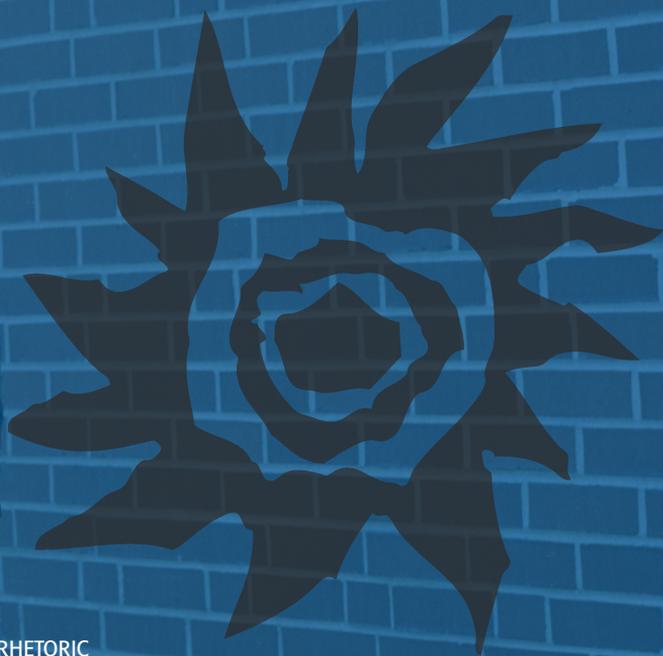




ASSEMBLING COMPOSITION

Edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey
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Assembling Composition: An Introduction

Kathleen Blake Yancey and Stephen J. McElroy

ASSEMBLAGE—A THEORY AND PRACTICE LOCATED IN media, contexts, and combinations—has been cited by several scholars in rhetoric and composition as providing a new and helpful way of understanding composing, especially in an era marked by postmodernism and postpedagogy. In their 2006 article “Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage,” for example, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber famously defined assemblage as “texts built primarily and explicitly from existing texts in order to solve a writing or communication problem in a new context” (381) and urged that the assemblage composing practices characterizing the workplace also characterize school-based composing. Byron Hawk’s 2007 award-winning *Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity* linked assemblage to invention, arguing that “a new paradigm built around complexity could produce a postdialectical understanding of contemporary pedagogies of invention for the emerging scene produced by digital technology” (7), an understanding enacted through assemblages formed by students, teachers, classrooms, and curricula in academic spaces. More recent scholarship has charted other paths. In his 2016 *Assembling Arguments*, for instance, Jonathan Buehl has recast assemblage as “rhetorical assembly,” which he defines as a fundamental composing practice for multimodal writing in the sciences. Focusing on what he calls the transformative quality of assemblage, Dustin Edwards, in a 2016 *Computers and Composition* article, sees in its transformative nature both an extension and an adaptation of classical imitation. And not least, in her 2015 *College Composition and Communication* article Jacqueline Preston

understands assemblage as the centerpiece of a new radical pedagogy, one in which previously transgressive textual practices are the norm. In these efforts, as we explain below, assemblage refers to and sanctions the makingness that textuality affords and its use, reuse, and repurposing of materials, especially chunks of texts, in order to make something new.

In their definitions and understandings of assemblage, this recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition is, as the authors often make clear, indebted to earlier work on assemblage occurring both in art and in critical theory: the thinking about assemblage in these two contexts thus provides a starting point for this chapter. We then turn to the ways that scholars in rhetoric and composition have approached assemblage, tracing similarities and differences and sounding themes across them so as to provide a background for the essays making up this volume. We then conclude the chapter by introducing the remaining chapters, suggesting how they provide continuation with and adaptations of earlier work on assemblage as they raise new questions guiding future theory and practice.

ASSEMBLAGE IN ART

In 1961 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), under the direction of the associate curator William Seitz, opened an exhibition called “The Art of Assemblage.” Although the word *assemblage* had been in use for centuries, as the OED suggests,¹ the definition of assemblage was nonetheless sufficiently unfamiliar that it led MoMA’s press release announcing the event.

Assemblage, a method initiated by major artists early in this century, which has been increasingly practiced by young artists here and abroad since World War II, is the subject of a major exhibition The Art of Assemblage at the Museum of Modern Art from October 4 through November 12. . . . An “assemblage” (a more inclusive term than the familiar “collage”) is a work of art made by fastening together cut or torn pieces of paper, clippings from newspapers, photographs, bits of cloth, fragments of wood, metal or other such materials, shells or stones, or even objects such as knives and forks,

chairs and tables, parts of dolls and mannequins, and automobile fenders. The symbolic meaning of these objects, not originally intended as art materials, can be as important as their realistic aspects. (1)

As Seitz explains, assemblage in the world of art is a practice bringing together everyday materials to create a new text, a text emerging from and bearing traces of a mix of connotations and contexts that also has symbolic import:

When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained or torn, when wood is split, weathered or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack. More specific associations are denoted when an object can be identified as the sleeve of a shirt, a dinner fork, the leg of a rococo chair, a doll's eye or hand, an automobile bumper or a social security card. (84)

In other words, it is precisely in the mix of "disparate elements," each of which has its own resonances and traces, that the new and the symbolic of assemblage are made, elements that, according to the UK's Tate gallery, are sometimes "scavenged," other times "bought specially."

Pablo Picasso is often identified as the originary composer of assemblage, particularly in his more sculptural works like *Still Life* (1914), "made from scraps of wood and a length of tablecloth fringing, glued together and painted" (Tate), and indeed his works were among those included in MoMA's "Art of Assemblage" exhibition, in part because of his attention to the tools he did not need, in part because of the diverse materials he combined. As Ann Temkin and Anne Umland explain, Picasso's "breakthrough came with the realization that he did not need particular tools or difficult-to-manipulate materials in order to work sculpturally" (15), that he could "cobble together," or assemble, many materials and many different *kinds* of materials, especially those of the everyday, into a single composition: "String, wire, pieces of paper and cardboard, wood scraps, and tin cans were cut, folded, glued, stitched, or otherwise

assembled. The results were musical instruments and other still life subjects of an unprecedented sort” (15). Materiality, everydayness, and cobbling together thus defined Picasso’s early assemblages and forecast his continuing interest in this artistic practice.

But another, contemporaneous artist, one with a somewhat different motivation if a similar practice, had an entire gallery in the MoMA exhibition dedicated to his compositions: Kurt Schwitters. A German painter born toward the end of the nineteenth century, Schwitters found in the assemblage of everyday materials—“bus and train tickets, stamps, wrappers, newsprint, buttons and other refuse which he collected in his pockets as he walked in the streets” (MoMA)—a response to a specific cultural and historical moment, that of the Weimar Republic in the aftermath of World War I. As art critic Alan G. Artner observes, this moment was one of crisis for Schwitters: “The Weimar Republic had been proclaimed in Germany; the old order had broken down. Schwitters thought ‘new things had to be made from fragments.’ The pictures he created with found objects and detritus were, as he said, ‘new art forms out of the remains of a former culture.’” In other words, it was the collapse of the old culture that motivated a new artistic exploration, one that understood the “choosing, distributing and reshaping” of everyday materials as an assemblage practice equal in value to painting, as Schwitters himself explains:

Merz paintings [Schwitters’s term for his assemblages] are abstract works of art. The word “Merz” essentially means the totality of all imaginable materials that can be used for artistic purposes and technically the principle that all of these individual materials have equal value. Merz art makes use not just of paint and canvas, brush and palette, but all the materials visible to the eye and all tools needed . . . the wheel off a pram, wire mesh, string and cotton balls—these are factors of equal value to paints. The artist creates by choosing, distributing and reshaping the materials. (91)

The artist, in Schwitters’s terms, thus creates compositions via an assemblage practice employing everyday materials, one that in his

case provided a mechanism for responding to the collapse of an old cultural order. To make the new, fragments of the old were used, but specifically to transform them into the new. Art, in this view, thus taps the material of the everyday to provide a corrective new composition for responding to the moral collapse of the old culture.

ASSEMBLAGE IN CRITICAL THEORY

Drawing from critical theory, two competing scholarly definitions for assemblage are helpful, especially given our interest in the role of assemblage in writing contexts. In the first sense, as defined in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an assemblage is “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’” (Deleuze and Parnet, qtd. in Anderson et al. 177). Here, the heterogeneous terms at work in any given act of composing co-function in a specific combination, an assemblage: the writer, her pen and paper, her ideas, her purpose, her audience; the Web designer, his markup languages, his editing program, his browser; the advertising executive, her products, her medium, her market. The constituents in each of these assemblages *unite*, relate, and produce. This first sense of *assemblage* thus allows us also to see composing as proceeding from interrelated combinations of bodies, concepts, and ideas: approaching composing in this light allows us to see and trace the assembled components and to map out how they work together, how they are related, to generate a particular composition. The second sense of *assemblage* refers to any text resulting from such a constellation, with text being understood metaphorically.

In the context of writing, however, it’s worth noting that a text isn’t only the composition a student writes in class: such a text, which we understand as synonymous with *composition*, could be a book, an image, a postcard, an album, and so on. Such a capacious definition, influenced by the works of Gunther Kress and D. F. McKenzie, is directly related to assemblage. Kress, drawing our attention to the multimodality of all texts, calls an ensemble

of modes that is “semiotically and communicationally complete” a text (149); a multimodal ensemble, in its provisionality and contingency, is assemblage-like. Similarly, McKenzie’s definition of *text* underscores the role of the materiality of texts. As Jerome McGann observes, McKenzie’s text “is meaning-constitutive not simply in its ‘contained’ or delivered message, but in every dimension of its material existence” (20). In other words, for both Kress and McKenzie, meaning is made and shared through engagement with materials, a feature of assemblage shared with art.

At the same time, citing John Phillips’s article in the May 2006 issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, both Stephen McElroy and Jonathan Buehl observe that there is some confusion around the term *assemblage* as it is commonly used in critical theory. Phillips claims that the confusion is basically a translation issue: Deleuze and Guattari, writing in French, never used the word *assemblage* in a philosophical sense. Instead, the attribution of that term is the result of a 1981 translation of their article “Rhizome” by Paul Foss and Paul Patton. Rather than *assemblage*, the common French term used by Deleuze and Guattari is *agencement*, which has “the senses of either ‘arrangement,’ ‘fitting’ or ‘fixing’” (108). Phillips describes the Deleuzian usage of *agencement* as conveying “an event, a becoming, a compositional unity,” making a tidy connection to composition (109). Bruce Braun, after Phillips, elaborates on the term’s meaning, also pointing to what he calls the “inadequate” translation of *agencement* to *assemblage* in a 2008 issue of *Progress in Human Geography*:

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept relates and combines two different ideas: the idea of a “layout” or a “coming together” of disparate elements, and the idea of “agency” or the capacity to produce an effect. . . . Hence, *agencement* neatly relates the *capacity to act* with the *coming together of things* that is a necessary and prior condition for any action to occur, including the actions of humans. (671, emphasis in original)

Agencement thus has a connotative power that *assemblage* lacks in that it incorporates the notion of agency and conditions for action

—or conditions for composition. Phillips notes that most but not all scholars writing in English have followed Foss and Patton’s translation, a practice that scholars in rhetoric and composition likewise followed. Thus, given the asserted inadequacy of the translation from Deleuze and Guattari, and considering the fact that both of these conceptualizations of assemblage are applicable and valuable, it would make sense to use (1) the original *agencement* when referring to the configuration of bodies, machines, conditions, techniques, and so on, that bring about and participate in the production of a text; and (2) *assemblage* to describe assembled texts, that is, texts that are composed after and with other texts. However, given that the field has not ordinarily made this distinction, the essays here employ *assemblage* as a single term to refer to both configurations and texts. Not least, an important implication of this critical-theory view of assemblage, as outlined by Alex Reid in the next chapter in referring to Jody Shipka’s conception, is that assemblage has the potential “to put the natural and social, the nonhuman and the human, realms back together,” especially, Reid notes, given the ubiquity of digital technologies and their networking capacities. From the perspective of critical theory, then, assemblage allows us to articulate the ensembles creating texts, the texts themselves, and the complementary roles that both human and nonhuman participants play in a material, multimodal composing process.

ASSEMBLAGE IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

Scholarship on assemblage composing has emphasized different dimensions of the practice, as we explain below. Among these are its explicit use of texts for social effects, its material and multimodal quality, its transformational power, and its pedagogical value.

One of the most cited sources for assemblage in rhetoric and composition is the 2007 Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber *Computers and Composition* article “Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage.” Johnson-Eilola and Selber invoke assemblage to describe a practice of composing with “original and existing fragments,” one intermingling new and borrowed texts—such combinations and interminglings a primary characteristic, they claim, of most texts, especially those oriented to “social effects”:

What if the “final” product a student produces—a text—is not concerned with original words or images on a page or screen but concerned primarily with assemblages of parts? Importantly, in this reconception, the assemblages do not distinguish primarily between which parts are supposed to be original and which have been found and gathered from someplace else; assemblages are interested in what works, what has social effects. The distinction between original and existing fragments in a text is, if not meaningless, at least secondary. In essence, we are arguing for a reorganization that is actually implied if not valued in many rubrics for assessing writing used by teachers who take a social approach: Rhetorical purposes can be addressed in context by either original or borrowed/quoted texts without a hierarchy of distinction between the two. (380)

In this case, of course, Johnson-Eilola and Selber, interested in how we assess student writing, argue that originality as it has historically been construed isn't a salient feature or criterion for today's composition. With no hierarchy between original and assembled texts, what matters isn't the ontological status of each, but rather the “social effects” of the text as a completed whole.

Johnson-Eilola and Selber thus do not define assemblage in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense of agencement regarding the collection/connection of people, technologies, events, intentions, and so on from which a text emerges; instead, Johnson-Eilola and Selber's definition aligns with that in art, where in art, as in writing, assemblage refers to “texts built primarily and explicitly from existing texts in order to solve a writing or communication problem in a new context” (381). As we investigate the nature of composing, thinking of texts as assemblages in Johnson-Eilola and Selber's sense of the term is useful because it explicates the fact that all texts emerge from contexts already saturated with other texts: textual production is necessarily informed and influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the texts that came before it. Moreover, such borrowing is multimodal in character as well: composers borrow words and passages; they borrow fonts, color palettes, images, and patterns. There are

no texts that are absolutely original (though their assemblage may be), and naming texts as assemblages acknowledges that. It also articulates the collaborative nature of composing, pointing us to the various producers whose work contributes to a final product.

In *Assembling Arguments: Multimodal Rhetoric and Scientific Discourse*, Jonathan Buehl focuses our attention on a specific variant of discourse, scientific discourse, one defined by multimodality, especially by a multimodal verbal-visual textual relationship and by the materiality of composing itself and of the production, distribution, and circulation of texts. Drawing on two examples four hundred years apart to demonstrate the need to consider visual texts as the important counterpart to verbal texts (rather than as some afterthought or decoration), Buehl summarizes the verbal-visual nature of scientific text and points to both its potential and its challenges.

Both groups faced rhetorical tasks requiring combinations of images and text, and their rhetorical performances were both enabled and constrained by available technologies of observation and reproduction. . . . As these cases . . . demonstrate, visualization offers creators of scientific discourse immense rhetorical potential and introduces equally significant rhetorical problems; however, a comprehensive rhetorical account of multimodal scientific argumentation has yet to emerge. (6–7)

To provide a framework for this account, Buehl turns to three “interdependent rhetorical processes, the conception, assembly, and circulation of rhetorical artifacts—in relation to three overlapping domains of human experience, the cognitive, the material, and the social” (20). These three concepts—conception, assembly, and circulation—collectively “provide a set of screens that can disclose features of rhetorical performance in multimodal texts that might otherwise pass unnoticed” (23). Here, borrowing from critical theory, a rhetorical artifact is theorized as a *rhetorical assembly*, “best characterized as an emerging form that temporarily fixes a diverse range of relations among concepts, institutions, symbol systems, and media” (24). More generally, in this effort, Buehl is specifically interested in multimodality in assemblaged rhetorical artifacts, and, like others

—he cites Rebecca Howard’s concept of patchwriting and Joseph Bizzup’s curricular BEAM research model (in its categorizing of sources)—Buehl is “attempt[ing] to reposition composition as a process of assembly” (250–51).

Two aspects of Buehl’s project are especially important for scholars interested in assemblage composing. First is his attention to materiality, an approach resembling that of the art world’s that specifically addresses verbal-visual multimodality: it includes the physical materials of composing at the same time that it provides for an embodied physical articulation. Material elements, Buehl says, “are the resources and constraints related to the existence and movement of physical structures: space, time, substance, and so on. They include the properties of objects—such as paper and ink and pixels—but they also include the properties of physical bodies: for example, people with larger frames may be able to project sound with greater volume” (21).

Second is Buehl’s reconception of assemblage as rhetorical assembly, a reconceptualization with two motives. First, as Buehl observes and as we have seen above, *assemblage* as a term is used inconsistently, even in the same field; thus in Buehl’s view it isn’t helpful in the way a central term needs to be. Second, citing Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s definition of assemblage as too narrow, Buehl reaches for what he understands as a wider construct, one including both “prior” texts and originary ones: “The crucial difference between this assemblage [as defined by Johnson-Eilola and Selber] and a broader rhetorical assembly as I use the term is that the latter does not restrict the assembled material to preexisting text, thereby leaving room for both ‘original’ and ‘recycled’ material” (27). It’s accurate, of course, to note that the Johnson-Eilola and Selber assemblage emphasizes the use of what they call existing fragments, but this emphasis needs to be fully contextualized. Johnson-Eilola and Selber are clear, for instance, that in their view such a distinction—that is, between original and reused texts—is “if not meaningless, at least secondary”; “assemblages are interested in what works, what has social effects” (380). In other words, Buehl and Johnson-Eilola and Selber here seem to be theorizing composi-

tion somewhat differently; the social and its effects governing composing for Johnson-Eilola and Selber play a lesser role in Buehl's formation. But in another way, these scholars seem to understand assemblage very similarly. Buehl wants it to include both prior texts and new material, while Johnson-Eilola and Selber seem to provide for both kinds of texts: assemblage, they say, includes "texts built primarily and explicitly from existing texts in order to solve a writing or communication problem in a new context." The key word here seems to be *primarily*: assemblages built primarily, but not exclusively, from existing texts. Their model thus does allow for the inclusion of both past and new texts that Buehl advocates and provides a warrant for our use of the term *assemblage* here. In sum, Buehl's attention to verbal-visual multimodality and its role in assemblage is useful for composing: it reminds us that the verbal and the visual are modes equal in value and even more valuable when used together. Likewise, Buehl's attention to materiality complements his interest in multimodality and links us to the work on assemblage developed in art.

In his 2016 *Computers and Composition* article, "Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward a Typology of Transformative Work," Dustin Edwards emphasizes another dimension of assemblage: its transformative capacity. Like Buehl, Edwards is concerned about the ambiguity surrounding assemblage; his remedy shifts the focus to an overarching concept, remix, locating a typology of what he calls remix practices, including assemblage. More specifically, the four-part typology, including assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play, operates heuristically to "foster intentionality" (46). Moreover, as Edwards explains, such a typology has the potential of "reconcil[ing] the sprawling posture of remix in writing practice":

If we are to accept remix as a valid and important composing practice, one that has the potential to teach a wealth of rhetorical knowledge for a digital age, we need to further develop and refine approaches to discuss the many nuances involved in transforming already existing material. A possible way to reconcile the sprawling posture of remix in writing practice is

to develop a typology that begins to delineate the rhetorical distinctions among types of remixed compositions. Here, I work toward such a typology by outlining four varieties of remix—*assemblage*, *reappropriation*, *redistribution*, and *genre play*—in an effort to alleviate confusion about a term encumbered with excessive meaning. (43)

Like Johnson-Eilola and Selber and like Buehl, Edwards thus intends to authorize new composing practices that are now possible, and increasingly frequent, given digital technology.

Edwards situates his concept of *assemblage* within ideas of rhetorical imitation, invention, and community, which allows him to consider the ethical use of material as well. As he notes, imitation in classical rhetoric “was deeply connected to invention, style, memory, ethics, and being” (44): imitation as a frame contextualizes remix as rhetorical. Moreover, given rhetorical *topoi* as *intentional devices*, this frame “celebrates a sort of community stockpile from which composers can continuously invent and reinvent”² at the same time that it demonstrates that composing, inherently communal, is a textual process of building from other texts. Not least, such a framework includes an ethical dimension:

Finally, to position remix within a revived frame of imitation encourages a sense of ethical mindfulness. It positions remix writers as producers, evaluators, and collaborators, and thereby demonstrates that responsible textual production matters, that the materials of remixes have histories, and that remixed texts might themselves be repurposed. In other words, it positions remix as a process whereby rhetors are productively and ethically—not haphazardly—working with other texts, communities, and people. (44)

In defining *assemblage*, Edwards echoes Johnson-Eilola and Selber (whom he also cites): “*Assemblage* is a method of composing wherein a composer builds a new text by gathering, repurposing, and redeploying a combination of already-existing texts,” and he links this practice to a definition of remix provided by Henry Jenkins: “[the] creative juxtaposition of materials that otherwise oc-

cupy very different cultural niches” (57). Assemblage composing thus creatively juxtaposes chunks of text emerging from very different contexts into a new text, much as is done in art. “Importantly,” Edwards notes, “Jenkins mentioned that materials may be—and are very likely to be—disparate” (47). Through Edwards, then, assemblage is established as a creative method of invention with ethical implications, one with antecedents in artistic practice.

Finally, Jacqueline Preston, in a 2015 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, employs assemblage to provide a more robust and satisfying pedagogy of composition than other post-process approaches have provided.³ In “Project(ing) Literacy: Writing to Assemble in a Postcomposition FYW Classroom,” Preston makes three arguments in support of this aim. First, like Edwards, she emphasizes the living quality of assemblage writing: “To regard writing as an assemblage,” she says, “is to insist that what is important about writing is not its capacity to represent ideas but, rather, what writing does, from whence it comes, and how it reproduces. Writing always and already functions with and connects with other assemblages—other writings, histories, memories, places, people, ideas, events, and so forth” (39). It is thus assemblage’s capacity to bring together diverse, sometimes dissonant multiples—texts, fragments of texts, and intangibles; *other writings, histories, memories, places, people, ideas, events, and so forth*—that makes it such a generative means of composing. Second, quoting Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Preston emphasizes the becomingness of assemblage composing, which contrasts with a more conventional view of writing located in what she calls representation:

Critical beyond the mechanics and organization underscored in theories of writing as primarily representation is writing’s complexity, its relevancy, its contingency, and, of particular importance, its *becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 272). To speak of *becoming* is to highlight writing’s protean quality. *Becoming* underscores change, flight, and movement. In *becoming*, one piece of the assemblage is knitted into the landscape of another piece, changing its value as an element and bringing about a new kind of unity. (39)

Third, and not least, citing Victor Villanueva's 2013 appeal for more productive curricular approaches to basic writing and first-year writing (FYW) in "Toward a Political Economy of Basic Writing Programs," Preston both argues that assemblage composing is useful for college writers and shows us how it is so:

To approach writing as an assemblage in the FYW classroom is to move away from a notion of writing as a set of discrete skills and processes and rather to draw attention to the heterogeneous components that go into the production or genesis of the writing. Herein, the writer is faced with writing's complexity, the diverse and overlapping experiences, and competing ideas that meet in and contribute to the writing space. The process of writing is one of removing a piece of writing, an event, an experience, or a memory, from its original function to bring about a new one. (40)

The writing space here resembles Johnson-Eilola and Selber's conception of composing, with Preston's "removal" of text from one context so as to use it in another also echoing Edwards's invocation of Jenkins's creative juxtaposition by means of shifts in cultural niches. Assemblage writing, for Preston, is thus a multicontextual practice of borrowing and arranging as a mechanism for creating a new text, much as defined by Kurt Schwitters.

EXPLORING COMPOSITION VIA ASSEMBLAGE THEORY AND PRACTICE

Assemblage has, as outlined here, looked somewhat different in different contexts: taken together, it is itself an assemblage, though always interested in media, combinations, and contexts. The artistic practice of collecting, combining, and reshaping older materials for a new composition is translated into two activities in critical theory, the textual assemblage itself and the agencement/assemblage of human beings, materials, and technologies from which it emerges. In rhetoric and composition, these antecedents in art and critical theory situate new emphases in assemblage for writing, among them assemblage's explicit reuse of texts for social effects, its ma-

terial and multimodal quality, its transformational power, and its pedagogical value. Taking such observations as a point of departure, this collection of essays continues to explore assemblage for multiple purposes, among them to retheorize writing, especially given current interest in materiality and technology; to “field test” such reconceptualizations for the classroom; and to consider what such reconceptualizations might help us understand about writing in the world. More specifically, this collection speaks to four dimensions of assemblage in particular: (1) ways that theories of writing, especially multimodal theories of writing informed by assemblage are especially suited to our current digital and material composing practices, as suggested by Buehl and Johnson-Eilola and Selber; (2) ways that introducing students to assemblage composing as theory and practice might help them better understand what Preston calls the aliveness of writing; (3) ways that we can trace earlier composing practices in the world as variants of assemblage, thus providing a fuller history of assemblage and composing; and (4) ways that, as Edwards suggests, we can begin to interrogate assemblage as an ethical practice.

In the book’s first section, “In Theory,” Alex Reid, Jeff Rice, and James Kalmbach provide a vocabulary and a theory for thinking about assemblage, especially the ways it changes in a world infused with digital technologies. Explicitly concerned with how the concept of assemblage can help us theorize and adapt to the changing landscape of digital technology and writing, they approach composing through the lenses, respectively, of big data, aggregation, and engagements.

Alex Reid offers the first word in this section: in “Big-Data Assemblies: Composing’s Nonhuman Ecology,” he provides a theoretical treatment of assemblage informed especially by Manuel DeLanda and by Gilles Deleuze, in partnership with Félix Guattari. Framing assemblage theory as offering a “nonhuman conception of cognition, agency, and expression,” Reid argues that such a conception allows us to see the ways in which technology and media participate in the act of composition, which is itself an exercise of rhetorical practice. Digital networks have made the nonhuman

dimensions of rhetorical-compositional activity more visible, Reid claims, but our conventional rhetorical approaches struggle to account for technology, except as an extension or limitation of human agency or as a tool for some ideological end. Reid's approach, in contrast, considers how "big-data" analysis, combined with assemblage theory, might reframe our understanding of composing, helping us see human activity as participating in a larger media ecology.

Jeff Rice, in the third chapter, takes up the question of the relationship(s) between assemblage, aggregation, and response on social-media platforms such as Facebook. In "They Eat Horses, Don't They?" Rice argues that aggregation is a means of assemblage, and more specifically that aggregation, as compiled on the Web through RSS and social-media feeds, constitutes a kind of just-in-time assemblage of different and disparate perspectives collected and displayed in one place on the screen. Moreover, as Rice demonstrates, the aggregated response that happens on a particular platform, Facebook, where users share opinions, images, videos, links to articles, and so on, has the capacity and often the tendency, because of the sheer volume of activity and the speed of the response potential, to occlude context—in this case, the intention of the original message—and, as important, to confirm preconceptions already available. As a consequence, Rice recommends caution in interpreting such assemblages: he encourages us to explore the implications of this type of assemblage given its tendency to separate and distort the relationship between prior understandings, circulated messages, and a "given state of affairs."

What technology—digital and otherwise—means in assemblage composing, for James Kalmbach, can be summed up in a single term: engagements. In "Beyond the Object to the Making of the Object: Understanding the Process of Multimodal Composition as Assemblage," Kalmbach focuses on the scene of writing, a kind of agencement defined by an *assemblage of engagements* involving multiple participants, including a composer, technologies, interfaces, templates, and content. For Kalmbach, as for Reid, multimodal composing involves both the human and the nonhuman.

Composers are tasked not only with participating in these engagements, Kalmbach says, but also with negotiating between and among such engagements. Interested as well in how students conduct these engagements and negotiations, Kalmbach observes that interacting with students as they think about and critically discuss their processes of negotiation poses a difficult but promising challenge. In addition, as a means of demonstrating what this looks like for students, Kalmbach describes different assignment sets that he has used in his classes over the years as technologies and their accompanying engagements have shifted—thus providing a metanarrative about his own engagement as an instructor—and calls on the work of students to illustrate his argument.

The next three chapters, which constitute the section “In the Classroom/On Campus,” draw on the assemblage thinking presented in the first section as they turn our attention to the role that assemblage plays or might play in the classroom, in a kind of “field test”—for undergraduate students working in both print and digital contexts and for graduate students assembling electronic portfolios. Beginning this section with his “Assemblage Composing, Reconsidered,” Michael J. Michaud starts by revisiting his earlier concerns about assemblage-as-plagiarism—a composing imported from workplace to classroom—in light of more recent thinking on assemblage-as-composition, focusing on assemblage as a naturalized composing practice for many students, especially those who bring workplace assemblage-composing (back) into school with them. Michaud then situates such practices within rhetoric and composition as a context for arguing that given the nature of today’s composing and our own theories, it’s not a question of whether assemblage should be allowed, but rather of how we can teach it as a composing process. Two genres in particular, Michaud claims, are hospitable for assemblage, a print white paper and a multimodal electronic blog, and he provides information about how in using assemblage theory we can teach these as specific genres whose composition can help students both practice composing and understand it.

Like Michaud, Stephen J. McElroy and Travis Maynard are interested in the potential of assemblage for teaching, in their case in

a specific course, first-year composition (FYC), where for them assemblage provides the key concept explicitly anchoring the course. Echoing Edwards's interest in assemblage as transformation, McElroy and Maynard, in "Copy, Combine, Transform: Assemblage in First-Year Composition," first explain the rationale for making assemblage the centerpiece of FYC. "[W]e began to see assemblage as something more central to the work of composing than previously understood," they tell us, "as a concept and practice that, in combination with multimodality, should be made more explicit for our students. Thus, in putting assemblage at the center of the course and in helping students to 'see, think, and do' assemblage, we hoped that students would become more experienced with the work of composing writ large." Given this commitment, McElroy and Maynard design such a course and teach it, here detailing its components, its outcomes, and its benefits: students understood and used assemblage as a heuristic for invention, appreciated the difference between plagiarism and effective quotation, and transferred rhetorical thinking into new contexts and for new audiences.

Completing the set of chapters articulating curricular and pedagogical applications of assemblage is Kristine L. Blair's "ePortfolio Artifacts as Graduate Student Multimodal Identity Assemblages." Here Blair defines ePortfolios as assemblages of digital multimodal artifacts, networked spaces, and student identities, but focuses on the role ePortfolios play in fostering graduate-student identity. Like Michaud, Blair links genre and assemblage, attending, in her case, to the two genres of the literacy narrative and the teaching philosophy statement as valuable in supporting graduate-student identity developed in ePortfolios. In highlighting these genres, Blair demonstrates that the play and experimentation they encourage contribute both to portfolios and to identities graduate students create and represent in these portfolios. The ePortfolios themselves are thus positioned as sites of assemblage welcoming an openness and flexibility, much as Preston claims, that academic professionalism requires.

This third section, "In the World," considers how assemblage can help us understand composing more broadly, in the world at

large, especially as a material, multimodal practice with ethical implications. In the eighth chapter, Jody Shipka's "To Gather, Assemble and Display: Composition as [Re]Collection," we are introduced to assemblage-as-collection as a very specific kind of composing, one emerging from various practices of material collecting. More specifically, Shipka attends to the materiality of assemblage as she offers a collection-based framework that positions composers as collectors of different elements—materials, ideas, quotations, and so on. Here, Shipka's intent is to encourage the development of "more robust notions of meaning-making practices" that, in accord with Reid's conception explained in Chapter 2, take into account the roles that humans and nonhumans play in the composing process. To illustrate directions we might take as instructors, Shipka draws on her experiences with an "Evocative Objects Workshop" she has conducted at conferences. Such collection-based composing activities, Shipka suggests, allow for the imagining of new combinations, new possibilities, and new assemblages.

In Chapter 9, Stephen J. McElroy provides another account of production and composition outside the academy, that employed to create a vernacular genre: the postcard. In "Assemblages of Asbury Park: The Persistent Legacy of the Large-Letter Postcard," McElroy begins by explaining the origins of the large-letter postcard genre in the early twentieth century. Then, exploring the modes and methods of their production-qua-assemblage, McElroy demonstrates the ways in which these assembled designs have resonated across the decades as they have circulated in a diverse array of textual instantiations. He argues that tracing these instantiations genealogically allows us to see two aspects of assemblage previously undocumented: the ways in which assemblages respond to contexts, and the ways that they shape the contexts for future acts of composition, including in political life.

Kathleen Blake Yancey pursues another site of assemblage composing in "Multimodal Assemblage, Compositions, and Composing: The Corresponding Cases of Emigrant Cemetery Tombstones and 'A Line for Wendy.'" Identifying memorial texts as sites especially hospitable to assemblage, Yancey begins with cemeteries and

traces the kinds of borrowing informing tombstones, demonstrating that, like Buehl's multimodal science writing, the borrowing on tombstones is a historical verbal and visual practice, in this case one providing for multiple identities. Yancey is also interested in the processes of assemblage a print composer engages in when creating memorial texts, a question introduced in McElroy's chapter on postcard production, taken up by Kalmbach, and forecast by Schwitters in his three-part conception of composing: "choosing, distributing and reshaping the materials." To explore assemblage composing in the context of creating a unique text, Yancey documents composing decisions—especially those involving layout, arrangement, and authorship—contributing, through fragments of texts authored by colleagues and friends, to the assembled "A Line for Wendy" memorializing Wendy Bishop.

Chapter 11 provides an evaluative perspective on assemblage: Kristin L. Arola and Adam Arola's consideration of both the practices and the ethics of assemblage-borrowing from First Nations materials. Arola and Arola's "An Ethics of Assemblage: Creative Repetition and the 'Electric Pow Wow'" returns to the work of Deleuze as a context for examining First Nation electronic music and detailing the implications of appropriating it, in the process suggesting that Deleuzian assemblage can help us reconsider the issue of cultural authenticity as it appears in new assemblages. Equally important, in a particularly valuable contribution, Arola and Arola begin to take up the necessary task of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" assemblages. Drawing on the assembled music of *A Tribe Called Red* as exemplar, Arola and Arola argue, first, that we can distinguish between good and bad assemblages; and second, that good assemblages are marked by four characteristics: they are responsive, they productively introduce novelty, they allow us to see something new, and they attend to their own effect.

Bringing tentative closure to this larger assemblage of texts as they compose their own assembled text, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber identify and comment on four themes emerging from this collective composing. In "Conclusion: Reterritorialization," they speak to "assemblage as connection with other peoples and

times, assemblage as material object, assemblage as performance, and assemblage as pedagogy.” In their processes of considering and composing, Johnson-Eilola and Selber raise many questions useful for guiding our thinking going forward. As they note, their questions “do not have a stable answer,” but are rather provocative and inventive, leading to “a constant performance: disassemblage and reassemblage, call and response, writing and rewriting.”

Or: assemblage.

NOTES

1. The earliest recorded instances of *assemblage* provide interesting antecedents for later conceptualizations: the first two instances include the idea of coming together—in 1717, in Elijah Fenton’s *Poems on Several Occasions*: “In sweet assemblage, ev’ry blooming grace Fix love’s bright throne in Teraminta’s face” (205)—and the joining together of two things, in 1728, in Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (at cited word): “The Assemblage of two Bones for Motion, is called Articulation.” See the entry for “assemblage, n.” in the *OED Online*.

2. Given the link between imitation and assemblage that Edwards makes, it would also be worth exploring other genres hosting other assemblages, among them commonplace books (see the Harvard University Library’s digitized collection at <<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/reading/commonplace.html>>) and scrapbooks.

3. There is other scholarship in composition employing assemblage: see, for example, Christy Desmet, Deborah Miller, Elizabeth Davis, Ron Balthazor, and Beth Beggs’s discussion of electronic portfolios as multi-modal assemblages and Jeff Rice’s discussion of networked assessment.

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Big-Data Assemblies: Composing's Nonhuman Ecology

Alex Reid

IN THIS CHAPTER I INVESTIGATE ASSEMBLAGE THEORY, as articulated in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and later developed by Manuel DeLanda and others, as it pertains to the investigation of digital composing. Assemblage theory proposes an ontology that is fundamentally different from the anthropocentric view of symbolic action that has largely shaped rhetoric and composition, offering in its stead a nonhuman conception of cognition, agency, and expression that investigates rhetoric as an activity that precedes and exceeds human beings. Digital networks have made the nonhuman dimensions of rhetorical-compositional activity more visible, but our conventional rhetorical approaches struggle to account for technology, except as an extension or limitation of human agency or as a tool for some ideological end. Here, then, I consider how “big-data” analysis, combined with assemblage theory, might reframe our understanding of composing and help us see human activity as participating in a larger media ecology.



For the most part, the focus of composition studies has been on the social, cultural, and ideological operation of writing. One can view the cultural emphasis of postprocess composition specifically as a response to postmodern theories, but the articulation of language as a cultural and human, rather than natural or nonhuman, activity

has a deeper history. As Bruno Latour has argued, European modernism, beginning with the development of the scientific method and Enlightenment philosophy in the seventeenth century, divided the world into two distinct realms: one natural and one social. In the modern view, the natural world operates by immutable laws, but true knowledge of the natural world is forever unavailable to us. The social-human realm, on the other hand, is an immanent (and thus changeable) space that permits thought and agency. For the Moderns, language—all symbolic behavior really—is a part of this social world. In this system, due to their access to the symbolic, social world, humans acquire an exceptional ontological status, separating them in kind from all other beings. At one point, we might have explained this human exceptionality in terms of a divine gift, and many today still hold to this belief. Academically, at least within our field, that exceptionality is explained by our evolved and epigenetic capacity for symbolic behavior: it is our capacity for language that distinguishes us from other animals (as Kenneth Burke would tell us), allows for the creation of societies, and produces our capacity for thought beyond the instinctual behaviors of others. In short, we assert that language is *for us*. Language enables and circumscribes both our capacity to produce knowledge about the natural world and our ability to create our sociocultural world. Aside from some brief forays into animal rhetoric (e.g., Kennedy), even debates over how “big” rhetoric should get remain limited to human symbolic behavior (Schiappa).

Assemblage theory, however, as Jody Shipka argues in this volume, puts the natural and the social, the nonhuman and the human, realms back together. In connecting humans and nonhuman objects within a common ontological space, assemblage theory articulates language and symbolic behavior as a relational capacity that emerges within a network of human and nonhuman objects. Language and symbolic behavior are not things “we” do, but are instead things with which we relate and activities in which we participate. Language is no longer “for us.” This philosophical move thus uniquely situates assemblage theory to address the role of technologies and other nonhuman entities in our shifting digital

compositional context because it does not articulate language as an inherent human-cultural characteristic, but rather as a nonhuman participant in a larger communicational network. To this point, my chapter provides a heuristic exploration of this supposition. It asks, first, if we conceive of composing as a process involving the participation of human and nonhuman objects rather than one located strictly within human beings (or human beings and some amorphous “culture”), what might we learn? And second, and more important, how might such a supposition shift and expand our conception of what is possible?

As the chapter title indicates, I am particularly interested in “big-data assemblies.” By now, *big data* is a familiar term that stretches across disciplines and industries. It begins with recognizing the massive amounts of data that are produced and stored across digital networks at a rate that astronomically exceeds the data produced in print in the last century. Big data also includes an understanding of the computational power required to process that data, resulting in a wide range of analytical and interpretive possibilities. How do these matters interest rhetoric and composition? Since the early days of the Internet, the attention of computers and writing has mostly turned toward digital multimodal composing, to the creation of webpages with hyperlinks and images, and then later with video, animation, and so on. While the variety of media has enlarged, an expanded multimodality has framed our approach to digital rhetoric, perhaps in part because it articulates a digital composing practice that remains manageable by a single author or a small group of collaborators within the confines of a college course. In this respect multimodal composition is teachable in a way that resonates with twentieth-century pedagogies. It permits us to hold on to a more anthropocentric rhetorical practice among digital networks. However, this version of multimodality, with its focus on the combination of media types that mostly precede the digital era (e.g., photographs, videos, graphics, audio recordings, and, of course, text), proves to be limited as a conceptual approach for understanding the breadth of digital rhetoric. As the concept of big data suggests, digital rhetoric runs from the binary realm, expressed

in voltage across a circuit, through the proliferating media forms of various proprietary systems, each with its own unique capacities, to the common media and information types of the Web, which allow humans but also machines to communicate with one another. In short, big-data assemblies open new avenues for investigation that do not put individual human beings (or human beings at all) at the center of rhetorical practice. Such investigations are not simply adjacent to more anthropocentric concerns as a separate form of research; they instead transform our understanding of the role humans play in composing.

AN ASSEMBLAGE-THEORY PRIMER

Assemblage theory offers a method for investigating these questions by establishing an ontology that focuses on the external relations among objects rather than on presupposing that objects are predefined by essential, internal qualities. In short, rather than beginning with the ontological premise that symbolic behavior is an intrinsic quality of being human, assemblage theory allows one to investigate symbolic behaviors as emerging from the external relations among humans and nonhumans. Here, I examine assemblage theory as it begins in the work of Deleuze and Guattari and is further developed by DeLanda. Appropriately for our interests, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus* in the context of discussing the composition of the book. “In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*” (3–4). *Assemblage* becomes a central term in the book, but given the nature of Deleuze and Guattari’s style it isn’t possible to give a complete, authoritative definition. However, they do draw some “general conclusions about assemblages” (88).

On a first, horizontal, axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one

hand it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away. (88)

Admittedly, at this level of generality, assemblages appear inscrutably abstract, an unavoidable result of attempting to describe a concept that accounts for how being happens. Nonetheless: an assemblage has two axes. The first axis has objects, actions, and relations on one end, and on the other end what might be loosely termed expressions. Though these are diagrammatically separated, they make up a single axis. Any object—a bichon, a city bus, Derek Jeter, an electron—comprises these elements: physical, material elements as well as expressive elements. The first axis has two general tendencies registered on the second axis: one tendency is cybernetic and homeostatic; the other is mutative or destructive. In order to understand the expressive role of assemblages, it is necessary to set aside considerations of self-awareness and intentionality. That is, one can assert that a river can express something without making an argument that it is conscious and self-aware. For example, one might think of the way an ecosystem might develop around the expression of a river: its speed and slowness, its cycle of flooding, and so on. The river isn't just the water flowing downhill. It is also the geology it traverses and slowly transforms and the rain, lakes, and springs that feed it. That's an assemblage. So, to return to the general description of an assemblage, a river has an intermingling of bodies, such as the water molecules, the soil and rocks of the riverbed, and the geologic contours of the terrain. It also has enunciations and incorporeal transformations: it marks a boundary between nations; it shapes the movements of animals that drink and feed at its shores; it defines an ecosystem that differs from the upper reaches of the hills that surround it. It has a tendency toward territorialization: over time, it wears a consistent path through the

land. It also has a tendency toward deterritorialization: it can dry up; it can be diverted for irrigation; the damage caused by a sudden flood might forever alter its path. The key point here is that the river emerges as an assemblage among these external relations. The material objects that interrelate to create the river, the expressions of the river, its tendency to stay the same or change: these are all products of external relations, not intrinsic characteristics of some essential “riveness” (a point that is central to the argument for assemblage as creative repetition articulated by Kristin Arola and Adam Arola in this volume).

The theory of assemblage I am working with here is founded on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, but with one key modification developed by DeLanda. In *A New Philosophy of Society*, DeLanda describes an assemblage with “an extra axis defining processes in which specialized expressive media intervene, processes which consolidate and rigidify the identity of the assemblage or, on the contrary, allow the assemblage a certain latitude for more flexible operation while benefiting from genetic or linguistic resources (processes of coding and decoding)” (19). This departure from Deleuze and Guattari’s approach allows DeLanda to investigate social processes of organizing and communicating.

Within this concept of assemblage, DeLanda distinguishes between properties and capacities, which provide terminology for understanding how the relations within and among assemblages produce new possibilities for action. One of the challenging parts of this concept is that assemblages are composed of other assemblages. There is no essential, primary unit (e.g., an atom) from which all assemblages are composed. To borrow from a familiar phrase, it’s assemblages all the way down. Any assemblage, once composed, will have properties, which are a denumerable list of characteristics. To draw on an example DeLanda employs, one might say that a knife, as an assemblage, exhibits the property of sharpness. A knife may be sharp or not, but its degree of sharpness is always present. In addition, assemblages also have capacities, which emerge in their relations with other assemblages. An assemblage has an open, indeterminate number of capacities as those capacities are only limited

by the number of relations into which an assemblage enters. DeLanda offers the knife's *capacity* to cut as an example. "In fact, the capacity to cut may never be actual if the knife is never used. And when that capacity is actualized it is always as a double event: to cut—to be cut. In other words, when a knife exercises its capacity to cut it is by interacting with a different entity that has the capacity to be cut" ("Emergence" 385). That is, capacities cannot be internal. They require some external relationship in order to become real. One cannot act without someone or something to act upon.

How might we employ the concept of assemblage to understand the conventional composition classroom? We could begin with the variety of objects in the room—desks, lights, windows, chalkboards, screens, data projectors, etc. All of these objects exert some physical presence in the room; they have size and shape, for example. They also have an expressive force: the hardness of the seats, the dull hum of the fluorescent lights, or the dustiness of the chalk. They have a collective enunciation as a classroom, assigning roles to the people who also participate in the classroom assemblage as students and faculty. The classroom has certain properties: a particular number of desks, for example. It is worth noting that the number of desks can change without the classroom ceasing to be a classroom, just as a knife that is dull is still a knife. The classroom also has capacities. For example, the chairs have the capacity to offer seating, but only in relation to people who can sit in them. Recognizing this, we include special desks for students who do not relate to the standard desk by sitting at it (e.g., students in wheelchairs). There are tendencies toward territorialization and the regular behavior of those people: students sit in one area and the professor stands in another. The class might sit in a circle, but one cannot erase the roles of student and professor so easily. There are also deterritorializing tendencies—broken chairs, missing chalk, flickering lights—that disrupt the assemblage's regular function. In every instance a classroom will have material content and expressions. It will have properties that are always present and capacities that might emerge depending on who or what else is in the room. The classroom has a tendency to remain a classroom and the potential to become something else.

To these dimensions, DeLanda adds the third axis of expressive media and symbolic behavior, which introduces specific discourses into the classroom. The assemblage of the room is transformed depending on whether its inhabitants are members of a student club, a graduate course, a first-year composition class, etc. We might say that as a professor, I have the capacity to teach students, but that capacity can only be activated within the assemblage of a classroom (or some other pedagogical/curricular space) and only when I encounter other people who have the capacity to serve the role of students in the same classroom assemblage. That is, they must be people who are enrolled as students in my class. I might have the capacity to teach other people in other situations, but not as a professor teaching students, which requires participation in a particular assemblage. This would be one of the “incorporeal transformations” of the classroom assemblage. It turns people into students and professors, just as the same people in a courtroom become jurors, witnesses, and defendants. When the objects that participate in the assemblage change, for example when one introduces new media technologies, the capacities of the students and faculty change as well.

If we can imagine the assemblages of the objects participating in the composing of an essay or an online comment, we can also follow many other assemblages: the genres to which these texts belong, the technological networks on which they are communicated, the communities of authors and readers sharing these messages, the institutions these communications support, and so on. Assemblage theory situates human actors among nonhuman actors in these compositional processes and offers a way to understand the roles of human beings in larger assemblages. What we can see from DeLanda is that agency isn't located inside a human author, and it isn't located in some idealist realm. Agency emerges in and among us, human beings and nonhuman alike: just as a knife's capacity to cut becomes real only when it comes into relationship with another object that has the capacity to be cut, a human being's ability to write only becomes real within a network of actors that facilitate writing.

Moreover, the emergence of digital media networks has altered the assemblages of human communication by shifting the proper-

ties and capacities of the coded dimension. The capacity to post to a blog rather than submit an article to a journal, the capacity to share video or images, the capacity for real-time interaction over a distance: these all alter our compositional assemblages as surely as the laptops with a wi-fi connection open on students' desks alter their experience of the classroom in which they sit. When our discipline approaches these situations from more conventional perspectives, the new technologies are viewed as either enhancing or inhibiting an inherent, human, agential property for symbolic behavior. That is, either the technology helps us to write or it gets in the way. If one views symbolic behavior as an emergent capacity of an assemblage, however, one sees that different technologies activate different capacities for communication. It is not easy to map capacities. We cannot simply say that a smartphone inhibits essay writing, for example. Instead, we can say that the assemblages in which we participate have tendencies toward territorialization and deterritorialization that result in the development and mutation of genres and other symbolic behaviors. In the last part of this chapter, I will turn in particular to sites of "big data" as an example of these shifts.

BIG DATA

While *big data* is a term widely in use, its meaning is elusive. *Big*, obviously, is a relative term. What is big for Google or the NSA is different from what is big for NIH or NSF projects or for the student-data needs of a large university. In composition, one might consider the thirty million words students produce each year in a composition program of a size similar to the one I oversee as big. Or maybe we'd consider the tens of billions of words produced nationally in first-year writing programs as big. Moving in a different and even larger vein, the vast social-media networks in which our students might participate—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.—constitute a series of big-data sets. By employing DeLanda's theory of assemblage, it is possible to analyze both homogeneous and heterogeneous collections of data. So we might think of those sets of data that have been collected and processed as part of a research

project as homogeneous. In terms of assemblages, this would represent the exertion of a strong territorializing force, complemented by an equally strong coding force. One can trace the servers, networks, monetary investments, coding standards, offices, and people involved in creating such assemblages. They are valuable and often proprietary because they do not happen accidentally. Indeed, we might say that the value of a company like Facebook is represented in its proprietary data set. On the other hand, we might also speak of looser, more deterritorialized and decoded data sets such as the set of all HTML websites or all the videos available online. At its most expansive, these heterogeneous assemblages might be understood as forming the media-data ecologies within which the more homogeneous data assemblages operate, just as the more homogeneous Facebook or YouTube operate within the larger ecology of the Web. Media and information types, often defined by file type, find themselves interacting, expanding or dying off, reproducing, and generating new types within these ecologies.

Put into the context of the composition classroom, assemblage theory gives us a different way of understanding the various activities that over the years we have called “inventing the university,” joining discourse communities, learning *the* writing process, and so on. Our twentieth-century approaches to composing, while quite diverse in many respects, shared a common participation in an assemblage of print-based media. The material and expressive capacities of paper, ink, typewriters, books, journals, and libraries exerted strong territorializing forces on composing. A writer's access, particularly a student writer's access, to information, colleagues, and an audience was severely limited in comparison to the situation today. Institutional practices, such as regulations regarding intellectual property and plagiarism, built up around these contexts, as did market forces like the publishing industry, which took advantage of the bottleneck in the publication and distribution of compositions. As a consequence, today I compose in much the same way as a scholar from the last century: alone with a keyboard and texts. I could be composing in a different way, but the institutional practices surrounding tenure might not value that work. They insist

that I work in a relatively solitary way, or at least they often do in English departments (though less so in other disciplines where collaboration is more common). Those scholarly composing assemblages work their way down to the undergraduate level and into first-year composition, where we insist that students compose in similar ways. However, just as the wi-fi and cellular phone signals penetrating the traditional classroom serve to deterritorialize and mutate many of our conventional pedagogies, the big-data assemblies of social media and Internet databases are shifting the way we compose. So while it may appear that my compositional practices echo those of the last century, closer inspection demonstrates that those practices are mutating. Perhaps the shifts appear subtle. For example, twenty years ago, in order to write this chapter, I would have driven to the library, searched a print index (or a non-networked database), found some articles, made photocopies, driven home, read the articles, and then quoted and cited them. Today, I accomplish the same thing in minutes with a Google search. The resulting essay might appear the same to the reader, but the process is very different.

Twentieth-century academic essays were part of a disciplinary field; they shared genre conventions and methodological paradigms; they cited one another; they shared an audience. Again, on the surface, the digital version of this essay might appear the same. It will not even break the surface conventions of print by incorporating video or Web links, but it has moved into an entirely different media ecology. Like the digital photograph, which once printed and framed on one's wall might appear indiscernible from a non-digital photograph but when posted to Instagram is entirely different, the digital version of the essay acquires new capacities quite different from a printed version of itself. The humanities have only begun to explore what is possible when text is approached as data. From tracing citation patterns to topic modeling, maps of conversations and discourse communities take on new shapes. In short, this essay becomes part of a big-data assemblage. While on the one hand it remains a discrete chapter in a specific essay collection, once it appears online in PDF or HTML format it becomes available

for a vastly greater number of connections, audiences, and purposes. How does this change alter our understanding of rhetorical and compositional practices? If we begin with the accepted premise that composing is shaped by one's participation in a discourse community and genre, how does the mutation of the legacy, print-age concepts of community and genre into the concept of a big-data assemblage shift our understanding of composing and authorship?

A detailed answer to that question will require extensive research, but my short, provisional answer offered here is that the role of nonhumans, as well as humans, in composing will need to be reevaluated. One probable result is that academic writers (if writer is still the correct term) will find themselves in a period of greater heterogeneity in terms of composing. That is, it is likely that at some future moment, the current rapid churn of technological innovation will settle, and genre communities will regularize and reterritorialize. Some scholarly genres that will function in a way analogous to the articles and monographs of the last century will develop. Until then, scholars and their students find themselves in a more fluid situation. In rhetoric and composition, the history of the journal *Kairos* is a good example of this, as it has identified itself as a site for such scholarly experimentation. As such, it represents a kind of mutative edge of the assemblage of scholarly publication. However, it is not an edge that has to date interested itself much in the particular mutative potential of big data. Indeed, where big data has entered into the digital humanities, it has remained largely insulated as an analytical method rather than as a compositional tool (e.g., Derek Mueller's analysis of citations over twenty-five years of publications in the journal *College Composition and Communication*). That is, one might perform a computational analysis on a large set of texts and perhaps produce some data visualization of those texts, but the resulting scholarship is no more shaped by big data in terms of its genre or composition than is this essay.

One place where we might begin to see big-data scholarly compositional assemblages is in the Digital Humanities Now project, which aggregates the blogging and other online contributions of a large group of scholars loosely affiliated under the rubric of digital

humanities. Here it is not the individual contributions that are of interest, but rather their combination. And this is the key point: I can't compose a "big-data assemblage" in the way I can compose a blog or an article or a monograph. My role as an author and my particular thoughts or intentions are not the issue except inasmuch as they become part of a larger mosaic. Digital Humanities Now is a relatively small set of data, but it is already more than any single person is likely to consume. So how do I understand my activity then? How do I make rhetorical and compositional decisions if I view my purpose as operating within a big-data assemblage rather than authoring a unique message? Is my objective to trend like a popular hashtag on Twitter or increase my Google PageRank? Perhaps something like Wikipedia is the model for a more homogenized, big-data disciplinary assemblage. At one point there were more than thirty million Wikipedia accounts, though the estimate of 270,000 active users was probably a better measurement of participation ("Wikipedia Community"). It is not so unreasonable to imagine that several thousand scholars in a field could compose on a single platform, that the currently heterogeneous media ecology of the discipline might meld into a more homogeneous environment.

Presented with the thought experiment of imagining composing in such a context, we begin to encounter different rhetorical and compositional pressures, such as the findability and interoperability of one's texts with others. Even though I know this essay will be placed in the context of other essays in a single collection, I have limited means for addressing those possible synergies. In the iterative environment of a big-data assemblage, those connections could grow. Rather than composing a series of stand-alone museum pieces, one might have a more organic approach to scholarship. In other words, we might be surprised to discover that a big-data assembly might feel more like a "human" conversational space than the metaphorical Burkean parlor conversation that is imagined to occur among texts, given that the exchanges could occur in real time and thus allow for the iterative back-and-forth of face-to-face conversation in a way that texts cannot. Unlike the parlor, though,

it might feel more like having a conversation in a giant stadium before a concert where the collective result is something more like a buzzing noise than a message. Big-data assemblages compose meaning from what only appears to be noise to the human being who is unable to process what is going on around him or her without developing new analytical tools. In the context of big-data assemblages, as an author I am no longer only “in conversation” via the intertextuality of quotations and other direct citations, nor with a nebulous, imagined, invisible and mute “discourse community” and audience, nor even with the specific editors and readers that engage in the publishing process. I become part of a larger, real-time stream of data for which I must develop new capacities to read and understand.

Big data confronts us with the realization that symbolic behavior is not only for us, that as human beings we have entered into a symbiotic relationship with the enunciative, expressive capacities of assemblages. We become vehicles for expression and in turn put expression to work for ourselves just as we simultaneously make use of and participate in the natural ecologies we encounter. This shift in perspective is more difficult in terms of symbolic behavior because we have always viewed ourselves as the beginning and end of language. Big data bursts that illusion as surely as the telescope burst our illusion that we were at the center of the universe. As vertiginous as this reorientation might be, for rhetoricians it permits new spaces for composing at a time when the traditional, print-based scholarly genres and modes of publication are running out of steam. Multimedia journals and monographs such as those published by *Kairos* and the Computers and Composition Digital Press; more conventionally textual, open-access journals and book publishers, such as the WAC Clearinghouse; subscription-based library databases; and other ebook options from university presses: these all represent efforts to shift from print to digital genres. Along with these shifts within academic publishing, the larger cultural shifts of big data and social and mobile media offer us an opportunity to rethink our anthropocentric prejudices by examining the vast assemblages of rhetorical activity around us. Undoubtedly, the

discipline is not in search of a scholarly Facebook or Twitter or even Wikipedia or blogosphere. It is equally difficult to imagine a rhetoric and composition smartphone app. However, once we recognize that it is not the “nature” of intellectual work to be solitary or slow or even written, that such experiences were only the result of the assemblages in which scholars labored, and that there is no necessary moral value to these activities, then new possibilities might emerge. As Ian Bogost argues, “[W]riting is dangerous for philosophy—and for serious scholarly practice in general. It’s not because writing breaks from its origins as Plato would have it, but because writing is *only one form* of being. The long-standing assumption that we relate to the world only through language is a particularly fetid, if still bafflingly popular, opinion. But so long as we pay attention only to language, we underwrite our ignorance of everything else” (90). Bogost’s point is to propose “carpentry,” to suggest that academics might seek to make things in addition to writing about them, a point resonating with Shipka’s argument located in a material context. More important, from my view, is his observation of the special role we give to language in our relationship with the world. It is not so much writing itself that is dangerous. It is our fixation upon a particular, print-culture writing practice as a defining, intrinsic activity of being human that must be addressed.

Assemblage theory serves as a tool for tackling this problem and imagining alternative possibilities of rhetorical engagement.

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