theories and methodologies

Introduction to "How We Write Now"

ANGELIKA BAMMER

HOW WE READ (CLOSELY, DISTANTLY, SYMPTOMATICALLY, AGAINST THE GRAIN, OR ON THE SURFACE) HAS BEEN VIGOROUSLY DEBATED, AND *PMLA* has helped foster the debate. Distant reading as defined by Franco Moretti is the focus of a recent Theories and Methodologies feature in *PMLA*, and two forthcoming issues will address "cultures of reading."[1] Whether we define ourselves as English teachers, public intellectuals in the humanities, or literary or cultural studies scholars, this newly energized attention to how we read reminds us that the critical practice of reading is foundational to our work. No matter what else we do (collect interviews, analyze films, pursue ethnographic fieldwork), attentive reading is our primary method of analysis and assessment. How we do it and to what ends warrant thoughtful discussion.

How we write has garnered considerably less attention. Yet it is arguably of no less importance. This *PMLA* feature on writing in the humanities in the twenty-first century addresses—and begins to redress—the resulting imbalance in public discussions about how we do our work.

When I proposed this topic, my premise was that writing is as fundamental to our work as reading—by some measures even more so. Conventionally, writing has been, and into the foreseeable future will continue to be, the primary means of humanistic knowledge production. However, while we convey what we know and think through writing, it is not simply a vehicle for *delivering* knowledge. It is a way of *acquiring* knowledge. Through writing, we figure things out, including what we think and what something means. Writing is a form of analysis, a method of interpretation, and a mode of thinking. In this light, a critical inquiry into the state of writing in contemporary higher education is not just timely and relevant; it is overdue.

In a sporadic and disaggregated way, this inquiry has already started. Several recent studies have addressed the state of academic writing from a range of perspectives, including how and why academics "learn to write badly" (Billig), how to write elegantly and why style matters (Sword), why clarity and accessibility are not necessar-

ANGELIKA BAMMER is an associate professor of interdisciplinary humanities in the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory University. Her coedited volume *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (Palgrave Macmillan) and an expanded new edition of her monograph, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (Peter Lang), appeared in 2015, and her study of the transgenerational transmission of history, *Born After: A German Reckoning*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Press in 2018. Her next project, a book tentatively titled "Not Reconciled: The Wounds of History and the Work of Memory," explores the concept of memory work in relation to collective memory.

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ily virtues (Culler and Lamb), how to write "otherwise" (Stacey and Wolff), and what the future of scholarly writing might look like (Bammer and Boetcher Joeres). Special issues of *Critical Inquiry* (*Comics and Media*, Spring 2014) and *Representations* (*Description across the Disciplines*, Summer 2016) have expanded the discussion by moving the exploration of scholarly forms and their heuristic potential beyond textual to visual and hybrid forms and beyond the humanities to the social and natural sciences.

To move an emergent discussion forward, "How We Write Now" builds on the work initiated by these previous studies. Our focus here is the state of writing as it is practiced and produced within the institutional framework of the twenty-first-century (North American) academy. However, the stakes, I believe, go beyond writing. Collectively, the pieces assembled in this special feature direct attention to one of the most consequential, yet largely undertheorized and unexplored, aspects of work in the contemporary humanities: the forms in which we conduct and present our scholarship. Perhaps a day will come when, instead of only asking one another (if and when we ask at all), "What are you writing?" we will ask, with the same degree of interest, "How are you writing it?"

These are challenging times for academics in the humanities. Given the dismal job market, steady decrease in the percentage of students majoring in the humanities, and shrinking number of foreign language and literature departments, the state of academic writing might not appear to be an urgent issue. Yet it is affected by—and might potentially affect—these other structural considerations. A number of converging factors have put pressure on the ways we write: the continuing exploration of interdisciplinary modes of inquiry, the emergence of new-media technologies and cultural regimes of communication, the diversion of resources away from the humanities, and the increasing urgency of engaged public scholarship. These same pressures, however, also present opportunities that challenge us to be purposeful about how we conduct our scholarship and urge us to reexamine the norms and conventions that have defined our work. At the same time, they invite us to explore alternatives: to innovate, experiment, and test the possibilities, at once communicative and epistemological, of new forms of inquiry and representation. This invitation to think expansively and creatively, to probe the potential of established forms at the same time we explore alternatives, is based on the assumption that humanistic scholarship could increase its impact if we were more intentional about the forms that shape our work.

To someone under pressure to publish, thinking about or experimenting with form (Which voice will I use? Should I include images? Can I tell a story?) might seem a rather low priority. When writing becomes production, and production is measured in terms of quantity (How much can I produce and how quickly can I deliver?), aesthetics and pleasure can seem irrelevant, even encumbering, like excess baggage on a raft in high seas. I have heard graduate students angrily counter appeals to write more aesthetically pleasing prose by saying, "It's fine for *you* to talk about the art of scholarly writing! We have to first get a job. Then we have to get tenure. If it's not too late, we can think about pleasure and the aesthetics of form then."

I believe that questions of form are foundational to our work as academics, public intellectuals, and scholarly writers. Questions like Whom am I writing to? Whom am I writing for? Whom am I writing as? What do I want my writing to do? What is my writing doing to me? cannot be relegated to the privileged preserve of tenured academics speaking to other academics. They are critical to our well-being, if not survival, as engaged thinkers with knowledge and ideas to impart that we believe are meaningful and as intellectuals committed to the work of the humanities.

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How we write matters. The power and effectiveness of our work hang in the balance.

In the mid-1970s Roland Barthes considered the dilemma intellectuals face when the expression of ideas is regulated through the marketplace. The problem, he proposes, is not the ideas. "The pleasure of writing, of producing," he observes, is evident "on all sides." The problem is the production context. "The circuit being commercial," he explains, "free production remains clogged, hysterical, and somehow bewildered; most of the time, the texts and the performances proceed where there is no demand for them." In such a context, he concludes, the pleasure and power we could derive from writing if we could freely choose what and how to write are thwarted, and the utopian potential of writing predicated on the vision of "a free society (in which pleasure would circulate without the intermediary of money) . . . reverts . . . to the apocalypse" (81).

Between Utopia and Apocalypse

Four decades later, where are we now in relation to writing? Is the process of production still, as Barthes described it, "clogged, hysterical, and somehow bewildered"? Are we still, "most of the time," writing texts for which "there is no demand"? Or have we moved forward and reached a point where "the pleasure of writing, of producing" can circulate more freely and be more fully felt?

The negative case is relatively easy to make (and has been made extensively in recent times). As production demands in the corporate university increase, those of us employed (or hoping to be) in academic jobs are expected to publish more and at a quicker pace, even though there are still only twenty-four hours in a day. The administrative sleight of hand that recasts writing as "content delivery," effectively turning us into content-delivery people, just makes matters worse. It tries to hide the fact that we don't have more time to write than academics used to have. Many of us have much less time. The compression of the job market and the resulting adjunctification of the academic work force means that more and more of us are teaching more and more courses, often at more than one institution at once, and without the vital, existential protection of benefits. If we get sick, have dependents to take care of, or lose one of our jobs, the apocalypse that Roland Barthes gestured toward no longer feels much like a metaphor.

Some of these problems are specific to our time. Others are long-standing. The disabling effect of economic, social, and cultural inequalities and their intersections is still measurable. As Gina Hiatt, a psychologist who has worked for years as a writing coach for academics, notes in her contribution to our feature, it's easier to meet the production demands of the contemporary university if you don't "belong to a marginalized race or group."

In the aggregate, problems like the ones outlined above have led to claims of a writing crisis. College teachers lament that students can't write anymore. Popular media mock our writing as arcane nonsense, while for many untenured faculty and, increasingly, even graduate students, the need to write and publish evokes feelings close to dread.

Yet claims that we face a writing crisis notwithstanding, one could argue that the generative side of academic writing is gaining strength. Inter- and multidisciplinary work is encouraged, public scholarship is applauded, and creativity (we are told) is valued.[2] One factor, both cause and effect, in these developments is a significant rethinking of the audience that we envision or aspire to create for our work as scholars and intellectuals. As public scholars or as participants in inter- and multidisciplinary projects, we invariably extend ourselves beyond the circle of discipline-based peers, with whom we share a specialized language and knowledge base, to engage a wider audience and different publics. Our choices of form and medium are crucial to this process.

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At the same time, the boundary-crossing nature of inter- and multidisciplinary work calls for new, sometimes hybrid, forms adequate to the particular mix of disciplines involved in a project. Instead of relying on established methods of inquiry and protocols of presentation within the conventions of a discipline, we have to reconfigure the methods of inquiry and protocols of presentation.

This need to think expansively and creatively about the forms in which we conduct and present our scholarship is encouraged by an ever-expanding range of options in the contemporary media landscape. The proliferation of genres, modes, forms, new media, and a panoply of hybrid forms continues apace, enabling—indeed inviting—us to experiment. The inclusion of visual components (from emojis and other images to graphic design) in public communication has made us more conscious of the visual dimensions of text production, while the expansion of online publishing venues has made the inclusion of images in texts an increasingly standard practice. ("You have to have images," my undergraduate students earnestly explain to me. "It's how people think.")

Meanwhile, social media continue to transform how we write and read, perhaps even how we think. *Twitter* has provided a forum for writing in short bursts that writers and thinkers are beginning to explore as a generative medium. Writers like Jennifer Egan and Teju Cole have already demonstrated its potential as a form for fiction and nonfiction writing.[3] The ethnographers Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki have used the dialogue form of an extended e-mail exchange to reflect on the work of ethnography as it is practiced and experienced in fieldwork. *Facebook* posts provide the structural framework and presentation mode of Jeff Nunokawa's hybrid work of literary criticism, personal meditation, and cultural theory, while the comic book form has already been recognized as a legitimate form of scholarly presentation. If Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, with its introduction by Edward Said, marked a beginning in this regard, the publication of Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening* by Harvard University Press gave it the academic seal of approval.[4]

Scenes of Writing

A few years ago I designed a graduate seminar on the art of scholarly writing to explore the state of writing in the contemporary humanities. Starting with the norms and conventions established by our respective disciplines (how we are taught and expected to write) and moving toward some of the alternatives that we might envision (how we would like to write), we mapped a range of possibilities.

I began by giving the students photographs of what I called "scenes of writing." They were a set of large, black-and-white portraits by the photographer Jill Krementz.[5] Each showed a writer writing in an intimate and evocative scene, inviting us into the privacy of the writer's space. Toni Morrison sits on her couch, revising text in a notebook. A myopic Katherine Anne Porter peers at a manuscript on her cluttered desk. Veronica Chambers perches on her kitchen counter, tapping on the computer balanced on her lap. George Plimpton focuses on the page in front of him, undeterred by the twin babies squirming at his feet, while Kurt Vonnegut, in a bathrobe and barefoot, is doing crossword puzzles, unfinished writing scattered in sheets on his desk and floor.

"Which of these scenes of writing do you identify with?" I asked the students, as they passed the photographs around. "Which one most represents you?"

"The me I am or the me I would like to be?" one of them asked.

"Either one," I said. "It's the space between real and ideal that our course will measure."

As they picked their images, they started to talk about the conditions under which they wrote: the time they had or didn't have,

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the places they found conducive to writing, their writing rituals, the distractions that made writing discipline difficult. Shame and anxiety often surfaced as they talked about their writing, the problems they faced, and what they wished they could change. When they envisioned an ideal—perfect conditions when confident writing would just pour out—the one image they invariably pointed to was that of E. B. White. Alone at his typewriter, in an uncluttered room at an uncluttered desk, a calm expanse of water and cloudless sky visible through an open window, he is absorbed in his work, both hands on the typewriter keys, his gaze focused on the page he is typing. "If my life were like that . . . ," the students exclaimed wistfully, imagining how, with a life "like that," they might write (fig. 1).

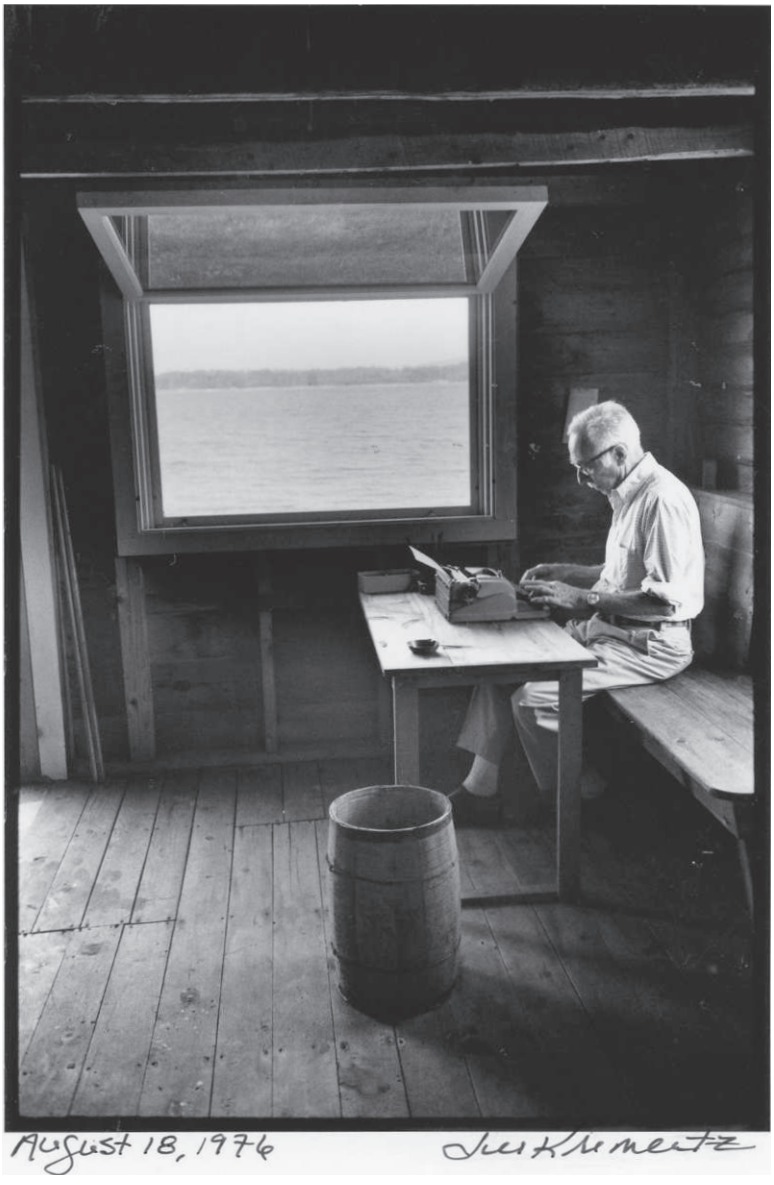


FIG. 1
E. B. White, photographed by Jill Krementz on 18 August 1976 in his boathouse in North Brooklin, Maine. All rights reserved.

We proceeded from there to explore the state of academic writing as we knew it and as we wished it to be. Our experience as teachers, mentors, colleagues, and writers ourselves provided the material we drew on. The cases we studied included the following:

Case 1: She is a first-year college student, and her first writing assignment is an argument essay. She feels confident. She knows how to do this. She learned and practiced the five-paragraph essay in high school and usually got As on her writing assignments. She repeats the formula that she learned in high school and gets an A on her college paper. But when asked to explain what she thinks in her own words, she can't do it. She wishes that she could explore her thoughts in other ways and write differently. The formula gets in the way of thinking.

Case 2: He is a graduate student in comparative literature and has things to say, but they aren't in fashion. Neither the theoretical framework nor the political assumptions that shape his thinking are shared by his graduate school cohort, and he wants to be part of the group. He bends his thinking to the group's approval but loses a sense of his own thoughts along the way (fig. 2).[6]

Case 3: She is on the tenure track at a major research university and is writing what she thinks of

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as her tenure book. "Trying to write" is how she usually puts it, and she calls it her "project," not her "book." (*Book*, she fears, sounds too presumptuous.) It isn't going well, at least not according to the timetable that she has set herself. Even in her sleep, she hears the tenure clock ticking. But it's the other clock, also ticking, that most worries her. She is in her thirties and wants to get pregnant, but she has been advised to wait. Once you have tenure, they tell her, you can start a family. But what if it's too late by then, she worries. And if she doesn't get tenure, what then? The asynchronous ticking clocks make it hard to focus.

Case 4: They are both graduate students at a large state university. She is in women's, gender, and sexuality studies; he is in history. He is not a native speaker of English, and she is the first in her family to go to college. They are both struggling to find their way in formal English. They are multilingual, but their other language is considered a deficiency, not an enhancement, a problem to be fixed, not an asset that makes their writing richer. They work to press their thoughts into the standard forms of written English, but in so doing they often lose track of what they actually want to say.

Case 5: She has a PhD in English and is hoping to get a tenure-track job. For now, she is working as an adjunct. She teaches literature and she also writes it. When she teaches poetry, her work as a poet informs the way that she teaches students to read. When she does scholarly work, the rhythms of poetry inform her writing. Yet she fears that the poetic tone doesn't sound sufficiently scholarly and tries to compensate by covering it up with theory.

Case 6: He is writing a dissertation on scenes of labor in southern literature and wants to ground it in his own working-class experience. His commitment to the people in the community that he grew up in informs his work. Yet he fears that including their perspectives, much less voices, in his dissertation will sound too personal, not sufficiently scholarly. He tries to disguise their presence by reducing them to footnotes.

Over the course of the semester the issues we explored ranged from the conditions under which we wrote and the forms in which we shaped our writing to what we wanted our writing to do and what it did to us. We debated whether the norms and conventions of our respective disciplines (the formulas that our first-year students, fresh out of high school, tend to rely on) helped or hindered our writing. Could the personal and the scholarly mix? Could we be "creative" without detracting from the "critical," or, as Naomi Scheman put it, could we still (or again) imagine a time when "the gentlemen (and some

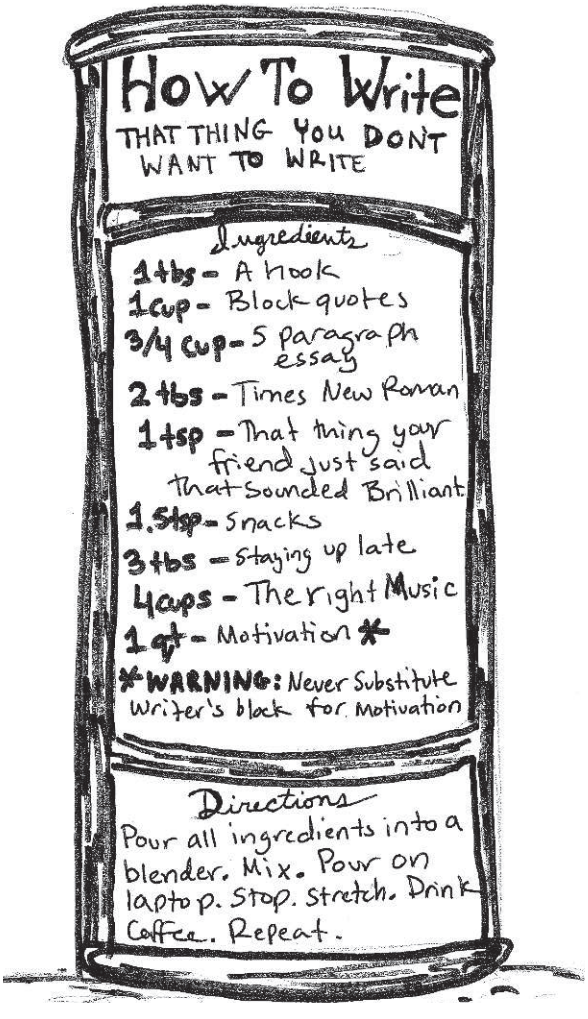


FIG. 2
Untitled drawing by Tesla Cariani, Atlanta, 2016.

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gentlewomen) who . . . wrote critical, scholarly essays and books . . . were thought of as writers as well as authors" (41)? Would we *like* to be both writers and authors? And how would such aspirations affect the work that we do as scholars? Would "author" and "writer" remain separate personae or could they merge into a creative-critical hybrid? We discussed whom we felt accountable to in our writing—how to honor, not betray, those we wrote about. How not to appropriate, how to pay back. We agreed that writing, whether scholarly or creative, was a form of action. It had effects in the world. What would it mean to write responsibly? What forms might such writing take? We worried about teaching writing. How could you teach someone to write well? What were the criteria and what was the goal?

We wondered, Who decided these things? Who were the arbiters of worth? Who decided what made scholarship and writing "good"? What role did the traditional community of peers play in this determination? Should the larger community of people with a stake in our work have a say? What rights did we—writers, authors, and scholars—have over our "product"? How did the institutions that paid our salaries and provided our benefits influence our writing?

The pieces that follow echo some of these questions. The contributors work in institutions ranging from private and public high schools to an art institute to small private and large state universities. They are at different stages of their careers. Those with academic positions include an adjunct professor, a visiting assistant professor, an associate professor, and a few professors holding named chairs at major research universities. Several contributors are graduate students on or approaching the job market, and one is a self-employed academic writing coach with her own online consulting business. They represent a range of fields and perspectives across the humanities. Most work in some capacity with questions of language and literature (mainly, but not exclusively, in English), but their work extends into fields like history, anthropology, religion, comic studies, art history, and art practice. For some, writing is the primary subject of their research and teaching. For others, it is the medium. For a few, writing is one among several media that they use in their work.

Each piece speaks for itself. I will merely note how this collection of essays begins and ends. In the first piece, Michael Bérubé discusses a recent, controversial case of peer review; after exploring the broad challenges facing scholarly work in the hypermediated culture of twenty-first-century democracies, he mounts a defense of scholarly expertise. But on reflection, readers will find that the stakes in his piece are much higher. They are about the uncertain state of democracy in our time: who we think counts and in whom we vest authority and on what grounds.

The last piece, by four young scholars from different fields, all graduate students at Emory University at the time of writing, picks up a theme explored in several of the other pieces (most notably in those by Anne Ruggles Gere, Terri Kapsalis, and the four high school teachers—Kevin English, Lisa Eddy, Beth Schaum, and Sarah Andrew-Vaughn): what writing means to students and what writing for a sustainable future might look like. These students, Tesla Cariani, Ashley Coleman Taylor, Christopher Lirette, and Marlo Starr, have no illusions about the problems facing the humanities and the ways that academic institutions, often with less than good faith, try to finesse the bottom line, using people as pawns in the process. But this is the career they have chosen, and they explain, with clarity and passion, what they cherish in the scholarly life and what it gives them as intellectuals, scholars, and teachers. They make a powerful case for ways of writing that resist instrumentalization. Refusing to become instruments in the service of a corporate university, they insist on the need—indeed, the right—to live, work, write, and think as hu-

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man beings, as embodied persons with lives, histories, and commitments to the communities that shaped and sustain them.

I hope that the issues that our feature raises and the way that we present them will spark a broader conversation about the challenges and opportunities for writing in the humanities in the twenty-first century. I am pleased to see *PMLA* take the lead in this conversation. I look forward to seeing where it takes us.

Notes

The fundamentally collaborative nature of writing in the humanities is belied by the very terms we use, such as "monograph" and "single-authored," that ignore the input of others who contributed to the work, on the levels of both form and content. They remain invisible and unnamed, while we alone get the credit. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those whose queries, insights, and suggestions helped shape this piece.

1. Franco Moretti's concept (and practice) of distant reading was explored in the May 2017 issue of *PMLA*. Cultures of reading will be the focus of the October 2018 and January 2019 issues.

2. Tepper has been a leading proponent of the importance of creativity as a generative, even transformative, force in higher education (e.g., Tepper; Lingo and Tepper).

3. Egan's short story "Black Box," which she described as "a series of terse mental dispatches from an undercover spy of the future" ("Coming Soon"), was published one tweet at a time (one tweet every minute) on *The New Yorker* Web site before appearing in full in the print magazine. Cole's short story "Hafiz" appeared in the form of thirty-one retweets by thirty-one contributors. His essay "A Piece of the Wall," which he described as a "serious longform investigative piece" (Calvin), was published on *Twitter* and is considered the first of its kind.

4. The 2015 publication of Sousanis's comic book *Unflattening* and Nunokawa's *Facebook*-based *Note Book* (Princeton UP) make that year the annus mirabilis of popular media as scholarly form.

5. The photographs I use in class are taken from the calendar based on Krementz's book *The Writer's Desk* and published under the same name by Pomegranate Press in 1997.

6. On the dynamics and costs of thought conformity in the contemporary humanities, see Ruddick.

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