighting or otherwise noting each time the author cites or quotes another writer. Please annotate each article in consideration of the following set of questions:

- What publication is the author writing in? Who is his/her audience? How might the medium of publication affect what kinds of citations (evidence) to incorporate?
- What is the archive? In other words, what types of evidence are used here?
- Does the author mention the full name of the writer he or she is introducing?
- Does the author give the full publication title, its date, or mention the medium of publication with each citation?
- What sorts of descriptive words does the author use to introduce someone else’s words, and what do those word choices tell us about the author’s relationship to the cited text?
This assignment draws inspiration from Jeff Rice’s *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*. Rice investigates the forms of writing practices singular to new media, specifically locating how they generate meaning through patterns. In his chapter on “Juxtaposition,” Rice contrasts the patterns of thought generated through hyperlinking against the fixity of linear thought that print culture reinforces. Using James McRimmon’s textbook *Writing with a Purpose* (3rd edition, 1963), Rice notes:

The thesis is, as McRimmon also writes, restrictive. Its task is not to keep the text open for further invention or addition (like juxtaposing or layering new images, ideas, writings created over a period of time, outside writings) but to shut down the writer’s scope quickly for reasons of narrowed interest. The student, obviously too scattered in thought and undisciplined in structure, needs the thesis
to put everything quickly in its place (and, we might note, to be put, herself, in place). (84)

Rice’s emphasis on the spatial organization of thought helps us to realize that many of the moves we make in our writing are deeply internalized to appear “natural.” But, the thesis has a place. The thesis is an authorizing move that resides in a specific location for reasons that are valuable to particular discourse communities. As we have been discussing, the location of authority in specific genres, or interfaces, it is also important to recall that these sites have subatomic constructions. Every genre or interface solicits and reinforces patterns of meaning. If we can help our students recognize these patterns of meaning as authorizing moves, they can begin to make more conscious choices about their writing within a given form.

**Multimodal, Generative Research**

Once students have established a working vocabulary with which to perform rhetorical and genre analysis, I hope to move them into multimodal assignments. As previously indicated, Bawarshi’s work is useful for helping students generate a foundational skill set with which to perform genre analysis. Bawarshi imagines authority in genres as a complex interaction in which students acquire, negotiate, and exact desires based on the genre in which they are writing. But Bawarshi’s account does not accommodate multimodal environments or the ways in which texts interact through time. This next assignment incorporates the work of Jenny Edbauer, Ryan P. Weber, and Nathaniel A. Rivers in rhetorical ecologies into an assignment that places students in a multimodal environment, wherein they must negotiate the authorizing moves embedded in competing genres and mediums.
Multimodal, Generative Research

For the longer research assignment this semester, I ask that you pick a controversy in authorship, preferably one that is semi-current. My definition of authorship is not restricted to creative works of fiction or even published “academic” work. Authorship, in this case, exceeds the bounds of verbal communication, and therefore can include musicians, photographers, filmmakers, public figures, etc… You can select anything from questions over Shakespeare’ originality to the somewhat recent controversy surrounding the iconic “Hope” poster of President Barack Obama, designed by Shepard Fairey.

Whatever you chose, there should be enough people out there discussing the controversy in different mediums. The assignment has several components:

- Each of you will construct an online digital space. The platform you wish to compose within is your choice. We can discuss options, but students with relatively little experience producing online content tend to prefer user-friendly sites like Google Blogger/Google Sites, WordPress, or Tumblr. Students with more technological expertise can experiment with website construction platforms such as Drupal, an open source content management system, or OSWD (Open Source Web Design).

- You will spend the semester doing what Jenny Edbauer calls “generative research” (21). Often we think of research as a solitary process that only leads later to a final product. Instead of producing a final paper that reflects research done in private throughout the semester, you will perform research on a public site over the coming months. This site will be your research project. The best web spaces are far reaching, so work to pull content from many sources and mediums (newspaper articles, videos, images,
etc…). Anything that you post on your site, you will annotate. In your annotations, consider not only the information you are getting from a given source, but also how the medium affects the audience.

-Near the end of the semester, for your final, you will contribute your own content to your website in the form of two compositions. They should be from different genres, so one could be a brief article, while the other could be a mini-documentary video. In these pieces, you will forward your own opinion on your selected authorship controversy, based on the research you have been gathering throughout the semester. After you post these works to your website, you will turn in to me a 5-8 page reflection paper in which you discuss the rhetorical choices you made, how you worked within a given genre, and how you addressed specific challenges throughout the composing process.

In an assignment such as this one, I would ideally like to use a collaboratively designed rubric for evaluating their websites for several reasons. The conventions of the academic essay have been largely naturalized by both students and teachers alike. The academic essay has a long tradition with a wealth of discourse surrounding it that provides any teacher with a set of conventions, values, and patterns of meaning against which to grade any student paper. Since the rubrics are often shared within departments, any teacher could consult with colleagues if he or she were unsure of how to assess academic essays. This is not to say that these rubrics are particularly good ones, as they often rely on current-traditional rhetoric and reinforce a theory of “good writing” as transparent and generalizable, but they populate departments nonetheless. But, when we ask students to compose in multimodal environments, the parameters for
successful or unsuccessful composition are significantly less clear or well documented. We can credit this to new media’s relative nascence and the comparatively limited amount of scholarship devoted to digital writing practices. But also, rubrics are far more challenging to generate when they must account for the intersections over time in multimodal environments of competing sets of conventions, practices, and values. In the week in which I introduce this assignment, I would ask students to scour the internet, investigating various blog communities. Also, I would ask that they begin to think about what makes certain sites good, while others are less successful. There are also literally countless guides to creating successful blogs online that they could review and bring to class. I would ask that they read articles, such as Barbara Warnick’s “Online Ethos: Source Credibility in an ‘Authorless’ Environment,” which reviews several studies that identify how audiences evaluate websites when there is no longer an overt author who’s credibility they can evaluate. Warnick ultimately argues that in digital cultures, viewers tend to privilege visual elements and the sophistication of design over an author’s identity (262).

With this kind of preparation, we would spend part of or a whole class day developing a rubric for their sites and for the reflective essay. In terms of authority, the collaborative rubric would serve two key functions. First, students would feel more in control of their success in the classroom by contributing to the guidelines by which they are evaluated. In other words, they act as participants in the shaping of a genre and what counts as successful participation within that genre. Secondly, the teacher can inhabit a location other than her standard posture as the authority on academic writing, the representative of the discipline (if the writing is even framed in terms of disciplinary conventions at all, which it is often not). As Geoffrey Sirc argues in English Composition as a Happening, classrooms are built spaces, architectures that cultivate
certain behaviors and practices. He opens his work by bemoaning the all too common layout of writing classrooms: “Or better, what we build are Museums, peculiar sorts of cultural temples in which students are ‘invited’ in to sample the best that has been thought and expressed in our language and maybe even, like art students we see poised in galleries with their sketchbooks and charcoals, to learn to reproduce the master’s craft” (2). The classroom architecture that Sirc envisions disrupts the usual patterns and channels of knowledge acquisition in which students are passive recipients of “the best that has been thought and expressed in our language” (2). Multimodal assignments can likewise disrupt stale patterns of knowledge acquisition by making students responsible for forging new channels of authority. Digital writing cultures are still so new, so continually fresh, and so undisciplined that most professors cannot even pretend to be authorities, at least not comprehensive or definitive ones. We can step back, then, and position ourselves as experts in writing, reliable sources of advice or wisdom, but by no means a representative sent by a discipline to teach students its practices and to be the gatekeeper of the university. In this setting, students are held responsible for doing their research, investigating the conventions of the mediums they wish to compose in, and making choices that they can rhetoricly defend in the reflective essay required at the end of the semester.

Finally, this assignment works toward the kind of environment imagined by Byron Hawk. By reorganizing the architecture of our classrooms, resisting the generic layout of the composition course through more open-ended assignments, we can challenge our students to create solutions to communication problems because there often is not an available blueprint for success upheld by a discipline. To restate Hawk’s words, we hope to build classroom spaces, filled with assignments that allow students to develop “new techniques, that in turn reveal new models for
action within those specific rhetorical ecologies” (206). As Hawk suggests, we can achieve this by being more attentive to the architecture of our classrooms as “ambient interfaces,” and by working to position our students in environments that open the possibility for invention (249). With a stronger emphasis on invention, students can see themselves as active participants, even shapers, in the authorizing moves that become valuable within a site of language activity.
CONCLUSION

In many ways, how we conceptualize and teach a practice of authority has never been more urgent. The general education requirement in composition has fostered an anxiety over the goals of writing instruction and what values we want our students to adopt as members of the university’s learning community. While WID programs have encouraged intensive writing instruction as a mode of disciplinary knowledge acquisition, many schools still use the required introductory composition course as a repository for a far-reaching and often incompatible set of learning goals. Administrators, faculty, and compositionists all bring to the required introductory composition course their own set of desires for what a student writer should look like and be able to do. And each learning goal, as a reflection of the writing activities that a community finds most valuable, entails its own version of authority and authorizing moves. The debates between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, published in the 1995 issue of CCC, testify to equally pertinent, yet largely incompatible, goals for writing instruction. But as more and more schools develop stand-alone writing departments, they make room for multiple approaches to teaching writing. Furthermore, they allow for Composition Studies to grown as a discipline, giving it the discursive and institutional space to further develop its own set of authorizing moves.

And on the other side, we have the students’ desires for learning. In a new landscape of digital writing cultures, many students are already producers of knowledge and authorities within particular writing communities. With the advent of stand-alone writing departments and the accompanying absence of required composition, Byron Hawk argues that we may no longer need to overstate our case about why writing instruction is important, reifying our values as our
students’ own. Instead, he argues that without the writing requirement, seduction may become the most ethical form of persuasion: “Rather than promising our students some instrumental value in taking our curriculum, which may or may not actually turn out to have that value for them, it may be better to seduce them into studying rhetoric even if they do not know why it is seductive. It may be better to let them determine what use-value the curriculum may ultimately have for them in their particular contexts” (218-219). Hawk’s use of the term “use-value” is particularly enlightening here. The general anxiety about the role of the required introductory composition course revolves in large part around its use-value. Should we prepare students to become authorities within a particular discourse or academic community? Such a classroom would interrogate the values and practices of authorship as an expression of authority. Or, should we prepare students for a different kind of writing life, like the one imagined by Elbow and other expressivists? But, Hawk encourages us to think not about what we want as teachers, administrators, or other interested parties. Rather, he encourages us to consider the use-value that individual students might generate in tandem with the shifting currents of emerging writing cultures.

Recalling from Crowley’s history of composition, the required introductory course, since its inception, has attached use-value to the curriculum as a way to reify the cultural values of a particular community. She argues that, “the invention of required introductory composition at Harvard during the 1880s was an administered response to the perceived literacy crisis, as well as the unarticulated class anxiety, that permeated genteel American discourse of the period” (260). Echoing Crowley’s sentiments, I would argue that the academy today feels the tension of a new crisis in technology and literacy. Critics of new media argue broadly that technology
disrupts patterns of memory, attention, logic, and linear thought. While there are many rhetorical scholars who champion the new patterns of meaning and emergence across new media (Rice 2007; Brooke 2009), the composition course currently finds itself in the midst of a clash between the disparate values of academic discourse and digital writing practices. In the recent study, “The Writing Lives of College Students,” researchers found that the highest ranking genres in terms of frequency and value for students included staples of academic work, such as essays and lecture notes, but also activities that students indicated as being personally fulfilling, such as online posts, texts, or emails (Grabill et al. 5-6). These findings do not mean that we should teach our students how to write better texts or Facebook updates in the composition classroom. Our students were instrumental in developing the authorizing moves in those cultures, and do not need our help.

Rather, further research into how authority is constructed within our own academic communities, emerging digital cultures, and all that lies in between, can help us to think more critically about the values that we often unconsciously and inexplicitly ask our students to adopt. Crowley’s history can serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of aligning general education requirements with the values of a culturally dominant group. We should neither push out new writing practices to preserve the sanctity of academic discourse, nor should we wholesale embrace digital writing cultures under the banner of futurity. Developing a practice of authority, in composition classrooms, should not privilege spheres of activity or communities, but rather should equip students with the skills to enter them and negotiate their terms of authority. As long as we continue to use the required introductory course, as a site for general education, the skills that we develop with our students should be appropriately general. I do not mean asking
them to do a little bit of everything, and therefore do nothing well. I furthermore am not advocating for writing skills to be decontextualized in a “general” sort of way for our students. I once asked my students on the first day of class what they knew about “good writing.” Their responses included things like “don’t use the word ‘I’” or “don’t use the passive voice,” without realizing (because likely no one has ever helped them to do so) that those textual features are valued by specific communities as authorizing moves for specific reasons. And so, a practice of authority in the required introductory course, as long as it remains institutionally viable, is useful for general education because it helps students to recognize what forms of credibility are valuable and how that credibility is rhetorically made visible to the community with which they chose to communicate.

Within more discipline-specific courses, teachers can tailor a practice of authority to suit the needs of their academic community. As detailed in David R. Russell’s book, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, much work has been done in WID programs toward achieving that goal. But, there is still much work to be done in this regard, particularly as we help our students along higher orders of professionalization and authority. When I first began to consider graduate coursework in English, one of my advisors asked me a question that has taken on increasing importance in my teaching and research. He wanted to know what types of writing I saw myself doing in graduate study. At the time, I answered by naming a few fields in which I wanted to do further research. But, it has become apparent that it would have been more appropriate for me to consider what professional discourse in English studies looks like, and what forms of language activity would make my future research meaningful to the community to which I sought acceptance. As teachers, when we comment on student papers and discuss writing with our
students, we could spend less time shifting their language and crossing out infelicities. Instead, as representatives of our disciplines, we can frame our suggestions by asking who finds certain moves to be valuable and for what reasons.

Above all, a practice of authority stems from the belief that students can engage more meaningfully with their learning and feel more in control of the knowledge they generate when they perceive that they are speaking from a place of authority. A practice of authority seeks to bridge the gap and cut down on the frustration that emerges when students feel disconnected from the community whose practices they are being asked to value and replicate. We can make authorizing moves visible to our students as language activities that are socially meaningful. Placing these moves within their ecologies can help students to see their texts as interacting with the language activities of a community over time. It can also help them to realize that the socially meaningful moves within a community are not stagnant, but rather dynamic and open. I also echo Bryon Hawk’s sentiments that we should be more responsive to the use-value students bring to writing instruction, and offer them more chances to invent techniques to address communication problems in emerging discourses and complex ecologies (218-219). Students can come to see themselves not just as imitators of a community’s practices, but active contributors to and shapers of what constitutes authority, to whom, and why.
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