

Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition, edited by Paul Lynch and Nathaniel Rivers. Carbondale: SIUP, 2015. 345 pp.

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Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest among rhetoricians and compositionists in new materialist and posthuman orientations of research, underpinning works such as Casey Boyle's "Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice," Sidney Dobrin's *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*, Jay Jordan's "Material Translingual Ecologies," and Laura R. Micciche's "Writing Material." In *Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition*, Paul Lynch and Nathaniel Rivers assemble a collection of writing scholars' reflections on the thought of the French theorist Bruno Latour that moves beyond the semiotic and linguistic turns in rhetoric and composition. The editors have wittingly pinpointed the problem that "rhetoricians sometimes account only the human, symbolic, and discursive" (4). Thinking with Latour, on the contrary, urges the act of composing to be construed as an assemblage, constituted by and transformed through the amalgam of both human and nonhuman actors.

Far from lauding Latour as a savior of rhetoric and composition, the collection positions the theorist as part of a broader movement injecting the nonhuman and nonacademic into a rethinking of long-standing traditions in the disciplines, for example, an overemphasis on human subjectivity and agency. As such, this collection is successful in offering an experimental glimpse at how Latour can be creatively and productively appropriated to enrich theoretical and pedagogical approaches to writing practices. Furthermore, a shift of focus from epistemology to ontology in writing studies serves to bridge the either-or divides, such as those between nature and culture, objects and subjects, body and society. Through this lens, this book both renders a reworking of rhetorical concepts and extends the boundary of writing disciplines toward enhanced transdisciplinary work and public engagement.

To these ends, the editors divide the collection into five sections that explore how Latour's work could be utilized and extended to inform writing theories and pedagogies. Section one—"Constituting Assemblages"—articulates Latour's foundational works that revolve around the themes of symmetry and hybrids, featuring contributions from Clay Spinuzzi, Carl G. Herndl, S. Scott Graham, Marc C. Santos, and Meredith Z. Johnson. Spinuzzi's chapter deploys the Latourian notion of symmetry—that is, human subjects and non-human actors exert equal effects in networked relationships—as a methodological move in writing studies. Echoing this vision of symmetry, the theorization of genre ecologies in composition studies seeks to describe associations in the

writing environment, particularly those among genres and texts. In a similar vein, Santos and Johnson employ Latour's framework of hybrids—for example, “material and cultural combinations” (61)—to debunk the Kantian division of academic and nonacademic labor, and engage rhetorical studies with public and political spheres of life.

Featuring works by Scot Barnett, Joshua Prenosil, and Ehren H. Pflugfelder, section two—“Conceiving Assemblages”—rereads rhetorical works through the lens of Latour, complicating binaries such as *techne/phusis*, or art/nature. Through Latour's critique of the modern divide between nature and culture, Barnett's chapter reinterprets Aristotle's concepts of *techne* and *phusis*. Following Latour's nonmodern gesture, this chapter reminds us that rhetoric has never been modern but is imminently interconnected with its past. Likewise, Pflugfelder's “Is No One at the Wheel?” contends that while rhetoric has been commonly perceived as a *techne*, it is actually more akin to a constellation of kinetic movement enacting both *techne* and *phusis*, which is illuminated through the metaphor of a moving car with no driver. This rereading of Aristotle again resonates with the Latourian nonmodern conception of agency as distributed among both human beings and nonhuman materials.

Gathering together essays by Thomas Rickert, Collin G. Brooke, and Jeremy Tirrell, section three—“Convening Assemblages”—enacts further dialogues between rhetorical conventions and Latour's thought. While extolling Latour's contributions to new materialistic politics as assets, this section does not shy away from delineating some of the boundaries that limit the incorporation of Latourian works into rhetoric and composition. Rickert, in his chapter, moves beyond Latour's skepticism toward the notion of context. Instead, this chapter contends that the rhetorical concept of context is not so much at odds as in alignment with Latour's construct of assemblage—in other words, context and assemblage are not the sole products of human subjectivity and action. Departing from a posthuman conceptualization of memory as a static and temporal construct subservient to human cognition, Tirrell's “Latourian Memoria” reconfigures memory in Latour's terms as “an act of translation among irreducible human and nonhuman actors” (165). Tirrell's chapter thus opens the gateway to a reexamination of memory as agentive, fluid, and relational. At the same time, Tirrell remains wary of Latour's framework of actors, which is actualized through an infinite tracing of instantaneous relations from one actor to another, noting that this may forestall further explanations of network development.

Building on the conversations in section three, section four—“Composing Assemblages”—invites us on a journey to renegotiate writing pedagogy and practice together with Latour. This section includes contributions by Marilyn M. Cooper, Casey Boyle, and Mark A. Hannah. Cooper's “How Bruno Latour

Teaches Writing,” for instance, elaborates on using Latour’s “description” in lieu of “explanation” (186) to trace network assemblages of writing. Specifically, the chapter exemplifies the value of description in generating robust knowledge of real life events, through tracing an imaginary student’s composition process in a research writing course. Also attending to the pedagogical aspect of Latourian thought, Boyle’s “An Attempt at a ‘Practitioner’s Manifesto’” reframes writing as an ontological practice, following and expanding Latour and Yaneva’s essay on documenting buildings. Warning against reducing writing to mere descriptions and reflections, the chapter induces us to rethink writing as building and reenacting relations, and ourselves as practitioners rehearsing the relations through the ontological practice of composition.

Finally, section five—“Crafting Assemblages”—constructs methodologies in rhetoric and composition under the influence of Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT), featuring works by Jeff Rice, Sarah Read, W. Michele Simmons, Kristen Moore, Patricia Sullivan, Laurie Gries, Janes J. Brown Jr., and Jenell Johnson. Of particular interest is Rice’s “Craft Networks,” which utilizes ANT in an effort to trace the aesthetic of craft beer across both physical and new media spaces. Complicating the Latourian foregrounding of material actors in ANT, Rice repositions himself as a hybrid, or “quasi-object” that affects and gets affected by other objects in the carpentry of craft network. From a different perspective, in “Dingrhetoriks,” Gries introduces a research method relying heavily on Latour’s ANT—for example, iconographic tracking—to veer away from the rhetorical tradition of representation that reduces visual entities to objects. On the contrary, by viewing visual entities as “things” that are agentic and vibrant, iconographic tracking pursues the collective activities of visual things, thereby becoming attuned to the ontological becoming of visual rhetoric.

Taken together, this collection challenges humanistic rhetorical traditions through a close reading and reframing of Latour’s ontological move beyond human subjectivity and agency, and moves toward a hybridity of both social and material modes of existence. Additionally, contributors identified a wealth of methodological innovations emerging from Latour’s ontological move. Practitioners in the fields of rhetoric and composition, including myself, may find these innovations conducive for renegotiating our agency within networked relations, a conception which has not been previously highlighted in writing studies.

Indeed, attempts to create a nuptial relationship between Latourian theories and composition remain exploratory and inconclusive, just as Latour’s strategy of tracing assemblages *per se* makes allowance for uncertainties (282). Nevertheless, through eighteen different and yet correlated chapters, this edited collection eloquently delivers the message that writing teacher-scholars

could benefit from engaging with Latour. Rather than conceptualizing Latour's theorizations as a cohesive unity, each chapter pays heed to the rewards and occasionally curses of conversations with Latour, probing into the juxtapositions, disruptions, and even contradictions therein. Lying at the heart of thinking with Latour is an advocacy for reconfiguring rhetoric and composition to be inherently transdisciplinary fields. Hence, the question is not so much what Latour teaches us prescriptively about writing as what new insights and knowledge about composition could be ignited descriptively from engaging in such intellectual exchange.

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Works Cited

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