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The New Hackers: Historiography Through Disconnection

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This response characterizes each of the articles in this special issue as instances of “hacking”—which is to say they create new historiographical approaches by getting inside established modes and subjects of rhetorical history, finding and exploiting their incongruities or vulnerabilities.

If each of the articles in this issue begins with connections—across oceans, across disciplines, across theoretical perspectives—each one also lays bare important disconnections. Those disconnections, in fact, enable and shape the essays in ways that are not always entirely explicit. By disconnections I mean the incongruities between the theories, texts, and methods that customarily structure histories of rhetoric, and subject matter and research tools that are distinct from the same old places, people, archives, and contexts. There are disconnections for Bo Wang and Christa Olson between feminist and rhetorical theories honed in a decidedly Western context and the non-Western national and cultural contexts in which they are working. For Janine Solberg, disconnections inhere between old technologies, archives, and methods on—or would it be at?—the one hand, and new technologies, new archives, new (possibly new) methods on the other. And Sarah Hallenbeck’s work exposes important disconnections that persist between things and words. My response to this selection of articles addresses these different disconnections as the very stuff of new histories of rhetoric. I end by suggesting that these specific disconnections encourage something like “hacking,” a metaphor which I draw from the material in Solberg’s article on digital technology but which is an apt description for what each of these newly arrived historians is doing. Wang, Olson, Hallenbeck, and Solberg are, in short, the new hackers.

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As I mentioned, Bo Wang and Christa Olson both hit on the disconnect between non-Western subjects of study and theoretical concepts or approaches developed primarily, if not exclusively, in a Western context. And that disconnection between what the field “knows” (as Wang puts it) and what these two scholars see in the archives, practices, and strategies of the populations they study is further intensified because they are examining deprived rhetorical actors in the context of non-Western rhetoric (in the case of Olson, indigenous peoples; of Wang, women). So it ought not be surprising that disconnection underpins their historiographic reflections.

Olson’s work articulates the need to figure out precisely where the disconnection happens and what can be done about it and—here is the hard part—then sets about doing it. Sometimes work in our field falls short of this doing, too often concluding by pointing out the jarring moments and having those form their conclusion full stop. But the disconnections—the odd impositions, the “forced theoretical fit” to use Wang’s phrase—ought to form the beginning, as they do in these articles. What follows from there is the exciting, innovative work of augmenting existing theories or finding and developing new ones.

Wang and Olson each carve out distinct approaches that reward more explicit reflection from the point of view of historiography, which I will provide here. Wang’s study of the language used by Chinese women writers shows how these writers make strategic use of every possible kind and feature of language. They draw on classical and vernacular language and exploit the image-saturated and multilayered features of Chinese language to evoke emotion or to appeal to reason.¹ Wang’s exploration of redefinitions, genre innovations, loanwords, and neologisms in the work of Bing Xin, Chen Hengzhe, and Lu Yin exposes the ill fit of Western feminist theory to the situation of Chinese women. The writings she examines show how something like “liberation” is not simply a matter of overlaying a generic rights-based discourse on top of oppressive conditions. Change, instead, must happen both from within and through creative use of the means available in Chinese culture and—importantly—by Chinese language.

Wang’s observations about feminist theory’s ill fit for non-Western contexts also hold true for rhetorical theory, as evidenced by Olson’s reflections on the awkward fit between Western rhetorical theory and the discourses and images of indigeneity in Ecuador. Her investigation of Ecuadorian nationhood prompted her to consult Kenneth Burke’s long-respected and recently revived theory of constitutions and Constitutions. But that theory proved wholly inadequate because of its dependence on the structure and structuring force of the U.S. Constitution. A committed theorist herself, Olson had at least three choices in the matter: (1) she could dispense with Burke altogether, or she could use her work on the ever-shifting situation of Ecuadorian constitutions to (2) expose the bias of or (3) to augment Burke’s theory. Now, choices 2 and 3 are not mutually exclusive, but it is

noteworthy that Olson did not settle for choice 2. Instead, she took on the challenging, heady work of augmenting Burke's theory of constitutions in a way that builds theory anew. What happens, she asks, when constitutions are far from the stable forces that Burke imagines? Her work on the "constitutions behind the constitutions" in the instance—many instances—of Ecuador brings forth new ideas about what those constitutions might be (i.e., not just textual documents but documentary images). The net result is a theory challenging Burke's idea that exterior constitutive forces—the "others" by which identity constitutes itself in the case of Constitutions—are often other than the other nations he posits. As she demonstrates, in the case of Ecuador, the constitutive/constitutional move turns on the nation's indigenous people, people who have been there all along. This point might well carry back into a reconsideration of the Constitution on which Burke builds his own theory.² Olson's augmentations, that is, stand to alter Burke's theory for good, perhaps for *the* good.

The remaining two articles in this issue feature theoretical disconnections as well, but they are different in kind from the contextual and cultural disconnections with which Wang and Olson grapple. Like Olson, Sarah Hallenbeck locates a kind of theoretical "stubbornness" (to use Olson's term) that persists in a number of rhetorical theories. Hallenbeck explicitly takes on the disconnection between everyday rhetorics and rhetorical theories that assume a less-than-everyday context. But rubbing up against—and perhaps helping constitute—that disconnection is a very strong and notable disconnection between everyday things and the words that swirl around and about them, at times almost emanating from them. So instead of running in the direction of performative language and the likes of J. L. Austin, who professes to show *How to Do Things With Words*, Hallenbeck's work promises to show what things themselves do—with, without, or even to, words. Hallenbeck, that is, takes seriously the call to attend to materiality in rhetoric by asking about the objects that motivate rhetoric, that become rhetorical controversies. By taking an object—the bicycle—as her focus, she examines *things* that moved people (in this case literally) and that moved them to speak or write. Words often wind their ways around or catch a ride on things.

Hallenbeck's piece, like the larger project from which it is drawn, contributes to theories of communication as mobility and communication *about* mobility. Here I am thinking of Jeremy Packer's book *Mobility Without Mayhem*, which explores the behaviors and policies that accompanied the arrival of automotive culture in the United States. Some of Packer's points about the anxieties and dangers these objects yield—especially his examination of the maligned "woman driver" (2008, 33–45)—align well with Hallenbeck's work on the bicycle, a comparatively slower mobility technology but still a technology that sends bodies barreling through space, compressing time, raising alarm about—gasp!—steel-straddling women striking out on their own, rolling through the city streets.

But to focus strictly on the women riding the machines would miss the theoretical advantages brought by the focus Hallenbeck ends up offering: a focus on the objects that move the women. A potentially fruitful context for Hallenbeck's bicycle-oriented work is Jane Bennett's notion of "thing power" as envisioned in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2009). A political theorist, Bennett wants to think about the lively energy that moves through objects. She does so in order to counter the "habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" (vii). This parsing habit of which Bennett writes also links to Solberg's work on the winding together of women and technology during roughly the same period on which Hallenbeck is working and the way that new subject formations emerged when women joined with certain objects or machines (women became "typewriters" and "calculators"). In both instances, concerns about bodies, livelihoods, and even health and social hygiene abound.

Hallenbeck pushes in this direction when she draws on Latourian actor-network theory (ANT), which "elevates" objects (like the bicycle) to the status of actor. ANT's focus on objects as actors, in my view (though not just my view) marks a possible entry point for object-oriented philosophy (OOP).³ Bennett too works—to some degree—in the contextual shadow of Latourian actor-network theory, using Latour's term *actant* to discuss objects and what they *do* in the world (rather than what humans do with them). Hallenbeck's contribution is an important one both in terms of the matter she investigates and in the methods she develops to perform that investigation. And here—in the realm of methods—is where ANT's importance and OOP's potential importance for Hallenbeck's work becomes most noticeable. When Hallenbeck moves from bicycles to dresses and dress reform, she replicates the movement of the social movements themselves: these issues slide into one another. In making those historical connections, Hallenbeck offers a particularly salient example of how ANT or OOP can guide such productive historiographic leaps in a way that makes such links less of a leap than they might seem at first glance. Objects, that is, work synaptically, allowing arguments to leap from one to another. While Olson and Wang must strategically (if temporarily) suspend their knowledge of Western rhetorical theory in order to listen to the concepts, values, and moves of the cultures they are studying, Hallenbeck suspends—here and there—a privileging of the human in favor of objects; she achieves a kind of comfort with moving from object to object, with letting humans go, however temporarily. Granted, humans oftentimes manufacture, use, and respond to those objects, but giving the objects their due *qua* objects and offering them a privileged place in the story creates a radically different historical picture than a history that begins and ends with human actants.

At stake in object-oriented philosophy's link with rhetoric is the very idea of agency. The point of actor-network theory, as Bennett characterizes it, is to "begin to describe a more *distributive* agency" (2009, ix, emphasis

in original). “Agency” as a concept is one of rhetorical studies’ occupational obsessions. As Diane Davis (2010) points out, rhetorical notions of agency are a bit too heroic, too speaker or subject centered.⁴ Davis’s chapter on agency turns to Levinas for what she calls a “radically nonheroic but ethical” model of agency (89). Such a model would link well with distributive agency along the lines of that presented in actor-network theory and on the even more radical lines of Bennett’s work. Hallenbeck heads in this direction when she writes (and compellingly so) about her research material *as* material, reaching past the hero-centric tendencies of feminist historiography. A focus on *stuff* is a promising starting point for alternative models of agency.

And *stuff* seems to me to be at the heart of Solberg’s article as well, for it treats research material *as* material. Scholars in rhetoric and composition must reflect on how digital humanities shape and reshape archival work, how the digital can help a researcher limit and sift through material even as it promises to kick a research question into the abyss.⁵ At first glance, the answer may seem patently obvious: yes, materials are indexed, searchable, that sort of thing. But the questions that Solberg raises show us how deep such transformations can go. Time—the speed of research, as Solberg makes plain—is of course a huge factor here. Solberg’s description of shifting values and time commitments reminds me of a moment in the 1990s when the availability of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae on CD-ROM brought with it the ability to perform searches and make conclusions about words in ancient texts in a matter of days, sometimes even hours, that previously took philologists decades to do and make. And I would note here that this sort of work instantly plummeted in the eyes of classicists, so there’s an interesting rhetorical effect for the ease ushered in by technology (it is no coincidence that office-working women in Frances Maule’s era became calculators and men accountants). Solberg addresses these shifting values and then some, building theory along the way. Here, the theorizing itself remains materially inflected.

The virtual proximity about which Solberg writes is as material as it gets, and here I am especially thinking of her explicit discussion of hybridizing approaches, of moving (fluidly it seems) between digital archives and weighty physical ones. Solberg is developing a theory of digital research together with a hybridized, technologically grounded model of historiography, even as she muddles through that research on her own. Solberg’s muddling-through performs the at-times dramatic messiness of research in multiple modes. Her article is a crucial and long-overdue foray into the matter of digital research for rhetoric in the context of historical research.

One of the reasons I homed in on these foundational moments of disconnection in this set of articles is that my own work on bodies and materiality in the history of rhetoric (and now a newer, in-progress study of

animals in the history of rhetoric) is also founded on such disconnections, despite the fact that the work has so far remained within the wriggly confines of Western rhetorical texts. How does attention to an unexpected topic or subject cause us to look askew at the stories we have told ourselves for so long or at the theories we spend so much time “mastering”? Olson’s narration of the limitations of Burke’s theory of constitutions seems to me to be a critical lesson for rhetorical scholars—and not in the finger-wagging sense of “see how Western you are?” but in the sense of pointing out the very serious limitations that Western-ness installs into our theories and concepts.

Why all this discussion of theory building and current theory in response to a cluster of articles about new histories of rhetoric? To put it plainly, history *is* theory. As contributors to recent collections on historiography make clear, history enacts existing theories and, by doing so, as each one of these authors illustrates, it *hacks* them. By “hacks” here I mean both an old-fashioned sense (chopping them to bits) as well as the more technologically inflected sense of changing through a ruthless inhabiting. Taking theories into new milieu (even, as in my own work, hauling new theories or questions down the seemingly overtrodden road of ancient rhetoric) breaks them apart, exposes their context-dependent bias, and notices what remains useful, at least in that context. Such careful, attentive work zeroes in on the need for alterations, augmentations, and innovations. The best work does not stop at critique, at noticing those places in need of a “hack,” but rather persists in performing the hack, in writing the history anew.

And just as Kenneth Burke posits constitutions-behind-the-Constitution, these four scholars present us with glimpses of the histories-behind-the-historiographies: the dedicated work of researching and writing histories can never be separated from the theories and methods they deploy. Extrapolating from Solberg’s article, I am proposing that we imagine theories as themselves technologies that present us with certain interfaces and direct us to certain material, indexed in certain ways. What the contributors in this issue are all trying to do in their own way is to “hack” those preexisting interfaces.

Instead of following Burke’s exhortation to “use all that is there to use,” Olson, Wang, Hallenbeck, and Solberg are asking, “What else might be there to use that we can’t see, access, or even yet imagine?” None of these essays would take the form they take without an acquaintance with or in some cases very deep knowledge of those existing stories and methods. So I would fall in line here with those who believe familiarity with those existing stories is crucial. The trick is to burrow ourselves in them so completely so that we can recognize where the disconnections are. Professional hackers, after all, are enabled by their deep knowledge of the technologies or systems they are hacking. And of all systems in need of hacking, Western rhetorical theory has long been asking for it.

NOTES

1. Here I am thinking of a 1989 article by Fan Shen about identity and language in a classroom setting, which gives careful consideration to the imagistic force of the Chinese language. See especially pp. 464–465.
2. For a consideration of Burke’s “constitutions-behind-the-Constitution” see Olson’s “Burke’s Attitude Problem,” 2008.
3. Thomas Rickert (2010) is leading the way to bring OOP to rhetorical theory.
4. See especially Davis’s chapter on agency, pp. 86–113.
5. This digital humanities question is very much alive in inquiries into history of rhetoric, as evidenced by the seminar hosted by the 2011 Rhetoric Society of America Institute on the matter of “Digital Humanities and the History of Rhetoric” led by Ned O’Gorman, Ekaterina V. Haskins, and Kathleen Lamp.

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