

Review:

Sidney I. Dobrin. *Postcomposition*.
(Southern Illinois Press, 2011)

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One cannot read *Postcomposition* without reacting to its claims that the field of composition is in the doldrums, that the “conservatism” of composition, most notable in its attachment to pedagogy, is ripe for attack. Dobrin writes “with the intent of violence” (2), and, although he qualifies this celebration of disruption, his goal of unsettling readers is apparent throughout. Dobrin’s polemical yet often playful argument probes the borders of what is acceptable, launching highly theorized incursions into hallowed orthodoxies, especially composition’s prioritizing of teaching and administration, what is, in Dobrin’s terms, an indefensible fixation with subjects and subjectivity. Metaphors of time and space predominate here. The “Post” in the book’s title suggests that something must come *after* composition, but “post-ness” is more often used as spatial metaphor, a marker of just where composition *is*. To Dobrin, contemporary theory reveals that although

composition may not be ending, it must move outside of its current “post.” In seven chapters of increasingly centrifugal argument, Dobrin features disruption and space as key concepts for writing studies (chapters one and two), attacks the sacred cows of teaching and administration (chapters three and four), and works toward new theories of “ecomposition postcomposition,” complemented by his examination of several contemporary theorists (chapters five and six). A final, caustic, and brief chapter on pedagogy and, of course, a postscript only underscore Dobrin’s preference for raising problems rather than prescribing solutions.

Postcomposition is built upon a searching examination of several strands of current theory and research, from approaches within composition, including place studies and ecomposition, to more radical arguments outside of composition from posthumanism, systems theory, and complexity theory. Dobrin wants readers to acknowledge that traditional understandings of writing are fractured by the powerful new ways that writing functions in an era of great technological advancement and hyper-circulatory writing systems. A central claim of *Postcomposition* is that compositionists mistake writing as merely an indicator or outcome of a writing subject rather than the very “object” of composition. The fondness within composition studies for historical accounts of writing programs and the continued linking of all work, even theoretical work, with classroom application suggests thralldom to a notion of writing that is not truly about writing at all but, rather, writers. Like his colleague Raúl Sánchez, who warns in *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies* that writing is mistakenly understood as a conduit to “something else,” Dobrin asserts a more vigorous attention to writing as a primary object of study that would confound our more deliberate attachments to subjects. *Postcomposition* posits a spatial and ecological theory which would redress these tendencies within composition and open the possibilities for work that reaches beyond the narrower preoccupations of today’s field.

Indeed, *occupation* is one of *Postcomposition*’s key terms. Dobrin cannot have known that the Occupy movement would coalesce in 2011, but he anticipates a parallel development within composition in his exploration of the centrality of space in theories of writing and

his featuring of writing as a claiming of space. In a chapter on “The Space of Writing,” Dobrin describes *occupation* as an “ecological” gesture of disruption and declaration, a register of place within a shifting network of forces. In this and in subsequent chapters, Dobrin provides what he sees as an apt provisional vocabulary for the activity of writing in the more contested spaces beyond the academy, asking compositionists to “theorize writing neither as process nor product but as occupying circulating spaces within space” (58).

This turn toward environment, soon linked to the posthuman, enables an escape from subjectivity. Posthumanism instead requires an understanding of writing that precludes separation of writers from the systems and networks that provide the conditions and relationships within which this writing functions. Although theories of the subject have always been similarly attuned to the problem of the self/agent imbricated in systems—Judith Butler’s work on Foucault comes to mind—Dobrin sees the posthuman prioritization of system as a more appropriate methodological tool for grasping the ways that writing works. To this end, “[s]ubjectivity can be dispensed in favor of more ecological understandings of the complex systems in which posthumans function” (87). Dobrin’s emphasis on system should not be mistaken as an embrace of machinelike uniformity, however. His engagements with systems and complexity theories underscore the contingencies and fluctuations within highly complex writing systems, and, in so doing, “[push] writing theory a bit closer to the edge of chaos” (184).

Although Dobrin clearly wants these heady, suggestive passages to inspire new work in *Postcomposition*, many readers will find the book’s two central chapters on teaching and administration, “Beyond the Subject of Composition Studies” and “Beyond the Administration of Subjects,” too provoking to, well, get beyond. In arguing that administration is essentially conservative in nature, that writing courses and writing programs necessarily normalize and standardize the activity of students and teachers, Dobrin seems intent on overlooking the obvious counter argument that these large-scale pedagogical enterprises are in fact very real “occupations” of the contemporary university, albeit often in limited and compromised form. Surely, less circumspect writing programs can fall prey to

an ideology of improvement and institutional compliance that is lamentable and counterproductive. Dobrin sharply identifies the consequences of a too-firm link to service, proposing wryly that writing program administrators working with contingent faculty “adopt the position of Melville’s Bartleby” (118). But *Postcomposition* does not question the similarly compromised position of the researcher or theorist within the university, suggesting, surprisingly, that “emancipation” of compositionists from writing programs (and, presumably, the consequent rise in status of the composition theorist) would not merely reinscribe an outworn disciplinary model at the expense of most of those currently working within composition.

Nevertheless, *Postcomposition* provides a remarkable tour through some of the most pressing issues in (and beyond) composition today. Dobrin explores the consequences of the profound technological shifts that occasion this rethinking of stable subjectivity, and few would question the relevance of theorizing writing anew within this context. Unfortunately, there is very little here about the specific elements that are supposedly driving this shift—new media, web applications, information theory, data mining, networks, algorithms, and so on. That is, the *terms* are here, but there is only the briefest contact with instances or examples that might help us see what *Postcomposition* looks like. While this oversight is perhaps another consequence of Dobrin’s eschewing of applications for theory, the absence of any material demonstration of this theory in action limits *Postcomposition’s* impact. But Dobrin’s rousing call to theory *as* action is a sure contribution to the debates this book will undoubtedly occasion.

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