

For Slow Agency

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes hypermiling as a generative metaphor for WPA work. By building on the idea that slowing down decreases energy consumption and increases resource preservation, I introduce alternative ways to think about WPA agency, giving serious attention to the arts of productive stillness, resource preservation, and slowness—what is called “gradual arrival” in the hypermiling movement. My aim is to illustrate that agency operates on a continuum including action and change as well as less visible but no less important forms of agency like thinking, being still, and processing. The essay ends with a reflective look at an object passed down from previous WPAs in my department, an object that offers a different but tangential metaphor for reconsidering pace and action.

When I began my tenure as WPA three years ago, I suffered stomachaches and had trouble sleeping. No matter how comprehensive my plans for the program, I had an unshakeable sense that I was forgetting something crucial. Like most WPAs, I suspect, I found a rhythm and a strategic way of compartmentalizing after that first year. But the felt experience of being physically and mentally over-taken by the enormity of the job, and the ostensibly normative status of this experience, at least as rendered in WPA scholarship and in anecdotes from the field, represents more than a rough patch to be endured and then transformed into portable advice. This state of disorientation is an opportunity for sustained thinking about alternative, even aspirational, models of administration.

WPA action tends to align with what I call “big agency,” or actions that intend structural results and effects. Recent job ads, for instance, seek candidates who will participate in campus governance, design and lead assessment initiatives, revise curriculum, hire, train, and oversee new teachers,

advocate for the writing program at college and university levels, and coordinate writing initiatives across campus. These expectations are echoed in “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration,” developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators as a resource for constructing equitable tenure and promotion requirements. Categories of intellectual work highlighted in this document include the following: Program Creation, Curricular Design, Faculty Development, Program Assessment, and Program-Related Textual Production (“Evaluating”). Suggested guidelines for evaluating contributions in each area are based on the WPA’s work in terms of innovation, improvement/refinement, dissemination, and measurable results.

The WPA whose actions have traceable effects back to her and her alone might be an anachronism in the context of current theories of agency (especially those engaged with new materialism), but this possessive, linear model of agency is alive and well in the world of administration (for critiques, see Gunner; McGee and Handa). Articulating a more dynamic model of agency, Marilyn Cooper, in her recent essay, defines agency as “a matter of action; it involves doing things intentionally and voluntarily, but it is not a matter of causing whatever happened” (439). Cooper’s view acknowledges what many of us know in practice—extenuating circumstances mediate agency so that intention and will are only pieces in a process, not determining factors. For Cooper, “[e]mergent properties (such as agency) are not epiphenomena, nor ‘possessions’ in any sense, but function as part of the systems in which they originate. And causation in complex systems is nonlinear: change arises not as the effect of a discrete cause, but from the dance of perturbation and response as agents interact” (421). Cooper’s view of agency as rhetorical flux largely focuses on the association between agency and change/action as outer-directed and so visible to others. Falling into a supportive role that Cooper says “should go without saying” are “‘mental’ actions—speaking, writing, reflecting” (424–25). Making more explicit these and other hidden agencies, I contend here that agency can be figured in myriad ways, including the counter-intuitive view of agency as action deferred. Deferral is not necessarily a sign of powerlessness, inactivity, or dereliction of duty. On the contrary, it creates much-needed space for becoming still and getting places, allowing for regenerative returns.

What follows is not an argument against action, change, and empowerment; it’s an argument for acknowledging a wider spectrum of WPA agencies. Agency operates on a continuum that includes action and change as well as less measurable but no less important forms of action like thinking, being still, and processing—hardly a contentious point given that over the

past 15 years or so *reflection* has played an important role in defining WPA activities as intellectual work. As Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser explain in *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher*, “effective WPAs reflect before acting, but they also reflect upon the actions they take” (ix). In addition to conceptualizing reflective moments in relation to agency, we might also come to see suspended agency as a valuable strategy for WPAs. This point is related to one that Linda Adler-Kassner makes in her preface to *The Activist WPA*, where she draws from yoga practices to convey a message about WPA work. She writes that striking a yoga pose reminds us “to focus on the here and now—to be in *this* moment, in this time and space. Not two minutes ago, not in the future—now, now, and now” (vii; emphasis in original). The typical pace of WPA work is fast and hectic, a manic, awkward dance rather than a set of deliberate poses (especially for junior WPAs working toward tenure). Thus, attentiveness to the moment requires a kind of pacing and ethos that, I’d argue, seem largely unavailable to WPAs on a daily basis. To focus some on why this is so as well as on strategies for being in the moment, I address pacing, agency, and administration, a triangulation of issues that simultaneously vex and energize WPA work at alternative turns.

SOME CONTEXT

When first writing about this idea, I turned to an unlikely source of inspiration: the hypermiling movement. The term *hypermiling* was coined by Wayne Gerdes in 2004—a summer of \$4-a-gallon gasoline prices—in response to the widespread anxiety, frustration, and concern about fossil fuel dependence, the likes of which was unseen in the U.S. since the energy crisis of the 1970s (Silver). Gerdes’s development of hypermiling was based on the idea that changing driving behaviors could make a difference in conservation efforts by maximizing fuel efficiency and decreasing resource depletion. Effective techniques include driving barefoot, removing unused cargo racks, coasting in neutral, using cruise control to reduce fuel-hungry accelerations, exploiting tailwinds, and over-inflating tires (Chin). While some techniques are controversial and others outright unlawful (driving barefoot), the most sensible practical strategy among hypermilers is slowing down in order to decrease energy consumption. This practice might be understood as slow agency, for it focuses not on tasks or deliverables but on pace, the rate at which activity progresses.

I was introduced to the hypermiling movement and its philosophy several years ago by close friends who kept exhaustive records of their driving habits, experimenting with various techniques as they slowly and delib-

erately changed their daily lives. I was intrigued by their conviction and follow-through; they moved beyond political alignment with environmental causes to meaningful behavioral change. At the same time, I became aware of my own reluctance to practice hypermiling because of how much I thought it would require of me. I'd have to transform my everyday habits, which seemed unrealistic since I could not imagine driving under the speed limit and delaying my time of arrival—not even for the sake of environmental sustainability. How would I get everything done if I spent more time getting places? It was nearly impossible to imagine a different daily pace when I ticked off the many responsibilities competing for my attention and energy. Despite my initial apprehensions, I have come to appreciate the way hypermiling calls serious attention to the arts of productive stillness, resource preservation, and slowness—what hypermilers call “gradual arrival.”

The movement's simple yet utterly radical recommendation to slow down and delay arrival offers a fresh standpoint from which to reimagine WPA work. This standpoint suggests to me that we might benefit from focusing on the rate of speed that is likely to result in the desired outcome, adding a temporal dimension to existing research on innovative structures, strategies, and methods for accomplishing WPA work. Pace complicates understandings of agents and the activities that stick to them by turning us toward our bodies in motion as part of the energetic matter of writing programs. We embody raw human resources that can be depleted and hijacked as well as conserved and protected. And, as suggested by others, the use and misuse and plain old neglect of such resources is mediated by the multiple positions we occupy, the intersectional identities that compose WPAs, individually and collectively (see, i.e., Banks and Alexander; Craig and Perryman-Clark; Janangelo).

BIG AGENCY

The continuous motion and activity associated with WPAing evokes for me Diana George's memorable description of WPAing as “plate twirling.” Much like these entertaining performers, she writes, WPAs are “on stage, trying to sustain the illusion of perpetual motion, worried over how to end the show without losing control as those plates go crashing onto the stage floor” (xi). The WPA's state of being, characterized by George as on the verge of losing control, contextualizes sentiments voiced by contributors to *Women's Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition*, particularly in Chapter 4: Succeeding Despite It All. One representative respondent to the authors' survey issued this warning to junior faculty: “Do NOT take on

ANY administrative work of ANY kind other than regular committee service prior to being awarded tenure. In particular, do NOT accept a WPA position of any kind” (qtd. in Ballif et al. 117). When criteria for judging a WPA’s performance includes the creation and maintenance of significant architectural structures, and when the wildcard, for many, is tenure and/or promotion, who has the luxury of treating agency as that which can be measured by anything other than tangible outcomes? Documenting outcomes in progress, as I’ll suggest later, is one strategy for proving the value of one’s work toward promotion and tenure while simultaneously practicing slow agency.

Our collective nervous condition in relation to WPA agency—often presumed to entail implementing initiatives on the quick—helps to explain why getting a handle on power occupies such an important place in the scholarship (see Amorose for an excellent overview). It also illuminates why research on building administrative structures is pervasive, for this work offers reassuring narratives about how the seemingly impossible—i.e., revising placement procedures, generating funding for computer classrooms, and implementing large-scale program assessment—is not only possible but potentially reproducible. We see this through-line in, for example, *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers* (Myers-Breslin), *The Longman Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators* (Ward and Carpenter), Kelly Ritter’s “Extra-Institutional Agency and the Public Value of the WPA,” and Amy Goodburn and Carrie Shively Leverenz’s “Feminist Writing Program Administration,” to hail just a few examples.

Another angle on WPA agency and its potential reproducibility is accessible in what might be described as legacy work, or research aimed at detailing the evolution and contributions of particular programs or key figures: *A Field of Dreams* (O’Neill, Crow, Burton); *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration* (L’Eplattenier and Mastrangelo); *Local Histories* (Donahue and Moon); and Part II of *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* (Rose and Weiser). Among other effects, this scholarship provides us with (sometimes uneven) progress narratives that situate our everyday actions, in all of their incomplete, compromised, and ambivalent glory, within broad historical context, suggesting that the long haul provides hope for the sustainability of WPA work.

Sustainability is certainly a valid concern given the energy-hungry quality of WPA work, so thoroughly acknowledged and fretted over in disciplinary culture that it has inspired a board game. In “Praxis and Allies: The WPA Board Game,” the authors describe a game, intended to prepare graduate students for administration, which focuses on “competition for

resources” (Sura et al. 78), “juggling multiple roles and responsibilities” (79), and learning how to use that “most precious [of] personal resources: energy” (79). On this last point, the authors add that WPAs must “learn to use wisely (and sometimes conserve) their supply of personal resources” (78). Indeed, ever-depleting resources of all kinds—physical spaces, support services, teachers, good health, funding, patience—are heavy on one’s mind when directing a writing program. And as the authors suggest, WPAs must carefully decide how to expend energy, including that which is needed to keep all of the plates in the air. This decision-making extends to *pacing* so that, in speeding from one fantastic trick to the next, WPAs have to be mindful of the consequences of missteps.

With its attention on resources and energy, the WPA board game provides a unique context for discussing slow agency and hypermiling. Both strategies require deliberate thinking and slight alterations to how we orient ourselves in particular contexts. Both are possible only as achievements earned through a deliberate and sustained change of behavior. And both entail giving up what’s familiar for what’s counter-intuitive. Yet, despite my first impression, hypermiling does not compromise one’s ability to get anywhere; it merely slows the pace of arrival. This slight shift in priorities—from fast to gradual arrival—reminds us that there’s no imperative to drive five miles over the speed limit on highways, tailgate, rush to an intersection and stop suddenly rather than gradually slow down, and so forth.

Likewise, the plate-twirling WPA is no imperative, though this figure casts a deep shadow and is even inadvertently endorsed through statements like that referenced above, “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration.” Hypermiling forefronts energy consumption and resource preservation, elements of WPAing that tend to get over-shadowed by the understandably pragmatic attention to solving problems and implementing new initiatives. This shadow can sometimes allow us to forget that corporeal aspects of our work are part of the felt experience of being WPA. We use our bodies and our energy, our endurance, as we establish a physical and emotional pace. Perhaps this is why it strikes a chord when Jonikka Charlton and Shirley Rose proclaim, “WPA is not just a job title, but a way of being” (114). Being a WPA is more than a sum of initiatives and accomplishments. Borrowing from political theorist, Jane Bennett, being WPA is experiencing materiality as a “lively force” that interacts with “the ensemble nature of action and the interconnections between persons and things” (51, 37). In other words, agency is relational. It entails a conglomeration of resources and activities that exceed a single agent but engulf her in a field of energy and activity. A rush to action can reinforce illusions of linear cause-effect actions while also neglecting the larger scene of activ-

ity that constructs institutional decision-making. Deferral and/or slowing down can be useful in this regard.

A good deal of scholarship already implicitly values deferred action and being in the moment. For example, research on feminist models of administration (Dickson; Goodburn and Leverenz; Gray-Rosendale; Phelps), masculinist models (Barr-Ebest; Gillam; Holbrook; S. Miller), and WPA protectionist strategies (Holt; Rhodes; Ward) suggests that the speed of getting things done, along with the enormity of tasks involved, creates ideologies and practices that disrespect and dehumanize programs and people. The problem such scholarship evokes but does not often directly address is that the correspondence between *agency* and *speed* remains stable, despite very convincing, even heart-breaking critiques of the turmoil they generate (see, for example, Bishop and Crossley; Hesse). This correspondence, in other words, affirms that effective agents are those who produce results quickly. It's not hard to see how this untroubled coupling of agency and speed leads to perceptions of WPAs as "the central symbol of writing on a campus. Worse, they are expected to be the actual glue that holds it all together" (Cambridge and McClelland 157). While feminist models of administration have forwarded alternative administrative structures that distribute power among agents, thereby resisting the single WPA figure who stands for "writing" at any institution, these models have not altered pacing expectations. Alternative structures tend to spread work around in more equitable, mutually productive ways, but they do not typically question why so much needs to get done in a given time-frame. As most WPAs already know, acting overwhelmingly in response to ever pressing urgencies frequently prevents us from coming to terms with a larger circumstance. It also creates barriers to occupying spaces of deliberate uncertainty in hopes of achieving a renewed standpoint on a situation.

Much as fast capitalism gobbles markets at lightning speed, fast agency inculcates pride in getting things done swiftly, obscuring conditions that make speediness necessary and normative in the first place. Editors Peter Case, Simon Lilley and Tom Owen note in their introduction to *The Speed of Organization* that Herbert Marcuse's reality principle helps to illuminate the role of speed in contemporary organizations. The reality principle is "based on competitive economic performance" that generates consent "enlisted through . . . acceptance of the prevailing order" (12). They continue, "The current reality principle emphasizes speed as a characteristic of performance efficiency. Speed, itself, can become elevated in our consciousness to the level of fetish" (12). Speed operates as a commodity, mystifying the relations and conditions that make it desirable and necessary. Noting the high premium placed on speed in our culture, Case et al. find

that speediness among organizations (and I include writing programs here) is considered “more admirable” and “more valuable” than a slower, more deliberate pace. Speed comes to represent “pure magic” (13). Serious recalibration, and perhaps vulnerability, is required if we are to believe that suspended agency, deliberate slowness, and intentional stillness benefit the health and vitality of writing programs and WPAs. Richard Miller articulates at least one difficulty associated with such postures. He writes that “we are all regularly called upon to act in the absence of [a full account of the necessary] information for the simple reason that collecting all the relevant data and interpreting it in the fullness of time is a luxury extended to no social agent at work in the world” (11). Like Miller, I recognize and regularly experience the perceived need to respond to a problem before I know enough. But I’d like to advocate for the value of sometimes residing longer than is comfortable in the complexity, stillness, and fatigue of not knowing how to proceed.

Suspended agency offers a counter-discourse that poses questions about big agency, program ownership, and the virtues of a good defense. It also creates openings for practicing vulnerability as a strategic administrative stance and for generating alternative work rhythms that allow the program and the person to do more than survive until the next director comes along.

TOWARD A DIFFERENT PACE

Donna Qualley and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater reveal ambivalence around WPA agency. In “Split at the Root,” they describe vulnerability as central to a WPA’s vitality and critical understanding of the job:

The vulnerability that often leaves us feeling unsure and off-balance as administrators and teachers is also what keeps us positioned as learners continually having to renegotiate our positions. It may be in these moments of vulnerability, these moments when our understanding seems tenuous, our knowledge and theories suspect, and our intentions questionable that we eventually find or invent a new rhetorical approach that will allow us to continue to do this work ethically and effectively in conjunction with differing others. (172)

Their stance on learning, renegotiating, inventing, and collaborating values deliberate efforts to control pace and distribute agency among stakeholders. This view of administration permits us to depict writing programs as a swirl of actors, things, structures, economies, and forms of matter always interacting to create effects. Like hypermiling, this construct of administration remains mindful of energy consumption and production by distributing it across subjects and recognizing relationality as central to enduring

ance, resourcefulness, and sustainability. In this section I describe how I've attempted to apply some of these principles in my daily activities.

When I began my tenure as WPA, the most pressing task I faced was shaping a newly implemented intermediate composition course. Our instructors, many of whom had taught the first-year sequence for years, had created well-conceived course templates, but even they felt unsure about the overall purpose of the intermediate course. Originally conceived as a writing-in-the-disciplines course, it never quite moved in that direction, largely due to a lack of institutional support and the absence of an enthusiastic advocate to enact the vision spearheaded by the former director. I needed to make the course intelligible to teachers, students, advisors, and programs across the university. Given that there was considerable anxiety among faculty about the identity of the course, as well as resistance to codifying it—particularly since the first-year courses were organized around a unified curriculum—I faced a real urgency. Timing was important because the course was required for most students at the university and was already being taught each quarter. The thirty-plus sections we were offering each term did not look very much alike, nor did they seem to be guided by shared principles or outcomes.

I could have made this a signature initiative for the beginning of my tenure. By developing a curriculum and set of goals and outcomes based on my prior experience and familiarity with current scholarship, I could have proceeded like Doug Hesse did during his first year in a new job, fulfilling the role he describes as “WPA-as-father.” Revealing the seductive nature of going it alone as a WPA, Hesse writes that he could have consulted colleagues when initiating a much needed curriculum change, but he knew

it would be more efficient [to work alone]. Developing a curriculum through collaborative work would be a long process of meetings, drafting, and revision. I was confident (aren't we all?) that my sense of theory, research, and pedagogy positioned me to develop state of the art courses, and I was confident, further, that my colleagues shared enough of my view that they would agree to the types of courses I drafted. (48)

His assumptions turned out to be correct, but his detailed accounting of the personal costs of his paternal approach to WPAing makes clear that getting the job done quickly because it *can be done quickly* is not necessarily the best option.

With Hesse's cautionary tale in my head, I decided to approach curriculum development as a marathon rather than a sprint, despite the time-sensitive nature of the issue. Because I was just stepping into a program,

I wanted to support and build on the strengths of the already established community of full-time writing teachers by involving them in curricular decisions that directly affect their work lives more than any other group of teachers in the program. Short-term confusion seemed worth the potential long-term gain: a community of empowered teachers who could claim some ownership over the program and in relation to their work with students. First order of business, then, was to establish a composition advisory committee. In addition to leading curriculum review and development, members also observed and mentored new teachers, participated in pedagogy workshops, co-organized writing-related events in the program, and acted as liaisons between the committee and other teachers in the program.

Developing a curriculum philosophy and description for intermediate composition took nearly eighteen months. Some of our discussions were difficult and tense, punctuated by serious concerns about how both to define and structure a course and to create opportunities for teacher-invention. Without our bi-weekly discussion and debate, we would not have achieved a flexible curricular model, one that established a coherent assignment sequence with some built-in flexibility for experienced teachers. Slowing down helped us to create a collaborative space where program matters became the subject of engaged, often spirited dialogue resulting in curricular revision that represented our collective and diverse expertise and value systems.

The process was a good lesson in organizational time. Few changes happen quickly in large organizations. While pressure is constantly exerted on WPAs, creating conditions that are made to feel like emergencies, rarely does the reality bear this out. In fact, upper administration—including those who review and assess WPAs—often take the long view themselves, a discovery that surprised me during that period of curricular revision. For example, I documented our ongoing progress and goals for the upcoming year in my annual program report, which satisfied the department chair and dean; it was also featured on the provost's webpage. Documenting the process, making the deliberateness visible to those outside the program, was viewed as a valued form of accountability. Even though the revision was incomplete, the report made clear just how much work was involved in the process.

Still, I recognize that WPAs are not always in control of work pace. I came to appreciate this during revision of our placement procedures. Unlike the previous example, this project involved oversight from superiors—department head, dean, and provostal officers—and coordination with faculty from other colleges and staff outside the writing program, including representatives from Enrollment Services, the Registrar's office,

and our course management system. The process was set in motion by alarmist emails from staff members in Enrollment Services (ES), which led to equally reactionary responses from the Provost's office. The issue was a familiar one: in looking for ways to trim budgets, our in-house placement program was identified as "redundant." Staff members in ES generated data, without involvement or input from writing faculty, indicating that ACT scores agree 86% of the time with our in-house placement results. And, it was argued, ACT scores deliver this (questionably) equivalent information without any extra cost to the college or university and with a degree of efficiency impossible through a human-powered placement system.

Because placement has been embattled for a long time at my university, my colleagues and I strategized how to make this protracted history work in our favor, reminding one another that change has never come quickly to placement protocols at our school. Despite the rapid-fire emails that called for immediate action, we pulled back in hopes of changing the pace and tenor of the discussion. Thus, while the immediacy of the budgetary crash and the fiery rhetoric from an ES officer (a long-time critic of in-house placement) put writing program faculty on the defensive, we responded not with in-kind urgency but with a request for a meeting involving all interested parties and, following that, research to produce a deep data set upon which we could together make an informed decision about how to proceed. These moves immediately slowed the pace and created a way for us to get out from behind email. In the end, placement revision took seven months to revise and another year to finalize. During that time, we were able to focus on gradual arrival as our goal, using energy and resources efficiently by involving more people in the process who could speak about placement operations from different standpoints and resisting the impulse to proceed defensively. Moving forward in this way required considerable calm and a willingness to be in the moment puzzling through issues of validity and reliability, funding, training and support, etc., *with others*, many of whom we initially believed did not come to the table with good faith.

The outcome was modest, not ideal by any means, but it was not as bad as we initially expected. In the beginning, members of ES made clear that they would fight any efforts to preserve the in-house placement essay; their intent was to make an irrefutable case for using ACT scores, an argument that was especially timely given budgetary realities. They were not entirely successful. We ended up with a hybrid model that requires students who score a 20 or lower on the combined English and Writing exam to take our in-house placement; students who score above that are placed into our first-quarter writing course. The class of 2010 was the first to be placed according to this system, so the coming years will necessitate careful assessment

of student progress and placement validity. Again, the outcome is not ideal, but a work in progress that has resulted in improved relations between different offices and constituencies across the university.

What both examples have in common is valuing collaboration as a way to draw in more stakeholders to the writing program. This is slow work. Hypermiling is a generative metaphor here because it heightens awareness of pacing, encourages deliberate strategies to preserve energy, and imagines a sustainable environment that admits others into its creation. In its application, administration-as-hypermiling challenges the bureaucratic stance critiqued by contributors to *Writing Instruction in the Managed University* (Bousquet et al.), characterized by an unwillingness to view work practices critically. By altering the pace of work and its distribution among stakeholders, hypermiling sheds critical light on dominant bureaucratic ideology: speed and big agency are stable, assumed, fixed goods.

It's not a given, of course, that those who oversee and assess WPA work will value slow agency, even occasional forms of it—a concern for junior faculty administrators in particular. Thus, establishing initiatives as multi-phase projects (and realizing that most are) and publicly documenting completion of each phase—similar to the annual report referenced above—can help to control how administrative accomplishments are perceived and measured. The deliberative approach that tends to accompany slow agency can actually help build credibility with other administrators, many of whom value the transparency achieved through public documentation of programmatic change. Revealing process can be an effective way to highlight outcomes, data collection, and assessment, among other practices inclined to be institutional priorities. These components can also feed into scholarly projects since narrating challenges and improvised solutions to local issues can lead to expansive research projects relevant to the wider community of WPAs (cf. Frank Dew). Slowing one's pace is not equivalent to loafing; making that case, however, requires persuasive, strategic communication,

POSTSCRIPT: THE DOORSTOP

I often have a hard time slowing down while driving, as I do not like the indeterminate space between here and there, even though that space can be sometimes utterly liberating. Still, liking indeterminacy almost never happens without effort or coercion (i.e., a traffic jam). To suggest another means beyond hypermiling by which to reconsider pacing and action, particularly for those who have their doubts about the utility of this metaphor, I end with a story about things, agency, and administration.

My office door will not stay open. A bad hinge, crooked floor, or deviant airflow tugs the door closed, defying my open-door policy. When I first moved into the office in 2008, I used a jar of coins, inherited from the previous director, to prop it open. Then one day a colleague and former WPA who was preparing to retire stopped by to pass along items she rightly thought I might want. These included several decorative plates from Italy, a small stack of books, decades-old memos and hand-outs relating to the administration of the writing program, and a rickety wooden object that turned out to be a doorstop originally owned by Jim Berlin, rhetorical and cultural theorist, historian, and WPA in my department from 1981 to 1985 (see figure 1). Berlin is not generally remembered for being a WPA, and this essay offers no evidence to suggest he should be remembered as such. As lore in my department goes, Berlin wasn't particularly fond of administration. His interests lay elsewhere—most notably, in community activism and the scholarship he went on to produce, which continues to influence the field sixteen years after his untimely death from a sudden heart attack.

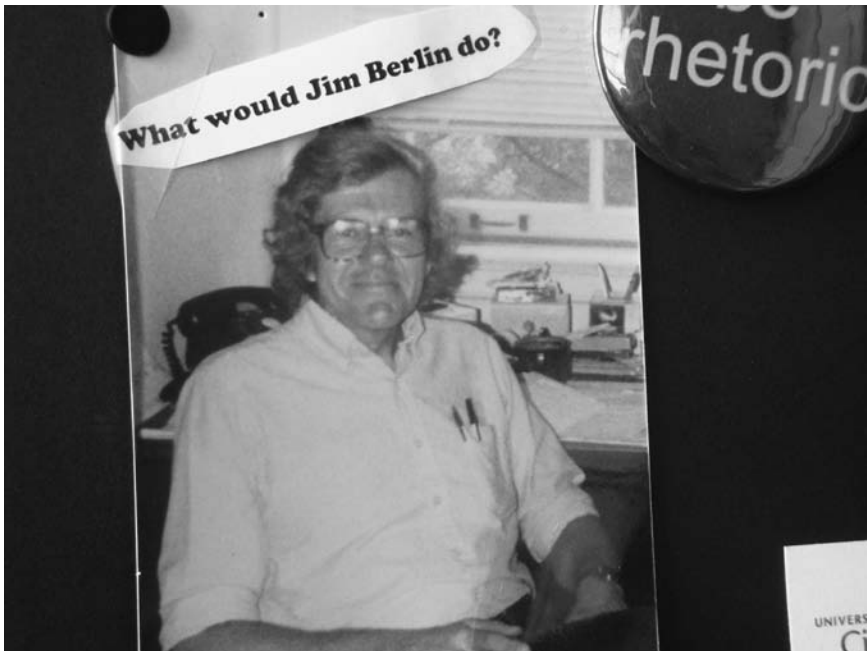


Figure 1: A photo of Jim Berlin that I found in a filing cabinet. I added the caption and tacked both to my door.

I never met Jim Berlin, but now I have his doorstop. Perhaps it's fitting that the doorstop is in the form of a miniature wine cask and bottle (see

figure 2). I remember reading Irwin Weiser's tribute to Berlin in the pages of the *Journal of Advanced Composition* where he noted that Berlin liked to party ("Memories"). Maybe he liked Spanish wine in particular; that might explain why the barely legible text on the miniature bottle is in Spanish. Initially, I thought the doorstop looked like an antique because of its utility, condition, and seeming rarity, but on closer inspection, I discovered a faded gift shop price tag on the bottom betraying its kitsch lineage.



Figure 2: Berlin's doorstop

This doorstop is not an object that I would ordinarily think much about. I'd expect to find something like it at a garage sale, indistinguishable from other similarly forgettable, ready-to-be-discarded knick-knacks, perhaps purchased impulsively at an airport gift shop. Yet, this doorstop has a respectable past and an ongoing present. Among other thoughts that have crossed my mind while sitting in my office with door propped open by Berlin's doorstop: What conversations did this doorstop permit and/or invite? Which ones were overruled by the heavy door, gravity, and/or a need for privacy—forces too heavy for this or any doorstop?

The doorstop is a professional heirloom and a symbol of place, relationships, past directors, and program evolution. A physical remainder, it represents the energy and evolution of a writing program. The doorstop has vitality, a capacity "not only to impede or block the will and designs of

humans but also to act as quasi agen[t] or forc[e] with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of [its] own” (Bennett viii). The doorstep is a tangible part of a larger field of tactile things circulating through this office, accumulations of time spent, work produced, bodies oriented toward this or that task. Such things include memos revealing placement battles stretching back to 1987, a worn copy of Janet Emig’s *The Composing Practices of Twelfth Graders*, a stack of weathered curriculum guides going back over 20 years, student portfolios, records of grievances, hundreds of program evaluations completed by former students, and files containing random program matter: photos, thank you notes, handwritten notes, drafts of memos with revision notes scrawled in the margins. Because the doorstep controls pace by stopping the slamming of the door, it stands out as an object with real consequences. When the door tries to swing closed, the doorstep, usually haphazardly pushed to a midway point in the doorway, prevents its closing. Due to the force of the door, the doorstep frequently inches, as if in slow motion, past the halfway point but never fails to hold its own. The doorstep essentially puts the brakes on the door’s inclination—to find the doorjamb and slam shut; it’s a physical embodiment of slowing motion.

In this sense, the doorstep is a lively non-human agent in our writing program. Bennett calls this form of agency “Thing-Power,” “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). Its thingness, embedded in a larger network of relations, produces a physical reminder (and literal instance) of gradual slowing and sometimes stopping, as means for preventing the fast slam. Of course there are moments when fast agency is appropriate and ethically necessary. But we should empower ourselves to slow down sometimes, grant ourselves enough agency to defer action in cases for which we need to be in the moment rather than racing against moments or believing that every request or problem requires an immediate response. This involves realizing that the program we oversee will not, in most cases, crumble if we fail to act under duress in each and every case. We can take advantage of the doorstep in order to preserve the energy we will inevitably need to address the various tasks that are an ordinary as well as extraordinary part of Writing Program Administration.

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