

# Thinking Ecologically: Rhetorical Ecological Feminist Agency and Writing Program Administration

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## ABSTRACT

*This article theorizes writing program administration in terms of place and ecology to create new understandings of how they function epistemologically and rhetorically for WPAs. To this end, I bring epistemologies of place and ecology to writing program administration to create more ways for WPAs to flourish as agents in their communities. First, I summarize key aspects of two alternative epistemologies that are more inclusive of women, minorities, and ecologies and that better reflect the messiness of life than positivist epistemology. Second, I outline a compatible rhetorical ecological feminist agency, where agency refers to “the capacity of the rhetor to act” (Geisler 12), in relationship to these epistemologies. Third, I illustrate how this theorizing can help WPAs administer their programs more effectively. My hope is to offer WPAs new possibilities for knowing and acting agentively in their working lives.*

I reject the rootlessness and ignorance of place typically ascribed to academics because of our intellectual orientation to a “boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths” and as a result of national job searches that mean most academics “are living wherever we could find work” (Zencey 15). I believe faculty can choose rootedness despite the vagaries of an academic job market. As I see it, the choice isn’t whether or not to choose rootedness but why and how writing program administrators (WPAs) in particular should choose to explore location as an epistemic identification.<sup>1</sup>

Unearthing “hidden subjectivities” like physical location disrupts assumptions that knowledge is discrete and knowers are neutral, universal, autonomous subjects who exercise mastery over the objects of their knowing (Code, “Taking” 19). Positivist epistemology dangerously privileges what bell hooks calls the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and advances anthropocentrism, an “overemphasis on the centrality of human

values and concerns at the expense of nonhuman ones” (qtd. in Preston xi). A great deal of scholarship in writing program administration destabilizes the former while the latter is emergent in our scholarship, largely in the form of discussions of place and context. Conversations about WPA places and spaces in *The Writing Program Interrupted: Making Space for Critical Discourse* begin to do this work. For example, Sidney Dobrin critiques the Council of Writing Program Administrators as an organization for its “guarded conservatism to protect its place” (57), while Lisa Emerson and Rosemary Clerehan explore how to resituate writing program administration outside of North American contexts. That “good assessment is local” has become a valued commonplace in writing assessment scholarship (Condon xiv).<sup>2</sup> *Organic Writing Assessment* is only one example; it extends Bob Broad’s dynamic criteria mapping into different academic contexts to strengthen the case for supplanting “fast-food style” assessment with “organic, localized assessment to nourish productive teaching and learning” (Broad et al. 2). Scholarship in community literacy and service learning also connects writing program administration to place. For instance, Eli Goldblatt’s *Because We Live Here* discusses his efforts to build connections between the writing program at Temple University and neighborhood literacy projects in Philadelphia.

I am encouraged by the rich attention to local context in WPA research. However, I would like to see us theorize writing program administration more fully in terms of place and ecology to create new understandings of how they function epistemologically and rhetorically for WPAs.<sup>3</sup> To this end, I bring epistemologies of place and ecology to writing program administration to create more ways for WPAs to flourish as agents in their communities. First, I summarize key aspects of two alternative epistemologies that are more inclusive of women, minorities, and ecologies and that better reflect the messiness of life than positivist epistemology. Second, I outline a compatible rhetorical ecological feminist agency, where agency refers to “the capacity of the rhetor to act” in relationship to these epistemologies (Geisler 12). Third, I illustrate how this theorizing can help WPAs become better at administrating, helping us to change things for the better.

#### FRAMING KNOWLEDGES: GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE AND ECOLOGICAL THINKING

I begin by introducing two related epistemologies that motivate my effort to persuade readers to include physical location and ecological thinking in doing writing program administration and that serve as a cornerstone of my argument for doing so. I draw on Christopher Preston’s epistemologi-

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cal project because of his close attention to the relationship between place and knowing and Lorraine Code's scholarship for her broader consideration of ecology, literally and metaphorically, as a new epistemological project.<sup>4</sup> Both projects significantly challenge positivist epistemology in useful ways for WPAs interested in disrupting divisions between place, ecology, and knowledge making.

In *Grounding Knowledge*, environmental philosopher Christopher Preston argues that "the very cognitive processes with which we contemplate our place in the world are themselves *derived from* and *wedded to* our physical locatedness" (xv emphasis original). Quite simply, place helps constitute knowledge. For example, people living by the ocean, in Tornado Alley, or in the desert Southwest all have values, beliefs, and practices grounded in those geographies. Moreover, encountering different environments productively disorients people's sensorimotor functions and creates confusion, a feeling that "reflects the struggle of the embodied imagination to hastily rearrange sensorimotor and cognitive structure so that a person can feel at home in the new situation" (Preston 132). I still have to remind myself that a hazy summer sky in Montana is not a sign of humidity as it is on the East Coast but a sign of fire season. Stepping off a roller coaster or a treadmill or encountering a dramatically new landscape for the first time challenges our senses, and the struggle to reorient is both physical and cognitive. This is a significant point because, as Preston goes on to argue, encountering environmental diversity supports cultural diversity. It helps us become more creative and flexible in dealing with the confusion of adjusting to differences and changes: "Walking long distances on snow, bundled up against the cold in Manitoba, requires significantly different embodied schemas from kayaking through the steamy swamps of the low country of South Carolina" (Preston 130).

Preston's work helps us consider how the natural and constructed environments we live in function epistemically. To draw the connection closer to the places in which WPAs work, consider the commonplace that rows versus circles of desks sponsor different kinds of knowledge, acquisition on the one hand and construction on the other. As we move from offices to classrooms and other meeting spaces, "even the most office-bound among us finds the phenomenal field reconfigured through direct or indirect contact with the spontaneity of the natural world" (Preston 45). We pull coats on or off to walk across campus to meetings, share our garden's abundance with colleagues, and observe encroaching darkness as winter approaches and increasing daylight hours in spring. While these experiences don't have a direct cause and effect relationship to writing program administration, Preston's research reassures us that "places draw together the natural, the

social, and the intellectual in such a way that they give us a location from which to understand the full complexity of our relationships to what lies around us” (107).

Faculty members also experience adjustment periods as we move to different institutional and geographic homes. Preston recognizes the difficulty of such physical transitions: “Relocating to a different area should be recognized as a painful time of mental reorganization rather than a harmless change of scenery” (100). That’s true whether you’re moving from a large public university to a small liberal arts college in the same city or from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountains. If we accept that academics live only in the world of the intellect, then we may struggle to observe and develop connections to where we live or to understand how location can be a stepping off point to understanding our writing programs and our campuses differently simply because such influences are not on our horizons.

Feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code’s most recent project, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Thinking*, shifts us from Prescott’s tight focus on knowledge making and place to take up ecology more broadly. That place constitutes knowledge figures as only part of Code’s project; she is concerned with larger ecological patterns and tensions. Ecology is “the study of habitats both physical and social where people endeavor to live well together” (Code, *Ecological* 25), and ecological thinking conceives of “place, embodied locatedness, and discursive interdependence” as “conditions for the very possibility of knowledge and action” (20). Code’s interests include the politics and ethics of situatedness and interconnection in studying the nature of knowledge. She advocates disrupting the “social imaginary of mastery,” or positivist epistemology, in favor of an epistemology characterized by a “responsible deliberative-negotiative citizenship” (Code 20). In doing so, she repositions knowers as

self-critically cognizant of being part of and specifically located within a social-physical world that constrains and enables human practices, where knowing and acting always generate consequences. For this subject, internal interdependence within communities and their external dependence on one another are given. . . . Acknowledging the partiality of their knowings and self-knowings, and cultivating an awareness of the effects of that knowing (however small, however local), ecological subjects are well placed, collectively and singly, to own and take responsibility for their epistemic-moral-political activity. (Code 5)

To summarize, ecological knowers are situated, embodied, interconnected persons whose recognition of the limits of perspectives positions them to

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be accountable for what they know and do because they are cognizant of politics of location and relation. For Code, *Silent Spring* exemplifies ecological thinking because Rachel Carson “read[s] evidence—say, for the power of DDT and other pesticides—together with the careful investigations of implications for human and other lives of profligate usage” (40), conducts research in the field and the laboratory, engages with multiple audiences (including scientists, government agencies, nature lovers), and recognizes that not just “the surface characteristics and internal specificities of organisms” matter but “understanding how those specificities work together” (51). These acts of knowledge making include practices like mapping inter-relations to examine patterns, willingly negotiating different perspectives, acknowledging multiple interpretations, advocating for others ethically, valuing scientific/disciplinary evidence and experiential evidence, and taking the “longer temporal and spatial view” (Code 45). It “is about imagining, crafting, articulating, endeavoring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation” (Code 24), or creating “habitats where people can live well together and respectfully with and within the physical/natural world” (Code 19).

Code’s scholarship helps WPAs consider our disciplinary knowledges and beliefs relationally, situationally, and ethically in the midst of the webs, patterns, and puzzles that surround us: competing and connecting departments and programs; local histories and happenings; different perspectives, alliances, and locations of faculty, staff, administrators, and students; and our own disciplinary knowledges, experiences, and affiliations. Ecological thinking helps WPAs resee everyday experiences like committee work. No committee is just a group of individuals with discrete knowledges and investments; rather, committee members may hold any number of locations and patterns and puzzles of affiliations crisscross within and beyond the immediacy of any given meeting. Knowing in this way means a WPA can observe and reflect on interactions in meetings like campus writing committees, writing center meetings, or department meetings differently, with an eye towards seeing where others locate themselves but also watching relationships in motion, ideas moving across perspectives, and positions oscillating in tension. Observing and mapping such patterns offers new knowledge of campus issues and helps us imagine new ways to interact with colleagues and advocate for our programs and writing students. Instead of discounting a faculty member (in a long line of different faculty members) who claims students can’t write as a histrionic stance, I can entertain and respond to that perspective in the context of larger conversations about what it means to write and learn to write on our campus (and nationally) and in terms of how our university’s writing requirements enable or neglect students’ needs as writers and faculty members’ needs when teaching writ-

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ing intensive courses. WPAs can and do practice the patience and planning a “long view” demands.

Christopher Preston’s and Lorraine Code’s epistemological projects both frame and prompt my case for WPAs to counter rootlessness not only by considering “connectedness to place” as a “key aspect of an integrated life” (Zencey 16), but also by exploring how an ecological framework (which includes recognizing place as constitutive of knowledge) leads to what Code refers to as ideal cohabitation, and what I want to identify as flourishing. In *GenAdmin: Theorizing WPA Identities in the Twenty-First Century*, my coauthors and I conclude our theorizing of GenAdmin as a productive identity for writing program administrators by sketching a concomitant ethics.<sup>5</sup> A WPA ethics of flourishing includes three interrelated dimensions: committing to hope, enacting epistemic responsibility, and seeking *eudaimonia* or the “good life.” We look to Paula Mathieu and Dale Jacobs to articulate “doing hope” as an active, social means of “working contextually, inventively, and creatively towards change while being equally creative in how we measure change” (Charlton et al. 177). Epistemic responsibility assumes we are accountable for where we stand as knowers, what we know, and how we put it to use. Responsible academic knowers

take the situations that we find ourselves in, add value to them, shape them to the extent that we can to meet our intellectual and pedagogical commitments. . . . but above all, expend our energy “*aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions*” to the extent that we can create that good life and those just institutions. (Hall 30, emphasis original)

While GenAdmin flourishing implicitly values much of ecological thinking (in part because we’re indebted to Lorraine Code’s work on epistemic responsibility), and reflects the rhetorical understanding of the significance of context, we did not explore rootedness to place and ecological thinking as means to flourish. I begin to do that work here by advocating for a specific kind of epistemological shift and, in the next section, developing a related definition of agency to articulate the agentive possibilities associated with these ways of knowing. My hope is that WPAs sympathetic to these epistemological projects will embrace new possibilities for knowing and acting in their working lives.

## DEFINING A RHETORICAL ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST AGENCY

Rhetoricians and feminists are among those who’ve examined the prospects for agency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries following postmodern critiques of the author. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell writes in “Agency:

Promiscuous and Protean,” “reports of the death of the author are greatly exaggerated” (5). Rather, the reliance on the autonomous agent or positivist knower has been supplanted by the understanding that “authors/rhetors are materially limited, linguistically constrained, historically situated subjects” (Campbell 5). Understanding that definitions of agency reflect models of knowledge reopens agentive possibilities for subjects who embrace grounding knowledge and ecological thinking. WPAs need robust definitions of agency that go beyond positivist epistemology to help them envision and undertake their jobs effectively.

To this end, I rely on feminist philosopher Chris Cuomo’s definition of moral agency as a starting point for articulating a rhetorical ecological feminist agency to help WPAs situate themselves as agents in respect to grounding knowledge and ecological thinking, epistemologies that help us choose rootedness and location as a subjectivity. I bring Cuomo’s definition of moral agency into dialogue with Andrea Lunsford’s concept “principled strategic rhetorical agency” (a definition of rhetorical agency that emerged during the first meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies in September 2003 and related publications) and my scholarship on feminist pragmatic rhetoric with Tarez Graban to offer a definition of agency that privileges subjects’ ecological and physical locations and is also explicitly rhetorical and ethical. In brief, a rhetorical ecological feminist agency is socially constructed, ecologically located and enacted, ethically responsible, rhetorically directed, and pragmatically oriented. It values experiential knowledge alongside disciplinary knowledge and recognizes that place and situation constitute knowledge. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency is valuable for WPAs for at least two reasons. First, WPAs always care about agency, and a consideration of the agentive potential associated with grounding knowledge and ecological thinking stimulates new perspectives on WPA agency. Second, WPAs value ethical decision making yet the word “ethical” is typically vaguely defined in our literature; Cuomo’s work, along with Preston’s and Code’s, offers renewed potential for ethical agentive activity because she locates agency in a specific feminist, environmental, and ethical framework called ecological feminism. Expanding ecological feminist agency via rhetorical agency and feminist pragmatic rhetoric renders ecological feminist agency more explicitly rhetorical and more fruitful for WPA rhetoricians who regularly need “to respond productively to what may seem an endless stream of irresolvable dilemmas” (Leverenz 106).

Cuomo’s ecological feminism “focuses on the links and patterns among the treatment of oppressed, exploited, or undervalued beings and entities—that is, among forms and instances of oppression and degradation, and common ethical and ontological bases for maltreatment” (7). It brings

together women's oppression and the degradation of nature without the problematic essentialism characteristic of much ecofeminist work where "woman" gets too simply equated with "nature." As Kim Hall puts it, "an ecological feminist must also claim, inhabit, and negotiate spaces between nature/culture" (81). Like Preston and Code, Cuomo's concern is with the knowing subject as local, embodied, and living in relation to human and non-human others. Like Preston, she challenges the limits of anthropocentrism and envisions her ethics as relevant for women and non-humans (although she doesn't go into detail on the subject of non-humans). Code acknowledges that ecological thinking and ecological feminism make "good allies" (*Ecological Thinking* 17). Finally, Cuomo's work with ecological feminism is oriented towards the kind of flourishing I seek here.

Moral agency is an "ethical starting point" for Cuomo's theorizing (52), and she enumerates this concept throughout *Feminism and Ecological Communities*. In general, moral agency is about making deliberate choices, choosing the "best" course of action or making the "best" decision in situations with competing choices and definitions of "best." Moral agency, Cuomo's term for the ecological feminist agency she outlines, combines the following five characteristics: moral agency is social (53), selves are embodied and fluid (87), moral agents are responsible to and respectful of living entities and ecosystems (72), moral agents practice deliberation and decision making, and moral agents are pragmatically oriented towards changing things for the better rather than towards specific ends (76, 109). Cuomo's ecological feminist agency entails social, pragmatic, and ethical beliefs that de-emphasize "liberal emphases on atomistic individuals" in favor of locating people in biotic and abiotic communities (111), advancing living with others as a practice of ethical decision-making, and connecting experiential and scientific knowledge making to action. Moreover, an active resistance to oppressions weaves throughout these features.

Critiques of Cuomo's flourishing tend to focus on rhetorical concerns, specifically questions about who gets to decide how to define flourishing, who "should" flourish, and "how to prioritize competing claims for flourishing" (Zack 59). For Naomi Zack, these concerns necessitate heuristics to help people practice the "judicious valuing" entailed in enacting flourishing (59). Augmenting ecological feminist agency with rhetorical agency redresses this exigency because rhetoricians recognize the responsibilities involved in decision-making and have any number of heuristics and theories for analyzing and composing texts (i.e. discourse, images, situations) in context. The strategies of decision-making, interpreting, creating (or inventing), and acknowledging context that Cuomo identifies as part of decision-making are all rhetorical practices. The realm of rhetoric is precisely this

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world of situated human judgment, the Freirean work of reading and writing our world. WPA rhetoricians are well suited to address these kinds of questions.

Andrea Lunsford's concept "principled strategic rhetorical agency" offers helpful elaboration for crafting the rhetoricity of a rhetorical ecological feminist agency.<sup>6</sup> Her definition acknowledges three key dimensions of rhetorical agency: "agency is always contingent but . . . can be adopted strategically, and rigorously, to bring about desired action," agency "mediates 'between individual action and the cultural environment in which individuals speak and act,'" and agency gets enacted in a "limited, rigorous and principled way" (Leff and Lunsford 65). A principled strategic rhetorical agency points to the social and contextual dimensions of rhetorical agency, the alliance between rhetoric and action, and the idea that rhetorical action is ethical action. Rhetorical agency, then, is adopted, constructed, situated, and deployed in context and among persons; it is ethically motivated and enacted. Augmenting rhetorical agency with Cuomo's ecological feminist agency impresses upon WPAs the fact that ecology goes further than context in making the critical point that interactions between living beings and physical and biological environments constitutes subjectivity and enables and constrains agentive possibilities.

Expanding ecological feminist agency via feminist pragmatic rhetoric, a specific rhetorical theory, renders ecological feminist agency more explicitly rhetorical even as it reinforces key principles of ecological feminism. Feminist pragmatic rhetoric is motivated by the feminist goal to end oppressions and the pragmatic understanding that we can change our lives and our world for the better by acting thoughtfully on our beliefs. Because subjectivity shapes knowledge, making knowledge is contingent and interpretive. In addition, knowledge guides action and action has the potential to change beliefs and redirect action through reflection. Like ecological feminism, feminist pragmatic rhetoric ascribes to pragmatic philosophy, seeks to disrupt oppression, and is a "thoughtful practice" (Cuomo 143). Feminist pragmatic rhetoric is a hopeful rhetoric, one where knowledge and discourse work in service of reaching a vision of change holistically and specifically without being prescriptive.

One site in which this cycle of experiential knowledge making, pragmatic reflection, and action gets enacted is in discourse; dialogic negotiation is feminist pragmatic rhetoric's primary discursive method.<sup>7</sup> Feminist pragmatic rhetors are responsible knowers who practice a willingness to believe others (until evidence proves otherwise), aim to keep conversations productive, acknowledge subjectivity matters in discourse, and recognize rhetors enter discourse with an openness to changing their own mind even

as they seek to persuade others to entertain different beliefs. Ultimately, this model revises unsatisfying discourse practices that end without useful resolution because of differences. It is particularly useful for WPAs who regularly find themselves in conflicts on the job because of such challenges as the limited views of writing extant on many campuses and represented in national media outlets and because of the conflicting desires faculty, writing students, and administrators express about writing instruction. When ecological feminist agents are feminist pragmatic rhetoricians, they do their best to make good—responsible and located—choices about how to interact and communicate with others, how to act as members of groups, and how to live respectfully, especially when discursive conflicts seem inevitable.

Enacting this agency can arguably serve WPAs well because it both reinforces commonplace beliefs in our discipline, like social construction and civic values, and it offers new ways of thinking and acting agentively, particularly when it comes to considering the interplay between human (and non-human) locations and interrelations. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency encourages WPAs to recognize negotiating decisions in place as part of our responsibility as individuals who engage with other living organisms in biotic and abiotic communities, where the means and ends we pursue are no less ethical for being open to possibilities yet aligned with a specific ethics. Consider Debra Frank Dew's point that "WPAs do not just enjoy a textual relationship with a subject matter; we employ our rhetorical training to establish a sound writing enterprise within the local context" (W41). WPA scholarship considers many methods, challenges, and strategies to do this work effectively because doing it is much harder than it sounds, and we need theories and practices for doing it well. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency can arguably help us do this work even better because it forwards a specific, robust ethical and ecological identification to enact epistemologies where place constitutes knowledge and embodied knowers situated among other knowers in place replaces positivist models and assumptions about knowers and agents.

## ENACTING A RHETORICAL ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST AGENCY

The possibilities for enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency are endless, whether you are a solo-WPA or part of a team of WPAs, a graduate student WPA or a senior scholar and WPA, or whether you are part of an independent writing program or firmly ensconced in an English Department. Here, I offer three ways to enact a rhetorical ecological feminist agency as a means to help WPAs imagine ways to adopt this agency in their own lives. First, I describe a scenario related to composition place-

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ment where I would have benefitted from this agentive perspective. Second, I discuss holistic reasons for WPAs to embrace a rhetorical ecological feminist agency that pertain to a sense of responsibility to the environment and other people. Third, I outline this agency at work in the context of a curricular revision. These examples illuminate what a rhetorical feminist ecological agency can offer WPAs, but they aren't intended as prescriptive because this agency is situated and contingent; quite simply, the dynamics of place, ecology, and interrelations among people on the ground help shape the situations we encounter, the decisions we make.

The first scenario identifies the kinds of gaps in communication and understanding that occur when a strong sense of location and an awareness of the connections and patterns among members of a university community are not fully present. When I was in my second year as the Director of Composition, a solo WPA position, I was asked to help implement a new Board of Regents (BOR) policy on composition placement, one that, like many colleges and universities across the nation, uses minimum ACT and SAT test scores and a local placement to determine whether students need to take a developmental writing course, a first year composition course, or an advanced composition course. My role was to adapt the current placement test and process (which I oversee as part of my responsibilities) to the new guidelines and communicate the changes to staff members in advising, orientation, and the registrar's office. At the time, I saw my task as largely organizational (regardless of what I believe about the value of the policy simply because the time was over to discuss the nature of or perceived need for the policy) and, in fact, simpler than the current placement process since fewer students would be required to take an on campus placement test administered during their summer campus orientation.

I was confused when I found pockets of resistance to the policy and to my efforts to revise the placement testing process accordingly. I later realized that I proceeded as I would have at my previous job, on a campus where lines of communication were clearer and faculty, staff, and administrators would have been more collectively prepared to respond to and implement a new BOR policy in composition. I was unfamiliar with some key aspects of my new institutional place, including a resistance to BOR policies in general on the grounds that they are often unaccompanied by funding and don't necessarily include stakeholders in the policy making process. I wrongly assumed that in the course of developing the policy, discussions about the nature of the policy included relevant staff people and faculty members. In fact, key staff people felt that they weren't well-informed by the administration and lacked agency in the creation of the policy, never mind its implementation. In retrospect, I better understand resistance on

my campus to BOR policies. What I first saw as resistance to placement policy implementation was more of a conscious/unconscious resistance to mandates that aren't necessarily well-known, well-understood, well-valued, or well-funded. I misinterpreted the situation and my role largely because I wasn't thinking about my current location, my new campus's institutional ecology and its web of relations. Instead, I was overlaying on that situation practices, values, and knowledges I was familiar with from another institution.

A rhetorical ecological feminist agency affords WPAs assigned a particular, wide-ranging duty when new to a job the opportunity to consider patterns, relationships, and discursive needs in the specific institutional place. In this case, it would have encouraged me to imagine, interpret, and explore the links and patterns or even gaps in communication in relation to staff people who should've been included in conversations about the policy sooner. It might have exposed the tensions between my experiential knowledge with BOR policies and the experiential knowledge of those on my new campus. It could have alerted me to the oppressions at play among those who felt disenfranchised by the method of the policy's creation even as they needed to adopt it, that is, to the ethics of helping others, particularly staff in advising and orientation, flourish in the context of putting the policy in place. Through conversation and observation, I could have developed different strategies to implement the policy responsible not just to the implementation of the policy and the students, but also the emotions and logics of the staff members involved.

Dialogic communication would have been an excellent strategy to use for talking face to face with people who seemed confused or frazzled by the change to explain the decisions we could make and invite others into shared decision making processes where possible to increase their agentive potential in at least implementing the policy. Had I thought through the potential differences in institutional location, I would have been better positioned to explore patterns of relations between faculty, staff, administrators, and BOR policy makers in relationship to what I already knew about policy implementation in general. In other words, a rhetorical ecological feminist agency calls for a shift in perspective from an autonomous and linear approach to implementing a task with a deadline to negotiating the best version of a policy implementation possible at the time, knowing it can be adapted over time as we learn more about the local implications of the policy. This approach would better mediate between action and location and respond to the complex webs of relations in which we are all implicated. The whole situation may have changed; people involved, including me, may have changed their minds about the implementation of the policy as well

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as beliefs and practices about how faculty, staff, and administrators on our campus might respond, individually and collectively, to BOR policies.

The prior scenario focuses largely on institutional ecologies; a more holistic even elusive scene for enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency is one that takes up environmental ecologies and ethics. I refer to the commitment to and respect of human and non-human others and to living in place well as holistic because there is no obvious cause and effect relationship between, for example, knowing the flora and fauna of the place you (now) call home and being a more effective WPA. However, WPAs can engage the bioregional premise that “people who resolve to live in a place indefinitely with deep commitment, no matter what their politics or philosophical views may be, are the key to that place’s future” (Thayer 258).<sup>8</sup> Part of the argument is that “If we are not directly tied to the land through our vocation, then we must attach to it by avocation” because “To really *belong* is to *immerse oneself within*; there are no substitutes for ‘being there’” (Thayer 85, emphasis original). Yet, as Eric Zencey observes, academics are often rootless, denizens of ideas not places. Derek Owens questions why composition studies largely ignores not simply place but the ecological degradation and ecological injustices rife in our world: “Why are these matters so absent in English and composition studies, whereas our work has been so radically transformed and enhanced by our willingness to explore race, class, and gender? To what do we owe this inexcusable lapse?” (366). Why separate ourselves from place when the earth “supplies the conditions and possibilities for everything we do,” and all our thinking “takes place against the background of the systemic impoverishment of many of those biotic systems in the face of increasing populations and consumption patterns” (Preston xii-xiii)?

Instead of asking why WPAs should care about environmental ecology, we might follow Owens and Preston and ask why many of us don’t. Because “graduate education is the site where our disciplinary identities are formed and internalized” (DiLeo 9), because job searches may take faculty far afield, and because publication is largely a disciplinary accomplishment, it takes time and effort for faculty to affiliate with a new institution and a new place. Hiring practices transplant faculty to new locations and leave them on tenterhooks while they earn tenure; as a result, pretenure faculty may not feel able to commit to a new place or develop community projects because they feel temporary. New hires may not realize the extent to which being a member of a department on a small liberal arts campus differs from being a graduate student in a privileged program at a research university. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency can help students and faculty, whether they stay in place for four years, seven years, or indefinitely, attend

to such differences in place and even shift from being “temporary and rootless occupant[s]” to inhabitants (Orr 102), “balanced, whole persons” (Orr 101), with a willingness to live in place and act for that place and its inhabitants. A rhetorical ecological feminism helps WPAs value and build connections to a new life place and campus colleagues as well as link local to global issues.

Living in a place knowledgeably and respectfully encourages commitment to its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Ways to build that commitment include learning about the local landscape, ecosystem, watershed, indigenous cultures, environmental history, climate, geography; workplace infrastructure, including sources for water, electricity, food, heat, and problems the workplace imposes on the environment; workplace history, current events, and future planning, and life place practices of those in the workplace and community. For instance, I’ve begun to learn about my adopted bioregion by observing the natural world, talking to locals, consulting guides like *Plants of the Rocky Mountains*, following local news on Twitter, and visiting websites to read about topics like local watershed restoration. Doing this kind of research helps transplants like me learn to live in and care about a new place and develop a willingness to understand people and help solve problems locally and cooperatively with an eye to the present and future. Understanding what it means to work at a land grant university or an historical women’s college can help you understand your campus’s and new state’s history as well as present challenges and strengths.

WPAs, new to their campuses or not, can adapt pedagogical mapping activities taught in composition courses to get to know their campus location in order to invent programmatically mindful of ecological location. Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh use deep maps to teach students to “consider the places they inhabit” and develop civic identities (133). One assignment asks students to “draw a map that is rich with the places and pathways you inhabit today” and compose a narrative legend to analyze and synthesize their maps, paying attention to patterns and questions about “both what they *did* know about the places they inhabit as well as what they *did not* know” (Brooke and McIntosh 135, 137). Place-based assignments like this one arguably help students recognize that “rhetorical action comes into being as the writer shapes a clear understanding of the *place of the action*” (Brooke and McIntosh 147). Nedra Reynolds’ scholarship on mapping builds, in part, off the concept of deep maps, too.<sup>9</sup> Her study of mental maps in Leeds shows how mapping “helps us understand the social production of space and people’s experiences in space” (86). Where we go, don’t go, and the places in between say quite a lot about our identities, including race, class, and gender. Reynolds’ students found, for instance,

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that some areas of Leeds weren't safe for them to go because of crime while others were places that "belonged" to other social groups," and still others were shared or contested spaces (92). Students in her Mapping URI project similarly explored, engaged and critiqued their campus environs by studying unfamiliar areas. This kind of mapping helps students consider the ways oppression is located in habitats and patterns of movement. For instance, a walking tour around the University of Tennessee's Chattanooga campus draws attention to significant racial and environmental histories in the presence of a Confederate cemetery across the street, a memorial to the Trail of Tears near campus, and a well-documented history of environmental toxins in the air and water that have been under restoration since the late 1960s.

Imagine what WPAs can learn from mapping the daily pathways and places we inhabit. Imagine what you might learn from asking your WPA or writing colleagues to make their own maps and then using them to catalog and reflect on patterns and divergences. Asking questions about such maps is instructive for reflecting on the ways we move about our campuses and communities and using this information to construct and reconstruct our programs. The questions Brooke and McIntosh ask students to answer can guide WPAs, too: "What people or groups of people do you associate with different locations on your map?" "What places do you walk, ride, or drive by regularly but never enter (outdoor and indoor places)?" and "What is not on your map?" (137). This analytical activity can help WPAs learn more about their workplace and colleagues. A more explicitly writing program mapping project might mean mapping places on campus where writing pedagogy, student writers, writing assessment or WPAs themselves are welcomed, excluded, or derided. Following Reynolds, studying the politics of place and writing spatially is a means to get to know circulating beliefs about writing in different parts of campus and potential sites of oppression and support (of student writers, writing pedagogy, etc.) from a different perspective. Practicing such ecological thinking helps WPAs discover "a whole new energy for shaping the state of the places where we will live, and the kinds of places we help those locations become" (Brooke and McIntosh 147). For instance, in mapping my typical movements on campus, I notice I rarely venture onto the south side of campus where many of the hard sciences are housed. If I want to hire a professional and technical writer, I should physically and mentally go over to that part of campus to learn about how such a position might support scientific writing instruction on my campus. By doing so, I can increase my awareness of and knowledge about writing in different places on campus and thus better—that is, more strategically and more effectively help construct the writing program on my campus.

Knowing our place and developing a sense of responsibility to it gives us a shared context for communicating with others, enabling our abilities to listen, talk, and learn. To know something of my colleagues as gardeners, hunters, or fly fishermen helps me talk informally with them to know them differently and them me, shifting our perspectives on each other, and thus potentially changing how we engage one another in committee work or departmental politics. As Thayer writes,

*People of considerably different backgrounds, and opinions can share feelings of belonging, identification, and caring for specific natural places.*

In the process of learning about a life-place, many can find new common ground with people whose political opinions they might otherwise or previously have disagreed. (254)

Sharing a life place can help people who disagree over campus issues uncover some mutual values (though potentially different ways of experiencing those values) to aid dialogue and campus work. Learning a colleague you regularly disagree with volunteers for an organization you admire can help you build new lines of connection and communication that support more productive dialogue on committees or in departments.

Curricular revision offers another opportunity to engage a rhetorical ecological feminist agency. The first year composition course at my university is taught largely by teaching assistants earning a master's degree in literature, English teaching, environmental studies, philosophy, or an MFA in poetry, fiction, or non-fiction. The turnover is rapid since teaching assistants teach one class each semester for only two, three, or four semesters depending on their appointment. A couple of long-term lecturers (one of whom mentors teaching assistants (TAs) and develops pedagogical workshops in her role as the Composition Coordinator), and two to three part-timers, often graduates of the program, round out the teaching staff. While the philosophy of the program, which draws from critical pedagogy and genre studies, remains fairly stable, the focus of assignments shifted too dramatically from year to year because I couldn't quite find a match that worked for our student body comprised largely of first generation students from Montana and nearby states, teaching assistants from across the United States, and specific campus and community ecologies.

I revised the first year composition curriculum following my participation in a two-day faculty development workshop on ways to incorporate sustainability into undergraduate courses. Working with a group of twenty colleagues in a cross-disciplinary campus workshop, called Green Thread, significantly motivated me to experiment with a focus on sustainability because I learned more about my campus's and my community's signifi-

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cant commitments to sustainability, and I received support from colleagues across campus as I shared my thinking.<sup>10</sup> As the only expert in rhetoric and composition in the composition program, I often feel alone in inventing the program; participating in the Green Thread workshop gave me an opportunity to invent with others who also feel a responsibility to live in place well and have seen the benefits of doing so for individuals and communities. Recognizing that agency is in fact “formed within and responsive to . . . communities” means even solo-WPAs like me don’t have to invent and design curricular changes alone (Cuomo 53).

Through this collaborative work, I realized sustainability was a potentially productive way to shape first year composition on our campus for students and their teachers, in part because it offers a powerful way to encourage new students and new teachers to inhabit where they live, work, and study. First, ecocomposition is a good curricular fit on my campus, where the College of Forestry and Conservation and the Environmental Studies Program are nationally recognized, where we have minors in climate change and wilderness and civilization, where the creative writing program’s legacy includes poet Richard Hugo and writer William Kittredge, and where students and faculty generally share a love of the outdoors. Second, the new curriculum invites students to live in place, to link local and global issues, and to know about and care about where they are and where they are coming from as means to speak and act on behalf of a place and its inhabitants. In this case, the social networks and places I entered through Green Thread gave me the knowledge, inspiration, and confidence to develop a new curricular focus that helps students find their place as well.

Overall, teaching assistants thrive in this new curriculum. Helping first year TAs orient themselves to a new town, campus, and program has reframed the TA orientation by reminding me and other seasoned teachers what it’s like to be new to the campus and program while helping us to encourage new TAs to think ecologically about their new endeavor. I ask TAs to write a life place essay in orientation, and not only does writing this assignment invite them to do the kind of writing they’ll ask of their students, but they also begin to explore their new place. Doing so helps TAs new to a rural place reflect on metrocentric perspectives they may unconsciously bring to the program and the classroom. In the past, some TAs have criticized our students for their interests in rodeo or hunting and their lack of knowledge of *The New Yorker*. Learning about their new town in western Montana helps new TAs see where they are and who they are teaching relationally and more holistically than they might otherwise. As TAs learn the curriculum, pursue activities to develop their own approaches to this course, and adapt common assignments to reflect their interests and

strengths, they develop as agents, too. TAs have pursued such innovations as developing service learning components to assignments, emphasizing social issues of sustainability, and inviting students to compose digital life place narratives. Understanding agency as social opens up opportunities for recognizing and thus more explicitly responding to the ways membership in a community extends agency and invites commitment to a location. This is also true on urban and suburban campuses, as Derek Owens' discussion in *Sustainability and Composition* illustrates.

When where we are is part of who we are, then as we move between places and live temporarily in them, we may come to hold more complex understandings of ourselves and others. For instance, the personal academic essay assignment first year students at my university compose on sustainability issues urges them to explore ways they construct their identities in a writing situation where "writers do not have recourse to an 'authentic,' independent, or centered self," and they learn the "constructed and interpretive nature of experiential discourse" (Spigelman xvi). More broadly, I've quite simply come to unapologetically agree with Owens, Orr, and others that sustainability should be an academic focus across disciplines and departments to change thinking about humans' relationships within and responsibilities towards biotic and abiotic ecosystems. My participation in the Green Thread workshop, as well as my reading in ecocomposition and ecological feminism, empowered me to articulate and act on this ethical stance as a WPA. The clarity, yet flexibility of making this commitment is agentive in that it gives me a direction in which to guide curricular revision, a collective conversation to inspire it, and a specific framework for acting ethically in my other WPA commitments.

Finally, enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency has lead me to construct a curriculum I believe in and one that seems more productive for students, teachers, and other program affiliates than past curricula we've used. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency offers an ethics and epistemology to guide program decision-making towards flourishing for all of those involved, including teachers, students, and colleagues. Second, as a specific ethics I can name and stand behind, I find it compelling—worth enacting and pursuing, and worth persuading TAs and students to embrace every semester. I am persuaded that ecological location matters and that we can reinhabit our campuses and our programs. A rhetorical ecological feminist perspective entails beliefs about agency I value for myself and for others: agency is social; individual agents are embodied and fluid; agents have a responsibility to and respect for humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems; agents are rhetoricians capable of making complex decisions; agents are pragmatic in the sense that they seek to change things for the better in com-

municative relationships with others. This article grew out of my belief that if we ask students to interrogate issues of place, ecology, and sustainability in their composition courses, so too can we ask ourselves, as WPAs, where these issues surface in writing program administration. Doing so has energized and improved my local program. Thinking ecologically, that is, drawing on grounding knowledge and ecological thinking through a rhetorical ecological feminist agency, supports not only my agency as a WPA but supports the entire enterprise as students, teachers, and colleagues develop a sense of connection and commitment to one another, the program, and the campus community and environment. Ultimately, the prospects for changing how we live on our campuses by embracing rootedness and location as epistemic are tantalizing for the prospects of flourishing in our world.

## NOTES

1. I want to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article and Rebecca Jones for helpful revision suggestions.
2. Chris Gallagher cautions us that “local assessments might *not* serve local needs and interests well” because “they may be poorly constructed, unaligned (or misaligned) with curriculum and instruction, and even blatantly unfair and discriminatory” (11). He proposes, rather, that good assessment depends both on “local *and* disciplinary values” (20).
3. I am thinking of the formative contributions *Natural Discourse* (Dobrin and Weisser, 2002), *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* (Reynolds, 2004), and *The Locations of Composition* (Keller and Weisser, 2007) bring to ecocomposition.
4. Lorraine Code acknowledges that her work on habitat “as a place to know” (*Ecological* 37) “is in some respect consonant with the position Preston develops in his *Grounding Knowledge*” (*Ecological* n31, 37).
5. GenAdmin means “a group or generation of writing program administrators whose graduate careers prepared them to do WPA work in some form, who came to see administration as a core component of their professional and intellectual identities, and who pursued or accepted administrative roles before tenure to satisfy personal or professional needs” (Charlton et al. xi). In other words, GenAdmin is a chosen subject position for WPAs.
6. “How ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?,” also the title of Cheryl Geisler’s report, was one of the four major topics discussed at the working meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (Geisler 9).
7. For a discussion of dialogic negotiation, see Kathleen J. Ryan and Tarez Samra Graban, “Theorizing Feminist Pragmatic Rhetoric as a Communicative Art for the Composition Practicum,” *CCC* 61.1 (September 2009): W251-W273.

8. In *Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Robert Thayer defines bioregion as “literally and etymologically a ‘life-place’—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can variously be defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region” (3). Bioregion offers a different way to form and organize our understanding of place by emphasizing environmental features that have historically shaped how people live in different landscapes.

9. Reynolds and Brooke and McIntosh are all indebted to William Least Heat Moon’s use of the term deep maps, which he used “to describe his rendering of the history, geobotany, cultural significance, and personal significance of one county in Kansas” (qtd. in Brooke and McIntosh 131).

10. According to the Greening UM web site, “The Green Thread Initiative is intended to infuse issues of ecological, social, and economic sustainability into courses across the UM curriculum.” Green Thread is modeled off of the Ponderosa Project at Northern Arizona University and the Piedmont Project at Emory University.

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