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## Introduction

### ATTENDING TO ATTENTION

Humans have never been lone arbiters of persuasion. Rhetorical theory has turned toward things, moods, sensations, feelings, environments, and their combined effects as the ground and grounding of suasive events. As Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle (2016, 1) have argued, “Things provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects, and arouse in us a sense of wonder.”

How do things do this? And how and why does the doing matter? How and why, to interpolate Karen Barad (2007), does matter come to matter in rhetoric?

One way to address to such questions is with thought experiments. Pick some *thing*, *any* thing, and work through its suasive potential. The Norwegian novelist and essayist Karl Ove Knausgaard has done something similar (*Autumn* [2017a], *Winter* [2017b], and *Summer* [2018c]), defamiliarizing and making strange the things with which we live our everyday lives—from rubber boots and winter sounds to frogs, chewing gum, piss, and Flaubert novels. Somehow, after reading his short chapters on chestnut trees or hollow spaces, you see those things anew.

Knausgaard makes the familiar strange at human scale—he muses on what things do to other things and non-human organisms and what they do to, for, with, and through *us*. He’s sometimes nostalgic and anthropomorphic; he reads memories and desires into things in ways that might give scholars pause. Yet things provoke thought, and humans tend to think at human scale, even when thinking through non-human things (a tendency not without problems; see Pilsch 2017). Things, too, “incite feeling, circulate affects”—what we typically see as non-cognitive suasion. And all this may be immanent, all at once—affecting us, conditioning us, spilling over into our words, thoughts, acts, and comportments. How? Follow me in a brief thought experiment: let’s consider desks.

Desks are flat surfaces that stabilize things and actions and ideas.

Although flat and smooth, the surface of a desk may be angled—as in the medieval desks of my imagination (stoked by images from popular culture) whereupon tonsured monks in heavy earthen-hued

robes labored to copy manuscripts on thin sheets of vellum. Or they may be rotated and evacuated, as in the contemporary desk-and-chair combos that populate classrooms around the world. Some desks look like tables, but tables are not always desks. Most desks are rectangular. Some desks have nooks and hollows and cubbies—perhaps a smooth, thin groove along one edge to prevent pencils and pens from rolling to the floor. A hinge that opens onto a hidden space for storing books, erasers, binder clips, sandwiches, juice boxes. A built-in shelf at the edge—like a dollhouse row of Brooklyn brownstones shorn of their facades—for tucking paperclips, stamps, bills, and receipts inside the walls of its apartments.

The flat, smooth surfaces of desks are kept in place and elevated by any number of innovations—poles we call “legs,” adjustable trestles, blocks of tooled and joined wood or metal that contain drawers or hollow cubbies—almost always with a large open space in the middle for a chair, feet, legs, or a curled cat. Some desks have cranks or motors with gears so one can adjust the height; some desks are for standing at rather than sitting. Some desks hide their surfaces and cubbies under a curved wooden canopy that rolls down along grooved walls at its sides, like the corrugated metal door of a bodega storefront, closed for the night.

The etymology of *desk* dates from the fourteenth century, from the medieval Latin *desca*, a table on which one writes. A common contemporary German word for desk is *Schreibtisch*, which fuses *schreiben* (to write) with *Tisch* (table) and thus preserves the connection between desk and writing. The French *escritoire* carries a similar connection and describes a particular kind of writing space with doors and drawers that resembles an armoire.

The notion that writing was an activity accomplished on a special kind of table—*desk* as a new species of the genus *table*, family *furniture*—seems to have coincided with medieval writing and, later, with the emergence of the printing press. Desks, in concept and material form, solidified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, alongside, perhaps, a dominant (Western) cultural conception of writers and writing. Our modern era has spawned desk jobs and deskwork, cubicle farms with desk jockeys, paper pushers and ergonomics and desktop computers. Desks have become places, destinations, anchors. Desks have their own gravity—they pull together myriad things, concepts, comportments. Desks keep things in place and function as launching pads for ideas that sometimes travel around the world.

\* \* \*

I am sitting at a desk, at home, facing a window and a dawning autumn day. My desk is a large rectangle of thick tempered glass with rounded, matte edges. It sits atop two adjustable wooden trestles, each of which has four angled legs that form large As because each trestle has a horizontal shelf, a few inches above the floor. On the left shelf is a wire wastebasket—empty because I am writing on a Thursday and have taken out the garbage ahead of tomorrow’s weekly pickup. In front of the wastebasket is a small plastic organizer I have carried with me, from one place to the next, for over twenty years. In its narrow, smoky black corridors lay a checkbook (used once each month to pay the rent and for virtually nothing else); stamps; a letter opener I can’t recall having ever used; two pens; library cards; a few business cards I found in one of my dad’s desk drawers after he died; return address stickers; a sad, reedy notepad; and credit cards rarely swiped in the flesh. On the right shelf is a folded towel I use in the early mornings, after running, to wipe sweat from my face and neck.

I like a clean desk, but I’m hemmed in by companions—some of which I need, some of which I loathe, some of which I am anxious to process and internalize and move away as soon as possible. To my left are three separate piles of books at different heights, like stout, nondescript office buildings in any city center housing insurance companies, banks, and more infernal insurance companies. Towering above is a sleek white pillar of index cards, more than 1,200 of them, each with a word in German on one side and a word or two in English on the other. I have been slowly digitizing them, the desk skyscraper shrinking day by day. Behind the little MacBook on which I type is a pile of printed journal articles; these need to be annotated, my handwritten notes and underlinings added to a research database and tagged for use as scholarly support in my writing.

To my right is a volume of Nabokov’s early novels; I resent this book, have been trudging through it joylessly. It’s a grudge match. I can’t wait to shove this book down the narrow metal throat of my library’s book return chute. Next to Nabokov are a small glass teapot and a ceramic teacup, both empty and sitting on a folded paper towel that is inelegant but functional. Toward the back of the desk are framed photographs—my three kids in various poses and places, my wife and me dressed in 1940s film-noir garb for a party in downtown Albuquerque, me and my two daughters on the beach in Carlsbad, California, one brisk, seabreezy evening when they were little. My camera—a Nikon 35Ti from the mid-1990s—sits in its faux-leather case, next to six rolls of exposed film in gray plastic cylinders awaiting their journey to the lab.

At this desk, I have struggled to finish this book. Two days ago, I scrapped a fieldwork vignette I had planned to use. Sitting here over the last few weeks, I've read and edited and smoothed the prose in the chapters I've drafted and revised. I've eaten here, read here, annotated here. My gaze has been here, peering into this screen as I type, but it has also been pulled toward my companions—my camera; the film I want to develop; a photo of my youngest daughter flat on her back at three or four years old, smiling from the fine mesh surface of a trampoline; the fucking Nabokov book.

A social theorist could read much into these descriptions of my desk, and indeed, there is much to glean. My desk, the things it holds, and my descriptions say much about me. It's trite, but my desk and these things support my writing, literally and otherwise. Reading meaning from these descriptions would be to extract salience—a move typical of rhetorical theorists, as Thomas Rickert (2013) argues. To extract salience is to make a point; it is also to miss a point. As Knausgaard (2018b, loc. 8603) has it, “designation is another kind of disappearance.” Something is pulled out, foregrounded, pointed to, probed, and so many other somethings fade into the haze of an arbitrarily defined background.

The things with which I have surrounded myself, sometimes intentionally, sometimes haphazardly, all condition my rhetorics—from the straightforward composition of this sentence to the ways I conceptualize myself as a writer, scholar, and human being. I am sometimes acutely aware of the effects of these things, but most often I am not. Sometimes salience is clear, but often there is none I can identify. I pay bills here, eat yogurt and bananas and cheese sticks here like a toddler strapped into a high chair. This glass surface, seemingly impermeable, is nonetheless embedded with memories, laden with affects, piled with inscrutable, numberless variables. I fall into the screen, into my document, my desk's deskness invisible to my machinations but no less crucial, despite my myopia.

There is a different form of myopia at play, too: how can I know how these things truly affect me? In what ways is their effect on me combinatorial, factorial, exponential, ineffable? How often does my gaze switch from the screen to the piles of books or to the photos of my kids? What causes me to check out and daydream? How can I ever see myself among my things, from outside myself? Is finding salience possible or even desirable? Isn't salience always a guess, an assessment, a sentence passed down? Thought experiments take us only so far. I am still connected to and immersed in the things that surround me, even as I attempt to make them strange.

\* \* \*

If rhetoric is originary, immanent in one's material environs, and ambient, how should we go about studying it systematically—with something more rigorous than thought experiments? This is a key question for contemporary empirical researchers in rhetoric, writing, communication, and related fields.

This book offers a set of approaches for addressing this question, connecting new materialist theories of rhetoric to empirical methodologies that enliven and extend such theories. It helps scholars operationalize and extend new materialist, affective, and ambient perspectives on rhetoric and writing by considering how we engage (and are engaged by) what surrounds us, in systematic, rigorous, and theoretically nuanced ways. It offers approaches to rhetorical study that meet the warp, weft, and welter of being and communicating in a world full to bursting with all manner of suasive and affective actors, moods, and comportments.

*Engaging Ambience* reexamines what we know about methodology and theory, about reality and imagination, about visibility and visibility, and about *techné* and *poiesis*.

#### SALIENCE/AMBIENCE

In Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, bracketing is a preliminary move, something one does before analysis in the hopes of unpacking experience, free of cultural bias. Bracketing is a nice idea, but it is effectively impossible. In the more common sense of "setting aside," bracketing is anathema to studies of ambience. As Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger realized early on the impossibility of bracketing—in a phenomenological or colloquial sense. And I cannot bracket—set aside—the problems Heidegger presents to contemporary rhetorical theory.

Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933. He was an anti-Semite. He turned his back on Husserl, who was Jewish. He was largely silent after World War II and tried to explain away his Nazi party membership in an infamous interview with *Der Spiegel*, published—at his request—posthumously.

I draw on Heidegger's work throughout this book because many of my sources draw from, build on, and push back against Heideggerian philosophy. My own arguments continue those scholarly conversations and, I hope, offer new understandings of what Heidegger has to say about rhetorical theory. I cannot reconcile Heidegger's personal and political views with his philosophy. They cannot be untangled or

bracketed. From my perspective, a theory of ambient rhetoric calls for unbracketing, an idea suggested by Heidegger's early work.

In his first lecture after World War I, Heidegger began publicly to think beyond the phenomenology of his mentor, Husserl. "The Idea of Philosophy and the Worldview Problem" (Safranski 1998) considered our *experience* of reality prior to any *appropriation*—before we layer our values, worldviews, and biases on material phenomena. It suggests that our experience is always already an intra-active enactment. At first blush, this sounds like classical phenomenology; but Heidegger was concerned with the nature of *experience itself*, or the *attitude* of experience—inclusive of what we bring to it—rather than a phenomenological bracketing of values and worldviews. He tries, therefore, to *unbracket* both materiality and subjectivity.

He was interested in *how* this happens, how these interactions unfold, here and now, absent some metaphysical synthesis or theoretical apparatus. He asks: "Do we experience reality before we arrange it for ourselves in a scientific, or value-judging, or worldview approach" (Safranski 1998, 93). And he uses the lectern before him to consider how we experience the lectern's lecternness. This should sound familiar.

In his biography of Heidegger, Rüdiger Safranski quotes from the lecture extensively, for the lectern acts as the argument's "hinge." What we see in the lectern are not various material parts that resolve, somehow, into "lectern" as concept. Instead, Heidegger says, "I see the lectern at a single stroke" (Safranski 1998, 94). The lectern is part of its material, historical, and cultural context, all at once. The lectern—and any related elements: a book lying atop its angled surface, its height, the lighting in the room, its orientation—"presents itself to me," Heidegger says, as something here and now and of one suasive bundle (95).

Heidegger cannot *bracket* his own history of visits to lectures, his interactions with previous lecterns, his sense of Western elocution, or his religious training. Bracketing is impossible, for the lectern presents itself with this bundle of learned histories and ways of being immanent *in its thingness* and not something exclusively in Heidegger's head. The idea that things are *presented to us* in an *attitude of everyday experience* is crucial, for it shifts the locus of agency from humans perceiving and apprehending an inert world to an intra-action of human apprehension and the world's active disclosures: "Living in an environment, it means to me everywhere and always, it is all of this world, it is worlding," Heidegger argues (Safranski 1998, 95). *Worlding*, Safranski notes, is the first of Heidegger's many neologisms.

*Worlding*, so crucial throughout Heidegger's oeuvre, emerges from a methodological-theoretical move: *unbracketing*. Worlding involves an "environmental something" that resolves into focus and "presents itself to me from an immediate environment" (Safranski 1998, 95). The lectern—and all its ambient *somethings*—arrives directly, "without any mental detour via a grasping of things" (95).

*Salience* comes later; worlding is *ambient*.

When we see the lectern, "we unexpectedly slide into a different order that is no longer the order of perceiving" (Safranski 1998, 95). Instead, we see a *bundle* of things, material and imagined. Heidegger argues that we should engage phenomena unbracketed, attending to our attention. Safranski adds: "The lectern is 'worlding' therefore means: I am experiencing the significance of the lectern, its function, its location in the room, its lighting, and the little episodes that are associated with it (an hour ago someone else was standing here; my recollection of the road I had to cover to get here; my irritation at standing here at the lectern listening to this incomprehensible stuff, and so on). The lectern 'is worlding' means it assembles a whole world, in terms of time and space" (96). "In the beginning," Safranski says, "there is 'worlding,' one way or another" (96).

Yet because of familiarity, much of the bundle is withdrawn in everyday apprehension. Worlding thus describes "that which normally we do not recognize because it is too close to us" (Safranski 1998, 95). Nearness means we regularly take things for granted *as disclosive and agentive things*—we overlook or misjudge or willingly evade (Heidegger 2010) a thing's capacity to "provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects, and arouse in us a sense of wonder" (Barnett and Boyle 2016, 1). We bracket unintentionally.

We simply do not *see* the ways things present themselves to us in everyday life, their myriad potential disclosures. We are only able to see such disclosures by focusing attention on our attention to them, a theme in Heidegger's work that grows stronger after his "Worldview Problem" lecture (see Heidegger 2010). We must perform some act or series of acts—thinking through the experience of encountering a lectern, performing a thought experiment on desks or Flaubert novels or winter sounds—and simultaneously attend to our attention to gather some sense of how we experience phenomena as an interchange of suasive disclosure and apprehension.

Thought experiments are useful but insufficient. We need other ways of attending to our attention, other ways of seeing ourselves with our everyday things from outside the compartments and affects that are



always already embedded and entangled with our understanding. We need ways of re-seeing, or seeing differently, the disclosures of everyday things, their worlding.

Worlding suggests that within phenomena—things, smells, caresses; desks, lecterns, winter sounds—“an entire life situation” may be immanent (Safranski 1998, 96). “We do not experience every Something as ‘worlding’ so powerfully, but every Something ‘worlds’ to some extent,” Safranski argues (96). This is the rub. The disclosures of things in our everyday environs emerge not from premise-free subject-object relations; instead we find ourselves presented with worldings—responding to them, interacting with them, embracing our fundamental entanglement with them (97; see Barad 2007).

In Heidegger’s later work, worlding is not mere presence, a bundle of things that are simply there. It is also not “merely an imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things” (Heidegger 2013, 43). Instead, “the world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be home” (43). The “world” does not simply stand before us as something we perceive and can bracket from previous experience; instead, the world *worlds* in and through our very *inquiry* into being (43).

Heidegger’s perspective on the world and worlding is congruent with Steven Shaviro’s (2014) understanding of the universe of things: being and interacting is more than we can grasp and describe; the more-than-human world is here, disclosing, worlding, whether we pay attention or not, whether we grasp disclosures or not, whether we “bracket” or not. We don’t always see or think about a lectern or a desk or a person walking behind us; rather, we *feel* their worlding. The world “is more fully in being” than we often realize, Heidegger argues (2013, 43); the world worlds even when we do not or cannot perceive its worlding. The world’s worlding is often non-correlational, nonobjective, pre-reflective, *presentative*, or *given* (Serres 2016) rather than *representative*. Representation is what humans do. We sometimes glimpse worlding, however; Proust’s involuntary memory is a canonical example.

\* \* \*

For Heidegger, experience of the lectern is framed by what we *see*. Yet *seeing* is an imprecise term, shorthand for something more complex than visual perception. Indeed, Heidegger explicitly demonstrates how visual perception is so embedded in everyday apprehension as to be *invisible* to us: “What do I see: brown surfaces intersecting at right angles? No, I see something different—a box, moreover a bigish box,

with a smaller built upon it. No, that's not it at all, I see the lectern at which I am to speak. You see the lectern from which you are spoken to" (Safranski 1998, 94). It feels odd to devolve *seeing* to the level of perception, to describe the lectern as brown surfaces at right angles or a desk's grooves and cubbies and articulated hinges. It feels odd because this is precisely what we do not mean by *seeing*. Instead, *seeing* often means something like sensing, feeling, grasping. None of these other gerunds evoke sight; they all evoke *touch*. Heidegger *sees* the lectern, but he means the opposite of *perceives*—the physiological work of rods and cones and reflected light waves.

He means, instead, that we *feel* something in the lectern—we become immersed in a whole world. In rhetorical studies, we typically use the word *visual* to mean the opposite of visual facticity and the *perception* of visual phenomena. Indeed, though we rarely use the term, we tend to be much more interested in *visibility*, a concept that is thoroughly material-social-historical-suasive. When we talk about visual rhetoric we are, above all, interested in what we *feel*, what we experience in our encounters with visual phenomena, in a Heideggerian sense of seeing: a worlding. We *see*, which is to say that we feel and hear and touch and take in the world with our eyes and with our bodies. Safranski (2017, 302) quotes Goethe's "Roman Elegies": "See with a feeling eye, feel with a seeing hand."

Roland Barthes connects photography and the sense of touch in both primary uses of the word—the notion that something could be affective, and the notion that one experiences something beyond the ocular, that interactions with photographs are somehow haptic and tactile as well. A photograph "is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately *touch me*, who am here . . . the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, *will touch me like the delayed rays of a star*" (Barthes 1981, 80–81, emphasis added). There are chemical, physiological, material, haptic, and affective affordances connecting referents, photography, photographs, and viewers all at once. When we view a photograph, we feel the light emanating from a real somewhere, and at the same time we *see*, perhaps, an entire world, in the Heideggerian sense: "at a single stroke" (Safranski 1998, 94).

Barthes (1981, 82) describes a family photograph as a "treasury of rays which emanated from [his] mother as a child, from her hair, her skin, her dress, her gaze, on that day." One effect of these emanations is the knowledge that what is pictured was irrefutably *real* (82). The two-way gaze—of Barthes into the photograph, of his mother into the lens—is, even decades later, an enacting material reality. Ordinary scenes depicted

in photographs yield a “reality in a past state: at once the past and the real” (82). More than any other visual medium, photography “offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence” (84). A photograph “does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been” (85). A photograph may thus “ratify what it represents,” in a way writing cannot (85). In photographs, “The past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch” (88).

In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1977, 90) argued that “touch is the most demystifying of all senses” while acknowledging that the sense of sight “is the most magical.” Yet as Shawn Michelle Smith (2014, 29) has shown, affect, feeling, and touch in and through photography were among Barthes’s central concerns—the intersection of demystification and magic. Affect, Barthes says, is precisely “what I didn’t want to reduce”; he approached photography not as a theme but as a wound: “I *see*, I *feel*, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (1981, 21, emphasis added). Smith (2014, 29) argues that “Barthes seeks to forestall the scholarly leap from perception to observation, to linger in the in-between moment of feeling, and to make his critical work account for his emotional response.”

Barthes proposed an affective approach to photography, one that was premised on the tactile aspects of seeing, one premised *on touch*. His theory of photography hinges on the *punctum*, on the affective *wound* in any given photograph: “the images that move him ‘touch’ him violently, ‘prick’ and ‘pierce,’ and ‘bruise’ him” (Smith 2014, 34). According to Smith, “Barthes’s entire understanding of photography is remarkably tactile; his experience of viewing is one of being touched”; “all attentive viewing is an exchange of touching for Barthes” (34). Seeing photographs is an affective exchange, touching, worlding unbracketed. Worlding may be *felt*: in our skin, in our throats, with our hands and bellies and eyes.

And Barthes has company. In bas-relief, Gilles Deleuze (2002, 99) saw “the most rigid link between the eye and the hand . . . which allows the eye to function like the sense of touch; furthermore, it confers, and indeed imposes, upon the eye a tactile or rather *haptic* function.” Deleuze argued that in “the different regimes of color” is found “a properly visual sense of touch, or a haptic sense of sight” (123). For John Berger (1977, 8), “To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it.” We situate ourselves with attentive *looking*, he argues; to look is to touch. The most distinguishing characteristic of oil painting is its “special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts” (88). As Michel Serres (2016, loc. 3012) has it, “The painter makes us see through touch.” We sense, we see, we feel with our eyes.

In *Blind Spot*, Teju Cole deftly evokes visual synesthesia. He recounts the parable of Doubting Thomas: “Christ advises Thomas to surrender the sensual faculty in favor of the cognitive. But his hand, guiding Thomas’s hand, says something different” (Cole 2017, 90). Christ asks if Thomas believed because he had *seen*. Thomas’s *seeing*, however, was haptic: he saw Christ, he *felt* his wounded side, and a world opens. Cole describes (and pictures) an ordinary tableau in rural New York: “This dreamwork bricolage comes by an arrangement of the eye, not of the hands” (228). And yet, the photograph evokes the hands-on: “An object is used. A thing is seen” (228). A few pages later he writes “how streaked we are by what we see” (230). For Cole, “Color is the sound an object makes in response to light”: “with my eyes I begin to hear what I see” (232). We sense, we see, we hear, we feel with our eyes.

These ideas are certainly not new to scholars in rhetoric. We see and feel with our whole bodies, and *visual* rhetoric is always already *multisensory* rhetoric. As Casey Boyle, James J. Brown Jr., and Steph Ceraso (2018, 253) argue, “Theories that focus on the visual are also affected and influenced by other senses. Even at its visual foundations, digital rhetoric was a multisensory enterprise.” They remind us that “by attending to rhetorical encounters as multisensory events we are afforded an experience of resonance between and among a host of relations” (254).

But how do we attend to rhetorical encounters as multisensory events, empirically? How do we identify which relations matter and how they matter? One approach is to get closer to the things that are near us, by literally and figuratively *picturing* them. Visual and multisensory methodologies and methods offer empirical ways of *unbracketing* the world. They demonstrate how we can build conceptions of ambience and composites of worlding rather than creating the critical distance of salience. They cultivate nearness—dwelling with the things and practices that condition the everyday rhetorics we see, hear, feel, and touch.

#### EMPIRICAL RHETORICS: SHOWING UP FOR WHAT SHOWS UP

New materialist, affective, and ambient theories have transformed understanding of rhetoric’s foundations—*what* rhetoric is, *where* rhetoric is, *how* rhetoric emerges, and what, where, and how rhetoric *might be* in the future.

Recent scholarship explores concepts that have traditionally received comparatively little attention: affect and emotion (Ingraham 2017; Rice 2012; Walsh et al. 2017), sound (Ceraso 2018; Hawk 2018), energy (Ingraham 2018), embodiment (Chávez 2018; Hawhee 2015), things

and objects (Barnett and Boyle 2016; Gries 2015), non-human animals (Davis 2010; Hawhee 2016), plants and trees (Davis 2017; Jones 2019; Rickert 2017; Walsh et al. 2017), accidents (Stormer 2020), and, most encompassing of all, ambience (Rickert 2013, 2017; Yarbrough 2018). In such work, rhetoric is something *in* the world rather than *on* the world (Ingold 2008), a phenomenon always already in things and added to things, immanent and invented, affective and cognitive, processual and fixed, salient and ambient.

These theories call for new methodologies—as Laurie E. Gries (2015, 5) argues, “new materialism is also a methodological project.” Complexity—one exigence for new materialist methodologies, Gries notes—“cannot be investigated via methodologies that give too much weight to language’s ability to account for reality, agency, and ontology” (6). We need instead “new kinds of empirical investigations that foreground distributed relations and attend to the nonlinear processes of materialization” (6).

We need methodologies and methods that explore ambience *empirically*—considering how desks, piles of books, smells in rooms, memories, framed photographs, lecterns, and views from windows contribute in a nonlinear fashion (alongside warrants, claims, and audiences) to our theories of rhetoric. “In arguing that rhetoric is ambient,” Rickert (2013, xii) writes, “I am claiming that rhetoricity is the always ongoing disclosure of the world shifting our manner of being in that world so as to call for some response or action.” This is the kind of complexity Gries identifies; this is the kind of ever-present exigence that requires new ways of approaching and studying rhetoric.

However, many proponents of new materialist and ambient theories of rhetoric have been less focused on methodological questions, despite Gries’s call to action (and despite her own methodology of iconographic tracking; contributors to *Text + Field* [2017] are also notable exceptions). Empirical researchers might ask: Which methodologies are most appropriate for understanding and extending new materialist theories of rhetoric? What are the implications of such theories for how we understand and undertake empirical studies of rhetoric, writing, and communication writ large? How might we study the potentially overwhelming variables found in theories of rhetoric that assume the world’s originary affectability? How can one credibly bound an empirical study of rhetoric if rhetoric is boundless?

As Clay Spinuzzi (2003) has argued, methods entail the specific ways we investigate phenomena. In any given empirical study, we might use multiple methods, and those methods may change or be exchanged

as we trace phenomena across participants, across scenarios, and across instances of fieldwork (see also McNely 2013a). Methods are tools—sometimes we need a wrench, and sometimes pliers will do. But methodologies *embody* theories—the practical working out of theory. Methodologies are several orders of magnitude more complex than methods—they create the very frameworks in which different methods are brought together and used. Methodologies include, therefore: our overriding theoretical perspectives; our value commitments as researchers, scholars, and empathic human beings; and the broader philosophies that bear upon a specific approach (see Spinuzzi 2003, 7).

Methodologies are not *appended* to theories. They *enact* theories, values, and philosophies; enliven theoretical understanding; and reciprocally extend the development of theory. In short, methodologies are ways of *doing* theory, such that theory and practice are inseparable and mutually constitutive. *Engaging Ambience* presents empirical methodologies for *doing* new materialist and ambient theories of rhetoric. Its purpose is to explore and demonstrate systematic means for understanding how matter comes to matter in rhetoric. The book offers methodologies and methods for the empirical study of rhetoric conceived as originary, immanent, and enveloping. It builds from and extends methodological innovations (Barnett 2016; Gries 2015; McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard 2017; McNely 2019; McNely, Gestwicki, Gelms, and Burke 2013; Rule 2018, 2019) that are central to the field's turn to things, affects, and ambience.

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In her introduction to *The Body Multiple* (2002, xi), an ethnography of atherosclerosis in one Dutch hospital, Annemarie Mol sketches the book's provenance: it began decades ago, during “long-gone Thursdays” in which she had philosophy classes in the mornings and anatomy classes in the afternoons, where she dissected and analyzed human bodies. Her days mixed Foucault and formalin, Merleau-Ponty and pelvic cavities (x). “The remarkable materiality of it all,” she says, shows up in her book: “sentences in difficult French, strange smells, my clumsiness in cutting” (xi), memories still palpable in the present.

This remarkable materiality framed her ethnographic practice: her study of atherosclerosis pays attention to, among other things, bike parking and name tags, vending-machine coffee and microscopes, gestures and sighs, tissue slices and stents, dog walking and documentation, patient stories and the sound of blood pulsing in the body as heard through a listening apparatus, “pshew, pshew” (Mol 2002, 60). Mol

argues that vending-machine coffee, bike parking, and the sounds of blood flow—pshew, pshew—are inseparable from the *reality* of atherosclerosis. These elements could not be bracketed from her fieldwork. But these elements of everyday life in the hospital are not, in themselves, salient, and this is the point: *they all matter* to an ontology of atherosclerosis. Mol's novel contribution is *unbracketing*: she slows the search for salience by embracing ambience.

How? By focusing on *enactments*, on how diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis was *enacted* in the everyday layering of conversations with patients; diagnostic procedures; patient history records; microscopic analyses; and scalpels, corpses, sounds, arguments, and slanted medical tables. Mol (2002, 152) calls her methodology *praxiography*, an approach that “follows objects where they are being enacted in practice.”

If atherosclerosis is a phenomenon with contours we can trace, understand, and discuss, she argued, “this is because it is part of a practice. It is a reality enacted” (Mol 2002, 44). But epistemological barriers persist. We cannot “know” atherosclerosis, for example, by following one surgeon or one pathologist or one patient. Further we cannot “know” atherosclerosis by consulting demographic trends and incidences of diagnosis. By focusing on enactments, Mol gave up on *knowing* to instead trace *knowledges*, which do “not reside in subjects alone, but also in buildings, knives, dyes, desks,” and technologies—especially technologies of writing, recording, and inscribing (48).

Knowledges are *embedded* in practices, in technologies, in things. Mol (2002, 50) suggests that we flatten agential assessments, that it “may be a good methodological strategy to withhold from doctors and patients the subjectivity we are reluctant to grant to corpses in order to analyze embedded knowledges instead.” This “may be a way out of the dichotomy between the knowing subject and the objects-that-are-known: to spread the activity of knowing widely” (50). The first step is to see the entanglements in any practice—each enactment must remain unbracketed for as long as possible (156). By tracing enactments, Mol presented stories about the assembled objects she observed: composites emerged, realities multiplied. An ontology of atherosclerosis unfolded—a composite of knowledges, practices, subjects, objects, affects, and stories.

Mol (2002, 1) describes her book as an “empirical philosophy.” It is philosophy in the sense that its object of study is ontology. It is empirical because her motivating question was not “how to find the truth” but rather “how are objects handled in practice” (5). To answer the second question necessitates attentional and methodological shifts. To understand how objects are handled in practice, one must show up,



pay attention to, and follow objects as they are pushed around, shared, yelled at, discarded. One must show up and observe systematically.

Such attentional and methodological shifts are a deliberate departure from “the epistemological tradition in philosophy that tried to articulate the relation between knowing subjects and their objects of knowledge” (Mol 2002, 32). For Mol, knowing is flattened, subjectivity is not granted by fiat, ontologies move and multiply. Although the philosophical object of her study—an ontology of disease—is found all over the world, the practices and objects she traced were decidedly not *everywhere* but in a very particular *somewhere* (140).

By showing up and asking “how are objects handled in practice” *here*, in this place and at this time, among these people, Mol (2002, viii) formulates “snapshot-stories” about a specific disease in a specific hospital. Her snapshot-stories slow down, thicken, and suspend enactments. Rather than carve a slice of everyday life, her snapshot-stories trace layers of ontological enactments. Together, they form a complex composite drawn from hundreds or thousands of everyday slices.

Mol’s work is empirical because it is systematic, grounded in observational fieldwork, a product of showing up repeatedly to a specific place, at specific times, among specific actors, practices, and environments. It is methodologically replicable, something someone else could do in the same hospital or a different one. But her “concern with theorizing,” she adds, “turns this into a philosophical book” (Mol 2002, viii). This is what she means by “empirical philosophy”: it is a direct consequence of changing focus—of asking “how are objects handled in practice” or “where are knowledges embedded” or “what actors do the doing?”

Tracing enactments means being there. It means attending carefully to the actors that do the doing. It means systematic looking and documenting and unbracketing. It means paying attention to vending machines, the sounds of instruments, the ways people talk about disease, the gestures they make, their sighs, the tissues being sliced, the bodies being probed, the muscles tensing, the samples measured. It means paying attention to walking, to staircases, and to stories (Mol 2002, vii). This is how an ontology is enacted, how a world *worlds*, or, as Kathleen Stewart (2007) might say, how a *something* throws itself together.

To explore enactments empirically—and to be concerned with *theorizing* a particular ontology—we must *be there*, we must show up to see what shows up, to see *how* it shows up, to see how all the remarkable materiality in which we are immersed matters in any unfolding reality.

\* \* \*



Praxiography has as much to offer to empirical rhetorics as it did to Mol's empirical philosophy. A praxiographic approach "allows and requires one to take objects and events of all kinds into consideration when trying to understand the world" (Mol 2002, 158). "No phenomenon," Mol adds, "can be ignored on the grounds that it belongs to another discipline" (158). No phenomenon can be ignored on the grounds that it is not a subject—non-human objects of all kinds participate in and shape the emergence of any ontology.

Praxiography is a way of framing and performing ethnographic methodologies. But praxiographic studies are difficult to execute: "No entity can innocently stay the same throughout the story, unaltered between various sites. There are no invariable variables" (Mol 2002, 121). Instead, there is interdependence and interference (121). To study interdependence and interference, to document and follow invariable variables, "the practicalities" of experience must remain *unbracketed*—"in the forefront of our attention" (119).

S. Scott Graham (2015) has adapted Mol's notion of praxiography to rhetorical studies, exploring the material and discursive practices of pain management physicians. Graham and Lynda Walsh (2019, 194) also note that Mol's praxiographic emphasis on ontology identifies her with new materialisms. Praxiography creates a kind of methodological and empirical overlay in which what happens in a given *somewhere* is compared against what is claimed or assumed to be in a conceptual *everywhere*. As Graham and Walsh note, praxiography relentlessly compares knowledge claims to ontological enactments (193). "As one might expect," Graham and Walsh argue, "praxiographies frequently demonstrate a misalignment of epistemology and ontology, theory, and praxis" (193).

Mol's praxiography and empirical philosophy thus foreground the artificiality of theory/empirical practice bifurcations. Her work illustrates several key methodological-theoretical concepts that guide this book:

- a. Epistemological lines drawn between empirical work and theoretical work are ontologically problematic.
- b. Distinctions between theory and practice are often placeholders, used to extract and demonstrate salience.
- c. Distinctions between theory and methodology are similarly tenuous; Mol's praxiography is a way of engaging theory—attending to practices, objects, and environments in the midst of enactments necessitates attentional shifts that, in turn, enrich the ways a given ontology is theorized.
- d. Attentional shifts foster shifts in understandings of agency.

- e. Empirical philosophy and empirical rhetoric are *realist* approaches—ontologies emerge from identifiable objects and actors, with socio-historical commitments and mores, in specific places and times, through specific practices that may be observed, apprehended, or imagined in their enacted complexity.

Rather than pry open a given epistemology with its attendant conceptual schemes and theories, Mol uses praxiography to trace an ontology and thus builds a theory of how that complex ontological object is *enacted*. Most researchers understand that epistemological lines delineate, circumscribe, and identify salience.

But in studies of ambience, those lines—like the epistemologies and conceptual schemes on which they are based—wobble, loosen, and spool from one's grasp. In empirical studies of ambient rhetorics, epistemological lines must be drawn loosely from the jump. In an ideal scenario, the methodology drives the empirical work; the empirical work points toward new theories, which drive new practices. In other scenarios, these lines are less defined, the movements among methodology, theory, and practice even more active and mutually informative. Messy, as John Law (2004) has argued.

Theory and practice are *both* ways of making things *visible*—complementary, intertwined, and recursive ways of bringing something to light, often literally. As Gries's work demonstrates, theory can be empirical and methodological. Marking *this* as theory work and *that* as practical work serves researchers interested in salience; to study ambience, we must assume from the start no clean or clear divisions between empirical work and theory work.

Even attempting to study ambience empirically is always already a theoretical-methodological undertaking. Ambient rhetorics posit certain assumptions about the world; the empirical rhetorics practiced in this book take those theories at face value and attempt to explore them in particular *somewheres*. If Rickert is correct in the notion that a worldly affectability conditions rhetorical practice, there must be a praxiological approach for studying that; in studying it, we should learn more about the theory and maybe even push it in new directions.

Our attention thus oscillates between theoretical perspectives and ontological enactments. We follow things and moods and affects that condition rhetorical practice. We do this empirical, systematic, practical work *as* rhetorical theory. Any distinctions, boundaries, and lines we draw are mere placeholders. Mol gives us an example of what can happen when we see theory as practice, practice as theory, philosophy as ethnography, ethnography as philosophy.

But to develop this kind of attentional oscillation, a different understanding of agency is needed, one that gives up on salience.

Gries's (2015, 57) definition of agency echoes Mol and builds from Barad: "Agency—an act of intervention—is not some capacity that any single image [or any other actor] has and carries with it just as it is not some capacity that any single person has. Agency is a doing, an enactment generated by a variety of components intra-acting within a particular phenomenon." If we're going to pay attention to metal tables, vending machines, patient stories, and "psheew, psheew," then we must acknowledge that none of these actors "has" agency; instead, they contribute—collectively, frictionally (Springgay and Truman 2017), diffractively (Barad 2007), factorially (see chapter 3, this volume)—to the doing in any given ontology.

We cannot make clear "cuts" about which actors have or do not have agency. As Gries (2015, 70) notes of the images she studied, "The visual things we intra-act with are both phenomena in their ongoing materialization and part of an ongoing reconfiguring of the world." These "ongoings" are "not frozen when we conduct our research" (70). Things and agency are thus "always in excess of what we can capture in our studies" (71). Agential cuts tend to make things intermediaries rather than mediators (75). As researchers, we often make agential cuts in the interest of finding salience.

Visual and multisensory methodologies and methods, consonant with Mol's praxiography, make snapshots—but of a different order. The methodological-theoretical approaches described in this book rely on an understanding of *realism* rooted in Mol's praxiography, Gries's iconographic tracking, and Barad's agential realism. Snapshots can slow things down and thicken *enactments*. They aim at complex understandings of what is *really* in a given *somewhere*, day after day, to create complex and layered *composites* of ambience rather than individual slices of salience.

Barad's agential realism assumes that reality can be documented and that the apparatuses we use to document reality are, in turn, inseparable from the reality that is enacted. It can't be any other way, for to remove the research apparatus is to create an agential cut. Many scholars in rhetoric have already explored the "agential" side of Barad's agential realism (see, for example, Barnett and Boyle 2016; Gries 2015; Rivers 2014, and others). We have written less about her "realism," however. For Barad (2007, 37), realism "is not about representations of an independent reality but about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world."

Realism in this sense is a form of *being there*, in a *somewhere*, inseparable from the environment, inseparable from ontological enactments, response-able (Davis 2010) as an intra-acting component of whatever happens. Praxiographic approaches for doing empirical rhetorics are not naive representations of some fixed reality that precedes their entry into the scene but rather consequential intra-actions and enactments, ways of tracing and presenting complex rhetorics, views of practice that temporarily slow down, thicken, and suspend ambient engagements—openings onto whatever is there, whatever emerges, whatever ends up mattering. These approaches don't seek salience; they seek to document, instead, *whatever shows up*.

In rhetorical studies, Scot Barnett (2016) has most directly explored the ways realist commitments in philosophy are congruent with, or divergent from, theories of rhetoric. Barnett proposed a historiographic methodology for exploring materiality in rhetoric. Gries (2015, 440; Walsh et al. 2017), too, has argued that new materialisms can help us “develop a more realistic understanding of ourselves, as human things intimately entangled with other entities from which all rhetoric comes to matter.” She stresses attunement to relationality, where relations are *real*, identifiable, traceable.

These approaches have much in common with those of speculative realism (Bogost 2012; Shaviro 2014)—a non-correlational philosophy that de-centers the human subject—and object-oriented ontology (OOO; see Bryant 2011; Harman 2011, 2016, 2018; Morton 2012, 2013), “a realist position that views objects of every sort as existing prior to their relations or effects” (Harman 2016, loc. 520). In OOO, reality exists as a surplus, an enveloping ambience that may never be entirely expressed or understood (287). Although there are important differences among new materialists, speculative realists, and object-oriented ontologists (see, for example, Harman 2018; Shaviro 2014), they all share a *realist* perspective on phenomena—things *really* exist in the world, before and in excess of what we can *know* of their relations and effects. For most new materialists and (some) speculative realists, real things (material or not) and their real relations and effects can be identified, followed, and traced to some degree. Even if we concur with object-oriented ontologists who counter that all such tracings are translations and approximations, we're still in the realm of the real rather than the transcendent.

Barad's (2007, 44) realism concerns “the sense in which direct engagement with the ontology of our world is possible.” Mol's (2002) praxiography demonstrates as much. In agential realism, one needs “a strong commitment to accounting for the material nature of practices

and how they come to matter” (45). Barad (2007, 206) thus grounds her theory in “specific material configurations of the world.” Phenomena are not merely social constructions and not merely products or handmaidens of human activity, but crucially, “neither is the world . . . independent of human practices” (206). Human practices matter in matter’s differential becoming, but so do myriad non-human practices.

#### UNBRACKETING AND UNFORGETTING

In Deborah Levy’s *The Cost of Living* (2018), the narrator lies on her sofa in her new home, exhausted, surrounded by unpacked boxes. “An Emily Dickinson poem came to mind,” she says; “I could say it flew into my mind from nowhere, but there is no such thing as nowhere” (loc. 274). *Engaging Ambience* explores empirical, systematic, theoretical, and practical approaches to the study of rhetoric and writing that are grounded in Baradian realism. This is a book about how to practice “direct engagement with the ontology of our world” in specific *somewheres* (Barad 2007, 44). I use visual and multisensory methods in a new materialist and ambient key to systematically engage “speculation, curiosity, and the concrete” (Stewart 2007, 1).

These approaches require the consistent *unbracketing* of reality and a systematic *unforgetting* inherent to visual fieldwork. Praxiographic studies of rhetoric and writing attend to whatever shows up in research sites. Drawing from work in visual anthropology, visual sociology, and material cultures research, I demonstrate how visual fieldwork is marked by an “excessive inclusion” (Pinney 2011, 89) that acts as productive ballast to field notes, interviews, and transcripts—the sifting and winnowing of attention common to traditional field methods.

Visual methods unbracket reality and unforget the “remarkable materiality” of enactments. They help us hold back salience for as long as possible so we can embrace ambience in its bewildering fullness.

Chapter 1 considers what it means to picture writing, both figuratively and literally. It argues for a stronger focus on visibilities in rhetorical scholarship and discusses ways visual methods, as *technes* for picturing writing and rhetorics, simultaneously circumscribe what can be made visible while opening fieldwork to ambient concerns. Visual methods are *technes* of *poiesis* that train our attention to visibilities, invisibilities, and absent presences. Chapter 1 connects Heidegger’s notion of “this-now-here-ness” to contemporary perspectives on ambience.

Chapter 2 explores realisms, literalisms, and imagination in methodologies and methods of unbracketing and unforgetting. It draws

from material rhetorics research to posit an approach to ontological constitution—how things and people and practices show up and coalesce as *real* enactments that may be traced and explored in an ambient key. Chapter 2 also situates the methodologies and methods deployed in later chapters by drawing from foundational approaches developed in related fields—namely, visual anthropology, visual sociology, and visual and material cultures research. These approaches are seldom used in rhetoric and writing scholarship, despite our decades-long focus on visual rhetorics. Chapter 2 describes how they may be productively adapted and deployed in praxiographies of rhetoric and writing.

Chapter 3 demonstrates what we can learn from picturing writing. Detailing findings from a visual ethnography of professionals in a media research firm, I use photo-elicitation as a method for making strange the familiar environments of participants' everyday rhetorics. Picturing writing revealed rich topographies: we can learn much about histories of collaboration and argument from the ways we make rhetorics *visible* to one another in everyday practice. Chapter 3 also introduces the notion of factorial rhetorics. In any enactment of *poiesis*, variables are multiple, combinatorial, historically laden, individually situated, and idiosyncratic. The products of such variables are *factorial* because they proliferate quickly and produce potentially dizzying follow-on effects. Chapter 3 traces factorial rhetorics, showing how—and through what kinds of things—rhetoric is ambient.

Chapter 4 details findings from a multi-site visual ethnography of Roman Catholic Eucharistic Adoration practices, focusing on sensory suasion. By dwelling with and attending to sensations, we can learn much about how sensory artifacts are built, how they gather and condition us, how they shape bodily and affective comportments in both presence and withdrawal, and how, through things, we are our *there*, wherever we may find ourselves. Chapter 4 illustrates empirical approaches to Heidegger's notions of building, dwelling, and gathering and Rickert's notion of ambient dwelling. These methodological attunements to ambience foster theoretical perspectives that evince the "constitutive roles of sensation in participatory, rhetorical acts" (Hawhee 2015, 13).

Chapter 5 extends discussion of sensory rhetorics by detailing findings from an autoethnography of an ordinary pedestrian commute. Central to this chapter is *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger's (1966) concept of *releasement*. Through visual and multisensory autoethnography, I demonstrate the ways releasement is both a theoretical and a practical mode of turning toward and tuning into one's ambient environs. As a theory of opening—of waiting in openness and of collapsing

distances—*Gelassenheit* conditions practice and aligns one's bodily comportments to worlding. In releasement, we open outward and intra-act in a world bursting with disclosures.

In chapter 6, I consider writing and photography as ways of standing outside ourselves. For Heidegger, meditative forms of thinking help us draw nearer to what is ostensibly most distant. Heidegger demonstrates that we can effectively think with and through visual phenomena. Chapter 6 argues that both photography and writing make worlds and worlding visible and legible—they both bring forth worlds in acts of *poiesis*. They are each in their own way sublime *technes* for engaging experience, sensation, affect, and ambience. Methodological innovation, I conclude, can suggest nimble and lightened ways into novel theoretical perspectives.