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Gateway to Complexity: The Adjacent Possible of Beginning Writing

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Abstract: Writing studies' "recent enthusiasm" (Roderick *CF* 25) for complexity theory has morphed into higher education's rabid embrace of reform. New curricula claim commitment to an "advanced," "networked," and "global" culture by erasing introductory composition, thereby dismissing the practices of those courses. Examples abound, but the author pays particular attention to the 2013 overhaul of general education at the nation's largest public university. She then draws on a year-long ethnography of one English 111 class to show how this course is a hospitable environment for genres that seek what Systems Biologist Stuart Kauffman calls "the adjacent possible." The "adjacent possible" represents unfinished combinations of complex structures—those that haven't fully evolved but make visible what's next in our expanding biosphere. The author defines one such genre and reveals how it offers another route to complexity and another understanding of FYC: as the gateway course to complexity.

My first act as a student was an apology for cutting class, sent the day before the start of the fall semester:

> Hi Professor D,
> Of course I know we meet tomorrow. But I'm afraid it's become impossible for me to make it. I promise to check in on the course site. Look forward to seeing you in a few days!

As a long-time teacher of composition, I've received countless emails like this: excuse masquerading as enthusiastic engagement. I usually ignore such texts. Trust in the process, I tell myself and new instructors; don't be derailed by resistance, and, above all, keep moving forward.

But then I became a student. And I wrote like this all of the time, and noticed everyone else doing the same. Indeed this kind of writing, what I eventually named "writing to avoid writing," became the most common companion of my experience in composition. The email above was the first of many examples of writing that not only got me out of something (attending my composition class) but into something: more writing, an email exchange, and the work that eventually led to the central argument of this essay: that this type of writing is of pressing relevance in our changing culture. Underexplored and in some places threatened by extinction, genres of beginning composition, like writing to avoid writing, help make sense of and expand on what we mean when we call writing and our culture complex.

From August through December 2012, and again from January-August 2013, I attended and did the work of English 111, the first of two writing courses required at the college where I teach, Lehman College of The City University of New York. As part of this ethnography of first-year composition, I wrote and observed others engaged in writing whose primary purpose was to avoid or circumvent writing. Time after time, no matter what the particular context, my English 111 classmates and I consistently tried to write our way out of it. We composed emails but also scribbled, narrated, tweeted, and texted our way out of a commitment by addressing our connection to it.

Writing to avoid writing is similar to practices that have been sources of research in composition for half a century. In the late 1970s and 80s, Peter Elbow introduced the field to the importance of "low-stakes," or "informal writing." Mike Rose and Donald Murray defined long delays and digressions in discourse as necessary routes out of writer's block. John Bean's widely adopted textbook *Engaging Ideas* called on teachers outside of composition to consider "exploratory" writing (97) as central to education in the disciplines. In the 1990s Kathleen Blake Yancey described "diverse reflective texts" as a "critical component of learning and of writing specifically" (7). More recently, such texts

fuel critique of ideologies of accomplishment that dominate our discipline (Jung, *Revisionary*). Reflective writing also grounds the argument for reforms to higher education, as these genres are newly critical to a variety of media (Shipka; Faigley et al). Central to the popular "writing studies" curriculum for First Year Composition (FYC) is that reflective texts help students transfer ideas throughout their learning lives (Wardle and Downs).

Writing to avoid writing is related to these genres. But its place in FYC and its role in complexity culture eschew any neat cause and effect equation. It won't necessarily prepare students for the future or transfer skills or solve particular political, institutional, or ideological problems. It's not a pedagogical intervention, curricular revision, or educational analysis. But it does derail, productively derail, business as usual in our complex culture. What propelled me to write this essay is the way writing to avoid writing works right now, at this critical moment of profound change: the saturation of networked communication brought on by technological innovation.

Thinking of beginning writing as important to this complex culture might seem contradictory. The starting point for most definitions of what Mark C. Taylor famously called this "moment of complexity" is not wayward, often hastily composed, seemingly unconnected excuse notes produced in introductory writing courses. Studies of networks like the web, ant colonies, or the brain, and how they exist in a world that is, as Taylor writes, "awash in a sea of information" (Taylor 4) comprise much of the interest in complexity. The proliferation and "saturation" of writing, in particular, has infused our field with studies of non-agent directed, "post-subjective" rhetoric (Dobrin, Roderick). "Agency *is* writing, not intention," writes Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola, ushering in what they call the postcomposition "new scenes of writing" (10, 8). Such scenes include Web 2.0 sites (Brooke and Rickert), political rhetoric (Cooper, Haynes), philosophy and rhetoric (Hawk, Rice), or literature and film (Hayles, Livingston). The 2004 special issue of *JAC* was devoted to understanding the many spaces of complexity. Scholars pay special attention to how the "ancient civic space" has given way to our "contemporary network space" (Hawk 831) and what Jennifer Bay describes as "local examples of bodies, as individual networks" as well as more "global examples of bodies networking" (930).

Writing theorists rely on philosophers like Latour, Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari to ground research into this writing-infused, object-oriented, posthuman culture. Cary Wolfe defines a "thematics" of the posthuman as decentering the human "in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates" (Wolfe xvi). Not only do we see rhetoric or literature or science in a poshumanist thematic, we might also, continues Wolfe, see "*how* thinking confronts that thematics" (xvi).

Writing confronts those thematics. More, it generates it. And yet beginners and beginning practices—proliferating everywhere in digital networks and in the university—are ignored or deliberately written out of these expanded networks of composing. Indeed many writing theorists argue that in order to connect to this "revolutionary" world of complexity, we must be "disassociated from the classroom" where writing is seen as enslaved by subjects—the academy, the administration, and identity politics. Moving "away from subjectivity" and "students" does reveal our field's tendency towards linear subject-object observation and analysis that ignores networked, posthuman realities. Yet declaring the beginning classroom and its practices as somehow off the grid in the network severely limits what writing and complexity can be in an evolving culture.

We are at the edge of a new culture, where networks of communication reveal and resist connections between past and present, between emergent ideas and innovations for the future, between beginning and complexity. In this essay I suggest that acknowledging the work of beginning writing in the "vital materiality" (Bennett) of our culture can not only move the discipline forward, but can also move complexity outward. It's time to get to get to know, or know again now, the practices in these courses of this threshold moment and these edged spaces. One way to do that is by considering FYC as a gateway course for accessing them.

The Paradox and Possibility of Beginning in Complex Systems

Recognizing how change occurs at the "edges" of systems is essential to any understanding of complexity. Complex systems are characterized by "dynamic networks," what computer scientist Melanie Mitchell defines as "components with no central control and simple rules of operation [that] give rise to complex adaptive behavior, sophisticated information processing, and adaptation via learning or evolution" (13). A key feature of complex systems is how they change through "emergent" and "self-organizing" feedback loops. As Marilyn Cooper explains, these feedback loops change "not as the effect of a discreet cause, but from the dance of perturbation and response as agents interact" (421).

Systems that change this way are "autopoietic": they use their own material to make more material. Popular writers Malcolm Gladwell and Steven Johnson describe everything from cells to capital existing within these self-organizing patterns; Ira Livingston describes the ocean waves and poetry as autopoietic cultural systems. German sociologist

Niklas Luhmann describes our communicative reality in this information world as such a system. The elements of an autopoietic system are communications that are recursively reproduced by a network of communications that cannot exist outside of such a network (Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference* 3).

Luhmann's sociological approach to complex systems asks what role we—observers—play in emerging networks existing in a sea of information and communication. Luhmann's work begins with the premise that there is a "pressing need" to "describe the present condition" of change in our autopoietic state, our fast-evolving biosphere and the cultures within (*Theories of Distinction* 92).{1} Certainly the "recent enthusiasm" for complexity studies in our field speaks to this pressing need (Roderick 1). But even as we consider complexity, we need to pay attention to how we "think about" the "thematics" of complex systems: how we tend to observe systems with only a forward-looking vision that ignores the self-organizing properties of systems and of writing. Luhmann readily acknowledges the futility of fulfilling the need to "describe the present condition" with full and complete understanding. Attempting to know a self-referencing world forces us to see partially, incompletely. Any observation of the present, he argues, only introduces another partial vision, more unknowns or distinctions or paradoxes. We need to fill in our limitations of observation. One way to do that is to notice practices and genres that disrupt, derail, detour, and reach out of and from existing systems. And in doing so, we may create potentially fruitful new systems (*Social Systems* 176-210).

Paradoxes pose problems; they leave theories open to critique and curricula open to failure. But they could also lead to places of possibility. They have the potential to make visible what Luhmann calls the "invariant possibilities" for participation and observation of the present (*Theories* 93). Writing to avoid writing is one way to make these possibilities visible. This genre doesn't necessarily come before or after real writing in any process. It has always been part of the human and posthuman but can be disseminated in ways that are removed from the human (digitally, in throw-away scraps). It is vitally linked to our natural world and social systems (official transcripts for students, curricular mandates, outcomes) but not always seen as part of them. Writing to avoid writing is not, then, a "new" scene of writing nor a radical network. Rather it's a "paradox" in the way Luhmann describes paradox: "a necessary condition" of "self-organizing" systems in our contemporary world (*Theories* 93).

To be a beginner in this complex age is already a paradox. To be a beginner writer in a class where everyone seems to be avoiding writing by doing it is a paradox of regenerative, recursive possibility. That condition propelled this project: to reconsider and renew our understanding of the place of beginning writing in our complex culture.

The Adjacent Possible: Beginning Writing in a Complex Age

The primary purpose of writing to avoid writing is innovation. But it's a paradoxical kind of innovation that has been overlooked in studies of complexity and composition. I now turn to Systems Biologist Stuart Kauffman's theory of the "the adjacent possible" to understand beginning writing's novel route to innovation.

Quick to tag other terms of complexity as part of our professional vocabulary, the adjacent possible has not been widely adapted by writing theorists, more likely to rely on philosophy.{2} Perhaps this is because the adjacent possible implies a connection to basic, unfinished, beginning practices that that our field finds counter to the complex agenda. For Kauffman, however, beginnings are sources. They lead the way to understanding the recent explosion in complexity, the "ever-expanding adjacent possible" (*Investigations* 143).

Steven Johnson popularized the term "adjacent possible" for non-scientists in his book *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation.* Here he argues that a "series of shared properties and patterns recur again and again" in the "hospitable environments" that produce incredible natural and cultural innovation (7). Part history of science and technology, part self-help book, *Where Good Ideas Come From* uses Kauffman's concept of the "adjacent possible" to define one key pattern of innovation: that new evolutions (and ideas) emerge not from one person or space but from the infinite expansion into the "edges" or "thresholds" where change occurs. These are places and structures that are almost, but not quite, ready to become something new. Much of the book is devoted to finding environments most "fertile" for innovation at the edges of change. The "crowded waters" of the coral reef, for example, allow for species and forming species to constantly interact and offer new spaces of evolution. This understanding of the adjacent possible leads him to make the enthusiastic and optimistic claim that everyone is capable of "tapping our extraordinary capacity for innovative thinking" (17).

When Kauffman first used the term, his goal was not to inspire innovation but to invite research in a changing universe. Alongside other scientists at the Sante Fe Institute, Kauffman did much of his early work on "emergent" and "self-organizing" evolutionary combinations. Kauffman's particular interest was in figuring out how early life forms were created at what he named the edges or "thresholds" of such systems. In the early 1990s Kauffman thought of the "edge of chaos" as a concept for understanding "self-constructing systems" that "address the relation between basis of attraction" (Cowan, Pines, Meltzer 84). Many theorists followed suit. Taylor looked at examples of

these edges in art and architecture, Johnson in the natural and technological world, and rhetorical and writing theorists in "new" scenes of writing. By observing what happens at the "edges" of chaos—the forms and reflections upon reflections, for example, in Frank Gehry's Bilbao Museum—we can consider what emerges when images, ideas, and writing move "far from equilibrium" and to interaction and constant chaos (Taylor 46). Though compositionist Allison Carr doesn't call her exploration of failure in the writing process part of a study of the edges of chaos, her investigation yields innovative combinations of culture and composition that happen at the intersection of success and disappointment. Likewise when linguist Dennis Baron writes that in "the computer age, the term 'aspiring writer' is meaningless" (163), he pushes us to consider not only whether an "aspiring writer" is a true identity or whether a first-year writing course must exist. Rather we can consider the proliferation of aspirational writing and the spaces where that writing happens as a critical, creative condition of our culture.

For Kauffman, finding life forms or structures at the edge of chaos is one key to making sense of the origin of the universe. But increasingly, observing such structures is central to understanding what's next for complexity. Kauffman finds them in not-quite evolved molecular structures hovering near fully evolved combinations. Before life emerged, Kauffman writes, there were certain elements that were part of the earth's atmosphere—"methane, hydrogen, cyanide, the familiar list" (*Investigations* 168). These are considered members of the "actual"—the original species and structures that created life. Existing just outside these molecular structures were species that orbited the actual, molecular structures that were not fully formed and did not combine with other structures. But they were potentially viable. Kauffman calls these "*one reaction step away from the actual*" from the original combinations (168). In his popular books like *At Home in the Universe* and *Investigations*, Kauffman locates the "actual": molecular combinations already "formed." In prebiotic times, this would include formaldehyde, for example. Other evidence of "substrates" or almost actuals is readily available in the natural world. Steven Johnson describes how plastic, mosquitoes, and the sunflower, for example, combined out of the unformed structures that orbited actual molecular combinations. I aim to describe how writing to avoid writing both formed out of an actual structure (an assignment) and into another one (collaborations with others, and this project).

Kauffman argues that you need both the actual and the edge of actual in order to access and innovate complex life forms. By looking to Kauffman's experiments in the universe of emerging molecular structures and connecting them to practices in the spaces of beginning students, I question what gets labeled and valued as complex. I do by first defining how our shift towards "complexity" has been manifested not just in theory but also in new curricula that ignores beginning writing. I use the general education reform at the largest public university system in the country, The City University of New York, as one example of curricula that seeks to "update" higher education by reducing time spent in introductory classes. I then show how writing to avoid-writing works as a gateway to complexity in one FYC class. This snapshot is drawn from a longer, ethnographic study of English 111. Finally, I return to the "adjacent possible" to find that genres of beginning writing—and the space where they happen—have a new role to play in a culture of complexity.

Complexity Actualized in Curricular Reform

Computer scientist and sociologist Dennis G. Pelli and Charles Bigelow have documented what they see as our emerging "author" culture. In their "graph of authorship" they show how society is moving, rapidly, from a culture of reading to a culture of writing. They predicted, back in 2009, that that in the next few years there will be "nearly universal authorship," something Sidney I. Dobrin sees as part of the "revolutionary" potential of writing and writing studies (4).

In theory complexity thinking often contributes to expanded authorship. But in practice it's often pitted *against* authorship of a certain kind: the beginner writer in a beginning class. Curricular reforms are willing away these writers and spaces because they don't mesh with our definitions of rigor in a complex society. From a new wave of polemics like *Academically Adrift* and *We're Losing Our Minds* to editorials in *The New York Times*, we hear about how current curricula doesn't yet meet the demands of this network culture. More rigorous learning must dominate higher education, writes Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, so that students will be prepared for the "revolutionized," global world of "mastery."{3} The federally sponsored Common Core Curriculum and the Race to the Top initiatives are just two efforts that seek to catch course work up to complex transformations in technology. There is no longer time for activities that don't prepare students for what the Obama Administration calls "the next generation of workers."{4}

The not so subtle premise in these manifestos is that entry-level courses do last-generation's work. The solution: ignore, dismiss, or work around these courses to get to the real stuff of complex systems. This is exactly what concerns Howard Tinberg, the recent Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. He based the 2013 convention theme, "The Public Work of Composition," on the growing rift in our profession and in the

culture between a "race to the top" culture of complexity and the students and courses that are often "left behind." He opens his "Call for Papers" by juxtaposing the early years of composition when "the novice or basic writer" inspired "foundational" scholarship and when "the college curriculum fostered a sense of social justice" with today's "radically altered landscape." The twin forces of public funding cuts and new "intellectual" concerns leave basic writing students and first year composition courses "vulnerable." They are what we "by-pass" on the way to the next new thing.{5}

The almost universally required first-year writing course has been controversial since its adoption in American colleges and universities at the end of the nineteenth century (Crowley, Fleming). FYC at colleges like mine—public, urban, commuter, serving almost all "non-traditional," first-generation college students—fuels debates about the place of democratic higher education in a changing society in general and basic skills learning in particular.{6} But there is a new threat to these courses and practices: complexity theory actualized as curricular reform that defines beginning writing as outside of our complex, networked culture.

One place where this new approach to educational reform has taken hold is at The City University of New York. The recent overhaul of general education at CUNY, "Pathways," was initiated in 2010 put into place in 2013. It's defined as part of a "national effort" to meet the changing needs of a new century. Acting Chancellor (and English professor) William Kelly writes this in a 2011 promotional document: "During the last decade American colleges and universities —from Harvard to flagship publics to community colleges—have rethought curricular design and re-imagined what knowledge might mean in a new century."{7} In early 2012, when I was asked to represent the Pathways composition, our first task was to create a "Master Syllabus" to match every other undergraduate campus. Our second assignment was to change the requirement for introductory writing from four credits to three. Frequent public relations blasts were sent to faculty and media that described how doing so would allow "the opportunity to move more quickly to advanced study." A 2011 report put out by administration provides a visual of this move out of beginning and into advanced study. "From Labyrinth to Pathways" shows the new map for complexity: quick routes to specialization, fewer detours caused by beginning courses.

There have been other moments when writing at CUNY was at the center of national debates about education. The open admissions policy in 1971 and the basic writing research that followed are perhaps the most famous of these (Shaughnessy, Perl, Bruffee); the aftermath of that decision led to research on the future of critical work in literacy (Sternglass). In addition, the 1999 decision to end remediation at the four-year schools was another watershed moment inspiring scholarship in literacy (Soliday, Summerfield et al). But Pathways is something different. This curriculum doesn't revoke, radicalize, or critique the composition course. Instead, it quietly diminishes it. Still a requirement for graduation, the purpose of Pathways was to lessen the load of "non-major" courses so that students could move quickly to their subjects of complexity. Composition has become something to "by-pass." {8}

Debate surrounding CUNY's initiative and what it means for "core courses" has made its way into the national media. {9} But rather than take a side on the prospects of Pathways, I want to ask how this new equation—complexity equals bypassed beginning writing—short-changes both complexity *and* beginning writing courses. While the particulars of Pathways are unique to the mission of CUNY, reforms made in the name of transitioning our culture to a networked system are common across higher education and K-12 schools.{10} We need to understand what gets lost when beginning writing gets situated outside of complexity theory and curriculum reform. The need is pressing as the maps of complexity are actualized without practices emerging at the edges of this transitioning culture.

Complexity Detour: Methodology for An Ethnography of Almost Actual Writing

In order to access those practices, I decided to resign from the Pathways committee and register for English 111. Certainly this was not my original plan for a long awaited for sabbatical. I had looked forward to time off in order to complete research for a book. But this year in English 111, avoiding both my unfinished manuscript and the committee work, allowed me to address what I see now as a necessary, productive paradox of FYC: to be a place where participation and avoidance, engagement and distance, beginning writing and our evolving complex culture coexist.{11}

The next section presents the first findings of my experience in beginning composition. I have collected writing from twenty-two students over two semesters. Here I focus largely on my own account.{12} I do so to highlight how this practice is not attached to one writer's identity but to a phenomenon of writing in one space and time. I modeled my research after other important ethnographies in writing studies. In particular, I relied on A. Suresh Canagarajah's understanding of "autoethnography" which aims to "represent the insider perspective on an experience or a culture" (114) and on the feminist understanding of a "vernacular sense of what social change looks like" (Selfe and Hawisher 36). I also began my research with the belief that genres are both "embodiments" of "social actions" and

"tools for accessing cultures" (Reiff 37). Finally, I thought of my participation in English 111 not as an opportunity to explain a culture or to argue for a policy but as way to engage in a space that is, as Gary Olson describes, a site of "hegemonic struggle" (39). Olson views the ethnographic encounter of observer and object as a struggle between humanistic and social science discourse. Here it's a site of struggle between complexity and beginning.

Assignment One: Avoiding the Descriptive Essay

I was formally introduced to the students in English 111 after the third week of the term. The twenty-five students and I had been preparing for the first written assignment of the course: "A Descriptive Essay of an Influential Teacher." On the fourth class, I explained my role as a professor in the department and my reason for being in the class. Students signed IRB permission slips, asked one or two questions, and after about fifteen minutes, class went on as usual.{13} After that, I participated like any other student.

The coursework up to this point was centered on Carl Rowan's "Unforgettable Miss Bessie," and our first group activity was to discuss the essay in preparation for our first writing task. {14} My group consisted of four women, two of us born in the United States, two not, and all of us except for one identified as "non-traditional"—working and taking care of children and other family members.{15}

In this session, we found "concrete images" as Prof. D told us to do and shared topic ideas. I had decided early on that first essay would be a description of the teacher who became my dissertation advisor. When I told the group about this choice, it prompted some talk about the culture of graduate school; I shared some background on my decision to pursue a Ph.D. in English, and one other student spoke about her Business degree. We ended class with a larger discussion of Rowan's use of description, what Prof. D called our "scaffolding" for the assignment.

One week later, we met in the computer lab to create a first draft. When I walked in at 10:05 am, I found most students already present and typing. The opening screen on our Blackboard page gave instructions: to take an "hour to write" and then "post first paragraphs to the class blog." In-class composing was familiar to me as a teacher.{16} But while I often joined my students when they wrote, I rarely joined in on what they wrote. As students in my classes would (presumably) respond to an assignment-prompt, I'd both join in and go somewhere else, jotting down lesson plans, making notes on a student essay, or, when really distracted, generating a grocery list. In this space, where twenty-five people surrounded me and seemed to be writing, I had nowhere to go but to the assignment at hand.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes ticked by and nothing. I managed only to shuffle around my name and date on the screen. Perhaps it was writer's block. My mind turned to explanations for my condition. It wasn't me, I thought, it was this assignment. I thought of former Lehman English department professor and *College English* editor Richard Larson's term for assignments like "the descriptive essay": a "non-form of writing." He was describing, back in 1982, problems with "the research paper" as a universal and de-contextualized assignment. But thirty years later, in the same building as he once taught, I also struggled with a genre that did not resemble any real discourse in the world.

Yet this was only part of the problem. Another was that I felt queasy about the belief-system implied by the term "influence." I had chosen to describe a teacher who had, in so many ways, "influenced" my life. And yet containing that influence and presenting it for evaluation by another teacher worried me, labeled me, cornered me into an outdated version of my self. I turned to some of my favorite pieces in the critical pedagogy canon, work by Ira Shor and Carmen Kynard, to help frame this discomfort not personally but ideologically. I was powerless to resist the defined description of "influence." Unless the blank page was my critique.

Resistance, critique, anxiety: it didn't move me to words. I was stuck in the way I see many students freeze up for standardized tests; stuck in the way that writing scholars, many from my university, describe students who need to produce prose on demand (Perl, Bruffee, Sternglass). Practiced and credentialed and yet still "unprepared," I thought both of complexity theory and of Mina Shaugnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, her groundbreaking book about basic writers at City College. Both Shaugnessy and complexity theorists frame meaning making spatially, in terms of patterns. Deleuze and Guattari use the image of "rhizome"; Luhmann the "horizon" of possibilities resulting from self-organizing systems; Livingston the "interzone" of ideas; and Shaugnessy the "map" of remembering. Meaning and writing, Shaugnessy wrote, depend on the "retrospective maps of where…thinking has taken"…on *remembering* a pattern (244).

Our scaffolding had us list descriptions of our important teacher, but I could not map them into a picture. Then Prof. D started to walk around the classroom, encouraging us to "try and get a paragraph out, using our notes from group work." I turned to the list of "concrete" and "descriptive" terms we generated with our writing group and strung them together to form a paragraph. Here is what I typed out:

> From the back, her short white hair looks like a ball of yarn that has been stepped on many times by frustrated cats and when she walks, the uneven clump doesn't move much. But her voice makes its way through the narrow corridors of the hallway. She's about to gather an impromptu and brilliant discussion group on something—teaching, politics, Chaucer.

This was showing and not telling, using "visual" terms as we had practiced. But it was headed nowhere, following no map, no pattern. I've known this scholar for almost twenty years; she looms large in my professional and personal life. Yet this picture of her felt like it was directed for and at nothing.

"Pathetic. I am sitting in a writing class, not doing the writing," opened my next bit of composing. But this time I had turned away from the class computer and was beginning an email to a friend, someone who knew that I had given up a treasured sabbatical to sit in on a composition class. "This is a failure of hysterical proportions," I went on. "I am boiling down decades-long mentorship to a hairdo."

And then I really started writing, conjuring up the day I met both the teacher and this friend. "Remember that sweltering morning in August…seventeen years ago?!" At this point I was typing quickly, with the phone precariously balanced on my opened copy of *The Blair Reader*. 1995 was the year I began graduate school. That hot August morning twelve Ph.D. candidates were in an orientation for our new program, grouped together with advanced students who would help us plan classes and consider our composition syllabus. I was in a group with three particularly vocal dissertation writers loudly unhappy with new writing program requirements and unnerved by unfavorable tenure decisions directed at the department's "theorists." The woman who would become my friend (and the person I was emailing) caught my eye as I looked nervously around the room. It was the first day of school and I had already missed lesson one: the humanities was in crisis.

I went on to recount how tumultuous those years of graduate school were: the country's culture wars being played out in the hallways of our writing program and theory seminars.{17} Why this memory came to me at this moment didn't matter. I knew it did, somehow, because I didn't want to put it aside, even when Prof. D announced, "Five more minutes of composing and then time to post." I reluctantly did, putting away my phone and hastily posting the three lines about the professor's hair.

Like many students, I didn't return to the assignment until five days later, the night before it was due. I put together a few pages that met the basic requirements and printed it out just in time to make it to our peer-review session. When we met the next Wednesday in our conventional classroom, we had specific instructions for our "feedback" workshop. All of us in the writing group brought hard copies of our essay, and common to many composition classes, we were to read these aloud and follow a reader-response guidelines sheet. Comfortable with each other now, my group began by ignoring Prof. D's directives. Instead, one by one each of us recounted the many ways we tried to complete the assignment as instructed but ended up doing, and writing, something else. The woman who became the defacto leader of our group provided visuals: lots of loose papers came out of her backpack and she talked quickly. "This one was about my fourth grade teacher in the D.R.: discarded," she offered. "And this one, well, this was stuff from two years ago; it didn't make it in."

What didn't "make it in" was a one-page musing entitled, "What I've Forgotten." She didn't share the text but explained how it "describes, in detail, everything I've forgotten, all the concrete things that happened when I first started school in this country. Teachers and tutors were there. But I can't really describe them. They are background to my own confusion from the time." One woman showed us hours of texting with a twin sister about the many teachers who would confuse the two of them. Another student explained how Instagram helped her curate pictures of the places she went to when she first started her second degree. I did this to "find the teacher, or any teacher, I could write about." I am "too old" she explained, to remember things before college.

I went last. I talked about my unsent email and described how considering the influence of this teacher brought me back to the power of that time and space. And then I grabbed a pen and starting writing on the back of my draft:

> Sitting among English 111 classmates and looking at my email, I still can't describe the professor but I can get to the objects, language, and feelings of our time together…the dog-eared books on the culture wars spattered about the student lounge, my first encounter with "high" theory, and also the frightening prospect—but still a prospect—that I was starting to be part of something important.

With half the class time taken up by the litany of our avoidance strategies, there were only a few minutes left to read our texts aloud. We did this then gave some cursory responses; we liked or disliked particular paragraphs, and commented on the need for more detail. I filled out my "feedback form" about what I would revise. We then had a week to review our work when I (and my classmates) changed little. On the final due date, Prof. D required a "cover

letter" for the essay, what Julie Jung calls, referencing Yancey, the ubiquitous "first-person accounts" where students make "visible the invisible processes of what happened during their production of a single text and why" (629). Pulled together at the last minute, it revealed nothing of my visible or invisible processes, or of my classmates'. Instead I explained where I composed the essay (the kitchen table), when (4-7am) and how (under duress). I ended the letter with what I thought was a humorous throwaway line—another attempt to address and also distance myself from the assignment at hand: "I have an idea for my next paper: how not to do it like this one."

Assignment Two: Adjacent Genres and Spaces of Possibility

That idea became this assignment, a project in associating complexity thinking with dissociative genres of beginning writing. Genres are sites of invention because, as Anis Bawarshi, Mary Jo Reiff, Charles Bazerman and others have argued, they emerge "at the intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire" (Bawarshi 13). Our descriptive essays, explained one group member, "may be lame" but our "distractions" were "everywhere around." This genre, everywhere but not necessarily codified in class, in curriculum, or in an emerging canon of complexity, still served as "rhetorical manifestations of a group's actions"(Reiff 41). Here my writing groups' action consists of our individual writing to avoid writing examples—which were networked with others and involved dynamic layering of the past and present—but also our collective sharing of our writing to avoid practices. These practices made us realize how our "almost-actual" texts were part of something else, something like a reconfiguration of the "living situation" in a culture (Bleich qtd. in Reiff 40). For example, my writing to avoid writing genre bridged a particular past—August 1995, a moment in graduate school—with a theoretical construction of that past—the culture wars. This happened as the writing orbited the assignment in the present: to commit to an explanation of one person's influence.

This could only occur with the tools and in the context of a very different moment and environment in the history of "authorship": English 111 in 2012. Completing this assignment meant being both distracted from our purpose and engaged with it, creating a new scene of writing while balancing screens related to it. Our texts pointed not in the direction of what was necessary but what could be next for us. Not everyone did something with these wayward writings, but all of us acknowledged them as present, as related. They were a source of carving out space —"structures" (Kauffman) that link beginning to complexity. They were examples of the adjacent possible.

Like any complex, adaptive system, writing to avoid writing constructs its "interactions with their environment *as* information" (Clarke and Hansen 9). It can do this because it is a genre of adjacent possibility: part of but not quite fully accepted or evolved as "assemblages" of a complex culture. This genre strategically distances itself from assignments while relating to them; it is associated with particular constraints (the course requirement, the academic culture) but gestures to worlds outside of these constructions (home, digital spaces); it is neither at the beginning, middle, or end of a product but circumvents these temporal markers, often landing close to but not quite on them; it is motivated but also meandering, not fully formed but persistently relevant. In short, this is writing working at what systems Kauffman calls the "thresholds" or "edges" of the "adjacent possible": the places where something new or different emerges: the places where complexity can expand (*Investigations* 143).

Gateway to Complexity: A Case for FYC

"Something has obviously happened in the past 4.8 billion years," Kauffman writes in *Investigations*. The "biosphere has expanded, indeed, more or less persistently exploded into the ever-expanding adjacent possible" (143). Kauffman suggests that certain spaces make expansion into the adjacent possible more likely. I propose that the innovation of writing to avoid writing happens because of the unique, paradoxical environment of the beginning classroom as it exists in this age of networks.

There are environments "unusually fertile" for finding the adjacent possible and others that are not, writes Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From* (16). For example, he shows how the creators of YouTube were able to piece together failed technological insights and cultural habits from many other inventions (hypertext, the site PayPal, the DVD) to launch this radical website. What's needed to access the adjacent possible is a space that encourages and can "expose" a "wide and diverse sample of spare parts"—half-baked and unfinished ideas and texts—that might germinate. The space of germination can't be "so satisfying that no one bother to explore the edges" nor can it be too limiting, "punishing experimentation" (31). It needs to be something of an enabling and constraining laboratory of composing.

FYC might not be the likely host environment for finding evolutions in complexity. Structurally, the required beginning writing course stands in between lower and higher education. It is "undisciplined" or "beyond" disciplines because its

reach is wide (generally required) and its content undefined (not attached to a sanctioned disciplinary representation of knowledge, skills, or a subject). As Fleming shows in his history of FYC at the University of Wisconsin, the course is perpetually "under stress," "constantly at risk of marginalization and yet surprisingly central" in the nation's history (27). There are well-documented problems with the course, from its function as gatekeeper, to its reliance on underpaid contingent teachers, to the way it can occupy the resources of writing in higher education (Crowley, Smit). Likewise, the prevalent genres of FYC, like writing to avoid writing, don't quite fit into the reigning definitions of complex systems and posthuman networks. Tied to the subject of FYC but always seeking a way out of its requirements, attached to pre-digital forms but often composed digitally, embedded in the confines of the classroom but suggestive of worlds outside of it, the genres and spaces of FYC are perpetual paradoxes.

Paradoxes don't make for convincing conclusion.{18} They won't don't drill down to the particulars of problems or raise stakes and claim solutions. Yet they do present an alternate, additional, expanded version of complexity. Johnson writes that the adjacent possible is "a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself" (31). Without the existence and recognition of these practices of avoidance that lead nowhere and next, how could we continue to expand the adjacent possible of the present?

Beginning writing should not be a first step for prescribed success or a way- station for gathering skills to transfer elsewhere or a pathway to bypass. But it can be a prompt: a prompt that claims an unprecedented place for beginning composition in an age of complexity.

Notes

1. Niklas Luhmann is widely used in literary and cultural theory (see Hayles and Livingston), less so in composition (see Jung's "Systems Rhetoric" for a link to writing studies). (Return to text.)
2. William Duffy is an exception. See his recent essay "Collaboration (in) Theory" which uses the term to rethink the field's understanding of collaboration. (Return to text.)
3. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/opinion/sunday/friedman-revolution-hits-the-universities.html?_r=0 and http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/opinion/friedman-the-professors-big-stage.html are two articles that link complexity to calls for "revolution" in higher education. (Return to text.)
4. The White House website in higher education is filled with this future-oriented terminology: http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education (Return to text.)
5. Tinberg's Call for Papers is archived here: http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CCCC/Convention/2013/4C_2013CP_120121.pdf (Return to text.)
6. See Mary Soliday's *Politics of Remediation* for an overview of writing policies at CUNY and Linda Hirsch and Dennis Paoli's chapter about WAC/WID at CUNY in Chris Thaiss's *Writing Programs WorldWide.* (Return to text.)
7. Statements like these come from promotional material mailed out to faculty and available here: http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/academic-news/files/2013/03/PathwaysQuotes.pdf (Return to text.)
8. The intermingling of innovation theories and curriculum reform is evident in this summary of recent general education overhauls: http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/03/historians-discuss-challenges-general-education (Return to text.)
9. For two examples, one in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and one in *The Nation* see http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/cunys-pathway-to-whatever/31150 and http://www.thenation.com/blog/172243/what-cuny-pathways-means-undergraduates (Return to text.)
10. CUNY cites the "best practices" of common-core reforms at other universities, including the University of California and the University of Florida systems. See http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/academic-news/files/2013/03/PathwaysQuotes.pdf (Return to text.)
11. Thank you to Deirdre O'Boy, whose wisdom and generosity allowed me to pursue this research. (Return to text.)
12. Some of the data for this project is collected on my blog: https://jyood.commons.gc.cuny.edu/author/jyood/ (Return to text.)
13. This study falls under the "exempt status" given to Marcie Wolfe and I, principal investigators for a large-scale WAC/WID study at Lehman College. (Return to text.)

14. Assignments are based on readings in *The Blair Reader*. Three required genres are required of students: description, persuasion, and analysis. All English 111 students take an in-class final essay exam based on a short reading taken from a popular newspaper or magazine. This 111 section was taught by full-time lecturer Professor D, as I will call her. We met years earlier at professional development events sponsored by the WAC program. (Return to text.)
15. See more on Lehman College demographics provided by the Office of Institutional Research at: http://www.lehman.edu/institutional-research/fact-book.php (Return to text.)
16. *A Community of Writers* by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff was used in the Writing Program at my graduate school. Their workshop directs writers on effectively engaging in their peers' work. This was especially influential to me and to many of my colleagues' teaching. (Return to text.)
17. I'm including the text of the email I sent here because, like so many bits of writing we compose everyday, it belongs somewhere, related to this essay, but probably as part of something else.

    > Though we didn't know it yet, the writing program and English department at this university were involved in debates familiar to many institutions in the 1990s. The largely British and American literature canon was constantly critiqued. Proposals were put forward to replace period requirements with theoretically organized courses. The writing program was attacked both for lack of rigor and for not addressing the needs of struggling writers. Graduate students felt in between the many warring factions, and were unsure how their positions might be affected. Intended as an overview of a department for newcomers this orientation soon became a primer in the culture and politics of my new discipline.

    (Return to text.)
18. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Composition Forum* who inspired this almost-ending and Heidi Johnsen and Pat Belanoff, who inspired its actual beginning. (Return to text.)

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