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In Beyond Postprocess, Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola gather a number of powerful voices in the field of writing studies to “rethink postprocess in terms of potentialities for philosophical revisions and the institutional failures thereof” (2). This collection resists presenting a singular stance on what it means to be beyond postprocess. Rather, Dobrin et al. aim to set the stage for a broad reevaluation of writing studies. To do so, they organize the book into three areas. Part 1 offers theoretical interventions into postprocess theory. Part 2 suggests ways in which developing new media technologies require writing studies professionals to move beyond postprocess. Finally, part 3 critiques what could be called the pedagogical imperative animating the majority of writing studies work. Generally speaking, this is a challenging text with ideas that push hard against disciplinary and theoretical assumptions about agency, pedagogy, and what it means to study writing in the twenty-first century. By many accounts, this collection is successful in providing foundations on which further conversations about the study of writing should be built. In this review, I pay particular attention to six of the more provocative arguments throughout the collection. Nevertheless, each essay is thoughtful in its own right and deserves critical attention.

Kent’s opening preface offers a useful overview of postprocess theory’s basic tenets: principle of charity, hermeneutic guessing, etc. In their introduction, Dobrin et al. distinguish Kent’s Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm from their own. Dobrin et al. suggest Kent’s version of postprocess theory situates itself in opposition to a standard paradigm of process theory in order to identify the problematics with process theory’s animating assumptions (1). Beyond Postprocess argues that early theories of postprocess were too oppositionally constructed. This new collection moves beyond that oppositional construct. The result is that the two collections become companion pieces rather than challenges to each other for theoretical supremacy.

Barbara Couture’s “Writing and Accountability” begins part 1. For Couture, writing in a postprocess era requires that assessment of writing includes a way to account for the ways that writers engage the other and the other’s experience in the development of writing. Couture asserts that to be accountable as a writer, individuals must understand that the other always already sets the conditions through which writers’ ideas are formulated. To achieve this understanding, theorists of writing must consider how writing functions, not as an articulation of the self, but as part of the way writers establish and maintain relationships with others (39).
Byron Hawk’s “Reassembling Postprocess: Toward a Posthuman Theory of Public Rhetoric” is a standout essay in this section. Hawk’s articulation of posthuman is a lucid and nuanced critique of the humanist assumptions animating process and postprocess theories. For Hawk, postprocess creates theoretical concepts that are still bound by social constructionist epistemologies and traditional hermeneutics (75). This centering of human agents has blinded our field to the ways in which humans’ embodied relationships are connected with ever-changing non-human objects of varying scales (77). In order to break from the subject-centeredness that characterizes both process and postprocess, writing theory that is beyond postprocess will need to become posthuman.

Part 2 centers on new media’s relationship to postprocess theory. Jeff Rice’s “Folksonomic Narratives: Writing Detroit” distinguishes folksonomic narrative from Helen Foster’s concept of networked subjectivity. Rice contends that folksonomic narratives reject the notion of a singular space and convention (122) that are important to networked subjectivities. Rice illustrates his understanding of folksonomic narratives through a “little narrative” (123) of Detroit. Detroit—as a general object of discourse—carries the tags “ruins,” “emptiness,” or “decline,” (120) yet these tags exist as part of a constellation of tags that also include “Model T,” “automobile,” and “industrialization” (123). This constellation gives rise to the spaces whereby multiple meanings co-exist in the same space and object. Using tags to freely float in a narrative is part of a folksonomic rhetoric that moves beyond a specific rhetorical situation and toward “little narratives” that are neither hierarchic nor invite closure.

In “Old Questions, New Media,” Kyle Jensen makes the case for the development of what he calls “online writing archives” (133). Jensen suggests that online writing archives would “consciously expose” (133) variations in writing, as well as provide a space for collaboration between scholars and students of writing. He outlines five basic features of the online writing archive: it must provide every aspect of a work’s revision history; it must be intelligible to its users; it must use digital technologies in ways that distinguish the archive from traditional print codices; it must attend to the material conditions of technology; and finally, it must acknowledge the way technology shapes the reception of the texts located in the archive (136-137). The online archive is a mode of inquiry beyond postprocess, as it allows users to shape and expand the archive. It’s dynamic nature, according to Jensen, can yield new insight into how writing works.

I would be remiss if I did not articulate my frustration with an obvious oversight in Jensen’s essay. Jensen’s work references a figure to help explain the online writing archive; however, the figure does not appear anywhere in the book. Such a mistake is unfortunate, given the significance of the figure in helping Jensen articulate his important contribution to textual archives.

Part 3 critiques classroom/pedagogical imperatives animating writing studies scholarship. In “First, A Word,” Raúl Sánchez argues that it is an error
to think that process and postprocess theories are substantively and epistemologically distinct (184). For Sánchez, both theories envisioned a subject in control of the writing situation, albeit from different angles. For process, the subject-orientation was toward the writers of texts. By positioning itself too closely as a reaction against process, postprocess theory makes its concern a critique of the subject. Such a critique reifies the subject-orientation. The critique of subject-orientation implies that writing theorists must work on the relationship between culture, pedagogy, and writing to reveal that writing is both culture and pedagogy, neither of which are solely guided by classroom concerns (193).

In “The Salon of 2010,” Geoffrey Sirc suggests that the bracketing of imaginative possibilities within postprocess theory necessitates a break with postprocess theory writ large. Because its insistence on theoretical constructs that exist outside the empirical world, “postprocess has restored the strict delimitation between composition and creative writing that was beautifully blurred in the process era” (205). Moreover, postprocess’s “fatal gesture” was its willingness to separate itself from the craft of writing by focusing instead on the effects of writing (215). Postprocess theory’s failure to account for the pleasures of “modernism’s making” (216) is precisely what necessitates a return to process. Yet as we return to process, we should carry with us the technological tools of the present in order to “refigure the classroom as a studio where students can create movies, collages, mixtapes, playlists, websites, podcasts, Photoshop parodies” (216). The technological “makings” allow ideas and texts to circulate in ways that move passions and ignite critiques. Writing in the salon of 2010 does work knowing full well that the work it does cannot be understood prior to its making. Moving beyond postprocess is to recall that textual production is still important to communication.

By means of a conclusion, I want to identify what I believe to be a missed opportunity. I see no reason why the conversations that are important to our field must always and exclusively take place within a scholarly press printed book or journal. The textbook industry—with its links to websites and companion CD-ROMs—could teach us some valuable lessons on this point. I offer one alternative possibility here. YouTube can function as a scholarly space if only we would make it so. Could not Utah State UP have worked with editors and contributors to develop a YouTube channel that allows those who read the book the opportunity to continue the discussion of these concepts online? What if, in addition to the essays written for this collection, the contributors also prepared 10-minute YouTube videos that extend the discussions that their contributions make?

These questions about how writing should be delivered are keeping within the spirit of Beyond Postprocess. Such new media or digital spaces might contribute in innovative ways to the development of online writing archives. Attention to how we present knowledge about writing might be a part of the salons of 2010 and beyond. These are questions not directed against the book. They are questions asked because the arguments within it
encourage such asking. Ultimately, the generative power of Beyond Postprocess makes it a collection worthy of careful attention and robust response.

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Works Cited