

## CHAPTER 4

# ACKNOWLEDGING ANIMAL COMPANIONS

“[Writing] is least often an isolated, solitary act created *ex nihilo*, and most often a communal, consensual act, one that is essentially and naturally collaborative.”

– Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, “Why Write . . . Together”

and now sometimes I’m interviewed, they want to hear about life and literature and I get drunk and hold up my cross-eyed, shot, runover de-tailed cat and I say, “look, look at *this!*”

but they don’t understand, they say something like, “you say you’ve been influenced by Celine?”

“no,” I hold the cat up, “by what happens, by things like this, by this, by *this!*”

– Charles Bukowski, “the history of a tough motherfucker”

In the acknowledgments section of my dissertation, I thanked various people—my mentor, committee members, family, friends—and then I wrote, “I also want to express my deep appreciation for Peanut and Tiny, who taught me the importance of wit, sound sleep, and playfulness. Peanut’s acrobatics have especially convinced me of the importance of mobility and spunk” (*Cultural* vii). Eight years later in the acknowledgments of a book, I thanked “[t]hose feline wonders for daily consistency mixed with good doses of surprise and silliness” (*Doing* xvi).

I have come across mentions of animals by other writers in their acknowledgments, though these admittedly amount to a very small number overall, totaling less than ten mentions out of the hundreds of books I reviewed for this study. Unlike mentions of feeling or time, both of which emerged routinely in my research, animal gratitude was marginal within a marginal genre. Despite their scarcity, though, the minimal mentions of animals echoed the seemingly “natural” relationship between (creative and “great”) writers and animals routinely represented in pop culture. The dominant tendency to make iconic the relationship between famous writers and animal companions led me to the fringes of written acknowledgments in books by a different class of writers: on the whole,

those who are not famous, not identified as creative writers who, through imaginative craft, seem predisposed to have close relations with animal partners because they presumably work alone, surrounded by books and writing tools, and need a living creature to populate, not disturb, the abiding solitude.

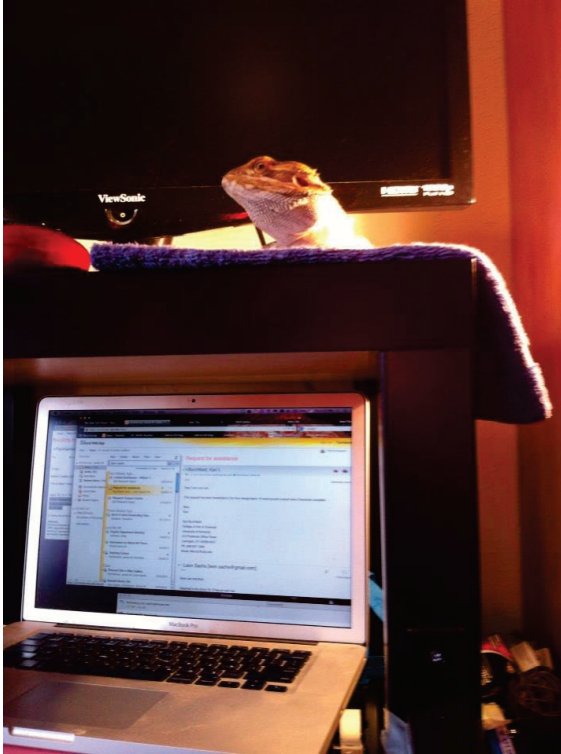
In other words, following the bread trail I uncovered in a handful of acknowledgments by academic writers, I sought to learn more about how this group of writers would acknowledge animal companions as partners when asked directly. Thus, in addition to analyzing written acknowledgments, this chapter more broadly engages acknowledgments as a rhetoric of partner inclusion, the focus of my qualitative study.

## COMPANION GRATITUDE

A friend of mine told me that before diving back into revisions of a long-abandoned writing project, she decided to adopt two cats. She didn't want to feel so alone while at home writing. If she could get away with it, she said, she would bring the cats to work with her. When I asked if she has friends at work to whom she can talk about her writing, she replied, "Yes, I do, but I don't want to talk about my work with anyone. I just want to *do* it with others around me."

As it turns out, this desire is not idiosyncratic. In 2013, *Times Higher Education* ran an opinion piece by philosophy professor Erin McKenna focused on pets in academic workplaces. Her institution, Pacific Lutheran University, has a permissive pet policy. She brings her Australian shepherds to the office with her because she is "more productive when Maeve, Tao and Kira are flopped around [her] desk." She cites studies focused on universities with "pet-friendly halls of residence," in which students have been found more likely to "persist to graduation." McKenna's linking of productivity and pets is reinforced by recent research showing that looking at animals stimulates oxytocin production, generating, in short, good feelings. And good feelings are linked to persistence, or continuing with a project for the long-term and weathering difficulty. In 2012 researchers at Hiroshima University conducted a study in which they "showed university students pictures of baby animals before completing various tasks" (Kliff). Another group of participants completed comparable tasks without viewing these images. The results showed that productivity was far and away highest among those who had seen the images (for similar research studies, see McQuerrey; Serpell).

This research, focused on intellectual tasks of various kinds, complements well-documented relationships, particularly on social media, between writers and animals. Animals and writing productivity (and/or avoidance) are often aligned, as illustrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, images posted by friends on my Facebook feed.



*Figure 4.1: Writing with Salsa. Photo credit: Janice Fernheimer*



*Figure 4.2: Writing with Waylon. Photo credit: Allison Carr*

In another post, a woman is reading in bed, flanked by a dog who is identified as her “research collaborator” (see Figure 4.3).



*Figure 4.3: Cricket (human) reading with Abby (dog). Photo credit: Amy Lind*

In this next photo, a graduate student works at her laptop with her friend’s cat, named har, sitting just behind the computer (see Figure 4.4).



*Figure 4.4: Writing with har. Photo credit: Chelsie Bryant*

The thread with har reads as follows:

First commenter: har's going to write my modernism paper for me.

Second commenter: har writes everyone's papers. That's how I've gotten this far without dying.

Third commenter: Can I borrow him this weekend? And can he write two at a time?

Second commenter: Basically, har has superpowers. The fatter he gets, the more papers he can write.

Playful, distracted, wishful—most definitely. But the idea that har writes papers is also an expression of how people think through and with animals. Dwelling with companion animals generates a powerful relationality in everyday life and, as this chapter demonstrates, in writing lives as well. Writing is an engagement with ideas and language, of course, but also with the many others who make up our worlds.

This partnership is uniquely reflected in written acknowledgments and in acts of acknowledgment more generally, which recognizes and names the contributions of others to one's own existence, achievement, and/or situation. Both the genre of acknowledgments and the rhetorical act of acknowledging broadly construed get considerable attention in this chapter. This dual focus allows me to enhance my textual findings with the inclusion of voices and images of writers who, through their participation in my qualitative study, provide extratextual access to the world of “we” referenced in the introduction to this book. What does that world look like? When asked to expand on the human-animal partnership that written acknowledgments called to my attention, what do writers say?

As is probably apparent, the wider cultural context also informs my work in this chapter. Well-documented creative partnerships between animals and artists—writers, musicians, visual artists, and others—abound. Several years ago singer-songwriter Fiona Apple wrote an open letter to her fans in South America, explaining that she was canceling her tour to be with her dying dog Janet. Listing the ways in which Janet has been faithful to her and important to her well being, Apple notes that Janet was “under the piano when I wrote songs, barked any time I tried to record anything, and she was in the studio with me, all the time we recorded the last album” (Popova). The album is in some ways a product of their entwined relationship, which makes Janet's passing especially difficult for Apple; it's clear from her announcement that her creative work is not accomplished alone, but happens with her dog by her side, who participates by barking during recording sessions.

When it comes to writing, cats often seem to get top billing, perhaps due to what catophile Ernest Hemingway calls their “absolute emotional honesty.” He continues, “human beings, for one reason or another, may hide their feelings, but a cat does not” (Minkel). Want tough critics or models of raw feeling, he seems to suggest, write with cats in your midst, an idea echoed in Figure 4.5, an image of the Floating Judgment Box.



Give your cat a place to rest  
...other than your keyboard

Give your cat the FLOATING JUDGMENT  
BOX to allow them to stare at your  
unfinished work from afar

Figure 4.5: Floating Judgment Box. Photo source: <http://www.funnyjunk.com/Floating+judgment+box/funny-pictures/5367004/>

The special alignment between cats and writers is ubiquitous. Perhaps the fact that writing requires a good deal of stillness has something to do with that connection—sitting before a desk, computer, or tablet for long stretches of time amounts to a lifestyle amenable to creatures who like to stretch out and recline in one spot, ideally while being stroked periodically. Cats do not need to be walked or let outside to relieve themselves. They are champion loungers, a point that comes up in my research when writers describe how cats help them persevere in a writing task by physically pressing on them, ultimately coaxing writers to stay put. In contrast, the breaks that dogs and other animals introduce into domestic scenes are perceived as assisting writers in a very different way—by instituting forced breaks that help writers gather their thoughts and return to writing feeling rejuvenated after a quick walk.

Returning to cats for a moment, “Writers and Kitties,” a tumblr site with the tagline “Where literature has whiskers and pointy ears” includes photos of well-known literary and philosophical figures posed in various states of proximity with cats. We see, for example, Jean Paul Sartre proofreading with “Kitty” on his

arm (see Figure 4.6); a dimly lit photo of Michel Foucault cuddling with a black kitty in the foreground, packed bookshelf in the background; and Yukio Mishima (pen name of author Kimitake Hiraoka) taking a drag from a cigarette while sitting at his cluttered desk and seemingly staring at a kitty who is watchfully positioned just in front of the desk. From behind, the cat appears to be intensely staring back (see Figure 4.7).



*Figure 4.6: Sartre and Kitty. Photo source: <http://writersandkitties.tumblr.com/>*

Representing a more pet-centric perspective, the Pets on Academia tumblr features mostly cats (some dogs) resting on or sitting next to academic materials in scenes largely absent of humans (see Figure 4.8). A typical image is accompanied by a caption that projects rhetorical agency onto the pet, constructing a sort of double for the writer, reader, and/or teacher who took the photo. That is, pets are ventriloquized, giving voice to the deep ambivalence that surrounds much academic work. Does this work matter? Is it anything? The captions express doubt, question the lifestyle required to complete academic work, and generally repeat the same gag over and over: “Your ‘important’ work? Meh.” We see a paradigmatic example in Figure 4.8.

And, so, all of the hard work and energy that went into your dissertation? In Achilles’ world, you’ve created an excellent throne—little else. No doubt the self-effacing humor keeps high-minded views of academic work in check, making room for sentiment that I’d guess is fairly common among academics, sentiment that questions the significance of our work in the broader scheme of things. Images on Pets on Academia do not usually document attachment between human and animal (like Writers and Kitties) as much as they document the need for a nonhuman stand-in to help cope with (some aspects of) academic work (dense, time-consuming reading, endless grading, difficult writing) and lifestyle (late hours, blurred lines between work and life, excessive screen time). Many of the images telegraph wishful detachment from academia, the kind of aloofness that cats exude so effortlessly. Academic work does not respect a life-work balance but instead spreads and sprawls across desks, relationships, and time (again, much like cats).



Figure 4.7: Mishima and cat. Photo source: <http://writersandkitties.tumblr.com/>



Figure 4.8: “Achilles thinks my dissertation draft makes an excellent kitty dais.”  
Photo source: <http://petsonacademia.tumblr.com/>



By positioning pets as projections of their own doubts about academia, participants engage in imaginative flight as the other. Jonathan Safran Foer writes in the foreword to *Animals and the Human Imagination* that “our self-conception has always depended on how we imagine animal others” (x). The dialogue about har above illustrates this dialectic between self-conception and imagining animals. har functions as alter-ego of the writers, who project superpowers onto him and, by extension, onto themselves. The displacement of writing powers onto har is a way for the writers to humorously deflect their own feelings of powerlessness by locating those feelings in the enigmatic figure of a cat who patiently keeps them company as they write under deadline. The implication is that one can only accomplish the many writing tasks of graduate school through deployment of super-human powers.

This is not to say that animals are understood exclusively as stand-ins for human anxiety in the context of writing. As noted by participants in my research study detailed below, companion animals are most certainly not objects but subjects who contribute in significant ways to writerly identity and persistence. Attributing pets with agency reminds me of Potter’s critique of bloated acknowledgments, discussed in the introduction, in which she remarks that pets should not be included in acknowledgments because, as she puts it, they “just do pet things.” Much contemporary research in and around animal studies offers considerably more thoughtful approaches to understanding just what pets do for and with humans. Part of my aim in this chapter is to make visible what some of those understandings look like when applied to writing activities.

Much of my analysis addresses the idea of “withness,” or the ways in which animals and humans, tangled together in everyday encounters, co-create writing experiences and spaces in large and small ways. Writing is defined, ultimately, by its radical withness, even as it can feel isolating and lonely—oppositions that emerge throughout my research. If writing is not exclusively a relay between mind and body, or mind and tool, then how do we describe it? And how would more chaotic descriptions of writing translate into theory and practice? Would they need to? Is writing ever dependent on the proximity of furry critters? On warm bodies pressing down, growling, or otherwise expressing affection, comfort, and closeness? One example of the sort of withness I have in mind appears in an exhibit called “In the Company of Animals,” organized by The Morgan Library and Museum in New York, in cooperation with the literary journal *Ploughshares*, for which artists in their workspaces reflect on connections between animals and their creative work. Writer Emma Straub, in an online video, describes her cats as important to her writing process in numerous physical ways (“In the Company”). For instance, when her cat Killer is lying on her, she is less likely to stop writing and do something else. She will continue at her computer,

even if she's hungry or has to go to the bathroom, essentially waiting out the cat and prolonging her writing time. Writing is deeply intertwined with Straub's context—sitting in bed with a laptop, weighed down by a resting cat—and with bodies as they are touching, warming and burrowing into one another.

Similar examples of animal-human writing relations are ubiquitous in the everyday and well documented on the internet. While this ubiquity invites uncritical views, my contention is that we can mine these partnerships to better understand the situated nature of writing writ large—in a world populated by all sorts of creatures in both explicit and implicit communion. As my research indicates, writing activities are frequently mediated by the presence of nonhuman others, and once we see this as meaningful, we are primed to consider writing as an overt practice of dwelling with others in the world. Also, animal companions in scenes of writing make visible dual realities of writing: writing is a lonely pursuit and always populated with others.

This chapter deviates from the preceding ones by including results from a qualitative study of animals in composing environments. The first section presents examples from written acknowledgments that demonstrate how nonhuman creatures contribute to writing activities. The remainder of the chapter reports on field research, prompted by my findings in acknowledgments, aimed at showing how writers conceive the contributions that animal companions make to their composing lives. These contributions acknowledge partners that render writing an art of living and engaging with a range of others.



“On the home front, a number of cats lent a great deal of warmth and a general sense of well-being to the composing process, including the much missed Kitty and Clyde and the current throng consisting of Casey, Gabe, Hansel, and Simon.” This is an excerpt from Donna Strickland's acknowledgment in *The Managerial Unconscious*. The cats, as it happens, figure more prominently than her “dearest companion” named in the next brief sentence. In another example, an author of *GenAdmin* moves seamlessly between thanking her coauthors and animal friends: “To my coauthors for making me think and laugh. To Cima and Eva for their furry friendship” (Charlton et al. v). The proximity of the sentences, revealing other forms of physical and felt proximity, suggests that animals are not mere props or background but are intimately intertwined with writing.

Likewise, in *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*, the editors cite the beginning of their collaboration by referring to the meals they made for their “cooperative household of seven students and two dogs” (Freedman and Holmes xv). Collaboration is influenced “by what happens,” to borrow from Bukowski, and what happens cannot be traced di-

rectly from idea to talk or writing but is messily concocted through a series of interactions, activities, and “outside” contaminants: food, cooking, animals, a co-housing partnership—all of which constitute the scene of invention, not merely a setting or place where writing “took place.”

In some cases, if one didn’t know better, animal companions could be mistaken for co-authors. They are described as present and dedicated during the writing and linked to the physical work of writing. Take, for instance, Patricia Donahue’s mention of dogs in her acknowledgment for *Local Histories*: “The bichon frises, Lily and Isabelle, remained steadfast in their devotion” (xiv). Her like-minded co-editor, Gretchen Flesher Moon, also praises four-legged contributions to the collaboration, “Brisk early morning walks with Fritz and Jeb (dogs of no discernible breed, but of great curiosity) made long days poring over the manuscript physically bearable” (xiv). “Physically bearable” suggests the embodied contributions these dogs make to the writing—perhaps similar to Emily Straub’s earlier mention of how her cats keep her physically rooted. “Brisk early morning walks,” made necessary by the dogs, starkly contrasts with “long days” of presumed physical stillness spent “poring over the manuscript.” In Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch’s acknowledgment for *Virtual Peer Review*, she thanks “Holly, for wonderful walks and for being my constant companion during long days at the computer” (x), calling to mind dog companionship, though I cannot be sure about that.

Haraway, who writes about cross-species co-evolution and habitation, unsurprisingly acknowledges dogs in her book *When Species Meet*. In the final paragraph of her acknowledgments, she writes, “How can I acknowledge Cayenne and Roland, the dogs of my heart? This book is for them, even if they might prefer a scratch-and-sniff version, one without endnotes” (x). Her love note reverberates throughout the book, as she explores how partners co-evolve and so, as she writes, “do not precede their relating” (17). On this point, Haraway explains in *The Companion Species Manifesto* that “[t]here are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends” (6). For her, every form of identification is a “produc[t] of relating”; we know ourselves as subjects, objects, genders, and so forth, only in relation to others (7).

In a similar vein, writing, as documented in acknowledgments, is animated by everything we do, encounter, everything we are when making sense of the world through language. Material structures, technologies and tools, chairs, music, friends, feelings, power grids, tables, forms of physical embodiment, and non-human others. Writing is the product of these and other relations. And relations are the stuff of writing, whether at the syntactic level—how words and sentences express and embody relationships among persons, ideas, things—or the content level—citation practices and the connected role of influence in writing,

audience matters, and meaning-making more broadly. Writing is contaminated, made possible by a mingling of forces and energies in diverse environments composed of various partners. The next section illustrates this point as I report on a qualitative study I conducted to complement and expand my analysis of written acknowledgments. Through the study, I sought to understand what sorts of contributions writers in rhetoric and composition would attribute to animals, and what writers would acknowledge as rhetorically, intellectually, emotionally, and/or physically significant about being with animals in scenes of composing. The next section details my methods and results.

## STUDYING WRITERS AND THEIR COMPANIONS

“I can’t even find a roach to commune with.”

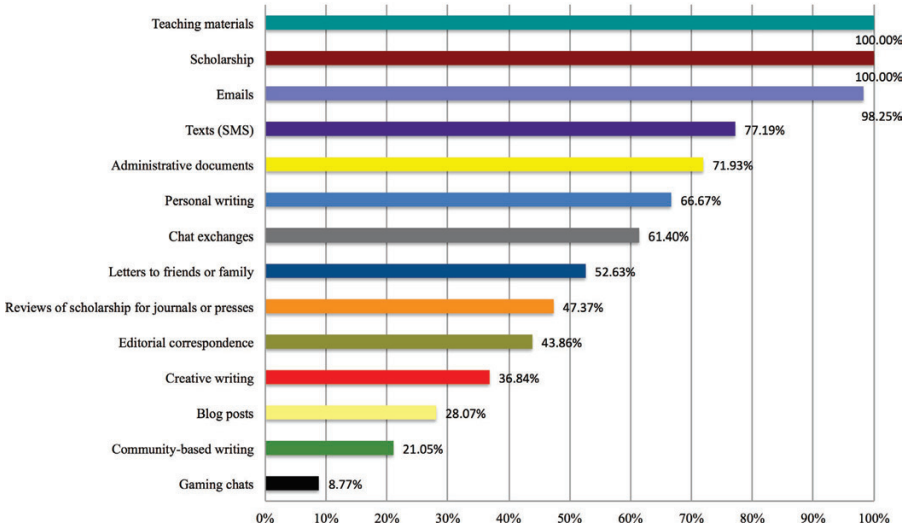
– Charles Bukowski, “metamorphosis”

In March 2014 I distributed an electronic survey link via WPA-L, inviting rhetoric and composition specialists to complete a survey on composing with animals. Sixty-one people completed the survey of 11 questions, the first of which immediately limited the respondent pool: “Do you regularly write in spaces shared with animals?” (see Appendix B for survey questions and IRB documentation). The one respondent who answered “no” was directed to exit the survey, as I did not want a general overview of writers and animals. I wanted a more particular view of how those who write in the presence of animals depict and understand that experience. Thus, my findings are not generalizable to a broad swatch of writers in the field; they reflect a small, self-selected sub-set of field members and are shaped by my deliberate limitations on the research design.

I focused on professionals in rhetoric and composition because I wanted to understand how teachers and researchers in a field organized around writing make sense of their own writing partners and environments. A larger, more diverse study sample could offer comparative insights—i.e., how do critical writers in various fields describe partners? What, if any, patterns emerge across and within disciplines?—thereby constructing a more representative account of critical writers at work. My goals for this research, then, are modest and preliminary. I hope the data builds on existing accounts in composition studies of how writers write, including work by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, whose edited collection *Critical Intellectuals on Writing* exposes the rituals and writing scenes of transdisciplinary theorists; Leon and Pigg’s study of graduate students as accomplished multitaskers; and Waldrep’s (now very dated) 1985 and 1987 two-volume collection of essays by researchers in composition studies, *Writers on Writing*.

Respondents to my survey included tenure-line faculty (31%), full time non-tenure-track faculty (41%), and doctoral students (28%). As Chart 4.1 illustrates, the top three forms of writing the respondents most engage in are scholarship, teaching materials, and email. Most of that writing is done in homes (100%), followed by offices (51%) and coffee shops (39%) (note that respondents could select multiple locations).

**Q3 Identify the kinds of writing that you regularly engage in (select all that apply):**



*Chart 4.1. Regular forms of writing*

A notable outlier, one respondent commented that s/he writes in a truck when taking retreats to the ocean, mountain, or desert, though the writer says nothing about the presence of animals in these settings. I mention it here mostly because the comment made me curious about connections between place, travel, and writing—a subject for another study.

The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions, with much of the substantive data predictably emerging from the latter as well as from the optional Facebook group site, “Composing with Animals,” to which survey participants were invited to submit photos depicting the presence of animals in their writing environments. Thirty-two people who completed the survey accepted my invitation to post photos to the Facebook group; half that number ended up joining the group, and ultimately ten participants—one male and nine females—posted material to the site. Instructions for the Facebook group were in part as follows: “Please post photos of animals in your writing environment to this page, and feel free to add commentary. However you interpret ‘writing

environment' is really up to you" (for a complete description of the group as well as posting instructions, see Appendix C). The 27 postings by 10 participants on the group page span nearly a year—from June 24, 2014 through May 6, 2015. As I write this in May 2016, the group is still open and available to participants even as my research collection process is complete.

In the survey portion of my research, forty-six participants identified animals who are a regular part of their composing environments to be equally divided among dogs and cats (28 participants each), with one rabbit and one bird also selected from my prepared list of options. In the comments section of this question, more diversity surfaced. Writers added the following animal companions:

- Mule deer outside the window
- Coyotes, ravens, and cows ("I mean, they're not in 'my' scene, but we're sharing a space and we know each other are there.")
- Fish ("I had a betta fish that I mostly credit for getting me through my dissertation.")
- Guinea pig and chickens
- Horses ("I have two horses and while they are not present, per se, when I am writing, I often use my time with them to think about and process my work.")

Most respondents answered that two animals populate their writing environments (41%), followed by one (28%), and then three (24%). While I had originally envisioned, without realizing I was doing so, domestic pets as the writing companions who would make appearances in the data, the respondent additions of animals in their wider environments demonstrated that encounters with others are not dependent on proximity or touch (as many of the survey responses cited below tend to underscore). In processing the data, I was reminded of Ingold's point that, when it comes to connections between humans and others, there is no "radical break between social and ecological relations" ("Hunting" 49). In that sense, writing and writers are in the world, not just in the room.

In the most descriptive, qualitative information about the relationship between writers and animal companions, we catch glimpses of what "witness" means to the participants and how those meanings might be linked to acknowledgments: feelings of gratitude, indebtedness, emotional and physical reliance. My discussion of results focuses on responses to questions 8-11, which address, respectively, forms of contact; values animals contribute to the writing process; reflection on the phrasing "writing companion" to describe animals; and, lastly, an open-ended invitation to add other thoughts. Forty-six participants responded to Q8-10, and twenty-three responded to Q11. Collectively, participants created a rich portrait of how writers compose with animals and a range of

responses addressing what sense they make of that witness.

To highlight patterns in the survey responses, I conducted a frequency analysis, coding data segments based on rate of occurrence. Since I designed the study to include only those who write with animals, the data collection process helped me gain more insight about my thesis, which I would characterize as follows: writers write with animals physically or mentally near, and this has some effect on composing. Thus, my reduction of the data for presentation purposes here does not require me to select representative and discrepant samples: all of the data is representative of my originating thesis, an appropriate outcome given that I aim to construct an impressionistic portrait of these writers rather than prove they constitute a preponderance of writers in the field.

The remainder of this chapter is organized by the following categories and subcategories, which constitute my coding scheme (see Appendix D): writing process (perseverance; proximity); communication (modality; effects); writer identity (self-perception; affect). These categories represent themes that emerged with regular frequency in responses to open-ended questions. Participant responses, excerpted below, are presented anonymously in order to make no unnecessary distinctions between those who granted permission to be identified and those who did not. This decision is appropriate given that my emphasis is on descriptions of writing environments rather than writer identity. By working with the respondents' words as is (I made no changes or corrections), I'm able to construct a descriptive account of how writers interpret the role of animals in composing scenes and to connect those accounts to acknowledgments generally—not exclusively the written genre but, more broadly, rhetorical gestures that credit others with meaningful contributions to writing that vary in form and kind.

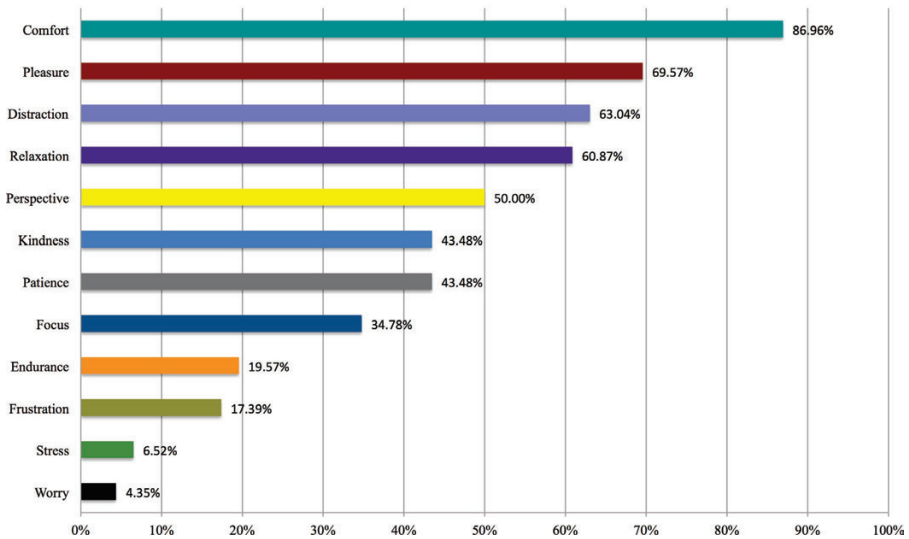
## **WRITING PROCESS: PERSEVERANCE AND PROXIMITY**

Within the writing process category, participants address activities linked to generating writing. Perseverance, the first subcategory, refers to a writer's ability to persist at writing. The second, proximity, has to do with closeness of animals and writers during writing sessions. Responses in this category suggest that animal companions participate in writing activities in various ways, not merely as "company," a reasonable assumption upon first glance. The participants describe how they persist, day after day, working on complicated projects that can be all consuming and lonely. One respondent, for example, states, "Writing can be lonely, especially because I generally prefer to write alone (I'm wont to talk if I write with others), but writing with a dog cuddled up with me, or even if they are asleep in the same room where I write, can help me to endure and write more." Others

addressed the ways in which animals enforced much-needed breaks, helping one writer to “forge ahead and get through the hard parts of writing. [My dogs] also are a welcome break and stress reliever.” Recognizing the deleterious effects of over-work, one person notes, “my animals are helping to force a break so that I don’t work too long.” Perseverance and proximity are explicitly linked by one respondent: “I take great pleasure in patting and playing with [my dog]. In warmer weather, we might go out on the deck. I read; she watches and smells the yard. What is most important, I find, is that she provides friendship, companionship, a feeling not being alone—and I do think that provides me with perseverance.”

Correlating to perseverance, when asked to identify values that animals seem to contribute to the writing process, writers largely selected positive values, as Chart 4.2 shows, with comfort, pleasure, and distraction ranking highest.

**Q9** Identify values that animals seem to contribute to your writing process:



*Chart 4.2. Values, animals, and writing*

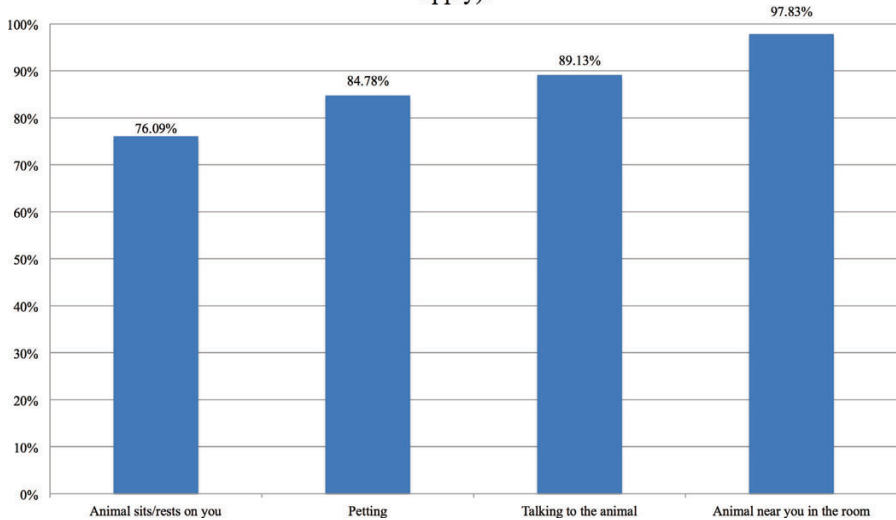
Eleven respondents added other values in the comments, and several explained the positive value of distraction, as did this writer: “I just want to clarify ‘distraction’—they distract me away from my computer so I step away from my work momentarily, which often benefits my writing tremendously. I tend to focus on my writing for longer periods of time.” This person links “step[ping] away” with overall persistence. Another participant offered “resilience” as a value, which indexes the ability to persist in the face of challenges and/or obstacles. Linking these positive values to writer persistence and to animal need (to play, to walk, etc.), each agent comes to “co-constitute one another” in mutually ben-



eficial ways (Haraway, *When* 4). It's worth noting, however, that sometimes this entanglement, bordering on dependency, can impede progress and adaptability to new circumstances. For example, one respondent confessed, "When we lost our cats last year (3 in four months), I could barely be in the house without them, and I could certainly not write." The effects of companion attachments are not unequivocally comforting.

When asked to identify kinds of contact writers have with animals while writing, participants responded as follows:

**Q8 Explain what kind of contact you have with animals while writing (select all that apply):**



*Chart 4.3. Writers' contact with animals while writing*

Respondents added 20 comments, offering clarifications of "contact" not accounted for in my answer selections. In so doing, contact came to signify play, taking breaks, working out ideas, and sensory experiences. Here's a representative sampling of those responses:

I attend to their needs when they communicate they have them, such as going outside, or sometimes just wanted my attention (touch).

I will play with my dog (throwing a ball or tugging on a toy) while I'm working. One of my cat often places his paw on my computer key board while I'm working or if I set my computer down to go into a room for a minute. I often have to go back and erase his "revisions."

Regularly, my cat initiates play while I am writing. Some games require me to stop writing, stand up, and move around the room; other games require only that I through something, usually kibble.

What might escape notice because seemingly commonplace—walking a dog, writing with cats on our desks—seems crucial to how critical writers accomplish their goals and persist with the competitive, laborious and often lonely task of critical writing. One participant offered this representative sentiment: “I don’t know if/how I would write without my cat or cats nearby. I wrote my book and each of my articles with the presence of a cat or cats close by.”

Proximity is most often understood as physical closeness by participants of both the survey and the Facebook photo group. Figures 4.9 and 4.10 offer visual and narrative examples that ground much of the commentary cited above.



*Figure 4.9: Photo credit: Jenn Fishman.<sup>1</sup>*

Proximity, however, is sometimes configured otherwise, not solely in terms of nearness. Katie Ryan’s animal companions include, for instance, a marmot, and, as pictured in Figure 4.11, a moose, both of whom she describes as welcome distractions from writing.

1 Jenn writes, “My cat, Charlie, was born two years ago in the Gambier, OH, woods. When she was 2 months old, she invited herself to a Kenyon Review Young Writers picnic hosted by friends of mine. Initially they took her in and their daughter named her, but half their household are allergic to cats. When I arrived in Gambier a month later to work on Kenyon Writes, Charlie joined me. Since the keyboard on my very old Mac laptop was no longer working (I typed via a bluetooth keyboard), she was able to take up residence directly in front of the screen. For the rest of the summer, she mainly slept while I read a great deal, took lots of notes, and finished the Year 2 IRB along with two article manuscripts.”



*Figure 4.10: Photo credit: April Conway.<sup>2</sup>*



*Figure 4.11: Photo credit: Katie Ryan.<sup>3</sup>*

2 April writes, “My composing companions are my dogs, Paco and Lola. Lola will lay at my feet when I write at the desk upstairs, and sometimes Paco will join her. Similarly, Lola will cuddle right next to me on the bed or couch when I read for my writing, and Paco will join us when he feels like it. My primary writing space, though, is at the dining room table, and so most often my view, when I look up from the computer, is of Paco and Lola napping in their respective spots on the living room furniture.”

3 Katie writes, “Here’s my animal neighbor composing distraction of the day. His rear end is over 5 feet tall. A glorious distraction!”

Likewise, Laura Rogers addresses the value of riding her horse as a strategy for getting focused. Riding seems to have a meditative effect on her, helping her to be in the moment which in turn serves her writing (see Figure 4.12).



*Figure 4.12: Photo credit: Laura Rogers.<sup>4</sup>*

## COMMUNICATION: MODALITY AND EFFECTS

As participants reflected on the aptness of “writing companions” to describe their experiences writing with animals, they addressed modes and effects of communication that foregrounded the interactive aspects of their relationships. For example, the sensory modality of sound came up several times. One respondent referred to “purring mixing with the click of keys” as “one of the happiest sounds”; another wrote that listening to dogs snoring was the “best background noise ever!” Others recalled “talking out loud and think[ing] through writing” with cats, or “writing aloud” while walking dogs, who are identified as “receptive and non-judgmental listeners” by one participant. While talking to her dog all day, one respondent also benefits from the “feel of her [dog’s] fur (especially her super soft ears!) on my fingers when I’m thinking.” In another scene of animal contact while writing, a Facebook participant reflects on her cat’s role as a “particular kind of actor and interactor,” explaining that “much of the time she opts to be/sleep wherever I am working (bed, living room, dining room, kitchen), and when she is awake it’s not unusual for her to ask for attention via a paw poking around the side of the computer screen, a paw to the side of my face, a swat to the legs followed by a dash across the room, and so on.” This respondent “value[s] and enjoy[s]” this kind of interactivity.

Tactile and sensory communication have clear effects on writers and writing. Responses focused on altered affective, mental, or physical states; renewed or

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<sup>4</sup> Laura writes, “While my Morgan mare Jessie is not part of my immediate composing environment, she is an important part of my writing process. Riding/being with a horse requires that one be totally in the present moment . . . I can return to writing more focused, present and grounded.”

depleted energy for writing; and changed perspectives on writing. For example, one respondent noted that “my writing days influence [my cat’s] experience of the world as much as her presence influences my experience of writing.” Another commented, “I see my cat as a companion in the sense that she is often a (loud) verbal reminder of the world around me.” Articulating a point made by many, one writer notes that an important effect of animal companions is that they “mak[e] me STOP writing or sitting at my desk. At 4:00 p.m., they’re letting me know it’s time for our afternoon walk, and I think that’s as important as anything else.” Sometimes the cohabitation becomes so intertwined that writers alter their writing lives to align with the lives of animals in their midst. In this vein, one writer describes her relationship with her ailing dog as a “mutual dependency,” which “became so intense that when I moved to my first job post-graduation, I was very reluctant to leave home to work at my office. . . . My dog (in concert with my research) changed my relationship to writing and to my attachment to public settings when I write.”

## **IDENTITY: SELF-PERCEPTION AND AFFECT**

Self-efficacy, confidence, and self-worth emerged as values writers frequently attached to their experiences with animal companions. Often their comments came up in the context of writing as a lonely activity (i.e., writing with pets nearby “alleviates loneliness of writing”). One respondent notes that having a dog at one’s feet while writing makes “you feel like you have someone who is always cheering for you”—though she is quick to point out that this feeling does not necessarily extend to cats, who are likely to make her feel “like I am always being silently judged,” calling to mind Hemingway’s comment on how a cat does not hide her feelings. Another writer gains great comfort and presence of mind from a dog’s nearness when “feeling desperate” about writing. Noting that the dog “has been beside me for every book I’ve read, every piece I’ve written, every presentation I’ve made, and every class I’ve taught,” the writer reveals something of the psychic difficulty of writing and the contributions her dog makes to easing that difficulty: “She reminds me, especially in the long dark hours of night writing, that we’ve ‘done it’ and we’ll ‘do it’ again! When the voices in my head get to be too loud and I feel as though I’m losing my mind, she has a calming and mind-clearing effect.”

This sentiment was articulated in numerous ways by participants. One says her dog companion generates “inspiration and centeredness,” reminding her of “my sense of purpose.” Regular contact with a dog improves another participant’s self-worth: “Seeing how much my dog utterly adores me—even when my writing is awful—reminds me that I’m more than a ‘writer’ or a ‘professor.’”

Here we venture into issues of identity and the construction of self through contact with the other. This comment also addresses the value of a widened perspective while writing—lightening the weight of writing by situating it in a broader field of activity where other responsibilities and pleasures are located—a point echoed by countless respondents. Another simply states, “Pet presence and contentment offset my own frustrations.”

These excerpts highlight the value of animals as loyal companions who offer a concentrated sense of calm and rootedness in a reality that is not dependent on academic work to validate worth or goodness. Given the difficult emotional labor associated with writing, as we saw in chapter two, a reminder of one’s value beyond the human centered endeavor of academic work acts as a reprieve, an important grounding in the material world and corresponding cohabitation in it. The acknowledgments of animal contributions to the daily work of writing are simultaneously earthly and transcendent, as they offer a peek into writing spaces grounded in mundane relations between writers and animals while also highlighting the complex psychological state of writers who, in appreciating respite from loneliness, doubt, and anxiety, often attribute their ability to transcend the hard production of writing to animal companions.

Or sometimes transcendence is not the goal. Sometimes identity as a writer, teacher, and person are so intimately tied to animals that the partnership is complete. Examples in this vein emerged in the Facebook group, where participants (understandably) revealed more about their lives than did survey participants, as they shared glimpses of their writing worlds through photos. We see not only animals in writing scenes but also personal spaces dense with the stuff of writing (computers, pencils, books, papers, coffee cups, etc.) and with life around writing (dishes, windows, rugs, couches, decorations, outdoor settings, lamps, etc.). I’ve come to think of the Facebook contributions as portraits-in-miniature of what the survey data suggests. They add texture and intimacy to the overall data.

Connecting writing and life in a striking way, one Facebook contributor writes:

I don’t have children so I don’t know what it must be like to think about my child incessantly but I do have dogs and I do think about my dogs incessantly, particularly when they are in pain and need my care. Work has been something that has to fall by the wayside when they need my attention but has also been a haven to expel all of my worry/anxiety ridden energies. Sam’s disabilities have made me more mindful of disability studies and it has in turn affected the way I see the world and think about Composition pedagogy and practice.

This excerpt is one of few in my research that explicitly addresses the interactive relationship between animal companionship and disciplinary concerns, reminding me of Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*, in which she argues that humans and dogs "shape each other" (29) and are "products of their relating" (7).

## REFLECTING ON THE DWELT-IN WORLD

"Environments are constituted in life, not just in thought, and it is only because we live in an environment that we can think at all," writes Ingold ("Hunting" 50). This claim clicked for me when I read through and processed the data for this study. I could not shake the idea that my respondents had set out to convince me that a writing environment is not so much about creating a space in which we can articulate our thoughts as much as it is about creating a dwelling where writing is just one activity interacting with others. In other words, the interaction and diversity is what really seems to matter to the participants of the survey and the Facebook group page. These writers encourage us to consider writing as always part of the dwelt-in world, and so to consider it apart from its habitats, as inevitably happens when we make writing teachable, when we give it the textbook treatment, is to mangle writing's lived qualities. I'm not sure there's any way around this, but it bears noticing that writing theory and practice must continually evolve, remain ever awake to more of the surround and eager to grow through interaction with it.

In practical terms, the takeaway of this chapter isn't that composition courses should be conducted with animals present (though that sounds good to me) or that theory must always account for how living creatures, beyond humans, bear on writing activity. Rather, my hope is that this study of animals and composers encourages teachers and scholars to insist on writing environments as central to what makes writing possible. More importantly, I believe this research speaks to embodied, sensory-rich, and cognitive studies of pedagogy and rhetoric that emphasize difference as key to appreciating the many variables that inflect writing activities. As such, thinking of and with animals generates questions about moral and psychological connections between self and other, what it means to be writing animals ourselves, and operative constructions of identity (what do they include? Exclude? What are the boundaries between self and other? How do bodies and identities blur together? What are the effects?). In other words, I see the study in this chapter as interfacing with broader efforts to pose questions about identity and difference that have bearing on writing activities so that these categories are not presumed or taken for granted. In addition, the accumulated study of acknowledgments throughout this book and the emphasis on varied

partnerships develop a wide frame of reference for collaboration. What contributes to school writing activity is both plain to see (assignments, peers, teachers, tutors, technology, etc.) and embedded in diverse contexts of activity (feeling, time, animal company).

The presence of animals in scenes of composing makes explicit the dialectic of writing as a lonely pursuit and writing as always collaborative. Through partnerships of various kinds with animals, writers are changed, even if only temporarily when a mood lifts and confidence returns. This claim expands my study of written acknowledgments so that acknowledging more generally might be theorized as central to the work of writing writ large. We are always dependent on others, learning from them, being changed by and changing in response to others, and finding our way through and with language while occupying scenes of cross-species (and other) partnerships.