

ONE

Reasons for Writing

Why should we write, now?

I'm writing this on a Friday morning. Let's say it's your Friday morning. Maybe you have taught your classes for the week; maybe you are floating in the enduring weirdness of a sabbatical or fellowship; maybe you have gotten your kids to school; maybe the slow mornings at your nine-to-five job mean you can steal an hour; maybe you are on the bus. You have something that my group texts will sometimes refer to as "my precious writing time," as though it were a plastic toy pony, which, let's imagine that it is. There you are, currying My Precious Writing Time's silky rainbow-colored mane, considering whether and where to go for a ride. On a given Friday, with one hour or two or six or twenty-four, what hope, what inspiration, what need, what goal, might spur you to write?

Some answers come readily to mind. We write for professional necessity. Because we love reading. Because we have an attachment to, a delight in, our own scene of narration. We desire status, authority. We desire having that authority recognized, reflected back. Because we're irritated that everyone else is getting it wrong. Because we're worried that without our writing, no one will get it right. Because we read *Little Women* or Proust and we seek the

scene of composition like a lost manuscript or a madeleine's scent. Because we love the world, and words. Because of spite, fear, fascination, the spirit.

It's easy to wax poetic. Sitting down to actually write is harder. Writing happens word by word and minute by minute. For me, the minutes aren't all the same. Writing warps them. My own personal Precious Writing Time continues to be an unpredictable means of transport. I never know how fast or slow it will go, which makes for uneasy traveling. In the slow moments, worries fill my mind. Is *this* direction the best one? Did I pack the right tools and snacks? Is the weather clear? Why, why, did I take *this* toy pony from all the choices in life's stable? Why, in a historic moment like the one I inhabit, would writing time be precious at all?

When I ask, then, why we should write now, I'm talking about a particular pressure I feel in writing. It comes when I'm trying so hard to toe the line of this moment—which, I know, is the only one in which writing can actually take place—and the seconds stretch out, empty of words, and the weight of the world crushes in. I'm in a long-term relationship with my habit of procrastination, so I'm well acquainted with this experience. But in the last several years, its texture has changed. My whole relationship to time has changed. The existential dread I have always felt hovering around any writing journey feels more oppressive, now, because time in general feels scarcer. Like glacial ice or public university funding, time feels like a resource it's increasingly difficult to renew. I don't want to spend it on something that doesn't matter. Yet the worry that I will spend time on something wrong eats at my decisiveness. I'm trying to figure out the right thing to do, to write, and I'm watching the seconds on my laptop Pomodoro timer—I'm using it right now—go tick, tick, tick.

Hence this writing guide, which aims to help you develop your own personal reasons for writing, in the rapidly changing compound that is the dark room of the “now.” This word names both a historical surround—here picture me gesturing broadly at the landscape from My Precious Writing Time's back—and the specific

minutes each of us get to work in, on Friday morning. How can we best use this minute or that to make the broader now feel, or be, better or more secure? What would that even mean?

In answering these questions, I've tried to be guided by theorists of writing practice who keep existential and ethical considerations—and one of these, I should say, is simple enjoyment—at front of mind. This book exists the way it does, for example, because of the intellectual and stylistic space opened up by Tressie McMillan Cottom's multiplatform expressions of expertise. It shows, more and less explicitly, my ongoing engagement (and negotiations) with questions about writing raised by Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, and Patti Smith.

To the extent that I've succeeded in keeping my compass aligned with these theorists, I often find myself scoping different territories than those mapped by writing guides directed at humanists particularly. Eric Hayot, for instance, provides clear formal advice in *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (2014); this book you're reading, in contrast, aims to help you consider whether academic style—used in pursuit of publication in an academic venue—is the one you want to use. More fundamentally, this book heads a different direction than Joli Jensen's wonderfully helpful *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics* (2017), which begins from the not-untrue claim that “Rightly or wrongly, the measure of our professional worth continues to be our ability to write and get published.”¹ The phrase “get published” has, in the context of Jensen's book, an implied meaning: to produce academic writing that universities perceive as such, to aid in our pursuit of university-based goals. I agree with Jensen that most of us who have spent time in universities have felt ourselves measured in such a way. We have felt that measure spur our writing; that through writing we might, for instance, as Jensen writes, “finally—if we are fortunate—achieve tenure.”² I certainly agree with Jensen that academic writing has an immense value; it creates a specific intellectual experience that I'll go to the mat (you can find me there in chapter 4) to defend. Like Hayot, and like many others, Jensen

delivers truly helpful strategies to help you commit to substantive academic projects, many of which I've used. In this book, I'll have some tips in that direction myself.

But for my own part, I simply can't start from the assumption that a specific form of professional-status-driven writing, or any kind of writing, is the best thing you can spend your Friday morning doing, as though there were no future in which our expert worth might be measured differently. In fact, that future has already slipped into the now of my mornings. Institutional uncertainty means, among other things, a proliferation of metrics by which our worth might be valued—and, much more importantly, by which we might value ourselves. In such a circumstance, the consolidated category of the “professional” or the “academic” weakens; it might already be irreparably damaged. I have some sadness about this state of affairs, but I'm not interested in pretending it hasn't taken place. And if we admit it has (admit the unlikelihood of finding even “finally—if we are fortunate” some kinds of professional security), how might our reasons for writing change? Can we still motivate our writing with some teleological hope of inchworming our way up a depersonalized professional measuring stick as it splinters around us? Why would we even want to?

I don't mean that last question rhetorically. Even as professional standards diminish in the material resources they promise, they remain psychically powerful. It's worth considering why. The answer has something to do with how our received fantasies about writerly talent costume a stark individualism of our moment. Humanists admire “good writers.” We have been trained in institutions that praise individual voice, personal brilliance, admirable discipline in producing words on the page. In these same institutions, courses teaching writing often spin away from other scenes of scholarly expertise, indicating to humanists that writing skill is something we should have, rather than learn. (Jensen, with admirable forcefulness, rejects this dangerous act of mystification.) In conversations with humanist writers, I see how many of us, even when we are critical of professional metrics, share their emphasis

on the self-directed individual. This mystical “good writer” figure may feel like a creative ideal. But in our current era, the romanticized visions of our work's production have particular stakes. There is a specific risk to how these visions leave us primed to see ourselves as solitary creative agents, acting for ourselves, rather than *as people in a scene*.

And writing is often a solitary act. It resists abstractions. It takes place in very specific particulars, richly textured negotiations with our individual selves and our embodied conditions. Even when two writers share a passion for a topic, they may have dramatically distinct relations to deadlines, hopes, research dollars, and carpal tunnel. Many humanists worry about the corporatized university, and this chapter will show some reasons we are right to do so. Corporatization may seem opposed to romantic “good writer” ideals. Yet when we focus too much on writing's individualist qualities—in terms of either talent or production—we hasten writing's dissolution, along with other art forms, into yet another form of economically driven practice and competitive social relation structured by what Sianne Ngai describes as the “hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism.”³ To return, then, to my question from above, I think our aesthetic myths about writing and talent predispose our feelings about and reasons for writing to be swept up in the destructive storm of our prevailing ideological weather system. In this maelstrom, writing feels like a tool for conquering the world, rather than comprehending it.

I do think my time is precious, and that writing is too. But our era's emphasis on productivity and privatized success teaches us to treat Our Precious Writing Time—even when we feel the preciousness as one of aesthetic creativity—like a resource we should hoard, something we should accumulate only for ourselves, hiding it away from the grasp of other people or things to do. It teaches us to feel that the best reason for writing is to divest ourselves, individually, of the struggles precarity creates. By this logic, our writing time becomes precious when it helps us shake free of precarious

conditions, leaving them for everyone else. Such ideas of “freedom” and “preciousness” we should work to resist. We can’t golum away Our Precious Writing Time, hoarding it to the detriment of the community that might read our work, and expect the preciousness of our writing to remain. Our writing loses value when the world of our readers gets worse.

So in this chapter, I propose that as we, individually, consider why each of us should write now, our answers might depend on the company that writing enables us to constitute, at a time when so many collectivities are shaking. Each of us might write, in other words, guided by a vision of a “we” that our writing could help bring into being. This prospect might mean coming to see writing as a multifaceted set of activities, taking place among many others, in which hard-earned expertise can be turned toward personally and civically enriching comprehension of the world. It could mean recognizing that our lived weird individual writing moments aren’t just undertaken at the same time, but also in a shared time—a now that none of us can ultimately escape. What if this now, freed from the false hopes of an obsolete and individualizing set of predetermined professional goals, allowed humanists to use our writing, and our time, to build an alternative, more collective, kind of worth? That might be a reason for writing, now.

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In this book, I’m addressing readers who face a particular crisis of the “we”: writers with expert knowledge in the humanities, defined here as those who have received some advanced humanities training at universities. While readers of this book may not currently write within universities, or at least not in a conventional way, this book’s “we” will all have negotiated with how universities, through the allocation of resources, make “the humanities” legible as a category. This book exists in the way it does because of an evolving instability in the conditions such experts face, whereby one set of expectations for how writing might secure individuals to this “we”

has eroded while nothing certain has taken its place. I am talking about the crisis in the humanities, as it exists now.

In saying that the now is an era of crisis, I don’t mean to be unduly nostalgic for a past that certainly had its own share of bullshit and insecurity. I believe us to be in a crisis of the humanities. I’m also well aware that humanities writers have held this belief for a long time. One researcher tracked the phrase “crisis in the humanities” through JSTOR and found its first use in 1922.⁴ Ever since, he writes, humanities scholars have been worrying about enrollment, methodology, and hyperspecialization, noting that “I think this is enough evidence to suggest that there has been a *sense* of crisis in the humanities almost as long as there have been departments of humanities” (emphasis in the original). This phrasing seems to imply that a sense is different from a reality or a legitimate situation; certainly, he’s right that a “sense” should be differentiated from, say, a dataset. Yet senses, no less than datasets, demand interpretation, and can have powerful effects.

I know the sense of crisis, for me, has been both enduring and highly variable. When I was in graduate school over a generation ago, in the early 2000s, a sense of crisis scented the entire experience. The first question I was asked in my first graduate school interview was, “Do you know that you won’t get a job?” This question does and doesn’t correspond with the data of that year. Hiring in the humanities has been volatile at least since the seventies, but in 2001, the number of jobs in English had risen for four successive years, reaching one of the highest levels in a decade.⁵ Clearly *someone* was getting jobs, and both the questioner and I knew it. Wanting those jobs was clarifying as a reason for writing. When advisors told me not to count on getting a job, because of the crisis, what I heard them telling me was “the good ones will get jobs, so write to prove you are good.” I absorbed the implicit standard—a “measure of my worth,” to go back to Jensen—that if I published one or two scholarly articles, I would be a good candidate for a job; that if I then wrote a book, I would likely get tenure. The language of crisis felt less like a call for structural transformation and

more like an internal sorting mechanism, or an enthusiasm test. Persisting in the face of crisis, and rising to the writing challenge scarcity created, felt like a way to demonstrate worth and love, a shared sense of preciousness. It was a steep but clear path to a we.

I can remember a specific moment when my own sense of the humanities crisis shifted under me, showing the fissures in the “we” into which I had previously believed I might write my way. It was December 2009, a bright and cold night, and I was bundled into a white winter puffy coat, wearing high heels and thick tights. I stood outside the home of Patricia Yaeger, then editor of *PMLA*. She was hosting the University of Michigan English Department’s faculty holiday party. I had been invited to the party because I was spending the year at Michigan on a postdoctoral fellowship. I had gone on the market the previous year with one chapter of my dissertation done; I didn’t get a job, but I wasn’t worried. The post-doc I later secured at Michigan seemed like a coup, and I was excited to go on the market with Michigan letterhead. In the fall of 2009, I scheduled several interviews, and then felt a slow emptying dread as every single one of the jobs was canceled due to funding reductions. Standing outside Patsy’s door—her gracious house under tall trees, silhouettes moving through the windows, everyone so welcoming, everyone so kind—I felt something like terror, and something like grief, and something like blankness.

Everyone at that party knew about the crisis—we had all talked about it for years. So I was uncertain about how to understand this changing reality I felt I was experiencing alone. What would I say when they asked me about MLA? About my interviews? I had long been told that my writing could secure a future in this we, the one whose house I had been invited to visit. My writing was good, but I had not published it. Was that why all my jobs, my future, had gone away? That was part of it, but not all of it. My writing had gotten me interviews. Could it be the fault of my writing, my publishing, if the jobs themselves didn’t exist? Was *all* of our writing, the way we wrote, the things we did, the problem? Was it the fault of my love, my commitment, my enthusiasm? I went into the party.

Everyone around me talked in bright tones, and seemed so beautiful, so smart and proud, and they couldn’t see the cracks I felt underneath me. Maybe those fault lines weren’t there. Maybe the “we” was fine, after all. Maybe I could join it next year. Maybe the humanities, like the crisis, was something that could endure.

Writing now, almost fifteen years later, I can see the ways that we have survived, and also the ways we’ve changed. I come to this book as one of the many people who trained to be a humanist in one version of the crisis and built a professional career in another. One thing those split experiences can teach is how crisis as a *sense* matters to the ways humanists struggle to communicate across historical divides.

The 2008 financial crisis caused a precipitous decline in humanities tenure-track hiring and enrollments, which a decrease in federal resources following the Bush tax cuts has made harder to remediate. By the time the 2020 pandemic hit, the number of MLA-listed jobs had already been dropping for ten years in a row.⁶ It seems that writers coming of intellectual age after 2020—and after 2025, and after whatever new crises will unfurl in the future toward which this book travels—will need to navigate their own decollectivizing ruptures. At the same time, those of us navigating professional worlds now still have much to learn from other ways of navigating crisis, both materially and as a felt sense.

I have always struggled to steer *My Precious Writing Time*; the 2008 crisis didn’t create my problems with writing. But shifting material resources post-2008 made the emotional burden of writing into a categorically different experience for me, one I have struggled to explain to those who came of professional age in different moments. I had to learn a whole new way to engage the act of writing when I realized that no matter how much I loved my topic, there wasn’t a way to write my way out of a new global reality into a “we” that no longer had material resources to welcome me, even if it wanted to.

The crisis in the humanities is just one part of a crisis in higher education, and, although not currently my focus, in education

across the board. For the last two decades, governments—motivated at least partly by their own financial shortfalls, or their ideological suspicion of educational systems, or both—have decreased direct funding of higher education (indirect funding continues, in the form of government-backed student loans). With direct public funding from national and state governments diminished, eliminated, or at increasing risk, universities must find other funding streams. These funds may come from tuition dollars, from philanthropy, or from other sources such as television rights to sports broadcasts (as most humanists know, none of these funding streams guarantee an investment in educational missions). In any event, these funds are increasingly earned in competition with other universities. In this competition market, even nominally public universities increasingly choose to guarantee their own survival by assuming a market logic in their self-understanding. They create themselves as brands. Within this context, humanities experts, in order to not perish, can't just publish. You also have to post and repost. Post on the other platform, do a podcast, write it up for the blog, put it in your handle. It's not unpleasant, when it's a way to show a passionate commitment. But the pleasure's wrapped up in the pressure to establish brand status—a market's measure of worth.

In discussions of the humanities crisis, villains abound. Sometimes the villain seems to be our own work: the narrowness of our topics and the styles of our prose repel resources rather than make the case for them. Arguments about method and style merge with existential anxieties, as though some change in our writing could remediate a crisis our writing didn't create. Sometimes the villain seems external: from within the humanities, accusations of malfeasance are lobbed at administrations, boards, governments, sometimes our students. These accusations are powerful because they are true. Administrations, governments, and students all regularly devalue humanities work. I can't get over the villainous consultants who leech university resources in exchange for terrible advice, and the business-world administrators who accept the

consultant's claims that what university classrooms need is fancy cameras rather than well-paid instructors.⁷ At every university I know of, specific bad actors need to be called to task.

Yet the problem of the “we” for us, as expert writers, isn't simply an external villain or prose form. Instead, it's the pervasive ways in which our own thinking and acting become infused with the same ethos of privatization that dominates universities—and the broader world as well. Privatization as an institutional shift means that both the costs and the benefits of university structures are decreasingly managed as public, collective goods: funding for universities comes from private sources (such as tuition, corporate investments, or individual donors), and university success isn't measured by an overall increase in public quality of life, but in alumni capacity for earning and social status. An ethos, however, is different from these measurable changes; by ethos I mean, following Christopher Newfield, that certain principles have transcended the status of economic axioms and become cultures, structures of feeling, that organize prevailing beliefs about what is possible, what is reasonable, and even about our own personal worth.⁸ Within the belief structure that Newfield understands privatization partly to be, our experiences of subjectivity succumb to market valuation. This includes humanists' sense of the crisis. Those of us writing in professional contexts, in the aftermath of these recent crises, don't often sense that a collective of scholars can make our writing feel valuable, and we may not be wrong. But a privatization ethos is not a good emotional teacher. In its sway, we feel valuable when the market values us, reinforcing our belief that only the market can make us feel better than we do.

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On this Friday morning—it's a different Friday, now, because I've been at this a long time—it's strange to remember the clarity I felt about writing and the crisis, that older crisis, back in 2001. Today, while the affective charge of academic publishing has not gone

away, other kinds of belonging-through-writing present themselves. In the exact same era that tenure-track jobs have declined, social media and independent media have made—albeit with a zigzagging sort of availability—other kinds of writing and publication available to humanities experts. (A more detailed account of this history appears in chapter 3 of this book.) So, on a given Friday morning, if you would like to join some we, the decisions facing you have multiplied. Not only must you decide to sit down to write, and decide what you want to write about, you face decisions about style and audience and publication speed and strategy. Do you want to work on a scholarly article, or monograph, which you might submit for peer review? Pitch something—and then maybe write something—for a venue specializing in critical nonfiction like *LARB* or *The Rambling* or *Public Books*? Try for something journalistic, at *The Lamoni Chronicle* or *The New York Times* or the *Daily Trojan*? Compose an Instagram caption? Some other social media post, navigating whatever ongoingly evolving communities and infrastructures?

As an expert you could share your knowledge and insights in any of these modes. All of them make demands, present opportunities. It can be difficult to distinguish between a demand and an opportunity. Which, for instance, is the expectation that you will talk about yourself, your life and body and its situations? Which is the mandate for an engaging style, in addition to meaningful content? Moving among these modes will require shifts in the subtlety of informational and argumentative revelation; the approachability of your style; the scope of your “hook.”

Decisions about our minutes become tangled because the rewards for writing become nearly possible to arbitrate between. What might be one’s aim? A job, an honorarium, a reputation? The nice people at the MacArthur Foundation taking notice? I think about the nice MacArthur people about once a week. It is exceptionally unlikely that most of us are going to be receiving a phone call from the MacArthur people this Friday morning. And yet, conditions on the writing ground are such—and many of you know this, on your Friday morning—that other rewards like “full-time

teaching position located near affordable housing” and “stable job in media” are so similarly unlikely that the difference between these previously obtainable hopes (a meaningful job with good insurance) and pie-in-the-sky goals (a “genius” grant) come to feel equally possible in that none of them can be counted on to happen at all. The fractured reward framework, for expert writers across the board, can flatten the external metrics we might use to make decisions.⁹ We have to choose without material guarantees.

On this point, I want to clearly position myself against a viewpoint I sometimes hear expressed in graduate seminars I visit. Sometimes I am asked to talk about “the future of academic writing” and sometimes “public writing” and sometimes “pitching” and sometimes “the humanities, now.” Regardless of topic, the students in the audience for these visits are all in the process of becoming some kind of subject expert; they are in the audience because they have some commitment to acquiring knowledge. With some regularity, the professor who invited me to the class will express some sense that larger, more difficult, and more institutionally oriented projects are a necessary step toward other kinds of work. Sometimes these professors will say to these students: Write your dissertation, work toward a job and tenure, and then you will be “free” to write more expansively.

This is wrong, at least from my perspective. Watching friends get tenure (from my own position off the tenure track), I have not regularly seen them become “free.” I know a certain kind of security comes from institutionally granted stability. But I’m not sure the language of tenure or “tenure track” is the best way to describe humanist hierarchies, given that in this crisis moment, “tenure” fails to name a consistently secure state. I don’t have tenure, but I do have the shelter of a wealthy university that leaves me mostly free to develop my curricula and gives me excellent databases through which to do so, whereas many tenured colleagues elsewhere have an experience that looks less like shelter and more like being stuck with a specific institution’s own precarity and political struggles. Even in institutions without enrollment crises or salary

freezes or a wholesale attack on the liberal arts (or critical race theory or the word “gay”), the administrative demands of tenured positions often lay claim to time that might, in some fantasies, be freely spent. Institutions can do many things for you. At their best, the security they offer shelters a world-building that I prize. But it is not their job to make you free.

The increasing privatization of higher ed, and the specific forms that privatization has taken, have undermined faculty authority to determine what kind of writing matters, or even *that* writing matters. There is no decision about writing—its mode or quantity or quality—that can ensure your safety in a class that can be wiped out at the stroke of a pen.¹⁰ So a better strategy for making choices about your writing time might be to ask: What do you find genuinely meaningful, in the horizontal circuits of community in which you now exist? Rather than reaching up the measuring stick, who is with you in your now?

I say all this realizing that describing what happens on a given Friday morning as a “choice” somewhat misrepresents what it’s like to be a person. There are many Friday mornings when I spend My Precious Writing Time composing a carefully zesty text, or a devastating or clever response to someone’s social media post, or debating with myself about whether or not to post or respond to a post, and I would not exactly say that this use of a Friday morning’s writing time is one that I have “chosen.” It’s more like I let My Precious Writing Time lead me into some field of delicious-but-of-uncertain-nutritional-value clover of its own choosing. It’s really different from the choice I make when I set my social media blockers and a timer and put on my “getting serious now” writing playlist and try to write this book.¹¹ Choosing to write this book is like urging My Precious Writing Time up a steep and lonely hill. I have to mean it. And sometimes even when I do mean it, it doesn’t happen the way I hope.

→ Yet setting it up this way plays into a long-standing set of *affective* reasons for—and responses to—writing. It’s too simple to say that the action of writing a book represents an expression of will,

while another type of writing, such as posting on social media, indicates a thoughtless and possibly shameful lapse in purpose, even though I have often experienced it that way. Putting my minute-by-minute hours into long-form writing has felt to me like an admirable investment: harder to do, but with the comforting sense that those minutes would accrue toward something substantive and real and mine. The article or book would create a byline, a CV line, leading to more opportunities. Maybe after that a job, a better job, a bigger bedroom for my kids.

What kind of historical context, what system of value, makes this neat alignment of form with mental faculty with good life outcome feel normal? Feminists and queer theorists have taught us the ethical necessity of asking: Whose social position is served by respecting this norm? What are its costs? When we accept this norm, what experiences become harder to see? I have come to believe that this deeply enculturated structure of feeling that divides serious, reasonable writing decisions from impulsive, trivial ones does not often serve us, as writers. The gap makes the complexity around writing’s motivations harder to understand and respect. The more I mark some kinds of writing with shame, the harder it can be to value all kinds of writing for what they most substantively offer, and what they teach us about what we want and need.

When I’m stuck on a difficult sentence and reach for the quick exchanges available on my phone, part of what I’m hoping for isn’t merely distraction. It’s relief. That relief might be a fantasy, like that of a penny-slot jackpot payout: sudden virality, fame, recognition. That relief might also be more reliably on offer, in the form of social moment, either aesthetic or anesthetic in its pleasures, to suspend the encounter with how increasingly scary writing feels. In the moment of the sentence, I encounter my anxieties about my own abilities, and my desires for my future, and my recognition of the world’s uncertainty, in a mutually reinforcing fear loop: as the world around me becomes less secure, the better my writing needs to be in order to protect me, and the more inadequate to the task my abilities seem.

Even as I write this, I am staring at my phone, which I have strategically placed just out of reach by the window. I can feel the pull of its smooth shape, and all the worlds it holds for me. I'm trying not to reach for it, and I'm hoping to continue not reaching for it even past my next Pomodoro break in (I just checked) twenty-two minutes and sixteen seconds. I'm hoping to resist my phone until noon, which is, on this particular morning of Precious Writing Time, still a couple of hours away. I am trying to stay with my thoughts, to finish this project I care about.

But after I reach this goal, assuming I do, I likely will reach for my phone, and spend some happy time there, as I do almost every day. If texting and social-media-ing make you happy, then you should too. When we put the minutes of Our Precious Writing Time into direct exchanges, we're not gambling at the penny slots; we're reaching out into the now, with other people who are doing the same. The only problem reaching for my phone early would create is that it might turn a source of pleasure and comfort into an avoidant act, rather than giving texting (or posting) the space to be a substantive act of writing, of world-making, in itself. Writing should be for the world, and worlds need nurturing. You can't just sit around making some book or some think piece about politics or gender and then send it out, with the belief that a world out there simply waits, in anticipation, for your writing to arrive. In our digital era, for worse but also definitely for better, we depend on communities that we have the capacity to write (sometimes on social media, sometimes in texts, sometimes via other interfaces) into being. Our quick digital exchanges, no matter how improvisational, can find real audiences and have real stakes. It doesn't serve us to cast aside as "not writing" these kinds of writing. It's hard to text or post with wit and empathy and insight, let alone do so with consistency, and the reason it's hard is because these actions carry much of the transformative potential that long-form writing can.

However, this is not to present digital interactions of any kind as a solution to the problem of privatization that has damaged higher ed. Social media platforms can feel like a public sphere, and they

have offered bright lights in dark times. But every day brings a reminder of their corporate nature, the dangerous power that their occasional brightness cannot fully eclipse. They make our belonging into "impressions," into clicks and followers we can count. As zones of collectivity building, they are hamstrung by the metrics of private, personal status inherent to their interfaces. By training us to consider ourselves through quantification and ranking, they operate in parallel to the brand logic, the obsession with ranking and scoring, that structures higher ed now too.

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To describe education and publication as obsessed with clicks and rankings and scores might seem to imply that they are driven by facts—by numbers anyone could count and agree on. Yet this is not the case. Even when specific humanities departments can deliver meaningful economic futures, and even when their enrollments rise, it can be, as the critic and departmental chair (and my frequent collaborator) Sarah Blackwood wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, nearly impossible to make such success, or the need for resources success demands, "rise to the level of fact."¹² The best data we have on university funding and hiring indicates that choices are being made on the basis of fear and projection as much as anything else. Students and administrations have created something of a feedback loop, whereby administrations "sense" that students want career-related majors, thus direct funding to those majors, and thereby intensify students' attraction to those majors, because the students' rightly sense that institutions themselves believe career-related majors are more valuable than the humanities. In this chicken-and-egg game, it's unclear which "sense" came first, but it is apparent that the humanities often lose.

This is perhaps to the humanities' credit. It certainly flatters a long-standing self-perception of humanities experts, as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon write in *Permanent Crisis* (2021), that our "we" is constituted by our sense of our willingness to serve as "guardians of

meaning, value, and human being" in the face of corrosive forces.¹³ A spring 2023 *New Yorker* article shows us this self-perception in action, when it describes Columbia University Professor of English James Shapiro sketching a graph of the downward trajectory in humanities funding and then calling the same timeline a "decline-of-democracy chart."¹⁴ Shapiro's implication, one I have heard repeated at many academic receptions, as we all snack on postlecture mini quiches, is that without the humanities, we will have no democracy, and further that those who hate democracy also hate the humanities, and attack the latter to undermine the former. Few people at these gatherings and in these *New Yorker* articles, even when they have read Kandice Chuh's excellent book on the topic, seem willing to consider the inconvenient possibility that the humanities, since their founding, have been as much a tool for rationalizing social stratification as working against it.¹⁵ "We'd" rather consider how our declining resources offer, in a backward way, an evidentiary sense of our moral worth.

I'm as inclined to self-heroics as any of the humanities experts Reitter and Wellmon describe, and if I didn't feel a full-throttle love for what the humanities can offer, I wouldn't be writing this book. But I'm worried by the impulse to assert our moral superiority, whether it's on display in myself, in Shapiro, or in any academic-mini-quiche situation. Not only do heroic interpretations obscure the ethical complexity of our work, they also naively position humanities experts as outside the overriding values of our world. We are not. We swim in the same water as everyone else. Cultural shifts toward individuation and privatization matter to our reasons for writing; they exert powerful influence over our senses, giving shape to what behaviors and attitudes can carry the force of reasonableness, individually and as we act within institutions.

I said above that universities increasingly collapse their ability to perpetuate themselves into their ability to brand; to sell themselves as a class marker that students, parents, and donors can use to enhance their own social status. In this system, humanists feel pressure to produce enough writing for universities to see our

value. But pressure is only one thing we feel, or, maybe, only one way that what we feel might be described. To describe the current system only in the negative erases the tantalizing opportunities privatized logic offers us, as individual writers, to escape the devaluation of the humanities by building a brand of our own.

In the grim archive of recent scholarship probing contemporary universities, one of the most bracing essays comes from Bennett Carpenter, Laura Goldblatt, and Lenora Hanson. Their "Unprofessional: Toward a Political Economy of Professionalism" offers an absolute fire account of the fool's bargain universities offer their faculty in our current underresourced moment.¹⁶ The essay tracks how we're asked to believe and act as though our only hope for professional security is to bolster the university's brand, in competition with other brands. In such a context, not only are we fighting for scraps, but as we do so we're asked to erase any harm we experience, since to make that suffering apparent would be to damage the brand that feeds us, as it were. We expose ourselves to risk and absorb the harm of any risk, because to complain that the university caused us harm would be to endanger what feeble remaining capacity the university has to protect us.

In this excellent essay, I find implications beyond the authors' claims. Their reading of complaint is inflected (as certainly mine is too) by Sara Ahmed's account of how universities contain experiences of the physical, sexual, and psychic risk those within them endure. But "Unprofessional" does not consider the many points of evidence suggesting something disturbing: how full of delight and pleasure risking ourselves can become. As humanities experts, we may feel superior to many of the people—athletes, aspirational sorority girls posting on RushTok—who purposefully turn their bodies into displays for university brands. We're skilled at critiquing the dark logic of identity commodification, the insidious ways corporate motives co-opt personal relations. But I don't think we can consider ourselves above or outside the world of branding in which such actors thrive.

In the ways we maneuver through our changing professional

options, I see our situation as becoming *more* like these athletes, rather than less. This is not only because all of us, athletes and authors, are doing our best with the bad choices available. We authors, too, far too often, internalize uncritically the status pleasures the privatized university seems to lure us toward. In our uptake of new publication options, we create brands that serve a range of resource streams. We write more personally, about more parts of our lives. We create professional value from our intimate experiences of embodiment. Like athletes, we expose ourselves; we compile our stats.¹⁷ Don't many of us—and don't the platforms I've personally fostered help us do it—essentially perform the role of humanities influencer?

To put it that way exposes me to my own cringe responses, even though I know the dire contexts that drive the performance. But I also know that I can't fully play the victim. It's not just bad choices and false consciousness. It's the pleasure of being ideologically affirmed. I wouldn't do it if I didn't, at least to some degree, *like doing it*. And I don't think I'm the only one. Put differently: to meaningfully consider our reasons for writing, in this time of crisis, we need to reckon as honestly as we can with our own investments, so to speak, in the privatized logic of our era. Because central to all this is how administrators' and students' "senses" shape our own sense of Our Precious Writing Time.

Those of us who have inhabited universities during the last fifteen years have felt how the institutions in which we gained our expertise, and thus in which we gained a sense of ourselves as experts, have changed in their relation to our expertise's value. We have felt it in crappy offices and bigger classes and increased publication expectations. Our Precious Writing Time takes place in an era governed by a weird inflationary logic. When our expertise is devalued, so is the writing that expresses that expertise. Perversely, then, we have to produce more of it in order to gain purchase on the security a university can provide. (Here I'm imagining humanities experts, like other historical victims of economic inflation, carting wheelbarrows full of JSTOR printouts to the HR office, trying to buy an adjunct appointment.)

At the same time, humanities experts ourselves are absorbing the lesson—how could we not absorb the lesson?—that we don't matter for each other as an audience. It's not simply that we have to write more for universities to value us. It's also that it's hard for us to value our own writing unless more people, preferably different people, read it.

Like athletes entering themselves in the new transfer portal, choosing to play, as it were, *on but not only for* a university basketball team, many of us humanities experts in our current now imagine ourselves as forces beyond the institutions in which we work, or the various collaborations (teams, departments) those institutions house. In many ways, this is a positive, even necessary, transformation. It would be so even if our institutions weren't so unsteady. But it is not easy, in this context, to find ways to value each other.

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I tell my students to be cautious of writing "we." As a political gesture, it's a term that can minimize difference, even as it purports to reject abstract or universalizing gestures. I ask my students: Who asked your reader if they want to be in your "we?" Did you? I also keep asking myself. Writers often use the "we" as a scrim, onto which a projected image obscures and aggrandizes the specific contours of the author's individual experience. Jennifer C. Nash is just one scholar to outline recently how often white feminists, in particular, make this move, claiming the feminist "we" for white women's experience.¹⁸ Knowing this is the case doesn't seem to make me immune to the habit.

The stratified crises of the current moment make collectivity ever harder, especially when I consider the "we" of a book that aims to reach readers in the nows of the future. I've felt an inherent incompatibility between "bookness" as an experience and publishing practice (a slow one, easily thrown into upheaval for material as well as intellectual reasons) and the topic of this particular book, which is the collapse of on-the-ground conditions for its readers. I'm writing in the midst of a particular set of historical

conditions, marked by war, state violence, environmental and institutional calamity. I am reviewing copy edits here on a Saturday morning in the aftermath of the 2025 Los Angeles fires: incinerated books, bicycles, lead pipes, asbestos, and artworks float in the air I breathe. You will read this book in a different set of conditions. My own sense of climate realities leads me to expect that whatever shape your now takes, it's likely to contain even more disparity, grief, and trauma than mine. I can't know what this future will be, and yet here I am, waving at future you, throwing forward some thoughts about political economy and ponies. I'm gazing at my imagined future reader through increasingly inadequate glasses as the writing conditions around me (and also, presumably, her) continue to shift. What universities will exist for her? What rights of personhood? What summary of this book will AI, which hardly existed when I started this manuscript, read to her, or allow her to access?¹⁹ What will remain of writing as a human intellectual art? I can't begin to know.

One thoughtful account of the word "we" comes at the beginning of Monica Huerta's *Magical Habits* (2021). *Magical Habits* sketches out some strategies for occupying the legacies of violent histories. In its opening pages, Huerta remembers sitting in church and listening to a "we" extended to a gathering of people, some there by pressure and some by choice. Like Huerta, I grew up with a liturgical we, and I know both the pleasures and the pressure it can generate, the competing senses of friction, irritation, and joy that come when one is called. The word "we" can describe, and it can be a performative. It can enact.²⁰ Huerta sees herself as "alone when I write we, but maybe soon with some company."²¹ The possibility of company, she posits, makes the "we" worth the risk, for her.

What readers of this book share is a lived relation to a broken time. This is a complicated thing to say. I know that differences in the degree of loss experienced by potential readers of this book are so vast they are better considered as differences in kind. Not all of our losses stem from writing, and it's uncertain how many of them may be repaired by it.²² Yet for any repair to be possible,

this broken time may require our remembering, to paraphrase Dickens, that we are all fellow passengers to the end of the world, not competing creatures bound on other journeys. We also share, in our different ways, the legacies of other writers who used their expertise and their artistry to address worlds in crisis, worlds for which they could not have trained. It's by taking responsibility for each other here, in this particular break, in this provisional kind of together, that we're most likely to access something like freedom in how, and what, we write.

To propose, as I do, that "the humanities" are something worth having in common at this stage of the journey means that one form I believe we should continue to work with and through is the university itself. This, too, is risky, because "the university," I really know, is so screwed. But universities make a particular kind of legibility possible. They are repositories of many resources we should not abandon. And they have, even if despite themselves, been sites where radical approaches to collectivity—what Chuh calls "alternative theorizations and models for ways of being and knowing"—have emerged and been strengthened.²³ Thus the "we" I'm trying to give us a way to imagine is one that must necessarily navigate between the institutional and the utopic. Another way to put this would be to say that writing, as I'm thinking about the practice, always navigates between fantasies of both endurance and transformation. To write is to enact a belief in sustained conditions of legibility; to write is to reach toward a future, one open to whatever change for which writing calls.

I have felt, sometimes, like nothing I could write would ever matter to the world's real problems. In other moments, I've felt like nothing about me or my life could matter if I didn't write. Both of these feelings carry the weight of a cultural order that tells us we can only matter individually. And both of these feelings are among those I hope this book can help all of us learn to resist. Thus the specific advice I give in this book for "humanist writing" often includes strategies for other activities: reading, editing, canvassing, and other forms of organizing, listening, talking, teaching, chilling

out. These activities not only improve what happens when you sit down to the page (although certainly they do that); they also teach us how to value the creative labor that takes place in receptive, collectivizing acts. They teach us, as writers, to be in solidarity with readers and other writers rather than in competition with them. They can reenergize our respect for other humanities experts in a world that teaches us to disregard them.

This book draws on my expertise and on my experiences; it proposes that bridging these categories makes stronger company. In the form and the content of what follows, I'm trying to figure out strategies that collectivize rather than universalize or generalize. My hope is that doing so offers some frameworks that help you surface your own reasons and feelings for writing. Writing now is terrifying. But writers have found forms in past conditions of calamity. We come to this moment knowing that if our times are unprecedented, they are not the first to be such. I try to tell myself what I tell my students who feel so unsteady as they look out at the future: amid this uncertainty, we might learn how freedom, in good company, feels.

TWO

Writing About Feelings

In the spring of 2013 I was having big feelings about a new pair of running pants. The pants were from Lululemon, then in the early days of its global conquest. The feelings were delight, in the pants, and irritation, in the way other people talked about the pants. I published an essay about my pants and my feelings called "The Unbearable Awesomeness of Lululemon Pants." In it I wrote:

I myself have just acquired my first pair of Lululemon running pants and I would like to offer a reason as to why they are worth 88 dollars: there's a seam across the top of the butt that makes my ass look better than it does in any other running pants, ever. That's it. That is the reason.

Here's a reason that has *nothing to do* with why my Lululemon running pants are "worth" 88 dollars: that they will "last a long time." This is a rationale often offered for why we running/yoga ladies should truck off to Lululemon with our hard-earned cash in hand, and hold our heads up high while doing it.

My opinion, and this is the point of this essay, is that this durability reason is bullshit and should be discarded and, let's be clear, *never used*.¹