Composing the Carpenter’s Workshop

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ABSTRACT
Rhetoric and composition (R/C) has been increasingly concerned with understanding rhetoric and writing beyond the human-centered rhetorical situation. This piece argues that R/C can be hospitable to various projects that take up the agency and existence of objects. Further, the composition classroom presents a promising space for what we call, by way of Ian Bogost, rhetorical carpentry. In particular, the field’s focus on ecology is concerned with making and with production. This is in keeping with R/C’s long tradition of focusing on rhetorical invention, which productively resonates with the object-oriented studies.

After all these implements and text designed by intellects
So vexed to find evidently there’s just so much that hides.
The Shins, “Saint Simon”

Since at least Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 essay, “The Ecology of Writing,” the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition (R/C) has been taking up the question of how an ecological frame changes the scene of composition. In that essay, Cooper argued that R/C’s various approaches to studying writers assumed a “solitary author” at the center of the writing situation (Cooper 1986, 364). In the face of this focus on the autonomous writer, Cooper offered her ecological model of writing in order to argue that “writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (Cooper 1986, 367). A host of
rhetoricians have taken up Cooper’s call. Margaret Syverson’s *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition* (1999) brings the insights of distributed cognition to bear on the practice of writing, showing how collaborators, technologies, and environments are all part of distributed cognitive writing systems. In “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” Jenny Edbauer argues that traditional theories of the rhetorical situation—typically understood in terms of easily locatable authors, audiences, texts, and contexts—ignore the complexities of how arguments circulate. By moving to a rhetorical ecology, rhetoricians can better account for “a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events” (Edbauer 2005, 9). Along these same lines, Collin Gifford Brooke’s *Lingua Fracta* (2009) retheorizes the canons of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, memory, style, and delivery—as an “ecology of new media practice” that retrofits the canons for contemporary rhetorical situations. Ecology has also been more directly employed in discussions of rhetorical pedagogy. In “Ecological, Pedagogical Public Rhetoric,” Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber argue, “Public rhetoric pedagogy can benefit from an ecological perspective that sees change as advocated not through a single document but through multiple mundane and monumental texts” (Rivers and Weber 2011, 187).

All of these theorists demonstrate how R/C has been concerned with understanding rhetoric and writing beyond the human-centered rhetorical situation. However, the readers of *O-Zone* will be quick to notice that the above accounts could never be labeled as “object-oriented” or “speculative realist.” To be fair, when R/C has taken up ecology, it has been focused on the human-to-human or human-to-world relation.¹ R/C has not yet taken a sus-tained look at the nonhuman-to-nonhuman relation. Still, while we would grant that rhetorical theory and composition studies do not always directly confront the problem of correlationism,² we will also suggest that R/C can be hospitable to various projects that take up the agency and existence of objects. Further, the composition classroom presents a promising space for what we call, by way of Ian Bogost,

¹ A notable exception here is Byron Hawk’s (2007) *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. While Hawk’s project is, in part, a historical one, he redefines the term “vitalism” for R/C, insisting that vitalism can help us understand how nonhumans assert themselves in writing situations.

² Correlationism, a term coined by Quentin Meillassoux, describes Western philosophy’s tradition of understanding being in terms of the human-world relation. For Meillassoux, correlationism argues that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux 2010, 5). In various texts, Graham Harman has described this set of assumptions under the umbrella of “philosophies of human access.” While theorists critique and address correlationism from multiple angles, our essay attempts to understand rhetoric beyond human access, to consider how nonhumans might persuade, communicate, and identify both with us and with one another.
rhetorical carpentry. The field’s recent focus on ecology is one that is mostly concerned with making and with production. This is in keeping with R/C’s long tradition of focusing on rhetorical invention.

For R/C, ecology offers a new way of theorizing rhetorical production. As we see it, this focus on production means that R/C is compatible with what Bogost calls philosophical carpentry, an object-oriented approach to philosophy that “entails making things that explain how things make their world” (Bogost 2012, 93). As he explains in Alien Phenomenology, philosophical carpentry is two things at once:

First, it extends the ordinary sense of woodcraft to any material whatsoever—to do carpentry is to make anything, but to make it in earnest, with one’s own hands, like a cabinetmaker. Second, it folds into this act of construction Graham Harman’s philosophical sense of “the carpentry of things,” an idea Harman borrowed in turn from Alphonso Lingis. Both Lingis and Harman use that phrase to refer to the ways things fashion one another and the world at large. Blending these two notions, carpentry entails making things that explain how things make their world. Like scientific experiments and engineering prototypes, the stuffs produced by carpentry are not mere accidents, waypoints on the way to something else. Instead, they are themselves earnest entries into a philosophical discourse. (Bogost 2012, 90–91)

For Bogost, carpentry is both a description of how objects fashion one another and also a practice of doing philosophy. We extend this one step further, suggesting that such making can be undertaken in an effort to do rhetoric. If philosophical carpentry is focused on speculating about “what it’s like to be a thing,” rhetorical carpentry is focused on how we might “construct objects (and conversations among objects) in order to demonstrate approximations of the strange, alien conversations happening around us” (Brown 2011, 6).

Constructing these strange conversations means that the rhetor must attune herself to a complex ecology of humans and nonhumans. This approach has broad implications for any number of ethical concerns. Such an approach might very well inform an alternative exploration of subaltern others, simulating the experience of those at the margins. Such simulations will only be able to catch what Bogost calls the “exhaust” of a subaltern’s experience, but we would argue that rhetoric is well-suited for such a task. Rhetoric is always speculative: about its objects, practices, effects, and, importantly, audiences. Rhetoric’s audience is always withdrawn, and this means that issues of race, class, and gender might also call for a speculative approach. Rhetorical instruction again and again drives home the key claim that a rhetor can never fully know or understand an audience. As Jim Corder writes in “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,”
The arguer has to go alone. When argument has gone beyond attempts made by the arguer and by the other to accept and understand, when those early exploratory steps toward mutual communication are over, or when all of these stages have been bypassed altogether—as they often will be—then the arguer is alone, with no assurance at all that the other or any audience will be kindly disposed. (Corder 1985, 9)

This speculative aspect of rhetoric reflects the withdrawn nature of audiences, of the others with whom we wish to communicate and identify.

In this sense, audiences are rather like objects. This argument, of course, might strike readers as, at best, counter-intuitive or, at worst, supremely monstrous. Are you suggesting that the ethical way to address subaltern others is to treat them as objects? Isn’t this what got us into trouble in the first place? Yes and no. The value of objectifying the other very much depends on the idea of an object one is working with. For us, Graham Harman’s approach to objects in *Guerilla Metaphysics* suggests ways of understanding and/or approaching objects that make *objectification* preferable. “Contrary to the usual view,” Harman argues, “what we really want is to be *objects*—not as means to an end like paper or oil, but in the sense that we want to be like the Grand Canyon or a guitar hero or a piece of silver: distinct forces to be reckoned with.” Furthermore, he writes, “An object cannot be fully translated or paraphrased; it simply is what it is, and no other object can replace or adequately mirror it” (Harman 2005, 140, 222). Objectifying others, if objects are taken as autonomous and always withdrawn, is here the most ethical approach. Bogost’s carpentry calls for us to create machines that simulate the experience of another, and one can imagine that rhetorical carpentry could make great strides by simulating the experience of both humans and nonhumans, presenting a unique site of persuasion and perhaps even identification.

Speaking on behalf of our home field, we argue that R/C at its best operates not with a detached, correlationist critical distance but *in media res*, in the middle of the thing and things. While we would not deny that R/C has tended to focus on the human composition of texts, recent work on ecologies of composition and multimodal composition has broadened the possibilities for object-oriented rhetoric and a rhetorical carpentry. What we want to do in this short piece is make the case for R/C as a vital ally of the larger object-oriented project, which is already interdisciplinary. The field’s interest in ecologies of writing, and its pedagogical commitment to making, strongly indicates that it can be yet another place in which to explore how objects carpenter one another and the world. An ecological approach to rhetoric and writing can fold together the work of making and relating, while keeping in place the withdrawn actuality of all objects.
While sharply focused on new media objects, Collin Brooke’s work points toward the general fitness of rhetoric and composition as a discipline for the work of carpentry. In general, Brooke does not see rhetorical theory as another way of looking at texts after the fact of their production; rhetoric is not a mode alongside literary criticism or cultural theory, but is a way to think through “what might still be done with [in his specific case] new media” (Brooke 2009, 10):

A rhetoric of new media, rather than examining the choices that have already been made by writers, should prepare us as writers to make choices our own. Such a rhetoric cannot be achieved through the reactive lens of critical/theoretical reading (Brooke 2009, 15).

Thus, Brooke offers an “ecology of practice” by refiguring each of the canons of rhetoric (2009, 28). Furthermore, he does so in the long tradition of constrained writing, redefining each of the canons with the letter “P” (for instance, arrangement becomes “pattern” and delivery becomes “performance”). As we can see, Brooke easily lets other things set the agenda for him. And while Brooke’s ecology of new media practice is focused on the rhetorical choices of humans, it also opens the way toward the rhetorical carpentry we have in mind. By understanding the rhetorical situation as networked and complex, Brooke shows us that the human is not the center of that situation.

The takeaway for us is that for Brooke the work of rhetoric is not to impose or discover meaning within some (new media) text (as object), but to invent new ways of producing meaning through an attunement to the constraints and affordances of new media. Old tasks cannot simply be remediated. To take one of Brooke’s examples, an annotated bibliography written out on index cards cannot simply be remediated as a blog (Brooke 2009, 17–19). The blog is a thing unto itself that will make demands upon its human interlocutors. Media are not simply vessels for human meaning. In this context, where media are granted ontological weight and rhetorical agency, rhetoric needs to remain (as it has always been if not always practiced) actionary rather than reactionary: “As actionary, a rhetoric of new media should prepare us for sorting through the strategies, practices, and tactics available to us and even for inventing new ones” (Brooke 2009, 22). As with Bogost’s philosophical carpenter, who works with things rather than observing them, an actionary rhetorician cobbles together strategies, practices, and tactics in order to address engagements to come. Rather than a focus on critique, a reactionary mode of engagement with objects that too easily falls back on correlationism, Brooke emphasizes the making at the heart of rhetoric. Brooke shows us that the way to theorize new media is not to pin/pen them down (through either critical theory or close reading) but to make with new media, to fashion new tools.

CARPENTRY UNPLUGGED
New media making might be preferable for those who don’t want to to fill a classroom with sawdust. However, some in R/C have not been so hesitant. Jody Shipka’s work is one of the clearest expressions of a more expansive ethic of carpentry in the field of rhetoric and composition. While her approach does not align directly with Bogost’s, it is clear evidence that the composition course holds potential as a carpenter’s workshop. Shipka provides a multimodal approach to composition that is not specifically tied to new media technologies: “‘multimodality’ as it is defined and treated here is not to be confused with or limited in advance to a consideration of Web-based or new media texts.” Furthermore, Shipka argues, “I underscore why it is crucial that we resist limiting the potentials of multimodal production to what can be accomplished with new media texts and tools, acknowledging instead the term’s capacity to indicate a wider range of texts and technological processes” (Shipka 2009, W347, W348).

In Toward a Composition Made Whole, Shipka argues that the field of rhetoric and composition has too often used “multimodality” to mean digital. The move to new media is an attempt to think beyond text. But for Shipka, the move to “the digital” merely replaces one fetish with another: text is replaced with another sign system (or set of sign systems), a move that serves to exclude a range of practices. Given Shipka’s broader sense of multi-modality, her students are freed up to create a range of objects and texts. One example of this work is a pair of “pink ballet shoes on which a student had transcribed by hand a research-based essay” (Shipka 2011, 2). When presenting this student project at a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) workshop that involved a broad range of teachers and scholars, one skeptic asked: “So where did she put her footnotes? On a shirt?” (Shipka 2011, 2). Shipka links this response to concerns about what the ballet shoes mean in a course that is supposed to be about academic writing. But she also notes that such a response is most likely linked to her audience’s response to product and not process. The latter is something that she has more access to, being the person who designed the course and the assignment and who “worked closely with the student over the month she spent working on the shoes” (Shipka 2011, 3).

On first glance, the slippers might seem like another instantiation of text. Writing on slippers, after all, still suggests that words are the best way to communicate a complex idea. However, as Shipka argues, we should understand the slippers as a reflection of a complex and sustained process on the part of the student. That reflection had to engage with material constraints and with the various desires and drives of objects. Additionally, part of this reflection process is the cataloging of participants, human and nonhuman alike. Reflecting R/C’s ecological bent, Shipka (employing Bruno Latour) asks students to “consider the ways in which they are always already collaborating with things . . . and, so, always working with or against the agency of things” (Shipka 2009, W357). Using the ballet
shoe as a writing surface throws into sharp relief the agency that things are always exerting.

The ballet shoes are only one example of the rhetorical carpentry happening in Shipka's composition classroom. Another of Shipka's students created a “Mirror IQ test” in order to make a participant “feel the same way [she] did in finding an idea to fulfill the assignments [she] was given” (Shipka 2011, 95). Here is a description of that test:

Mirror IQ test came inside a 9 X 12” manila envelope. Karen’s university address appeared in the top left corner. A plastic bag containing nine mirrors was stapled to the front of the envelope. Inside the envelope was a typed sheet of paper entitled “Setting Description and Instructions,” a stapled four-page single-spaced copy of the test printed entirely in reverse (a technique often referred to as ‘mirror-writing’), a duplicate copy of the test that was printed normally, and an answer key for the test. (Shipka 2011, 94)

The test was designed so that a test-taker would fail. The mirrors were chosen because they would be, in different ways, useless to the test taker: “By creating an environment that required the test taker to employ meditational means (the mirrors) not typically associated with test-taking, Karen seems to be suggesting that just because one is given permission to take up a variety of meditational means does not necessarily make a task any easier” (Shipka 2011, 96–97). These projects grow out of what Shipka calls an activity-based multimodal pedagogy that “requires that students spend the semester attending to how language, combined with still other representational systems, mediates communicative practice” (Shipka 2011, 15). Shipka asks students to imagine “how images, movements, gestures, objects, colors, sounds, scents, and so on impact their interactions with (and their understanding of the potentials of) talk and text” (Shipka 2011, 85). For Shipka, and for the classroom rooted in rhetorical carpentry, language is only one way of making arguments. The act of carpentry allowed students to theorize the act of composing in particular ways. This is a process of making in the interest of rhetorical action.

FUTURE CARPENTRIES

It is November 2015, and you are visiting what you thought was a college composition classroom. However, something seems to be amiss. In one corner, a group of students pass around a long wooden cylinder that they constructed using a lathe (they were able to get help from a professor in the Art department to gain access to the equipment). In another corner, a group huddles around a 3D printer as a strange looking blue plastic object emerges (it looks like a helmet). You find out from the professor (an excitable, bespectacled man with curly hair and a wry
smile) that a third group is not present; they are across campus working with a group of architecture students and blowing glass. This happens a lot in this particular class. The English department has not yet approved the professor’s grant proposal for a workshop that would offer students the ability to work in various media. The proposal has been met with curious stares thus far, but the professor is undeterred. He tells you and anyone who will listen that these students are merely taking advantage of “the available means of persuasion” and attempting to gain insight into the “vacuum-sealed.” Whatever that means.

Your unease is increased when you learn that this composition classroom is actually focused on public rhetoric, specifically, environmental rhetoric. Part of what throws visitors and colleagues alike is that the class is not about the objects; the objects under composition are part of the class (they are what the students work on, of course), but, more importantly, the objects are also what the students work with. As you move through the room, you hear students discussing the features of the objects they are working with: you see the first group run their hands over the smooth surface of the cylinder and the second group probe the grooves inside of the “helmet.” You soon learn that these objects each have a specific object or purpose. The objects are all interactive arguments built to engage audiences in object-oriented environmentalism: objects designed to confront audiences (who are now also users) with the strange withdrawal of nonhumans that posses their own ontological weight and rhetorical agency.

For example, the blue object is not, in fact, a helmet, but a puzzle. The grooves on the inside of the sphere allow users to place and re-place dividers to create a series of self-contained compartments on the inside of the sphere. Users are first asked to pour a certain amount of water into the sphere (proportionally representing the amount of fresh water in the world). The challenge is to evenly apportion the water in all of the compartments by sliding open and close the dividers inside the sphere. The object of the object is to foreground water itself as a political actor. Aside from the human intention to fairly distribute fresh water (which might or might not be present), the puzzle presents water as an object with its own purposes and features, both of which make it difficult to control. Through this object, environmental rhetoric becomes something other than the task of shaping human hearts and minds to “save the world,” and instead becomes something more akin to the recognition that the “world itself” is likewise populated by a plethora of nonhuman political actors.

In addition to the design and production of the sphere, students develop the means to distribute it: creating packaging, writing instructions, and developing advertisements, tasks themselves rendered in terms of ecology. This range of compositions enacted ecologically introduces students to a multiplicity of composing skills, moves them to many scholarly activities across campus, weaves in an object-oriented approach, and positions rhetoric not simply as humans changing the minds of other humans, but as the work of relations, relations that remain strange and sometimes strained.
REFERENCES

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