

Book Review

Making matters: Craft, ethics, and new materialist rhetorics

by Leigh Gruwell

Gruwell, L. (2022). *Making matters: Craft, ethics, and new materialist rhetorics*. University Press of Colorado.

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From the opening paragraphs of *Making matters: Craft, ethics, and new materialist rhetorics*, Leigh Gruwell draws our focus to knots, tangles, and tensile strength of the fibers that tie us together: these entanglements are ways, Gruwell demonstrates, of thinking through relation in craft and in rhetoric. Through her careful explication of the relations between rhetoric and making and her insightful case studies of two such contemporary craft infrastructures and movements, Gruwell demonstrates how “craft can articulate rhetoric’s material contours, and as such, helps to define the political implications and ethical weight of this materiality” (p. 131). For Gruwell, an attunement to craft in our discipline “focuses our critical attention toward the intra-actions that produce materially bound agents and reframes political agency as the result of those intra-actions” (p. 131). In short: in the context of new materialist rhetorics, craft reminds us that relations constitute a potential for liberatory political action and coalition-building across difference.

Such an orientation toward relationality guides Gruwell in “[examining] how craft might model an ethics and politics of new materialist rhetorics, and [imagining] its possibilities as such” (p. 15). In conversation with ongoing work in new materialist rhetorics, Gruwell argues that craft can “illuminate the interdependence of materiality, power, and rhetorical action” (p. 6) and that as such, craft agency “locates ethical practice in the cultivation of reciprocal entanglements between agents that are both co-constitutive and materially specific” (p. 7). Here, craft constitutes an expansive array of materials, practices, spaces, epistemologies, and communities:

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Gruwell weaves case studies of digital hub Ravelry and cultures of making in and around the 2017 Women’s March tightly with accounts of long-standing political craftivist practice, reminding us that “when we acknowledge that making is not just material but also relational, and thus ethical, we create the conditions for new ways of being” (p. 11). Gruwell’s case studies contribute to ongoing conversations around what feminist and new materialist rhetorics teach us about struggles for more equitable relations, with an emphasis on local movements and communities that also contributes to how the history and scope of craftivist work is understood. Indeed, Gruwell writes that “craftivism reframes the denigration of craft, and crafters, as a political stance that values the labor and knowledge of historically oppressed peoples” (p. 65) through its focus on “collaborative partnerships and social ties that are typical of crafting practices” (p. 65). As Gruwell demonstrates in later chapters, these types of partnerships and social ties might also inform pedagogy and administration in concert with new materialism and feminist materialist approaches (both themselves a tangle), particularly in the ways that craftivist practice attunes us to emplaced, embodies, and entangled epistemologies.

Though readers of this book will likely take pedagogical inspiration from Gruwell’s detailed and compelling case studies of Ravelry and the Women’s March, her chapters on rhetorical history and (perhaps most notably) “craft’s relative absence from contemporary [conversations]” (p. 131) in rhetoric and writing studies are especially instructive for teachers of writing. While craft has certainly had a long presence in rhetoric and writing studies, Gruwell highlights recent moments of disciplinary history in which craft fell out of favor with those in the field seeking to establish “disciplinary legitimacy” (p. 135) tied to “a reductive view of writing that locates invention wholly within the individual genius rather than within the intra-actions between various actors” (p. 135). That Gruwell argues that “grounding techné in craft is critical [because] craft is uniquely positioned to present alternate modes of writing, writerly subjectivity, and the identity of the discipline itself” (p. 140) is consistent with not only new materialist accounts of writing ecologies, but also ongoing and emergent work in the field focused on digital writing interfaces

and feminist approaches to digitality broadly. Gruwell's case study of Ravelry offers generative opportunities for teachers and scholars of digital writing and rhetoric to explore digital interfaces and infrastructures that give shape to online communities and writing environments, a contribution that, as Gruwell unpacks, brings together our discipline's long history of incisive work on the politics of interfaces and yet-emerging scholarship on the intra-actions among human and non-human actors in digital networks. Her gestures toward the materiality of digital interfaces also offers provocations for scholarship concerning craft around extractivism.

Gruwell's reflexive, reflective orientation toward the often extractive relationship between new materialist rhetorical scholarship and Indigenous epistemologies is another strength of this book, demonstrating the ways that feminist rhetorical methodologies might help support more ethical relations among knowledge traditions, particularly when new materialism's claims on "newness" are inherently bound up in colonial projects that elide existing work that already weaves together agency, subjectivity, and relations among human and non-human actors. Gruwell does this kind of reflective work throughout the text, particularly as she theoretically emplaces craft agency and craftivism while also acknowledging the ways that some white, privileged craftivists can appropriate the material foundations of Black and Indigenous maker communities, their "uncritical tendencies [recreating] exclusionary racist and/or classist power structures" (p. 81). Even in view of this potential for elision, exclusion, or even appropriation; Gruwell argues that "it is still worth examining craftivism's capacities to illuminate the relationship between power and materiality [as it] invites awareness of the degree to which all actors are mutually embedded in and constitutive of material circumstances and maintains that political change can only be achieved through recognizing this mutual material entanglement" (p. 81).

While such mutual material entanglements are often made manifest in the craft pedagogy that Gruwell explores most explicitly in the sixth chapter, the same chapter offers serious provocations for program administration as a site for emplaced material relations—and thus, the potential for meaningful political action and disciplinary identity-(re)creation. Arguing for a shift from a focus on "rhetoric or writing as the result of sovereign subjects" (p. 142) and instead for a deep understanding that "any political outcome results from specific material intra-actions among emplaced and embodied human and nonhuman agents" (p. 143), Gruwell reminds us that craft agency and craft pedagogy demand that we take seriously the capacity of craft to invite students to "participate in the (re)assembling of more ethical rhetorical outcomes" (p. 146). In this chapter, Gruwell argues that a similar outcome might be possible at the level of program administration, where we might consider how to adopt "labor practices that are based in a reciprocal ethics of entanglement" (p. 148).

Where Gruwell's audience likely accepts the proposition that craft and new materialist rhetorics are concerned with what materiality means for ethical relations, her focus on these relations reminds us what is (and isn't) new about new materialist rhetorics. Highlighting that the "revolutionary" capacity of new materialist rhetorics is "the recognition of the transformative power of relationships [towards] the creation of more equitable conditions for rhetorical action" (p. 12), Gruwell argues that feminist rhetorics can teach us much about "how materiality functions as a key location from which power emerges, persists, and may even be upended" (p. 27). As a core intervention of this book, Gruwell presents craft agency as part

of an ongoing conversation in new materialist rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, and particularly among Indigenous knowledge traditions: one that "advocates for a reciprocal ethics of entanglement aimed at equalizing power relationships and making social change" (p. 15). With attention both to the deep imbrications of craft and techne in rhetorical history and the strong ties between craft and activist practice, Gruwell's case studies also highlight where craftivism might diverge from and else inform new materialist rhetorics. She reminds us that "just as the materiality of nonhuman objects shapes their rhetorical capacities, craftivism recognizes how the materiality of human bodies is essential to their position as rhetorical agents" (p. 75). Gruwell goes on to distill some of the political potential of craftivist practice—and perhaps craft in rhetoric and writing more generally—this way: "for craftivism, bodies matter because bodies are matter" (p. 75).

Throughout this text, Leigh Gruwell offers provocations for our field to see craft and new materialism differently: she suggests that "recasting new materialist rhetorics as crafts recognizes rhetoric as a material practice that is both structured by power and carries significant ethical weight" (p. 7). Gruwell reminds us not only of who does craft—particularly when communities engaged in craft are so often marginalized and delegitimized by neoliberal institutions—but also of what networks of human and non-human collaboration and entanglement might be illuminated, highlighted, or otherwise emphasized by a focus on craft as a part of our engagement with new materialist rhetorics. *Making Matters* offers us a chance to understand our work as rhetoricians in relation with one another as a practice of craft: indeed, this work is something we weave together.

REFERENCES

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