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Composing Online: A Case Study of Embodiment, Digitality, and YouTube

by

Meagan E. Malone

Under the Direction of Mary Hocks, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

This study examines YouTube channel, *ContraPoints*, by trans woman Natalie Wynn. It begins with close readings and analyses of an example video and body of comments from Wynn's oeuvre that draw conclusions about how trans embodiment intersects with online, multimodal composing. The study finds that, in her video "Beauty," Wynn's bodily presentation and rhetorical attitudes towards dominant norms of gender and sexuality constantly shift.

Furthermore, the study uncovers evidence that commenter attitudes about gender and sexuality in the video "Autogynephilia" likewise shift as a result of encounters with the video and with other commenters. Next, the study reads the YouTube video page as an assemblage composed of smaller assemblages, or modules. I discover that each of the modules relate to one another in such a way as to endow the YouTube video page assemblage with the capacities to enter social justice movements, yet the specific properties of the modules on *ContraPoints* video pages fail to provide the sufficient conditions to exercise this capacity. Nevertheless, the study concludes that *ContraPoints* video page assemblages do have the capacity to generate interpersonal, communal reflections on complex issues around gender and sexuality, reflections that may give rise to changing beliefs. These belief changes are necessary for any future community-building that may enable social justice movements aimed at expanding rights around gender and sexuality.

This case study, then, offers one answer among infinite possible answers to Phil Bratta and Scott Sundvall's question of how composers with diverse embodiments address systems of domination using digital technology. The study also suggests that assemblage theory represents a productive framework for interpreting online, multimodal compositions that incorporate large bodies of information, or big-data assemblages.

INDEX WORDS: Embodiment, Digital, Transgender, Composition, YouTube, Multimodality

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2021

Composing Online: A Case Study of Embodiment, Digitality, and YouTube

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May 2021

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Patty and Mark Malone. Thank you for your unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

This study—much like the artistic works and online platforms it analyzes, as well as the methodologies and methods it employs—is difficult to introduce succinctly. Intended to be a response to a specific call for research, the dissertation emerges from the seed of that call but grows outward, superseding the original purpose and generating offshoots that lead to unforeseen conclusions. It is particularly fitting, then, that this work incorporates assemblage theory, Deleuze and Guattari’s ontological framework often represented metaphorically by intersecting underground systems of rhizomes.

The work begins by answering a “plea” from Phil Bratta and Scott Sundvall, scholars in the field of computers and composition, to do research that engages with diverse embodiments and digital composing tools. I chose my object of study, Natalie Wynn’s *ContraPoints*, not just because of her unique and engaging style of argumentation but because her videos represent a perfect intersection of the issues that underly the call for research. By studying multimodal, online compositions about trans embodiment by a trans woman composer, I hoped to push forward relevant disciplinary conversations while also bringing attention to her rich and important work. My findings in chapters two and three are explicitly linked to trans rhetorical practice and the way embodied experiences of gender and sexuality affect online composing.

While the dissertation begins with a focus on trans embodiment and digital composing, it ends by constructing speculative methods for effectively reading, writing, and understanding multimodal, online, big-data compositions; ultimately, I use the methods to draw conclusions about how such compositions might function to further social justice movements. Specifically, I conclude that YouTube video pages with dogmatic narratives about justice can foster networks capable of influencing social justice movements. This study’s ultimate destination may seem far

afield from its point of origin; however, the two points are connected by a non-linear research journey that responded to unexpected connections and discoveries along the way. My serendipitous engagement with two works in particular informs the trajectory of my research and thinking, providing helpful, cutting-edge, discipline-specific avenues for framing the project.

First, Phil Benson's *The Discourse of YouTube: Multimodal Text in a Global Context* gave me the language and unique perspective with which to analyze and understand Wynn's work within the context of YouTube more broadly. Per the recommendations of John R. Gallagher, I initially sought out scholarship that provided terminology about the YouTube space so that I could effectively identify and name the boundaries of the present case study. Benson does the helpful work of delineating and naming the features of a YouTube video page, providing vocabulary for my own work. He breaks up the parts of a page into what he calls modules, identifying seven in all, and I take his terminology and build on it in this dissertation. Furthermore, he challenges current perspectives by suggesting that the video page as a whole constitutes a composition in itself rather than simply constituting the container of a composition. Whereas others have viewed the video as the composition and its creator as the author, Benson argues for adopting the view that the composition is in fact the whole video page taken together—the content of the video, the likes and dislikes, the comments, the suggested videos, and more—and that the authors include all of the actors—both human and nonhuman—that generate the data on the page. This resonates with moves in rhetoric and composition scholarship to notice the collaborative nature of composing as well as the nonhuman role in composing. I, therefore, adopt this perspective along with the module terminology, choosing to narrow the boundaries of my case study to a manageable size by doing close readings of the most important modules: module two, the video player, and five, the comments section.

Alex Reid's work gave me the tools I needed to synthesize my analysis of the distinct modules. After completing research for and drafts of chapters two and three, I had drawn conclusions about the way trans embodiment intersected with the video's content and the video comments respectively. As I sought a means of combining these conclusions to understand their cumulative effects, I came across the volume *Assembling Composition* which contained Reid's "Big-Data Assemblies: Composing's Nonhuman Ecology." In the chapter, he gives the name "big-data assemblage" to those online works that include a great deal of information, and he poses some broad but important questions about how to scholars and users ought to go about interpreting them. He asserts that assemblage theory, which he describes and illustrates in the chapter, may be one tool that aids interpretation of these potentially overwhelming texts. Not only did I find that Reid's description of big-data compositions fit the YouTube video page compositions I was studying on *ContraPoints*, but I immediately saw how assemblage theory might be applied to the YouTube composition and used to understand how the different modules on the page work together. I therefore extend Reid's work by applying the assemblage theory framing to a *ContraPoints* video page to generate hypotheses about how the video player module and comments section module function together. I use conclusions about trans embodiment and digital composing from close reading and rhetorical analysis of modules in chapters 2 and 3 as data; these data serve as inputs for an assemblage theory reading of a *ContraPoints* video page in chapter 4.

In other words, my lens and focus widen in Chapter 4, using *ContraPoints* as an example to demonstrate how assemblage theory might help users, authors, and researchers interpret big-data compositions. The initial aim of the study—to study the way people with diverse embodiments use technology to recompose themselves—animates chapters two and three, and a

new, complementary aim grows out of this research to animate chapter four. I use conclusions about how trans folks compose online, multimodal compositions to generate answers to Reid's questions about how to interpret big-data assemblages. The structure of the dissertation, then, represents my organic process of coming to a method for making sense of dynamic, online, multi-authored compositions, a method that is able to register and understand the effects of diverse bodies/embodiments.

Rather than following a linear trajectory, the study shifts and changes as it progresses, adjusting its lens and angle to respond to findings and discoveries while staying within the boundaries sets in Chapter 1. In this way, the research process and resulting structure of the chapters exhibit the characteristic of in-flux-ness, a term that I use in the dissertation to describe the tendency toward constant change and fluctuation. Not only does the term describe the way my research unfolds and gets codified, but the term is also useful for capturing important features of trans embodiment and big-data compositions. Part of the appeal of assemblage theory is the way in which it registers in-flux-ness as a native feature of all phenomena and provides a way to understand these phenomena even as they are necessarily in the constant process of changing. The in-flux-ness of Wynn's bodily presentation, of the attitudes and beliefs of those who write comments on her video pages, and of the content of her channel get accounted for in an assemblage theory reading. The dissertation's destination, then, aligns with its point of origin, or Bratta and Sundvall's original call to be attentive to the process of becoming a body/embodiment; it answers the call and suggests language, perspectives, and methods that might allow researchers in computers and composition to continue the work of recomposing marginalized bodies/embodiments in the ever-shifting context of big-data, online compositions.

CHAPTER I: MAKING THE CASE FOR *CONTRAPOINTS*

In the introduction to the 53rd volume of *Computers and Composition*, guest editors Phil Bratta and Scott Sundvall situate the conversation on digital technology and embodiment not only within recent scholarship in rhetoric and writing studies (RWS) but also within the social and political context of the 21st century. They draw readers' attention to the material realities that form the backdrop to these scholarly conversations, invoking the real body, breath, and words of Eric Garner, a Black man choked to death by police in 2014. Using the metaphors of decomposition and recomposition, their introduction does more than merely prime readers' understandings of what is to come; instead, I suggest that this piece draws a kind of disciplinary line in the sand. RWS, they seem to say, can either work in service of the continued *decomposing* of those whose bodies/embodiments are outside of what has institutionally been recognized as "normal," or RWS can actively seek to do work that facilitates the *recomposing* of these people's bodies/embodiments¹ and identities.

This 2019 *Computers and Composition* introduction and, in particular, its use of the decomposition-recomposition distinction are even more timely in the wake of police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and countless others, and the subsequent wave of mass protests and calls by many to defund the police in the summer of 2020. Bratta and Sundvall use the term decomposition to refer to the interplay between the "hegemonic" "institutionalization of language and writing" and the "dire consequence" of such unyielding,

¹ A conversation about the meaning and usage of the term body versus the term embodiment is forthcoming in Chapter 2. In brief, from Wysocki, body refers to the physical matter of a human person in space (noun) and embodiment refers to the experience of being/acting/doing things within a body (verb). For the purposes of this chapter, these two terms are considered together.

traditional taxonomies and practices in RWS. When RWS scholars do not work to uproot the “racist and ethnocentric approach to language and writing” that pervades the academy, they perpetuate conditions that lead to “oppression, bondage, and murder” (1). The consequence of a refusal to do this kind of work is continued “marginalization, oppression, negation, and death” (2). Recomposition, on the other hand, involves letting go of academic preconceptions of bodies/embodiments/identities as fixed or defined concepts and “thinking in terms of *being/becoming* a body/embodiment” (5). This involves, among other steps, “[bringing] diverse embodiments to the fore,” paying attention to the “brute materiality and affective dimension of embodiment” and thinking about bodies/embodiments as always being in relationship to other bodies/embodiments (4,5).

In the same way that the rhetoric surrounding the mass protests in spring and summer of 2020 demonstrates the urgent need to focus RWS work on the recomposition of overlooked and oppressed persons’ bodies/embodiments, these protests also demonstrate the need to investigate the role of digital technology in the development of sites of resistance—as well as in the perpetuation of oppression. Smartphones, with their video and audio recording capabilities, linked with social media networks are at the forefront of exposing instances of police brutality, widely circulating and educating the public about those instances, sparking and facilitating mass response in the form of gathering, marching, demonstrating and protesting the brutality, and creating communities of compassion and care for those affected by the brutality. Simultaneously, digital technologies manage to thwart popular uprisings, circulate misinformation, make space for oppressive narratives about instances of and responses to police brutality, and create conditions for further violence to the most vulnerable in our society. If it was the case in 2019 that RWS scholars had a moral obligation to engage in work that recomposes marginalized

embodiments, then this obligation takes on heightened urgency in the wake of 2020's national and global confrontation of police brutality in the United States. Given the climate of continued violent oppression against marginalized bodies, Bratta and Sundvall see a need for additional work that focuses on "subjectivities, identities, and digital technologies," stating that their "issue [is] an offering, but also an invitation—a plea—to continue doing work on how different embodiments address systems of domination differently with a vast array of digital technologies" (3). They stress the importance of understanding "the convergences and divergences between digital technologies, bodies, and embodiments" as a step toward recomposing bodies/embodiments (2).

This dissertation is a direct response to Bratta and Sundvall's invitation. It takes the form of a case study of the YouTube channel, *ContraPoints*, that investigates these convergences and divergences. Authored by transwoman Natalie Wynn, this channel represents fertile ground in which to do the work Bratta and Sundvall urge, firstly, because Wynn's YouTube channel explicitly aims to address systems of domination; her videos engage in leftist critiques of fascism, capitalism, and alt-right ideology as well as of mainstream, transphobic discourse. Yet the relevance of Wynn's work for RWS lies in the complex intersection between her unique and engaging rhetorical choices—at the level of visuals, sounds, *and* arguments—the online platform of YouTube and the attendant community of her followers and detractors, and the presentation of her own body as a transwoman in the process of transitioning. With over one million subscribers, her online presence as a progressive leftist is substantial. Journalists and even some academics have noted and begun to analyze and report on her intelligent and nuanced but engaging, relatable, and entertaining style of persuasion. They have written about the way that this style of right-wing critique is not only attractive to broad audiences but is forcefully capable of changing

minds. She is most lauded for her work in deradicalizing alt-right and neoconservative young men. Yet less has been said about Wynn's contributions to explaining, unpacking, and clarifying trans issues to both cis and trans audiences. There is also some analysis of the role that YouTube plays for her as a creator and some pieces written about the impressive theatricality of her videos. However, there is no work yet that puts these seemingly disparate issues in conversation, asking how her own body, experience of transition, visual presentation, argumentation style, and use of YouTube and other digital tools work together: in other words, a work that seeks to understand what arises at the intersection of them all. Truly, her channel represents a fruitful site for doing the work that Bratta and Sundvall highlight as an important for RWS scholarship (2). See Figure 1.1 for an example of one of her characters in the video, "Transtrenders."



"Transtrenders" | ContraPoints
2,197,129 views • Jul 1, 2019

👍 130K 💬 3.9K ➦ SHARE ⌵ SAVE ...

Figure 1.1 Natalie Wynn as Digital Messiah/Online Oracle/Social Media Savior in "Transtrenders"

While Bratta and Sundvall's call for research animates this present study, Manuel DeLanda and Alex Reid's work on assemblage theory suggests a way to accomplish it. This theory, borne out of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is useful for the study, first, because it provides a framework that allows us to connect the many strands within Bratta and Sundvall's call; they ask RWS scholars to consider the connection between embodiment, the use of digital composing tools, and the appeal to systems of domination. By examining the video pages within *ContraPoints* as assemblages, we have a means by which to register each of these variables and to theorize what properties and capacities arise out of their interaction with other elements on the YouTube platform.

As this chapter will explain, my study looks at the YouTube video page as an assemblage composed of smaller assemblages which I will call, following Phil Benson, modules. In *The Discourse of YouTube: Multimodal Text in a Global Context*, Benson argues that a YouTube video page is a dynamic, multi-authored, multimodal, online composition unique from early static webpages in its embedding of the video player within the page. Benson's account is integral to my assemblage theory reading in two ways. First, he suggests that the whole page is a multimodal composition, including as its authors the video creator, the code writers who build the YouTube platform, and the users who leave comments or like, dislike, and respond to any part of the page. This differs from many other scholars who implicitly take the perspective that the content of the video constitutes the composition—the video creator being the sole author—and that the comments by users are to be understood as audience reception. Benson's view then, is compatible with an examination of the YouTube video page as an assemblage given his recognition that each part of the page contributes to the composition as a whole. Second, I borrow his choice of language to name and understand the different parts of the YouTube video

page. Benson notices that unlike a more traditional webpage, there are multiple parts on a YouTube video page, each of which are “relatively independent” (61). Also responding to the page’s “non-linear structure,” and “multiple authorship,” Benson chooses to call these heterogenous parts “modules,” naming and describing seven different ones found on each page (61-2). I adopt the language of modules and pull out two of the seven to analyze in more depth. In my second chapter, I analyze module 2, or the video player, found on the page *Beauty*. Next, I look at module 5, which is Benson’s appellation for the comments section, found on the page *Autogynephilia*. In chapter 4, I extend Benson’s work and my analyses of the modules by putting them in conversation with assemblage theory. I use Reid and DeLanda, first, to read modules 2 and 5 of *Men* as assemblages, and second, to understand how the interaction between the two gives rise to the larger assemblage of the video page, *Men*, as a whole.

What this study discovers is that each of the modules relate to one another in such a way as to endow the YT video page assemblage with the capacities to enter social justice movements, yet the specific properties of the modules on *ContraPoints* video pages fail to provide the sufficient conditions to exercise this capacity. Using DeLanda’s work on network assemblages and my Chapter 3 conclusions, I posit that the comment module, module 5, meets the necessary conditions to be considered a network assemblage; however, conclusions I draw from the previous chapters’ analyses of suggests that *ContraPoints* video pages lack the clear, direct messaging that a network needs to vault it into the social justice struggle. DeLanda demonstrates how, in order for networks to participate in social justice movements, the community must possess “well-defined boundaries” which result from clear “conflict” as well as “shared stories” that present dogmatic in-group definitions. Yet the rhetorical style Wynn uses in her videos is constantly in flux, as is the video player itself. As she addresses systems of domination, namely

heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity, Wynn moves in and out of accepting, rejecting, and subverting language used to oppress and decompose trans bodies/embodiments. Similarly, many of her co-authors' comments avoid expressing rigid attitudes towards dominant norms around gender and sexuality. The conversations in the comments serve to question, play with, and open rather than solidify boundaries around gender and sexual identity groups. Furthermore, the comment module itself is always in flux, constantly adding new data, presenting different views to different users at different times based on underlying algorithms, thereby changing the tenor of the conversation and themes of the video page assemblage at any given moment.

Assemblage theory allows us to conclude that the *ContraPoints* video page assemblage, at present, may not have the capacity to become a forceful player in a social justice movement that seeks to win rights and protections for trans women that cis women currently have or to increase the rights and protections for all women, cis or trans. The in-flux-ness—or tendency toward constant change and fluctuation—of this assemblage, facilitated by the YouTube medium and by Wynn's varying rhetorical orientation toward systems of domination, leads it to resist stability in messaging, making it ineffective at galvanizing clearly bounded groups and mobilizing them to specific action. The use of assemblage theory, furthermore, points to the kinds of properties that *would* allow a YouTube video page assemblage to exercise the capacity to join social justice movements, and it provides the tools needed to understand how the video page assemblage functions within the YouTube channel assemblage, the YouTube site assemblage, and more. An RWS researcher can easily extend these conclusions to other social media or online platforms to continue developing scholarly understanding of the limitations and affordances of social media activism more generally.

While unable to directly participate in social justice movement, my study also concludes that the *ContraPoints* video page assemblage *does* have the capacity to generate interpersonal, communal reflections on complex issues around gender and sexuality, reflections that may give rise to changing beliefs. These belief changes are necessary for any future community-building that may enable social justice movements aimed at expanding rights around gender and sexuality. This case study, then, offers one answer among infinite possible answers to Bratta and Sundvall's question of how composers with diverse embodiments address systems of domination using digital technology. Natalie Wynn, a trans woman composer, exploits the in-flux-ness of the YouTube platform by foregrounding her own fluctuating gender and sexual identity, priming her coauthors to register and apply this sense of fluidity to their conversations, attitudes, and beliefs around dominant norms of gender and sexuality.

The *ContraPoints* oeuvre, therefore, aligns with what transgender scholar Susan Stryker suggests is a fundamental feature of trans embodiment. She argues that what is of scholarly, social, and political importance for transgender folks is not the arrival at a final, fixed, static form of the body of a person that transitions but is, rather, the "movement" itself "away from" unwanted definitions, labels, and categorizations (1). Stryker's insistence on the importance of the movement and on the process of transitioning as opposed to the "transitioned" body demonstrates that in-flux-ness, my term that describes a state of constant change, is a salient feature of the identity of a trans person. Focusing on the process of transitioning rather than the arrival at a transitioned state is also a forceful example of Bratta and Sundvall's call for RWS scholars to "cease thinking in terms of *having* a body/embodiment...and start thinking in terms of *being/becoming* a body/embodiment." To focus on the body as this or that particular noun "marks an inevitable *decomposing* of bodies" whereas a focus on the experience of bodies and

embodiments—their active doings—“marks a necessary *recomposing* of bodies and embodiments” (5). On a fundamental level, then, work in trans studies—at least insofar as it aligns with a Stryker-like understanding of transgender—is oriented towards recomposing bodies/embodiments. That orientation forces scholars to think about bodies/embodiments as always being in flux.

A study of YT compositions that shifts its focus from the digitality of the composition to the in-flux-ness of the composition complements and is complemented by a thematic focus on transgender identity; this focus shift also allows the study to avoid the inevitable collapse of meaning surrounding the term digital. Yet another consequence of this work, then, is a complication of Bratta and Sundvall’s original call for scholarship. I find that a using assemblage theory to understand how embodiment intersects with composing that takes place in online environments or with what we might call “digital” tools leads scholars away from foregrounding concept of digitality in their work; instead, through the assemblage theory lens, the digital becomes just another feature among many that contributes to the rhetoric of a composition.

As I began research to answer Bratta and Sundvall’s question about embodiment, digital composing, and dominant systems, I undertook a journey through the RWS literature looking for a clarification about what “digital” *means* for the field. I found article after article and book after book that only further complicated the quest. Works I found that discussed digital rhetoric fell into one of three categories. First, there were pieces that employed the term “digital” without clarification of its meaning in the particular context, forcing the reader to infer the author’s focus. In some cases, this proved difficult to do. Second, there were works that appeared to assert that one or another particular usage of the term digital was paramount for all digital rhetoric.

Lastly, there were works that provided helpful taxonomies of the various ways the term gets employed in scholarship.

In its discussion and insight on the way “digital” is used in RWS, Bratta and Sundvall’s introduction falls somewhere between the second and third type of work; it points scholars in some general directions of how to understand what is meant by digital while still observing the way this word has grown almost unhelpfully bloated with meaning. They undertake a brief discussion of how conversations in the field of RWS about the digital intersect with their focus on bodies/embodiments, ultimately highlighting digitality as both a way to describe a set of composing tools and as a “condition” in which composers now necessarily find themselves. Scholars, they recognize, have written not just about how new digital technologies are taken up as tools for composition but also how these technologies begin to change the “logic of why and how we write, including our selves, our bodies—*embodiment*” (2). They cite the influential 2018 *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* article by Casey Boyle, James J. Brown, and Steph Ceraso “The Digital: Rhetoric behind and beyond the screen;” according to Bratta and Sundvall’s interpretation, this article posits that “digital” is no longer a label specific to any one technological apparatus or to a place—online or offline—but is instead a word that describes “a multisensory, embodied condition through which most of our basic processes operate” (3). They suggest that existing in this digital condition has implications for how “otherwise decomposing bodies” might work towards recomposition; the digital milieu opens possibilities for recomposing, for mediating in the face of oppressive institutions, but does not guarantee it. Ultimately, the articles in Bratta and Sundvall’s special issue are meant to, they say, “elucidate the practice of embodied rhetorics within the ecology of the digital, showing the recomposition of bodies with digital technologies” (3).

Highlighting these two features of the digital—the digital as embodied condition and the digital as a set of tools—does some work to help shape inquiries but nevertheless leaves much to consider for the individual researcher who aims to undertake a particular study. If we are to take digitality as an essential variable in some study, it would be necessary to at least posit what falls within or outside the “ecology of the digital” in RWS as well as what distinguishes a digital technology from other technologies. Discussing the digital in this general way of course allows Bratta and Sundvall to introduce the articles in their special collection with some unifying broad strokes, understanding that each study will have its own objects of study and specific purposes. However, if we insist on using the concept of a digital ecology, each researcher will need to locate their study somewhere within the ecology of the digital that is most pertinent to their aims. Yet as Brook Bolander and Miriam A. Locher point out in “Beyond the online offline distinction: Entry points to digital discourse,” there is almost no consensus about what marks the division “between physical, material and virtual spaces and their associated discursive practices” (1). They note that any study that looks at “digital discourse” might entail focusing on one of many different elements including:

different aspects of the medium, such as the manner in which the technology works (*digital* as opposed to *analog*), the tools that are used (*computer-mediated*), the relative newness of these media (*new media*), a contrast to the *offline* world (online), the use of a particular platform (the *internet*) and the location of people in local and global networks of communication (*social, networked*). (2)

The digital may be an embodied condition or milieu, but even if it is a default condition of all of us at all times, if we insist on digitality remaining a variable in the study, it would be necessary to understand what distinguishes the digital from that which is not digital and to zero in on what

element of the digital condition a study aims to illuminate. Without these distinctions, it is difficult to do the work of establishing boundaries to delineate a particular case for studying.

What I found as I read the YouTube video page as an assemblage is that the vexing question of “what or where is the digital in digital composing” became nearly irrelevant, affirming Casey Boyle, James J. Brown Jr., and Steph Ceraso’s assertion that the digital is not any one thing but is instead a set of “conditions” in which rhetoric operates. There is a great need to analyze the role of what we call “digital” technologies not as distinct from the persons who use them in service of dismantling or propagating oppressive structures—whether those structures are linguistic, political, rhetorical, social—but as part of one’s embodied experience. The phones in our hands, the many and various “online” identities we curate and inhabit, the compositions we create, disseminate, and ingest, and the interactions which we engage in that are mediated through screens or forums or online platforms are all integral parts of our bodies and beings. It might seem tempting to say, then, that to live in a body in the 21st century in the United States is, in part, to be a digital self that is continuously fashioning and refashioning itself in relationship to other digital selves; however, this implies a distinction between a digital and a physical self. Instead, as scholars in RWS, digital media, and more have pointed out, the reality of our inextricable enmeshment with digital technology means that there is, necessarily, a digital-ness to our lived experience, whether explicitly mediated by digital technology or otherwise. Any work on digital composing, then, needs to attend to this enmeshment and avoid positing distinctions between digital and non-digital, as such distinctions usually collapse upon further investigation.

Assemblage theory avoids such distinctions by considering all objects, actions, characteristics, forces, and relations that make up any given unit, or whole, including those that

are organic, inorganic, human, nonhuman, bodily, or otherwise. The theory helps us see any given assemblage *not* as digital or nondigital, human or nonhuman, but as a complex system of interrelated elements with any one of these characteristics at once—always in relationship to other systems, and always, therefore, in flux—that give rise to properties and capacities that have diffuse effects. That which we may colloquially consider to be “digital” gets accounted for within an assemblage theory reading, but our resulting understanding of the assemblage does not rely on any stipulative construct of digitality. In other words, to read a *ContraPoints* video page as an assemblage means that we can *register* the function of all its features we might call “digital,” such as its online location, its existence on a screen, its ability to generate massive amounts of data, its reliance on algorithms, its background coding, and more, without *calling* the assemblage digital tout court. Naming the YouTube video page assemblage “digital” suggests that there is some definable essence of digitality, which scholarship reveals not to exist, and obscures the enmeshment of the bodily with and the technological which leads to the invisibility and further decomposition of bodies and embodiments.

Reid uses the term “big-data” to name some of the kinds of compositions, or assemblages, that RWS scholars have historically called digital, and my work suggests that this is a more productive label to capture the unique qualities—especially the in-flux-ness—of the YT video page assemblage. By big-data, he refers to assemblages incorporating “massive amounts of data that are produced and stored across digital networks at a rate that astronomically exceeds the data produced in print in the last century.” This term also is meant to “[include] an understanding of the computational power required to process that data, resulting in a wide range of analytical and interpretive possibilities” (28). The move from talking about digital compositions to talking about large, fluctuating bodies of data generated by a suite of human and

nonhuman actors is aligned with a study that hopes to loosen embedded, institutional language used to oppress; embracing the fluidity and constant change of big-data assemblages can serve as a metaphor for the methodological orientation in RWS that aims to embrace fluidity and change of language about bodies/embodiments. Reid also emphasizes that shifting our view of digital compositions from single-authored, highly multimodal texts to big-data assemblages requires us to fundamentally rethink what it means to compose. With this perspective, the questions we ask ourselves as composers and interpreters change. In the conclusion of this study, Chapter 5, I grapple with some of the implications of these shifts in greater detail. At present, however, Reid helps us uncover a more comprehensive, inclusive way to express what Bratta and Sundvall hope to accomplish by investigating digital composing. Instead of focusing on digital composing, this study looks at the in-flux-ness of medium, message, authors, and forces inherent to big-data assemblages.

It is precisely because I seek to understand the relationship between multiple, complex variables that I have chosen to undertake a case study. In “A Framework for Internet Case Study Methodology in Writing Research,” John R. Gallagher discusses the complexity of studying online compositions, noticing that, while there are rich and interesting concepts for researchers to mine here, the complexity, interconnectedness, and dynamism of such compositions can make them particularly difficult to pin down in order to draw meaningful conclusions (2). He suggests that a case study of online compositions, properly conceived of and bounded, represents one avenue for conducting RWS research on these works. As this chapter will demonstrate, part of what a researcher must do to conceive of and bound a case study is to explicitly and clearly state aims and foci of the inquiry. In what follows, I will spell out the case’s aims, foci, and boundaries and will provide a preview of the subsequent chapters.

1.1 *Contrapoints*: Building a Case

As the title credits for *ContraPoints* video, “Men,” fade, a luxurious interior setting comes into focus. The small corner of the room that the shot frames is dimly lit, a reddish glow illuminating the shiny, delicate Japanese silk-screened room divider that lines the back left of the shot. This backdrop is flanked on one side by an elegant table on which a porcelain urn sits, intricately painted in blue and white, and on the other side by an upright piano of dark wood displaying sheet music, one page nonchalantly askew. Undoubtedly, however, the focus of the viewers is on what is in the foreground: Natalie Wynn, one arm draped casually over the arm rest of the chaise-longue on which she is arrayed, clad in black lingerie from head to toe, the creamy white of her skin brought out by the deep maroon velvet of the chaise and the contours of her figure on full display. “I’m pandering to the male gaze,” she says as she fans herself languidly—the folding fan emblazoned with the word MOUTHFEEL in her signature font—then winks and adds, “*aaaand* the male straights” (3:31).

Within the first three minutes of this video, viewers are already confronted with the numerous variables that this study hopes to examine: technologies, bodies, embodiments, and systems of domination. Simply by viewing the video in the context of the YT platform, one which differs from both from analog technology and from files that are downloaded and played on separate software, the audience is engaging with unique technology. Wynn’s body, front and center, commands viewers’ attention, contrasting with her earlier costuming; she appears initially fully clothed, dressing in a self-proclaimed masculine way, clad in a blazer and chic fedora in order to welcome the male viewers she intends to address. This early fluidity of bodily presentation, coupled with the audience’s knowledge of Wynn’s own real transition from male to female only a few years ago, primes viewers to conceive of the in-flux-ness of both body and

embodiment: the ever-shifting experience of living, being, and doing within a body.

Furthermore, given that the topic of her video is the Men's Rights movement and that one of her intended audiences is men, she is directly addressing systems of domination; she unpacks the claims that men's rights activists (MRA) make about the oppressions that men suffer in contemporary society, fairly evaluates their concerns, and ultimately calls for a positive men's rights movement.

These variables continue to arise throughout the duration of video as well as on the YT video page in which the video is embedded. Halfway through the presentation, Wynn invokes the Hegelian concept of the continuous dialectical unfolding of history, with its contradictions creating tensions that resolve into new principles, to frame the way that our current concepts and principles about gender are similarly always changing; social ideas about gender are, at present, unstable, full of contradictions, and working towards new articulations (19:43). Here again, audiences are reminded of in-flux-ness of identity. Near the video's end, the audience's attention is drawn to the unique affordances of YT as a composing tool when she invites the male viewers to begin a conversation with one another in the comment section about what a positive men's movement might look like (28:08). Audiences will see a different version of this composition every time they visit the "Men" video page, reminding them of the way a YT composition is never the same at any moment; a visit to the page today may show that there are 23,605 comments when a visit on another day shows even more, demonstrating the way that new viewers react or how those who have seen the video multiple times return to comment, reinterpreting it based on the news of the day.

There is an overwhelming wealth of data here: from the semantic, audio-visual content of the video itself to the interface of the YT platform to the conversations in the comments and

contributors' shifting status as viewer and author. A clear study of *ContraPoints* that allows us to draw any conclusions about the interplay of the variables requires an explicit articulation of what parts of the channel the study will examine and to what end. It is not enough to say that the "case" under study is *ContraPoints* because of the rhizomatic nature of an internet artifact; with every comment, linked content in the description, links posted in the comments, or suggested video appearing on the margins of the video page, the boundaries of *ContraPoints* shoots off into an ever-broadening web of online and offline locations, authors, and content. I turn now to Gallagher's framework for building a case to help guide the process of narrowing the important elements of *ContraPoints* and develop the case.

1.2 RWS Internet Case Studies: Guiding Goals, Boundaries, and Spheres of Influence

Given the ubiquity of the "case study" in RWS, Gallagher aims both to justify it as a valid tool for research and to offer case study researchers a framework for building one that is located in online spaces. The resulting framework outlines important considerations and decisions to make in building the study and provides guidance about how to make those decisions, guidance that proves especially useful for choosing manageable entry points for a study of *ContraPoints*. A case, for Gallagher, is a researcher-created, bounded "system" within some larger system, and a case study is a detailed examination of that system. While some question the value of an artificial isolation of some part from the whole, Gallagher argues that looking at a case allows researchers to "capture the complexity and richness of that system" which may not be evident when it is enmeshed with larger structures or when it includes innumerable variables (2). The value of carving out a case may be clear but, given the seemingly boundless reach and dynamic nature of "digital communication," the degree of difficulty in

crafting the system is high (1). To create a system requires articulating boundaries, and the internet, it feels at times, knows no boundaries. Gallagher's framework, then, gives researchers some guidance in crafting a bounded system within an online landscape. The major elements of Gallagher's case study framework are

- (1) guiding goals
- (2) boundaries
- (3) spheres of influence.

Table 1 Elements of Gallagher's Case Study

Elements of a Case Study (From Gallagher)	Description
<p>1. Guiding Goal(s): What is/are the purpose(s) and aim(s) of the study?</p>	<p><u>Guiding goals can be:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explanatory 2. Exploratory 3. Descriptive
<p>2. Boundaries: Of what does the case consist? What is/are the phenomena under consideration?</p>	<p><u>A case should establish:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spatial boundaries: the space of the object of study within a case (e.g. browsers, page structure, site design, participant spaces) 2. Temporal boundaries: the periods of time under consideration within a case (e.g. the period of time

	<p>to study a message board or online forum)</p> <p>3. Relational boundaries: the relationships that enable the boundaries to be constructed (e.g. the relationships between video author and audience, the relationship between researcher and online content under study)</p>
<p>3. Spheres of Influence: What guides choices of boundaries?</p>	<p>Spheres that influence case construction are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analytical: influence from disciplinary theories 2. Ethical: influence from concerns of ethics in research 3. Personal: influence from researcher's personal background 4. Practical: influence from pragmatic concerns (e.g. institutional circumstances)

Table 1.1 provides an overview and brief explanation of Gallagher's elements of a case study.

1.2.1 Guiding Goals

For Gallagher, it seems that methodology and guiding goals are, if not one in the same, at least tightly connected with one's methodology. He stresses the importance of being upfront about methodology, or the guiding theoretical concerns, when undertaking a case study "so that the case can be better understood on both its own terms as well as the reasons researchers present the case in the way they do" (2). One of the advantages to a case study is the exciting variety of "techniques and strategies" that a research might employ to gather information and draw conclusions about a case; however, this heterogeneity of methods can be viewed by audiences as messy, "ad hoc," or lacking clear foundation in scholarship (3). Taking time to spell out the reasoning for using such methods lends necessary coherence and legitimacy to the project. Gallagher offers three categories of guiding goals that researchers might use as starting points: (1) "explanatory," (2) "exploratory," and (3) "descriptive" (3).

The present study might be best described as explanatory though it will involve exploration and description. By asking RWS researchers to draw conclusions about how composers with diverse bodies/embodiments address systems of domination with digital technology, Bratta and Sundvall hope to explain ways that recomposition is possible in the 21st century. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* functions, in many ways, as a catalogue explaining the available means of persuasion of the day, at least of the means available to those with certain bodies/embodiments and social statures. Where those means of persuasion are insufficient or lead to decomposition, there is a need to further study the means that are yet to be articulated but that offer some promise of recomposition. A more complete statement of the guiding goal, then, might be that:

This study aims to explain how the YT channel, *Contrapoints*, and its various authors and contributors use tools of the YT platform to address cis-normativity, patriarchy, heteronormativity.

1.2.2 Boundaries

Along with a guiding goal, Gallagher asserts that a case study must posit the boundaries of the case at hand. In other words, what slice of the internet or of the online world does the project aim to study? It is not simply a matter of declaring a particular website or digital platform, network, or infrastructure as the site of study; rather, one must consider all of the associated websites, platforms, networks, infrastructures and more that might affect or influence or be importantly connected to that which one hopes to study. Perhaps making boundary selection even more complicated is the reality that offline structures, not just virtual ones, also shape online sites of study. Obviously, the case study cannot and will not survey all of these interconnected parts; the idea is to, with the help of the guiding goal and overarching research questions, make key determinations about what sites count as relevant and important for a particular case. Important to note, however, is that when drawing boundary lines around a specific case, a researcher is not creating “concrete, axiomatic sources of research production” but is, rather, giving shape and clarity to the study at hand and has flexibility to blur lines as needed to best meet the goals of the study.

Some “possible boundaries” researchers might consider are:

- (1) spatial
- (2) temporal
- (3) relational

To determine spatial boundaries means to determine what, more specifically, constitutes the “object of study” (4). Because of the way that online “spaces involve nested interfaces” with overlapping sources of information and structures such as “browsers, pages structure, site design, website HTML and JavaScript, and participant spaces,” placing boundaries around the object of study can be challenging (4). For example, if the present study of Wynn’s YT channel engages with participant spaces such as the comment section of a video page, does this entail engagement with cross-posted content that takes one to other associated videos or ancillary websites such as Reddit or Twitter? Determining temporal boundaries requires choosing the “period of time” for a particular investigation (5). The same tangle of factors exists in determining temporal boundaries as they did for the spatial boundaries of a study on Natalie Wynn’s YT channel. Given that an active YT channel frequently adds new video content, it is necessary to determine a date range for what published content to analyze. That range may or may not apply to how the study might treat participant spaces on YT as the comment function on a video is open indefinitely.

Furthermore, how should a researcher treat content that is available only to Patreon subscribers? Wynn purged many of the older videos from her public YT page, but they are available within the Patreon platform. Choosing temporal boundaries means thinking about what role these once public videos ought to play. Lastly, “relational boundaries refer primarily to relationships between researchers and the people they study” (4). Gallagher suggests that, while perhaps the most important set of boundaries, relational boundaries grow out of decisions made about spatial and temporal ones. Once the general sketch is available, researchers begin to ask questions about the relationships between the digital space under study and the people who consume or use that space, the creators of the space, and the people involved in studying the space.

1.2.3 Using Spheres of Influence to Select Boundaries

Having asserted which boundaries exist, Gallagher discusses strategies for crafting those boundaries. He articulates four spheres of influence that may help guide decisions regarding project boundaries. The spheres include the:

- (1) analytical
- (2) ethical
- (3) personal
- (4) practical

While the other three have real bearing on boundary determinations, the analytical seems of particular importance as Gallagher suggests that “researchers might start with their analytical spheres of influence, thinking deeply about the theories, literatures, and methodologies they bring to a case” (7). In other words, current disciplinary conversations about the topic ought to be the first place to go for choosing what parts of the case might be the most fruitful to explore and what parts are less pertinent to the interests at hand. It is likely, then, that to create boundaries for a case study on *ContraPoints*, Gallagher would suggest to first determine what foci are most likely to complement and further disciplinary conversations. I will use Benson’s articulation of digitality and the architecture of YT as well as Bratta and Sundvall’s analytic focus on bodies/embodiment and on the language of oppression to determine appropriate boundaries for this study.

Benson’s discussion of the way that digitality enhances multimodality, specifically in the space of YT, informs the way I narrow my focus for this case. It also forms the basis of my suggestion that what is most salient about “the digital” for RWS research that hopes to facilitate recomposition is the in-flux-ness of message and medium; his insights, then, ultimately facilitate

my reading of the YT video page as an assemblage. While RWS scholars have done considerable research teasing out the variety of multimodal characteristics of what they call the digital page, Benson's account of multimodality in YT differs insofar as it argues, following Kress, that "the different modes 'become the same' in a digital text" (43). To understand what he means requires understanding his distinction between digital and nondigital text.

While it may now be impossible to posit a general definition of "the digital" that applies to all or even most instances in which the term is used, doing so within a well-defined context, regarding a specific tool or set of compositions, is not only feasible but necessary. Benson focuses on "digital text" in his analysis of the multimodality of YT, positing that it refers not to the user-friendly webpages of YT that we interact with as we watch videos and post comments but instead to the coding *behind* the moving images and sound that constitute a YT page. That coding includes "programming and mark-up language, and digital image, audio and visual formats." This coding "translates visual and sonic modes into strings of alphanumeric and graphic characters and, ultimately, into machine-readable binary code" which can then appear in "the form of integrated texts, using a single device that coordinates visual display with sound reproduction" (43). Digital text, that which operates behind the scenes of what we experience when we look at a screen or hear sound through a speaker, is expressed in one mode: the particular language of coding. Yet digital text gives rise to a product that expresses a "range of semiotic modes": the webpage or application or video game etc.

Benson, therefore, argues that what is importantly digital about a medium like YT is its background text which creates a dynamic webpage that allows for increased user participation. That digital text, which uses one set of semiotic resources, gives rise to an integrated text that is multimodal. That multimodal text makes use of multiple sets of semiotic resources which

audiences can experience, manipulate, and participate in actively. YT, according to Benson, was the first site that exploited this feature of digital text in order to “[integrate] a video player into the text of a web page” (46). The player was not a physical machine like a VHS or DVD player, nor was it a separate piece of software. Instead, the player was expressed as HTML. While many find this innovative because of the way it allowed people to immediately stream video content without downloading and playing a file on a piece of software located on one’s own device, Benson finds the integration of a video player into the digital text important for other reasons: namely, “that the text of a [web]page now incorporated both the potential for interaction with a media player and the sound and moving image of video” (46). This integration distinguishes a YT page from both physical, written pages and basic “static webpages.” The text on a written page does not respond to an audience’s manipulations. Static webpages are, on the other hand, a product of digital text and allow for users to navigate through them actively. However, the difference between this navigation through various hyperlinks that a static webpage allows and the YT innovation is that, because of YT’s use of digital text, “the user engages not only with a set of instructions to display a text, but also with a set of executable programs that engage the user in interaction and vary the content of the page” (47).

Benson notes that this new kind of webpage, facilitated by digital text, has a characteristic of always changing, a characteristic which I will call in-flux-ness. Any YT page, because of the way its background digital text facilitates interaction, is always changing. Benson points to three main dynamic elements of YT pages that digital text creates. First, when a page has the ability to play video and sound, the page itself changes in real time as the user experiences it. Benson writes that “the integration of sound and video adds a dimension of temporal syntax to the spatial syntax of the page as a whole.” Second, the text will appear and

respond differently to each individual user. He notes that “personalization causes the text to vary according to the identity of the viewers.” Lastly, given the way that users can continuously add comments day by day, the text is never the same at any given moment. The “interactive features” of a YT page, he writes, “cause the text to change over time in response to input from multiple users” (47).

Benson’s understanding of the digitality of YT allows me to narrow the focus for my own case study about Wynn’s YT channel. Born out of studies in multimodality, a topic of interest to RWS scholars, his definition of digital text is both clear and productive for studies in RWS. By drawing a connection between the background coding language of the YT composition and its subsequent dynamism is a strong justification for placing boundaries around that which will allow me to register the in-flux-ness of *ContraPoints*. It also offers a clear reason *not* to focus specifically on the filming apparatus or the materiality of the screen or the energetic pulses of light through cables that generate images and sound.

Benson helpfully distinguishes three ways that YT “exemplifies” the dynamism of digital text:

- (1) the temporal syntax of the page—the audio and visuals changing as the user plays with video and engages with the page
- (2) the personalization of the page—the way the composition appears different for each user given their previous activity on the site or their own manipulation of the video’s controls
- (3) the change of the page over time—the way that over hours, days, months, and years, the interactivity changes the semantic and visual content of the page continuously

With this focus in mind, it is possible to sketch the spatial, temporal, and relational boundaries of this present case with more precision. The boundaries around *ContraPoints* should be open and flexible enough to provide insight into the ways that Wynn and the channel use YT to address systems of domination; however, the boundaries must also limit the amount of data under consideration to that which is capable of analyzing with clarity.

Benson offers a description of the “architecture” of YT in general as well as the specific “design” of individual pages; these descriptions give a sense of the shape of which YT spaces might fall within the boundaries of the present case. At a birds-eye-view, YT is a “self-contained world of a website that consists of myriad pages with same design” (65). Within the world, there are two other containers: channels and pages. Channels are self-contained collections of videos within the YT world, and the video “page is a self-contained unit” (65). A video, for all YT pages, is “the primary semantic unit” around which other features are digitally embedded (49). Given that I hope to understand the interplay between the semantic meaning in Wynn’s work—the themes of her videos and the comments by co-authors—I will limit this study’s investigation to the YT video page. Benson identifies seven distinct “modules” that one finds on all video pages:

- (1) ‘site management’
- (2) ‘video player’
- (3) ‘video management’
- (4) ‘video metadata’
- (5) ‘comments’
- (6) ‘video links’
- (7) ‘information and help’ (62)

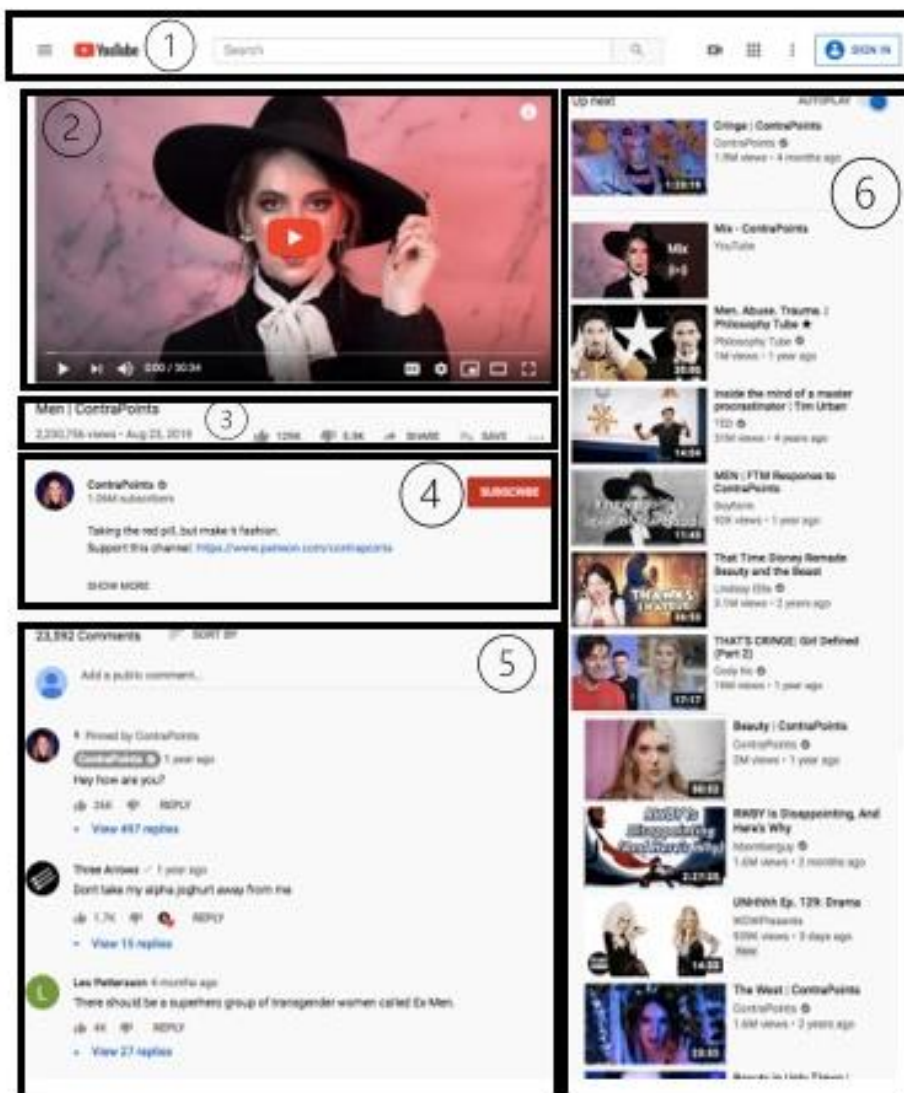


Figure 2 YouTube Video Page Modules

Figure 1.2 displays the placement of these modules using *ContraPoints' Men* as an example. 7 is not shown.

For Benson, a module is “a functionally and visually distinct area of the page” that offers both possibilities for spectatorship and authorship (62). Some modules direct users’ attention and encourage participation within the world of the video page itself while others direct users to other parts of YT or other sites. The location of these modules, Benson argues, correspond

roughly with their function of harnessing attention and participation to the page itself or ushering attention outward. “Modules 2-5...constitute the main site of user interaction *with* the page” and therefore appear all together in the middle of the page. Modules 1, 6, and 7, on the other hand, appear “on the top, bottom and right-hand margins of the page, which offer routes *away from* it” (64).

The present case hopes to engage with both the composition strategies as well as the semantic content of the videos of Wynn’s YT channel. That suggests that, at minimum, the spatial boundaries of the case must encompass at least some of the video pages within the self-contained collection of *ContraPoints* that exists within the larger landscape of YT in general. As for which modules the case considers, it is clear that the study should include module 2, the video player, within the boundaries given that the video constitutes, as Benson argues, the primary semantic unit. The video player houses the moving images and sound crafted and uploaded by Wynn and must therefore be included within the boundaries of the case.

Yet as Benson and others point out, the channel creator is not the sole author of the semantic content on a video page, and so examination of the composing strategies within the channel is not limited to Wynn’s choices. While the channel does indeed represent the work of Wynn, any YT page has three distinct authors: “YouTube, which contributes the page template and a certain amount of auto-generated text; the page creator, who uploads the primary video and metadata; and other YouTube users, who add to the text of the page” (62). The content of a YT video page includes not just the sound and moving images available in module 2 but also the text and images in the other modules. In particular, module 5 contains the space in which users post comments, comments which have the potential to inform and shape—or continuously re-inform and reshape given that, unless disabled, a video page allows for infinite commentary over time—

a viewer's understanding of the video's content. Not only does the presence of other interactive modules affect the content of the page over time, but it also shapes the way the video's creator makes a variety of rhetorical choices. For example, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, studying "interaction/'dialogical' processes on social media through story making," brings attention to the unique ways that those who create and upload videos onto YT compose in order to elicit viewer participation (155). Creators compose using titles, tags, and thumbnail images, among other resources, to prompt specific feedback and engagement from YT users (159). In other words, the digitality of the medium of YT—its in-flux-ness—yields changes in both composing strategies and in the resulting composition, one that is always in the process of being composed.

The boundaries of this case, therefore, must also include module 5 as it registers the video's change over time by amassing user comments. Modules 3 and 4, at their most basic, house and display data about the video itself such as a description from the author as well as its number of views and likes. The case will refer to these modules at times, integrating their content into a larger analysis of modules 2 and 5. While modules 1, 6, and 7—the ones that Benson reminds us are those which direct users away from the site—"have been produced by the participation of YouTube users" and therefore count as a site of interactivity and co-authorship on a YT page, it is outside of this study's scope to analyze these modules (61). I will focus only on modules 2 and 5.

The case must, furthermore, consider what boundaries to place around the inevitable spidering network of other YT channels, websites, materials, and media linking from the YT page away to sites other than YT. Within module 5, there are infinite opportunities for creators and users to post links to non-YT spaces. For the purposes of this study, I will not comment on or consider linked material; however, as I will discuss in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, studies that hope

to build on this present work would benefit in engaging in network analysis which entails mapping out and engaging with these linked resources.

The final consideration when choosing spatial boundaries is to determine how to treat offline activities. Bolander and Locher observe that the internet can be more than just a “tool for communicating” but can also be considered “a place” (2). Instead of thinking of online compositions as static texts that “can...be explored from a distance,” conceiving of online compositions as places “prompts for methodologies which engage with the interaction between online and offline, for example, via the use of blended data (screen data and data from interaction with users)” (3). I recognize that there is no way to divide one’s online activity from one’s offline activity in the sense that, on the other side of a screen are, offline, fingers that type and hands that move cursors to create effects online; in addition, our ostensibly offline identities are always affected by whatever material we view, actions we take, and identities we create or maintain online. In this sense, the spatial boundaries of the case includes offline activity insofar as it pertains to the composing process; however, the case will only look at data that exists online in the form of data on the YT video pages and on the pages of linked material. The case will not solicit or incorporate “data from interaction with users” other than that which already appears on the screen.

Having established spatial boundaries, the next consideration is temporal; however, in thinking through the possible temporal boundaries, it is immediately clear that the distinctions between the various boundaries Gallagher names are slippery. The two main axes of temporality to consider are, first, the range of video publication dates that the case will include and, second, the range of time on any given comments module to analyze. Given that, at the time research for this study began, there were twenty-four distinct video pages within the channel, each housing

videos from between fifteen minutes to nearly two hours in length as well as thousands of comments, it is not feasible to include every video page in the case study. Yet it seems arbitrary to choose to limit the videos under consideration based on publication date.

To choose which video pages to consider, I returned to the conclusion I drew from the conversation about analytic spheres of influence. The study hopes to understand composing in dynamic online environments, bodies/embodiments, and tackling dominant systems. Of the 24 videos, I chose three that engaged these elements most explicitly: *Autogynophilia*, *Beauty*, and *Men*. The process of choosing temporal boundaries, therefore, led me to articulate further spatial boundaries. Like the spatial boundaries of linked materials, the temporal boundaries around comments—those within the three chosen video pages and, potentially, those on linked materials—depend on the context of the particular analysis. In chapter 3, I undertake an analysis of the comments on the *Autogynophilia* video page, and there I discuss and justify my choice of temporal boundaries.

As for the relational boundaries, this study considers each of the three authors of a YT page as equal participants in composing the page. I follow Benson in this, choosing not to call Wynn the sole author but viewing the YT video page as a multi-authored composition. The roles of the authors, though, are in-flux just as the page is. Wynn, as video creator, is the author but is audience when she reads the comments. The comment authors are viewers when watching the video and readers when following the comment threads but are authors when composing comments and replies to others. As a researcher, I am not only a viewer but am also a patron, subscribing to Wynn through Patreon and supporting her monetarily each month; however, I was never and have never been a comment author nor even an author in terms of liking the videos or comments. Benson would consider me an author insofar as the history of my YT use at least in

part composes the suggested links that appears in module 6 and contributes data to algorithms that compose those suggestions for other users; however, given that this study does not look at the modules that direct users away from the video page, I assert my relationship to the material as spectator and researcher rather than contributor.

While I have sketched the boundaries of this case in order to justify the study, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4, assemblage theory allows us to incorporate some of what we know about the objects and activities that fall outside of these boundaries. In that chapter, I will discuss the way assemblage theory intersects with the case study and will reframe the boundaries in a way that can still align with Gallagher’s methodology. Table 1.1 presents the elements of the *ContraPoints* case study.

Elements of a Case Study (From Gallagher)	Description of <i>ContraPoints</i> Case
<p>1. Guiding Goal(s): What is/are the purpose(s) and aim(s) of the study?</p>	<p><u>Exploratory and Descriptive:</u> This study aims to explore and describe the various means by which the YT channel, <i>Contrapoints</i>, authored by Natalie Wynn and by those who contribute to the pages of her channel, address systems of domination.</p>
<p>2. Boundaries: Of what does the case consist? What is/are the phenomena under consideration?</p>	<p>1. <u>Spatial boundaries:</u> Modules 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the video pages of “Autogynophilia,” “Beauty,” and “Men”</p>

	<p>2. <u>Temporal boundaries</u>: only videos published before July 2020; comments published before November 2020</p> <p>3. <u>Relational boundaries</u>: Wynn, comment authors, and YT platform creators are related by equal role in authorship; their roles are fluid; I relate to the video pages as spectator and researcher</p>
<p>3. Spheres of Influence:</p>	<p><u>Analytical Spheres that influence case construction are:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. embodied rhetorics outlined in Bratta and Sundvall’s introduction 2. “digital” rhetorics informed by Benson’s account of the digitality of YT and Boyle et al.’s recognition of the “the digital” as “the conditions through which rhetorical studies finds itself endlessly transducing” (258)

Table 2 The Elements of the ContraPoints Case Study

1.3 Conclusion

Earlier, I identified several elements of “Men” that would be of interest to an RWS study that seeks to understand a diversity of bodies/embodiments, composing online, and confronting systems of domination:

1. Wynn’s dynamic bodily presence on screen in the video as it plays
2. Her addressing systems of domination at times sympathetically and at others critically
3. The call for co-authorship in the form of comments on the page
4. The conversations within the comments about bodies/embodiment/gender/sexuality

In the following chapters, I explore these features by focusing on modules 2, the video player, and 5, the comments section, separately then combining my insights using assemblage theory. In Chapter 2, I attend to the first two features by performing a visual analysis of module 2, the video player, concluding that Wynn’s rhetorical orientation towards dominant systems changes in a parallel manner to her changing bodily presentation. The in-flux-ness of the message, it turns out, mirrors the in-flux-ness of the medium. Wynn’s arguments resist stable, definitive interpretations just as the YT video page, due to the digital text that allows for constant change over time, resists any static, stable form. Analysis of the comment module, module 5, in Chapter 3 looks at features 3 and 4. I undertake a corpus analysis of over 7,000 comments from the video *Autogynephilia* and use linguistic ethnographic methods along with consideration of network analysis to draw conclusions. I discover a pattern of comments in which the authors signal their gender and sexual identity for the purposes of destabilizing rather than codifying dominant norms around gender and sexuality. Furthermore, I find a category of comments in which authors

disclose their cis identity in order to express appreciation to Wynn for expanding their knowledge of the possibilities for gender and sexual presentation. The fluctuation of the module over time—its continual addition of comments, likes and replies—mirrors the commenters’ desire for similar fluctuation and movement of attitudes about gender and sexuality. Chapter 4, as I discussed above, reads the YT video page as an assemblage, combining conclusions about Wynn’s rhetoric in the video with the conclusions about the conversation in the comments to make claims about how *ContraPoints* addresses systems of domination. While not likely to exercise the capacity to enter social justice movements, the YT video page assemblages I examine are capable of promoting reflection to change beliefs and create conditions for future movements.

2 THE RHETORICAL DECOMPOSITION-RECOMPOSITION STRUGGLE

A woman sits in profile in a dark and sumptuously adorned salon clothed in 18th century, aristocratic dress (see Figure 3). She wears an ornate Venetian carnival mask, and, just like the girl depicted in a painting on the wall behind her, is delicately touching a human skull. She holds the skull aloft in her left hand, tapping it lightly with the long nails of her right hand. The video cuts from a wide shot of the present scene to a close-up of the painting, "Allegory of the Vanity of Earthly Things," and then back to the wider shot as the song "Faceshopping" by Sophie, a transgender musician, plays (:10). Viewers hear Sophie’s breathy intonations of "My face is the front of shop/My face is the real shop front/My shop is the face I front/I’m real when I shop my face" as the woman unties and slowly removes the golden Venetian mask to appear in profile (:18). Before Natalie Wynn can turn to camera for viewers to see her face, the musical track, heretofore completely comprised of unaccompanied speaking, explodes in a burst of electronic, dubstep-like low bass beats and an almost cacophony of rhythmic, mechanical noises (:20). The

scene disappears and is replaced by flashing images of Wynn's face wrapped from chin to forehead in bandages (see Figure 4). What viewers do see—her eyes, cheeks, and mouth—are bruised and scarred, apparently post-operation.



Figure 3 The Enlightenment Salon

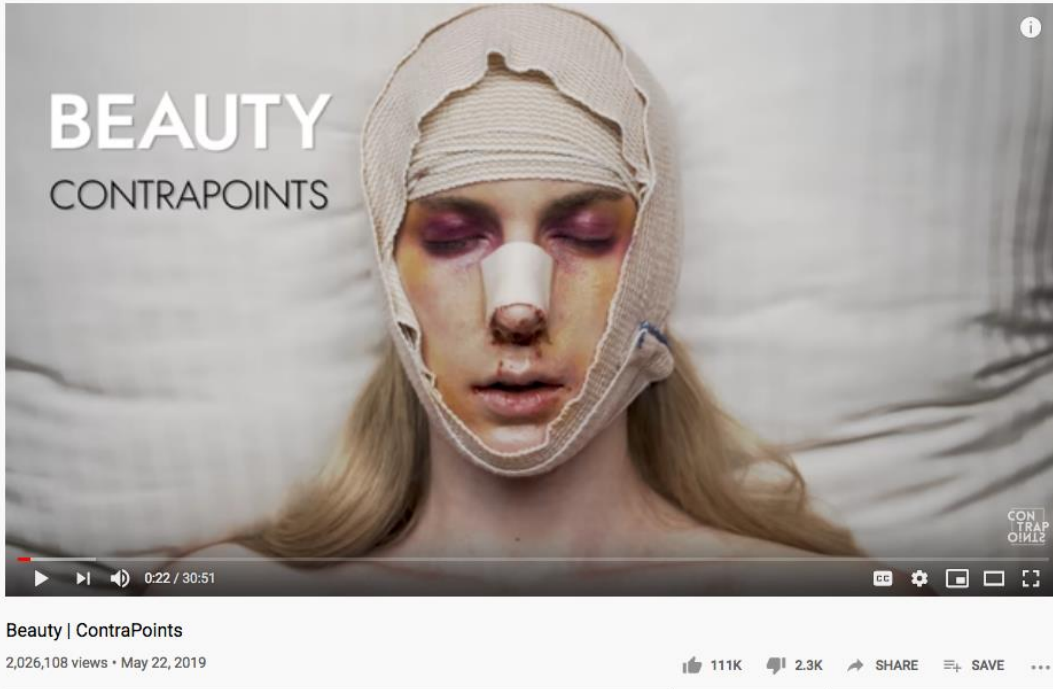


Figure 4 FFS Recovery

Like so many of her other videos, Wynn’s physical presence in this work, “Beauty,” is paramount. Numerous popular YouTubers are consistently visible to their viewers. For example, PewDiePie, the YouTube (YT) creator with the second-most subscribers on the platform, often posts videos in which the majority of the screen is taken up by the visuals of a video game he is playing and narrating but where his upper torso and face is visible but relegated to the small bottom right corner. Other popular creators may show most of themselves but are often clad in quotidian outfits and set in common scenes such as their kitchens or bedrooms. In these instances, the creators’ bodies, while present, do not constitute any significant rhetorical choice outside of the generic conventions of YT. Wynn, on the other hand, uses her body very purposefully in her compositions; as a transwoman in the midst of transition, she shares moving images of herself in an impressive array of styles, looks, and states of being. I argue that Wynn’s body serves as the primary visual site on and through which she continuously negotiates what I will call the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle: the ever-shifting rhetorical

orientation toward language that decomposes that any author takes on as they try to recompose the bodies/embodiments of oppressed peoples. The *ContraPoints* oeuvre provides a compelling example of work that rhetorically oscillates between at once “pandering” to—as well as at times accepting—at other times working to understand one’s relationship to, and lastly subverting and casting off oppressive, institutionalized, rigid language and ideas about gender. The movement between pandering/accepting, honestly unpacking or understanding, and subverting gendered language, or oscillation along the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, happens in the linguistic and aural modes as well as visual; however, through costuming, makeup, framing, and more, moving images of Wynn’s body—the visual mode—most forcefully expresses this struggle.

In chapter 1, I identified four features of *ContraPoints* that this study hopes to examine in order to draw conclusions about the way embodiment intersects with composing in dynamic, online spaces to facilitate the recomposition of marginalized bodies/embodiments. In this chapter, I narrow my focus to the video player, what Phil Benson calls module 2 on any given YT video page, of “Beauty” in order to understand the connection between:

1. Wynn’s bodily presence on screen in the video as it plays
2. The manner in which she addresses systems of domination

I conclude that both features are always in-flux in “Beauty” and that, in many significant cases, these two features shift in a parallel way; as her bodily presentation changes, so does her rhetorical orientation towards dominant systems. Table 2.1 lists the boundaries of this chapter.

First, these findings add to RWS literature on embodiment and composing. RWS scholars, writing about embodied rhetorics and digital technology, have noted the liberating potential of compositions that foreground rather than obscure the corporeality of the author and

audience: Ben McCorkle praises digital interfaces that prompt users to register their own physicality; Heather Lang sees value in social media use that elicits visceral responses and helps audiences connect real bodies to abstract information; and Aaron Raz Link emphasizes the importance of rendering visible the bodies of composers to their audiences. Wynn's videos consistently make the moves for which these scholars advocate.

More importantly for this study, the conclusions of this chapter play an important role in my final reading of the *ContraPoints* video page through an assemblage theory lens. To understand what is born out of the relationship between the modules, we must understand the properties and capacities of the individual modules given that the capacities of any assemblage depend on the properties and capacities of its parts, smaller assemblages. In Chapter 3, I will use DeLanda's work to demonstrate how module 5, the comments section, constitutes a network assemblage. As the chapter describes, "shared stories" are some of the forces that can contribute to the stability and unification of communities that emerge from networks. Given that the comment network always exists on a page alongside a video, the content of the video serves as a built-in anchor text around which the network coalesces. Part of the evidence needed to make claims about the network's capacities includes the rhetoric of the shared stories; the extent to which the stories communicate a clear message affects the eventual strength and stability of the network. In other words, the rhetoric used in the video, module 2, of any YT page will directly affect the type of network that forms in module 5.

This chapter describes the properties of the module 2 assemblage that allow us to understand the capacities of the video page assemblage. This chapter's analysis of "Beauty" demonstrates that the video resists stable interpretation. As chapter 4 will discuss, the absence of clear conclusions in the video reduces the chance that the network in module 5 will amass the

solidarity necessary for taking clear action in a social justice movement. At present, however, the chapter focuses on demonstrating this rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, providing evidence of how Wynn intertwines her own embodiment and her argumentation to yield a composition that is always in-flux, resisting dogmatic conclusions. The boundaries of this chapter, then, are quite narrow.

<p>Boundaries: Of what does the case consist for the purposes of this chapter?</p> <p>What is/are the phenomena under consideration?</p>	<p>a. <u>Spatial boundaries</u>: Module 2 of the “Beauty” video page</p> <p>b. <u>Temporal boundaries</u>: 30:51 minutes of video content</p> <p>c. <u>Relational boundaries (relationship of researcher to content)</u>: viewer rather than participant user</p>
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Table 3 Chapter 2 Case Boundaries

In what follows, I offer a detailed description of the settings of “Beauty” as well as Wynn’s costuming and affect, connecting those features to her explicit argumentation regarding conformity to dominant norms of gender and sexuality. Before this close reading, I first return to Bratta and Sundvall’s introduction in order to complicate our understanding of the role that dominant systems play in recomposing oppressed persons. While work on embodiment and composing leads us to focus analysis on an author’s agency to mediate through composition, we must also recognize the way the body-as-mediated affects the way an author composes. I show how using the framework of the recomposition-decomposition struggle helps preserve the unresolvable analytic tension between body-as-mediating and body-as-mediated that is necessary for understanding how people compose to address dominant systems.

2.1 The Decomposition-Recomposition Struggle

To build the idea of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, I borrow insights about and definitions of the body and embodiment from Anne Frances Wysocki and combine them with Bratta and Sundvall's articulation of tendencies towards decomposition and recomposition in 21st century RWS. Wysocki's introduction to *Composing (media) = composing (embodiment): bodies, technologies, writing, the teaching of writing* is an important piece for RWS insofar as it delineates conceptual distinctions between bodies and embodiments, complicates our understanding of these concepts, and then clearly articulates the natural connections between work on the bodies, embodiments, and digital media. The piece continues to inform RWS work today and forms the basis of this project's understanding of bodies and embodiments. It is divided roughly in two parts, and the conclusions of each inform my concept of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle.

In the first section, Wysocki sets out to establish that the study of media and embodiment are inextricably linked; that is because, she argues, "bodies" are "the primary media" insofar as bodies are that which is between a subject—a person—and anything outside of it. Bodies, then, are nouns and are the fundamental means by which subjects relate to other subjects and objects. Embodiment, however, refers not to the physical projections, or nouns, that constitute the materiality of a person but to the specific felt experience of the subject in the midst of existing, doing, and making—verbs (3). Each subject has a different physical makeup (body) and experiences existing, doing, and making (embodiment) differently. This section gives us our general distinction between and rough definitions of bodies and embodiments and provides a rationale for studying media in relationship to bodies and embodiments. While conceptually distinct, they are often linked analytically which accounts for my use of the shorthand

“bodies/embodiment” that will follow. The second section of Wysocki's introduction, glossing a number of psychoanalytic thinkers, critical theorists, continental philosophers, and German Idealists, argues for RWS scholars to acknowledge the way in which bodies/embodiment are “both active and passive, felt by us as well as produced by us” (19). In other words, as subjects in the world, we have a physical presence and experience doing things in the world that others see. Our body/embodiment is subject to the gaze of others and is, in this sense, passive. Yet we nevertheless have some agency through which to shape our bodies and control our activities. Wysocki establishes, then, this inevitable tension: that the body is *mediated* by others through the external gaze—one over which the subject has no control or authority—but also *mediates* through embodied expression. Of course her larger project, and the one she asks of RWS, is to tease out and cultivate all the resources at our disposal to actively compose in the face of mediating institutions: to balance our condition of being mediated *by* mediating as thoughtfully as possible.

Combining Wysocki's insights about the dual characteristic of bodies/embodiments—namely that they are always both mediated, or passive, and mediating, or active—with Bratta and Sundvall's decomposition/recomposition distinction brings necessary nuance to an important ethical conversation. Bratta and Sundvall write that RWS scholars ought to:

cease thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment (juridical) and start thinking in terms of being/becoming a body/embodiment (onticological /ontological), particularly through relationships with other bodies/embodiments and digital technologies in social systems (epistemological): the former (juridical) marks an inevitable decomposing of bodies; the latter

(ontocological/ontological/epistemological) marks a necessary recomposing of bodies and embodiments. 5

There are good reasons to urgently move away from the juridical, or that which is set, determined, encoded, and toward the ontocological/ontological/epistemological: that which really is, regardless of how we may come to know it, if even partially. The existing, given, institutionally defined, and socially ingrained terms we have with which to compose about bodies/embodiments are used to hurt, disenfranchise, undermine, and murder. It is plainly true that we must indeed “start thinking in terms of being/becoming a body/embodiment” in order to build a language that supports and furthers conditions of freedom. Yet we cannot entirely dispense with “thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment” precisely because of the passive element of bodies/embodiment that Wysocki describes. There are real, material consequences to having a body/embodiment that is mediated, that exists for others to see, and over which a subject has little control. While ours is a body that we experience while doing, ours is also necessarily “[t]he objectified body (the body as it is perceived by the world).” Wysocki cites Lacan, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty who assert that “embodiment...happen[s] through culturally developed identities being placed on us by others” (pp. 12-13). These identities, these expectations for who we are which are “placed on us by others” based on our “objectified body” which is “perceived by the world,” are often the forces which lead to decomposition but still necessarily constitute, at least in part, our felt identities: who we believe ourselves to be, who we feel we are. Wysocki’s discussion, echoing critical theorists like Walter Benjamin, certainly does underline the way that using emerging technologies can allow for the recomposition of oppressed bodies, noting that subjects can use available tools to compose in a way that is “productive on their own behalf” (15). Yet she does not suggest that embracing the liberating potential of

composing with technology entails dismissing or ceasing to consider the equally real condition of being a mediated body/embodiment (p. 14). This passive mediation, while often pernicious, nevertheless shapes our identities and gives us desires, goals, fears that we cannot simply cease to consider. Rather, we must grapple with the effects of what it means to have a body.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Bratta and Sundvall call to ignore or paper-over the racist, sexist language of institutions that are used for oppression. Their introduction to the special edition is a testament to the importance of noticing, calling out, and robustly refuting that language. Rather, I mean to tease out an implication of Bratta and Sundvall's existing discussion of the decomposition/recomposition distinction in RWS. In studying the way that diverse embodiments use digital technology to address systems of domination, it becomes clearer that recomposing one's body/embodiment entails *using* language otherwise wielded against one, language historically used to decompose. Wysocki shows us that there is "no dissolution of the tension" between the body as mediated externally and the body that productively mediates (18). While she focuses her scholarly efforts on understanding "what it is that enables subjects—those on the 'inside' of felt embodiment—to take on productive, mediating actions, through written textual possibilities," she does not ignore that "the subjectifying and objectifying processes of media" and of language, I might add, "stay active" (19).

Therefore, I suggest a rephrasing the earlier mandate to include implications of the mediated/mediating body/embodiment:

RWS scholars ought to start thinking in terms of being/becoming a body/embodiment (onticological/ontological), particularly through relationships with other bodies/embodiments and digital technologies in social systems (epistemological). This requires entering a rhetorical decomposition-

recomposition struggle which entails, at times, thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment (juridical). What allows for a necessary recomposing of bodies and embodiments is locating a “balance of mediations” (Wysocki, 2012, p. 19). That balance can occur when subjects with diverse embodiments compose in order both to understand their relationship to subjectifying and objectifying structures and institutions and to imagine new, more productive relationships.

My phrasing eliminates the call to “cease” thinking about having a body/embodiment and instead offers a productive way to attend to this reality while nevertheless focusing on the process of being/becoming a body/embodiment. Table 1 displays the original mandate from Bratta and Sundvall alongside my rephrasing to clarify the differences.

<u>Original:</u>	<u>Rephrased (my additions in italics):</u>
<p>[W]e suggest that we cease thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment (juridical) and start thinking in terms of being/becoming a body/embodiment (onticological /ontological), particularly through relationships with other bodies/embodiments and digital technologies in social systems (epistemological): the former (juridical) marks an inevitable decomposing of bodies; the latter (onticological/ontological/epistemological).</p>	<p>RWS scholars ought to start thinking in terms of being/becoming a body/embodiment (onticological/ontological), particularly through relationships with other bodies/embodiments and digital technologies in social systems (epistemological). <i>This requires entering a rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle which entails, at times, thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment (juridical). What allows for a necessary recomposing of bodies and embodiments is locating a “balance of</i></p>

marks a necessary recomposing of bodies and embodiments. (5)	<i>mediations” (Wyscoki 19). That balance can occur when subjects with diverse embodiments compose in order both to understand their relationship to subjectifying and objectifying structures and institutions and to imagine new, more productive relationships.</i>
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Table 4 Amendments to Bratta And Sundvall's Original Call for Research

Any work, therefore, that aims to *recompose* marginalized bodies and embodiments, in the Bratta and Sundvall sense, cannot escape acknowledging, grappling with, using, and even at times accepting language and ideas that simultaneously have the power to *decompose*. The collection of videos on *ContraPoints* are, ultimately, oriented towards a recomposition of trans bodies/embodiments; yet in order to honestly and productively make new space for these historically oppressed persons, the content constantly vacillates, rhetorically, between three points on a spectrum of the decomposition-recomposition struggle. The points represent some composer's rhetorical orientation towards current oppressive, rigid, institutional language used to categorize and fix bodies/embodiments. At one end of the spectrum is a rhetorical space in which to accept, live into, and express one's identity through language historically used to decompose. The middle of the spectrum represents the rhetorical space in which to dissect the language of decomposition, to position oneself in relation to these fixed categories, and to honestly unpack the consequences of one's relationship to oppressive language. Finally, the far end of the spectrum represents the rhetorical space for complete rejection and subversion of predetermined categories for one's identity and the space to consciously create a more fluid and flexible sense of self outside of that which is prescribed. Within a single composition or a body of work, many

authors will move in and out of these three rhetorical attitudes towards the language of oppression, never finally arriving at any fixed orientation towards them, rather constantly negotiating with them. This oscillation captures the experience of composing as a body/embodiment that is subject to the tension Wysocki describes, and it affirms Bratta and Sundvall's observation that any body/embodiment is always in the process of being/becoming.

ContraPoints provides a rich group of compositions that illustrate the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle. The push and pull of rhetorical attitudes towards institutionalized or socially-sanctioned language used to oppress trans women occurs throughout her oeuvre; however, a subset of them can be used to demonstrate the way this phenomenon happens not just at the level of stated propositions and linguistic argumentation but visually through Wynn's use of her own body. Whereas some of Wynn's work pertains only peripherally to issues of trans oppression, focusing instead on critiquing capitalism, fascism, or climate change, some videos make transness the primary topic of discussion. In these, like most of her videos, she refuses to dogmatically accept or reject conclusions about how trans people ought to respond to the various pressures they face. Instead, she unpacks the often sordid, tangled web of given ideas about trans people, considering a diverse range of perspectives as coolly as possible. She endeavors to honestly explain her personal position in relationship to the ideas and concedes and accepts some points while subverting and refuting others. In Wynn's videos, this examination, acceptance, and rejection of ideas about trans people happens through speech either directly to the audience or in dialogue between characters; however, she also uses visuals, particularly her own body, to make this tension more apparent and, at times, even visceral to audiences. In the video *Beauty*, her aim is to examine the complicated role that physical presentation plays for trans women. Her movement in and out of various sets and costumes

mirrors and underscores the rhetorical movement in and out of mocking, rejecting, and accepting harmful, oppressive language about trans women and beauty.

2.2 Beauty

After nearly two months of anticipation, *ContraPoints*' more than one million subscribers were particularly excited to find a new video published on May 22nd, 2019. Not only was the excitement greater due to a slightly longer wait than usual for another installment of dramatic looks and withering critiques from Natalie Wynn, but viewers were also anxious to see the first glimpses of Wynn's altered appearance after undergoing facial feminization surgery (FFS). In keeping with her history of speaking honestly and frankly to audiences about her gender transition, Wynn took the video "Beauty" as an opportunity, first, to explain in some detail her cosmetic surgery and the feelings she experienced throughout and, second, to unpack the complicated relationships between feminine beauty standards writ large and the pressures trans women face both to meet and to defy those standards. The video that results is an exploration, through the lens of a trans woman's experience, of the different ways one might react to society's obsession with beauty. She articulates responses that come from dominant voices, relative to her own, regarding trans women's orientations to beauty norms, and she examines the merits of these responses while also pointing out their shortcomings and the ways they further marginalize trans women; she both parodies the dominant responses and admits ways in which she is complicit with them, ultimately sketching a more liberating, alternative way for all people to think about the concept of beauty. Yet she does not dogmatically endorse the alternate path she envisions, refusing to posit a clear solution to a complex social, political, and personal issue. "Beauty" is a clear example of how Wynn enters into the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, exploiting the in-flux-ness of the YT medium to make space for trans

embodiment while preserving the tension between dominant narratives, individual experience, and subversive potentials.

If the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle represents an author's shifting rhetorical orientation towards some dominant narrative about marginalized bodies, it's necessary to first say what those dominant narratives are in order to get a sense of how the author contends with them. In "Beauty," Wynn looks at the different responses to the question "Should a trans woman undergo FFS?" examining what values, interests, and voices inform each response and then unpacking her own relationship to feminine beauty. Near the beginning of the video, she explains that many people, both trans and cis, believe that FFS and other cosmetic alterations are "medically necessary" for relieving gender dysphoria (5:47). Others, however, including academic feminists and some gender non-binary people, disagree with FFS saying that it is analogous to "East Asian people getting double eyelid surgery" insofar as it is an attempt to align with homogenizing, toxic, Western beauty standards (6:41). These detractors say that having cosmetic surgery to appear feminine plays into hetero- and cis-normative, patriarchal ideas of what it means to be a woman and further marginalizes trans people and women in general. Wynn disagrees, noting that "telling a trans person to just learn to accept the way they look can actually be kind of transphobic because a big part of what it even means to be trans, at least for [her], is the desire to look more female" (6:56). Yet she recognizes some truth in this position and has criticism for the FFS affirmative position, too, saying that "gender dysphoria is not sealed away in a vacuum away from the influence of societal ideals and norms" (7:17). The conversation that ensues is her attempt to carve out a more nuanced understanding of what a healthy relationship might look like between trans women and the desire to appear beautiful, one that acknowledges the inevitable influence of language and ideas about beauty that decompose.

By tackling this issue, Wynn is indeed addressing “systems of domination” given the role that female beauty plays in nearly all arenas of existence (Bratta and Sundvall 3). Beauty is not simply a neutral, abstract, aesthetic concern; rather, Wynn directs our attention to the fact that “beauty is power, that beauty is political” (24:25). She indicates that there are certain physical markers for women—markers that Wynn suggests stem from patriarchy, or male desire—that are more highly valued than others. When she says that “beauty is power” and “is political,” this means that if a person possesses those markers, they are more likely to do well on the job market, to have security and agency in accomplishing their goals, and even to live without harassment. This also means that those without the conventional feminine markers may be subject to unfair treatment and may ultimately have less of a chance to realize the kind of life they desire. In the case of trans women, specifically, who may not appear to others as conventionally feminine, they may be subject to extreme violence or even murder. Furthermore, Wynn mentions the role that beauty plays in capitalism, noting that companies with products to sell sustain and benefit from a society in which exacting beauty conventions are enforced (25:25). Because of the far-reaching role it plays, conversations about feminine beauty are always set on the backdrop of overlapping systems of domination. A discussion of how feminine beauty relates to trans women will include language, norms, and assumptions that come from patriarchal systems, those which take men to be the default type of embodiment around which society ought to be constructed; it also involves hetero- and cis-normative language, norms, and assumptions which see male-female partnering and sexuality as the default and assume that one’s gender-assigned-at-birth is fundamental to one’s identity and place in the world. These systems inform our legal, medical, political and academic institutions, and, because of their ubiquity, they act powerfully in shaping our individual understandings of sexuality and gender.

There are multiple, power-laden values and voices about female beauty in the conversation that Wynn starts in “Beauty.” The values and voices come from individuals whose beliefs about what it means to be trans fall on a spectrum of extreme views. Among the most fervent believers that FFS is not just acceptable but is a requirement in order to be a “valid” trans woman are those who staunchly believe in “transmedicalism” which offers a medical logic to the state of being trans. It suggests that one is only trans if one has a certain set of medically diagnosable conditions, including gender dysphoria, a condition which describes an individual’s uneasy, disruptive, and uncomfortable feelings living as the gender they were assigned at birth. Adherents to this logic often refuse to acknowledge a person as trans if that person has not sought medical attention or if they do not feel dysphoria. While not taken on directly in *Beauty*, several of Wynn’s other videos explore this position, pointing out the appeals and strengths of the position as well as the shortcomings (Wynn “Gender Critical,” “Tiffany Tumbles,” “Transtrenders”). The most vociferous opposition to FFS comes from the voices of activists and academics, including certain feminist groups, who believe that trans ought to represent a category of gender nonconformity, one that pushes society in the direction of eventually abolishing the concept of gender. In this category might also be trans exclusive radical feminists (TERFS) who are either reluctant or simply refuse to acknowledge trans women as women, excluding them from conversations about dangers, risks, consequences, norms, expectations, and pressures to which cis-women are subject.

In “Beauty” then, Wynn attempts to negotiate the positions of transmedicalists on the one hand and academics and activists who oppose adhering to feminine beauty norms on the other. Transmedicalists, and those who believe there must be some medico-scientific explanation to point to in order to validate the trans experience, are appealing to Enlightenment-era

assumptions, written into Western ideology. This type of thinking assumes that all bodily phenomena need a scientific explanation to be considered a real experience that deserves care, recognition, and protection. Especially given the way that the medical research community has taken the white male body as the point from which to understand humans in general and has excluded women, both cis and trans, from studies, this view is complicit in many ways with patriarchy. At a more basic level, those who believe in FFS as necessary for being a trans woman implicitly accept, at some level, a set of arbitrary norms that dictate what an ideal “woman” ought to look like. As Wynn establishes in the video, these norms stem from dominant systems, namely male desire—patriarchy—and consumer capitalism. Similarly, the FFS opposers are working from sets of ideas and assumptions that come from dominant discourses, including some from academic feminist literature that often diminish the experience of embodiment in favor of abstract arguments about what gender equality requires.

Wynn uses an array of strategies to compose “Beauty.” Perhaps the most important is the connection between the contrasting visual presentations of her own body and the similarly contrasting rhetorical orientations she takes towards the dominant discourses at play in the issue of trans women and FFS. Just as there are three points on the spectrum of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, Wynn appears in three distinct and divergent looks and settings in “Beauty.” While there is not a one-to-one correspondence between look/setting and rhetorical orientation, the ever-shifting visual presentation of Wynn’s femininity and location brings to the fore, for the viewers, her ever-shifting attitudes towards language and ideas about trans women and beauty that comes from dominant systems. This embodied rhetorical style complicates rather than clarifies viewers’ beliefs and attitudes towards gender and sexuality; the

distinction between complication and clarification becomes important when using conclusions about this video, module 2, to understand the whole YT video page assemblage.

2.3 The Sets, Looks, and Their Places on the Decomposition-Recomposition Spectrum

The opening scene features a costumed Natalie sitting in a chair to the left of the frame in the first of three sets which I will call the Enlightenment Salon (see Figure 3). This set is a richly furnished interior that uses warm colors of taupe, gold, firebrick red, and mahogany. The wall behind Wynn is papered in damask, a popular fabric for wealthy European elites in the middle ages and renaissance, and on that wall to the right of Wynn hangs a dark painting framed in gold. The 17th century painting by an unknown French artist is entitled “Allegory of the Vanity of Earthly Things” and depicts a young girl, dressed in the same firebrick red as the salon’s walls, staring forward at the viewer as she delicately places her finger at the crown of a human skull that sits on a desk. Wynn’s garments and her pose, seated in the chair, mirror those of the girl in the painting. On her face, she wears an ornate Venetian carnival mask. She, along with the girl, is delicately touching a human skull which she holds upright in her left hand, tapping it lightly with the long nails of her right hand.

While the specific adornments change from video to video, the Enlightenment Salon is a category of sets that appears in several *ContraPoints* videos, often as a backdrop for the musings of Lady Foppington, a recurring character on the channel. Lady Foppington, an 18th century European aristocrat, is often a mouthpiece for 18th and 19th century ideas about science, specifically those having to do with race. She is rarely seen without a skull in her midst, a not-so-subtle nod to the thoroughly debunked, racist pseudo-science of phrenology. The presence of the Enlightenment Salon and of Wynn as a version of Lady Foppington are visual cues that prime viewers to consider Enlightenment-era thinking, that which is preoccupied with rationally

conceiving of the body and categorizing it into distinct parts that are knowable scientifically; these sets of visual signifiers serve as reminders of the oppressive, dominant discourses that lie at the foundation of transmedicalism, asking viewers to challenge the idea that science can and should provide an ironclad, logical, medical explanation for the embodied experience of trans people.

The second of three major sets, which serves as the primary one for “Beauty,” then appears. While the video cuts back and forth from the other two sets, most of the video takes place here in what I call the Hyper-Femme Boudoir (see Figure 5). In contrast to the darkness of the previous set, this is an extremely brightly lit vanity area, but, as with the Enlightenment Salon, it appears luxurious. Pale pink curtains serve as a backdrop to this room that appears to be a backstage dressing area. To the right of the video’s frame is a vanity mirror lit with oversized bulbs attached to a table cluttered with sprays and lotions and innumerable other bottles of beauty products. A smaller table covered in the same array of products is to the left, also carrying a vase of pink roses and a mannequin head on which rests a curled white wig akin to the sort that Lady Foppington might wear. Wynn sits facing the camera and we see the décor behind her. She wears her long, straight hair down, simply styled with a side part, flowing behind her shoulders and revealing oversized, silver, hoop earrings. She wears an extremely colorful, patterned sequin top that sparkles brilliantly in the bright lighting that illuminates this set.



Figure 5 The Hyper-Femme Boudoir

Given that “Beauty” is the first video in which Wynn appears post FFS, her choice of facial presentation is particularly important. Her use of makeup is much simpler than in other videos; it is neither “draggy” nor is it minimalist. Her face looks fresh and sparkling, in keeping with the brightness of the set, thanks to a generous use of highlighter. Electric blue lines the bottom of her eyelids and a sunset purple covers her lids. Along with the false eyelashes and filled-out brows, the makeup choices render her brown almond-shaped eyes the clear focal point of her face.

The Hyper-Femme Boudoir and Wynn’s bright, colorful look are the visual sites on which a complex spectrum over the meaning of feminine beauty for trans women occurs. In this video, Wynn does not debate the merits, shortcomings, and meanings of FFS in an abstract context; rather, she offers her own body to the viewers as an example of the results of FFS and places herself in a setting that exudes stereotypical, capitalist, consumption-oriented femininity in color, décor, and props. The use of such hyper-feminine visuals allows Wynn to move

seamlessly in and out of lampooning, on the one hand, and reconciling with, on the other, the strict, exacting adherence to feminine beauty norms. The visuals prime viewers to consider patriarchal, capitalist systems that inform our understanding of what feminine beauty entails, and, in “Beauty,” Wynn negotiates her relationship to those systems via her embodiment as well as the logical presentation of arguments.

The third visual space of *Beauty* is what I call the Darkness Vanity Table (see Figure 6). While it might be best described as a sub-location of the Hyper-Femme Boudoir, I categorize it as a distinct set given the notable difference in lighting and costuming from the other locations. In this space, the camera frames the vanity table with the mirror and oversized bulbs visible to the right of and behind Wynn in the Hyper-Femme Boudoir. Natalie sits before the mirror so that, in the shot, viewers see her face regarding itself, framed by the lit bulbs. The lighting is colored in a toned-down pale pink hue on one side of the shot’s frame while the other half of the shot is lit in a darker, indigo hue. Here, Wynn is dressed down. We see her torso and face, and she wears a plain look with her hair down, framing her face which features a simple makeup look. The look may be described as natural, save for the amped up highlighter, with no real inclusion of colors like the Hyper-Femme Boudoir makeup.

Rather than calling to mind any extreme views, ideas, or attitudes, I read the Darkness Vanity Table as a space for honest, personal, and often painful reconciliation with external, dominant pressures regarding feminine beauty standards and one’s own experiences of gender and outward appearance. Of the three sets and costumes, the setting and the clothes are closest to quotidian; some viewers may be able to imagine themselves in a similar place, position, and outfit as we find Wynn here. Furthermore, the way the frame is split in two by opposing colors—airy pink on one side and dusky blue on the other—prompts audiences to consider the burdens of

negotiating external expectations and individual circumstances. Conforming to and accepting patriarchal, capitalistic, and even at times transphobic norms results in both pleasure and pain, fulfillment and emptiness, as well as rewards and risky consequences. Here, then, is where Wynn will challenge viewers to look at the darker side of life as a trans woman navigating these tensions.

2.4 Using Language that Decomposes

As “Beauty” progresses, Wynn does not simply reject language and norms about feminine beauty that originate in oppressive systems. She does admit that these oppressive constructs about beauty are capable of harming trans women who adhere to them—or are *made* to adhere to them; yet she ultimately cannot escape accepting some of these constructs as real for her and as playing a role in helping her become who she wants to be. The two strains of dominant voices she engages with are, first, those of the transmedicalists and their ilk who emphasize the medical need for trans women to match up with a socially agreed-upon set of feminine characteristics, and second, the activist/academic voices who argue for complete freedom from participation in patriarchal, capitalistic feminine beauty norms. Through participating in a rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle which plays out in the video, Wynn appears at times to accept that feminine beauty, defined externally and likely originating from dominant systems, is something she desires to attain and something integral to her experience as a trans woman.

Whereas some, perhaps the activist/academic voices, would expect Wynn as a leftist to at least decry, if not eschew, participation in beauty norms, Wynn admits openly many times throughout the video that she cares deeply about the way she looks. Viewers are poised to believe her here as they have just witnessed the title credits which expose, somewhat

gruesomely, evidence of her recovering, post-FFS visage. Wynn does not hide that she is actively participating in a mainstream, medicalized conception of what it means to look beautiful for women. The last image of her pallid, gauzed face from the opening credits disappears, immediately replaced by a smiling Wynn beaming at the camera in the Hyper-Femme Boudoir. Here she is, revealing her new, cosmetically altered neck, face, and skull, dressed in colorful sequins and nestled in a bright pink setting. She speaks frankly about the procedure, telling viewers that her FFS included “forehead contouring, a brow lift, rhinoplasty, mandible contouring, a trachea shave” before she cuts back to the Enlightenment Salon to let Lady Foppington explain (1:58). Lady Foppington describes the procedures, demonstrating by gesturing to the skull, in her typical, haughty, and at times inscrutable 18th century British English syntax. For example, as a prelude to discussing the forehead contouring, she states that “a coronal incision was made athwart the cranial vault whence the skin of the forehead was stripped away from the bone” (2:10). She ends her demonstration by proclaiming that the procedures “thereby [delineate] a facial silhouette exhibiting that aspect which medical men call *cunty*” (2:56). Along with the humor that Wynn typically extracts from the juxtaposition of Foppington’s aristocratic turns of phrase and a more frank 20th century vernacular—here, the use of the word “cunty”—this cutaway brings viewers back, visually and thematically, to that way of thinking that seeks to scientifically categorize and quantify physical features of womanhood. Wynn’s own recitation of the numerous procedures coupled with Foppington’s addition of the grisly details leaves audiences with an overwhelming sense of the meticulous and exacting way that feminine features are catalogued and subsequently held up as intrinsically female. Wynn, back in the Hyper-Femme Boudoir, shares images of herself in profile before and after FFS, and, of course, displays the results simply by speaking to the camera. And while there may be

commenters who disagree, she feels, as do many of her supporters, that FFS indeed resulted in a desired softening of her features, giving her a look that is more aligned with the gender with which she identifies (3:30)

The content of “Beauty” appears, then, to align with the voices of transmedicalists and those who posit a rigid set of characteristics that determine one’s femininity. Wynn knows and admits that these are characteristics that likely originated in male desire and have been used to harm women, that they are sets of ideas that serve to decompose the bodies and embodiments of women, both cis and trans. Here, it seems, she is rhetorically aligning herself at the decomposition end of the rhetorical spectrum, literally embodying—via FFS—feminine characteristics prescribed by dominant discourse despite the harms that this entails. She cites the example of the way that participation in beauty culture, required to some extent for being recognized as a woman, also makes one the target of derision from those who simultaneously see obsession with beauty as “frivolous” (10:02). Ours, she confesses, is “a society that pressures women to be beautiful while simultaneously belittling them for caring about it” (10:15). The charge of frivolity is perhaps among the lesser consequences of women’s participation in beauty culture.

Women who conform to patriarchal beauty norms can be subject to much more intense repercussions. Clare Chambers’s (2007) *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice*, cites feminist academic Germaine Greer who says that “women’s bodies are shaped...as a result of compliance with *normative* rules that directly dictate appearance” (25). But compliance does not equal greater freedoms or more power. Appearing continually youthful, for example, “is a way of deriding female power and experience,” and “[h]igh heels render women unable to walk or run easily” (29). According to Greer and other feminists Chambers references such as Naomi Wolf

and Judith Butler, these consequences actually *do* render women inferior to men. Feminist scholar Marilyn Frye sees adherence to beauty norms as one of the mechanisms by which men maintain a gendered hierarchy in which women are generally cast as lesser. “Women’s physical restraint,” she says, “is not rewarded.” Instead, “it fits in a network of behaviors through which we constantly announce to others our membership in a lower caste and our unwillingness and/or inability to defend out bodily or moral integrity. It is degrading and a part of a pattern of degradation” (16).

Yet Wynn, as a trans woman, must also consider the equally risky penalties for refusing to comply with these norms. To fail to meet feminine beauty standards can and does mean, for many trans women, being misgendered, being ridiculed, or being open to transphobic violence. Some of that violence may even stem from feminist discourse around trans issues. Wynn, in her video “Gender Critical,” cites a Germaine Greer piece for *The Independent* in which she mocks and refers to a trans woman as “it.” If, Wynn says, feminist academic Greer is routinely “calling trans women ‘it,’ what do you think the guy on the steps of the liquor store is gonna say?” When trans women do not “pass,” they “get treated as monster gender,” which leads to what Wynn calls “pronouns it and spit” (“Gender Critical” 13:59). Avoiding these consequences, for many trans women, means working with extreme care to achieve an outward appearance that is beautiful in a feminine sense. “To all the people who’ve called me a man,” she explains, “I wanna say ‘Fuck you!’ by looking like the undeniable visual archetype of a woman” (10:35). She delivers these lines sitting in the Hyper-Femme Boudoir, presenting her body to the audience as the embodiment of someone on a journey to become that very archetype. She worries about continuously feeling the humiliation of coming across as a “caricature of a knuckly, hairy, burgeoning, mannish trans woman with which society has terrorized me to my core” (7:50). If

she desires to live and be recognized as a woman by others in her midst, she demonstrates that she must accept and live-into at least some standards of female beauty, regardless of whether these standards come from oppressive institutions or are used to harm and punish women in a variety of ways.

Many would respond that what I'm calling Wynn's *acceptance* of institutional language and ideas that has historically been used to decompose is, in fact, *acquiescence* in the face of what Frye has called the double-bind. This term describes the situation in which members of oppressed people find themselves where all available options for action lead to unwanted, harmful consequences. There are dominant norms placed on or given to members of any oppressed group. The double bind expresses the way that any individual group member, when choosing how to navigate these norms, is constrained by "networks of forces and barriers that expose one to penalty, loss, or contempt" regardless of choice (12). One example Frye offers is the way that many "younger women are in a bind where neither sexual activity nor inactivity is all right." One risks "censure and punishment for being loose, unprincipled, or a whore" if one chooses to engage in sexual activity; yet the choice to abstain is met with punishment also in the form of being "harassed by men who try to persuade her into it and pressure her to 'relax'" or being given "labels like 'frigid,' 'uptight'" and so on (11). The double bind for Wynn, here, is the choice to distance herself from rigid adherence to external feminine beauty norms and risk, at worse, transphobic violence or buy into the norms and experience the harms associated.

The double-bind is a state in which oppressed people find themselves and is a feature of an oppressive society; Frye introduces it in her essay "Oppression" in service of making claims about the macroscopic nature of oppression. Being faced with a double-bind, therefore, constitutes an unjust situation and points to the existence of systematic, institutional injustices of

an oppressive society. This explains many academic feminists' reluctance or refusal to accept or live-into one of the choices the double-bind might present for women. To do so would be to endorse that which maintains unjust hierarchies and further contributes to one's own degradation and social, political, legal, and material inequality. The fear of reproducing inequality is, in part, what animates Bratta and Sundvall's call to "cease thinking in terms of having a body" (5). The available means by which scholars might refer to bodies, they might say, are infused with a kind of double-bind effect. The language and concepts about the bodies of oppressed people are so deeply infused with oppressive systems that, no matter how one might use them, such language and concepts lead to penalties and punishments; it decomposes.

The dominant language and concepts around feminine beauty and trans women may decompose, Wynn might respond, but asking trans women to ignore these normative ideas because of their function in an oppressive society fails to take seriously the bodies/embodiments that are subject to these norms. She takes great pains to emphasize both the reality of the desires she feels to attain beauty and, though perhaps to a lesser extent, the intrinsic aesthetic value she places in at least some feminine beauty practices. "The truth is," she confesses early in "Beauty," facing the camera in the *Hyper-Femme Boudoir*, "I don't *just* want to look female. I want to be beautiful." The shot becomes tighter around her colorfully made-up face as she adds, "Desperately. God, I'll do anything!" (8:40). As a self-proclaimed leftist, she knows the way that these beauty norms fit into oppression saying, exasperatedly, "We know, we know, we know all of this because we've been sitting around critiquing it for decades because that's what leftists do. We critique things" (24:59). But she draws attention to the fact that "[t]he intellectual exercise of critiquing things doesn't usually affect...desires very much." After any critique of oppressive conditions, the real experience of feeling the desire and need to align with potentially harmful

norms remains. She wonders, somewhat hopelessly, what individuals ought to do in the wake of critique, suggesting that the academic/activist answer is something along the lines of “sit...in silent contemplation until [one’s] desires finally align themselves with the international proletariat revolution.” Her response: “Oh fuck the revolution, I wanna be a pretty rich girl” (25:52). Perhaps a society organized around patriarchy, an oppressively male-dominated regime, has unjustly given women certain desires; but, Wynn seems to emphasize, there is something condescending, unfair, and belittling about the move to entirely dismiss those real desires as simply residue of oppression without recognizing the real role they play in women’s lives. In other words, language and concepts that decompose cannot be excised or overlooked when they are intimately bound up in our desires, who we want to be, who we feel ourselves to be given social construction. Bratta and Sundvall hope for RWS to think primarily in terms of “being/becoming a body/embodiment,” but in order to do this, we must take seriously the way that oppressive norms are native features of some bodies/embodiments and be sensitive to rhetorical choices that arise from composing as a body that is mediated by others (p. 5).

2.5 Lamponing and Subverting Language that Decomposes

Wynn may ask viewers to take seriously the socially constructed desires for feminine beauty that trans women may possess, but “Beauty” does not wholly endorse trans women’s acceptance, tout court, of norms about feminine beauty. Her attitudes and orientations towards feminine beauty shift, just as her body shifts in and out of these various spaces, appearing in the different costumes and with different facial presentations. As part of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle in this video, Wynn also appears to criticize and distance herself from participation in gendered attitudes about beauty. She does this through bouts of

satire as well as through sketching potential resolutions to the psychic aspect of the tension Wysocki notes between experiencing the body/embodiment as both mediated and mediating.

Early in “Beauty,” just before explaining the details of her FFS, Wynn demonstrates through parody her awareness of the way that cosmetic surgery, and the YT industry built around beauty, is ripe for judgment. Because the Hyper-Femme Boudoir is the site that most fully embodies the external expectations for femininity, it provides the ideal setting for caricaturing these expectations. Upon viewers’ first glimpse of this set and of Wynn’s surgically altered look, she immediately launches into a boisterously energetic welcome message to viewers that promises them a “makeup tutorial as always” even though there are never such tutorials in other videos on her channel (:42). The minute-long parody of makeup tutorials that ensues makes viewers aware that Wynn sees the insipidness of beauty culture and that she recognizes the hollowness of the refrain to emphasize “inner beauty” in the face of a billion-dollar industry that these YouTubers participate in; her discussions later in the video of, among other issues, the oppressive role capitalism plays in beauty culture, gives viewers enough evidence to support a conclusion that the inner beauty comment is dripping with irony. That she dresses the part of the beauty YouTuber and sits in heightened version of a set on which these personalities might appear could give viewers the impression that she is aligning herself with these kinds of personalities. But in the context of a parody, the visuals of the Hyper-Femme Boudoir and her look take on a different meaning; she uses her body as a conduit for mocking the false earnestness of these YouTubers and their obsession with beauty. In these moments of parody, she shifts her strategies to the opposite end of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition spectrum, decrying dominant values, language, expectations used to decompose marginalized bodies.

Wynn returns to parody later in “Beauty,” but this time the target of her derision is the skin care industry and associated YT content. She laments that keeping up with societal pressures to conform to womanhood requires battling the aging process and says that this means engaging in “the ritual of skincare products” (20:07). As a complete contrast from her very colorful, meticulously painted face, she next appears entirely without makeup at the Darkness Vanity Table where she looks into the mirror at the camera and says: “Here’s my daytime routine” (20:08). Importantly, before beginning, she confesses that none of the products she will share are sponsored but that she is simply “supporting corporations out of the kindness of my heart,” clueing in audiences to her awareness of the enmeshment of beauty products and capitalism (20:19). She proceeds to apply product after product, discussing each step just as a YT skin care tutorial might; however, whereas the convention is to explain the product and its usefulness, Wynn instead delivers a scathing one-liner for each. For example, as she daubs toner onto her skin, she says to the audience, “Now a lot of people don’t know what a toner does, but um” she waits several beats. “Look it tones, OK!” she finally says, gesturing exasperatedly to the mirror, following with “Do you want your face to be *un-toned*?” (20:44). Each joke pokes fun at generic conventions of skin care routine videos and call to mind a particularly infamous one published after *Beauty* but very much in keeping with its sentiments. In it, actress Liv Tyler demonstrates her 25-step skin care routine, the products for which cost a total of \$1,065 according to an *Allure* estimate (Robin). Just prior to the release of “Beauty,” CNN reported that growth in the skin care industry had outstripped the sale of makeup and comprised, at the time, a \$5.6 billion market (Garcia). The report cites social media influencers and practitioners of skin care as a major cause of the growth, noting that, like with makeup, there is a highly visual component to skin care making it appropriate for platforms such as Instagram and YT.

The rhetoric here is on the opposite end of the spectrum of decomposition-recomposition struggle from the scenes previously analyzed, mocking and rejecting dominant expectations for femininity rather than demonstrating their centrality to her identity. The consistent wisecracks she makes throughout the skincare demonstration, as well as her comments about the costs involved and therefore the benefit to corporations, serve to mock the skin care industry and demonstrate Wynn's awareness of the huckstering afoot in YT tutorials of the sort and in promoting mainstream expectations for how women should manage aging. Her choice to set this parody not in the Hyper-Femme Boudoir but at the Darkness Vanity Table strengthens a reading of it as emphasizing the sinister aspects of patriarchal, commercialized beauty and skincare norms. The setting is decidedly less effervescent and glittering, and Wynn's face is stripped down, a generic practice of a skin-care video but also a signal of the removal of artifice and exposing of reality. The moments after the tutorial similarly reinforce the sinister reading, as Wynn says, having just put on the finishing touches of "some more expensive mist," that "this is the part where I usually just stare at my own face for ten minutes and contemplate the futility of my struggle against the ravages of time" (21:57). The shot lingers on Wynn's face for a few seconds before there is a transition revealing a now sobbing Wynn, still at the Darkness Vanity Table and depicted in Figure 6, still staring at herself, who whimpers through tears "I'm fine, it's fine, this is fine, it's fine" (22:10).



Beauty | ContraPoints

Figure 6 Darkness Vanity Table

In these scenes, Wynn’s rhetorical orientation toward mainstream views about feminine beauty is scornful; she disdains and distances herself from the way that dominant systems function to shape attitudes about the way women ought to look. She presents the dark side of following feminine beauty norms via parody, using a setting—happier pink on one side and more foreboding midnight blue on the other—and her own body/embodiment—makeup-less face, performative weeping—as visual features that expose the grim reality that lies beneath a colorful, lacquered veneer. The truth is, her parody shows, that the skin care rituals cannot bring fulfillment; accepting and playing into social pressure to purchase one’s way back into youth comes with punishments—e.g. the time, expense, confusion—and harms—disillusionment—just like the choice to ignore the pressures.

Revealing the darkness of feminine beauty norms leads Wynn to articulate a potential alternative to playing-into or distancing: that is, opting for a subversion of the norms. She softens

her earlier condemnation of the idea of “revolution” or revolution’s softer relative, the move to “change society,” recognizing the possibility that “social constructs can change” (26:51). She nods to the common idea that having beauty icons of a greater range of ethnic, racial, body, gender, sexuality types is one possible step towards “[loosening] the grip of restrictive beauty standards,” but it is her articulation of what it means to have Personal Style that represents a unique alternative to the double-bind in which feminine beauty norms entrap women, both trans and cis (26:33). She says that:

Where I can see an escape from my particular doom spiral is in style as an alternative idea to beauty. You can be stylish at any age. You can be stylish whether you pass or not. Style is a way of cultivating a personal aesthetic that you have complete control over. It’s like art in that originality is a virtue. Style is an individual aesthetic unlike the collective aesthetic of beauty standards....So even if you don’t conform to conventional beauty standards, through the power of original style, you can create the taste by which your unique beauty is to be appreciated. 27:49

This calls to mind Wysocki’s impetus to focus on the power composers have to engage in productive mediation in the face of mediating institutions. However, while Wynn emphasizes the possibility of creating a physical presentation that is unique to oneself, of taking control over one’s relationship to the aesthetic of one’s body/embodiment, she remains aware of the reality that one’s body/embodiment is still subject to an external gaze. While Wynn’s vision of personal style here is one that the individual controls, one nevertheless understands that the style “is to be appreciated” by others. One’s style may be original, but it participates in a larger social landscape. It does not exist just for oneself but as an outward-facing “personal aesthetic” that

others will take in. Nor does the cultivation and execution of a personal style preclude one from experiencing the social sanctions that accompany breaking with norms. Trans women sporting unique looks are still subject to being misgendered, insulted, gawked at, or in the worst instances physically harmed. Wynn asserts merely that being active in shaping and embodying personal style can afford dignity and “confidence” to those subject to censure for not conforming to dominant norms of femininity (28:10).

2.6 Honestly Negotiating Tensions Between Accepting and Rejecting

Anyone who watches the entire 31-minute video, however, knows that Wynn does not provide any real answer to the questions that animate “Beauty.” Any tentative acceptance of the norms is undercut by ridiculing them in turn, and any path to subverting the norms is met with the reality of her society-given but real desires to be beautiful. She swiftly denies that the potential dignity-conferring power of personal style would preclude her from engaging in additional cosmetic surgeries, exclaiming, “What do you people think I am, some kind of transgender Mother Theresa?” (28:34). This reversal alerts audiences that Wynn’s composition, unlike some traditional essay in which counterarguments are met with rebuttals, will remain ambiguous, refusing to resolve the tension between body-as-mediated and body-as-mediating. As we will see in Chapter 4, the ambiguity of this video will deeply affect the properties and capacities of the *ContraPoints* video page assemblage.

In many moments of *Beauty*, Wynn appears to neutrally acknowledge rather than actively accept, reject, or subvert mainstream views about trans women and feminine beauty; this represents the middle point of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle. In these moments, she is most honest, reflective, and personal about her own relationship to the norms and to the dominant systems that dictate them. She admits that her FFS experience was

extremely expensive, painful, and fraught with anxiety, and that, while she is pleased with the results, in many ways she feels more depressed than ever (3:38; 23:03). The depression, she surmises, stems from the false hope that a more feminine look would help her feel more like a woman and feel more beautiful. She found, instead, that the search for beauty is a futile process given its function in an oppressive society and that it is important to stop believing that any beauty intervention represents “a solution to deep psychological issues” (23:31). Nevertheless, exacerbating her depression is the feeling that she is somehow shallow or inferior for having a preoccupation with beauty. Instead, she does conclude with some finality, “I need to start forgiving myself for wanting to be beautiful” (23:49). This is the closest thing that resembles a conclusion in “Beauty.” Notice that the conclusion is neither prescriptive nor traditionally persuasive; it acknowledges the role dominant systems play in shaping her identity rather than wholly endorsing or rejecting it. To “cease thinking in terms of having a body/embodiment” means being less attuned to the way that Wynn’s experience of having a body materially affects her rhetorical choices. Scholarship that only focuses on the recomposition end of the decomposition-recomposition struggle may fall into the category of academic work like Greer’s that disrespects the lived experience of marginalized people and ultimately prop-up dominant systems.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter looked at the rhetoric of “Beauty”’s module 2 as a step towards the larger goal of understanding the *ContraPoints* video page assemblage. “Beauty” is just one of several videos in Wynn’s oeuvre in which a rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle happens visually, on and through her body as it exists and moves in carefully curated spaces. She uses the contested site of her own body as one of the primary vehicles for talking back to those who have

the power to shape the future climate for trans people; through an embodied performance, she refutes and also reappropriates the language and ideas used by the powerful to control trans bodies. Rather than arguing for or against any one concept of how a trans woman ought to look, think, or exist, “Beauty” moves in and out of a variety of rhetorical positions; Wynn accepts, rejects, subverts and concedes points without ever committing staunchly to any one position. In Chapter 4, I connect this conclusion—that is, Wynn’s resistance to commit to a position—with conclusions about module 5, the comments section, to support my claim that the *ContraPoints* video page assemblage has limited capacity to foster social justice movements.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of module 5 that leads to my Chapter 4 claims. While the present chapter focused on Wynn as the primary author, Chapter 3 looks to understand how multiple authors address systems of domination in module 5 of the YT video page. One of my takeaways from the larger study is the value in shifting scholarly understanding of YT videos from digital compositions as big-data assemblages; it is in Chapter 3 that I grapple with the “big-data” element of the video page assemblage. I demonstrate some methods scholars might use to analyze comment data, and I uncover ways that *ContraPoints* co-authors foreground their own embodiment in the comments and replies they compose.

3 YOUTUBE COMMENTS: IN-FLUX-NESS OF ATTITUDES ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

Natalie Wynn emerges from behind deep red curtains and welcomes the audience to what she calls “The Gender Circus” (17:53). She appears in a simple look with natural makeup and a red, short-sleeved top in her video, “Autogynephilia,” an exploration and critique of psychologist and sexologist Ray Blanchard’s theory about the psychological motivations that lead people to seek a gender transition. Wynn explains that, at present, there is a widespread psychological and medical recognition that gender dysphoria that is the cause for a person to seek to live as a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria is, as Wynn describes it, “the state of social, emotional, anatomical, sexual, spiritual and sartorial angst relating to one’s assigned birth sex.” Yet Blanchard offers a different theory which holds that men seek to become women entirely based on sexual desire and that these men fall into one of two camps. They are either “homosexual transsexuals” who want to live as women in order to have the best chances of attracting heterosexual men for sex, or they are “autogynephilic” which means that they are sexually aroused merely by the thought of being or becoming a woman (4:35). Despite this being a “sinister fringe theory” that most trans women say does not describe their reasons for transitioning, Wynn notes that it grew in popularity due to its being taken up and championed by Northwestern University psychology professor, J. Michael Bailey. In 2003, Bailey published *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science and Genderbending of Transsexualism*, which used Blanchard’s theory, albeit in scientifically dubious ways as Wynn argues (1:46).

This propping-up of transphobic theories by men with impressive academic credentials allowed the idea to circulate into the mainstream understanding of trans women to such a degree that it is tacitly accepted by many in society. Wynn says, in fact, that she has “had several

conversations with academics and journalists where it becomes clear that they believe in Blanchard's theory" (2:17). "One of the reasons it's difficult for trans women to refute Blanchard's theory," she explains, "is that even arguing against it from your own experience is incredibly humiliating and degrading and invalidating." In service of robustly countering Blanchard's ideas, Wynn decides to take on the challenge of presenting and using details from her gender and psycho-sexual history. "Get your clipboards out, gentleman," she demands fiercely. "I wanna make this as easy as possible for the psychoanalysts at home" (18:17).

The scene cuts abruptly from the shot of Natalie narrating in front of the theatrical, circus-like backdrop and the screen is now framed in black, featuring in the middle a rectangle of static accompanied by the roar of white noise (18:18). The static center cuts to a black and white shot of Wynn, reclining on a couch, visible from the waist up. Along the top and bottom of the black frame is white text bearing information about "patient #655321" who viewers assume is Wynn. Her age and sex are listed at the top as 29 and "M" respectively. On the bottom left is a stopwatch-like time counter beginning at 00:59:44:00 which continues to run throughout the following scene. Also along the bottom of the frame is the date, "1/29/2018" and on the far right, the letters BMGC (18:19). For the next five minutes, Wynn narrates her gender and sexual past from childhood to the current moment, explaining her intimate thoughts, feelings, and encounters that led to her present embodiment. As she speaks, she looks at some offscreen person or object rather than at the viewer, and she intertwines and untwines her fingers and wrings her hands in apparent unease. The shot variously changes to a closeup of her hands, capturing and highlighting this nervous fidgeting. When she finishes offering her personal experiences to the unknown presence beyond the camera, the timer on the bottom of the frame reads 1:04:33:09 (23:07).

As of October 7, 2020, viewers could find 7,372 comments below this video that was originally posted on February 1st, 2018. That number continues to grow, reaching 7,654 by just a month later, on November 6, 2020. Among the thousands of comments is one dated “2 years ago” that begins: “Hi, cis-woman here. For a long time, I had very private ideas about trans women which sort of veered heavily into TERF territory” (see Figure 7). TERF, which is shorthand for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist, describes a group of people who refuse to recognize trans women as women because of TERF claims about the way trans embodiment and experience of oppression differs from those of cis women. The commenter explains that while she was uneasy in some ways about denying trans women the status of women, she also felt that, because in her view trans women did not experience the oppression of cis women, they should not be afforded the opportunity to “enter into ‘my’ space” or “[criticize] ‘my’ movements.” Despite her original feelings, she says to Wynn that: “watching your videos has been enlightening to say the least. I came here for the anti-capitalist propaganda but stayed because I was learning valuable things about a marginalized identity that I had some very misguided ideas about, and because I learned the error of my ways.” As a result of Wynn’s videos, she realized that “thinking about a trans-woman [sic] as a man who became a woman was fundamentally missing the point, and denying their lived experience.” She concludes her comment by offering “gratitude” to Wynn for her “candor and bravery to be so open in this public space,” an act that facilitated the commenter’s shifting attitudes towards trans women to be more inclusive and accepting.

7,654 Comments  SORT BY

Add a public comment...



Highlighted comment

Erica Kriner 2 years ago

Hi, cis-woman here. For a long time, I had very private ideas about trans women which sort of veered heavily into TERF territory. I hated this, because I recognized myself as being just another person who denied trans women entry into female spaces. But on the other hand, I also felt as though my understanding of my own oppression was based heavily on the experience I had as a cis-female throughout childhood and into my adulthood. It felt bad when people who didn't have to undergo that oppression made their way into "my" space, or especially criticized "my" movements. (I'm thinking specifically of the backlash against the Women's March and its trans-exclusionary slant.)

I never explored these ideas with people because I wanted to be seen as a good, intersectional feminist, and I recognized my own beliefs as being very hurtful. So what ended up happening is that my ideas remained problematic and perhaps most frustratingly, unchallenged. I told myself that it was enough that I would never intentionally misgender someone and I continued on with my problematic mindset.

All of this is to say that watching your videos has been enlightening to say the least. I came here for the anti-capitalist propaganda but stayed because I was learning valuable things about a marginalized identity that I had some very misguided ideas about, and because I learned the error of my ways.

I understand now that my oppression-olympics was a form a gatekeeping that hurts my cause more than it helps, and that thinking about a trans-woman as a man who became a woman was fundamentally missing the point, and denying their lived experience.

Anyway, this long comment is my confession that I had really terrible ideas, and my expressed gratitude that your candor and bravery to be so open in this public space has allowed me to grow into a better person.

Thank you so much, Natalie. Much love and support from a new (and still learning) ally. <3

Show less

 850  REPLY

 [View 12 replies](#)

Figure 7 Former TERF Comment

The comment had garnered 849 likes as of October 7th, 2020, making it the 23rd most-liked comment out of 7,372 at the time. The comment with the most likes—9,269—was from Wynn herself, offering a rationale for the video. She begins by admitting that she “was initially reluctant to do a video on this topic in part because [she] worried that only a handful of trans women and TERFs would even care” about the issues she presents; yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, activity in module 5, the comments section, provides evidence that some TERFs and cis people learned something new and, in some cases, changed their beliefs. Analysis of “Autogynephilia”’s comment section reveals transformational experiences for cis people away from transphobia and towards increased understanding and acceptance of a wider array of gender presentations. Yet perhaps more importantly, the community of trans people and trans allies in module 5 used likes and replies to affirm and encourage these transformations. As a result of the comments over time, one of themes of the YT page “Autogynephilia” is the affirmation of

diverse trans experiences and the invitation to cis people to continue to learn. In other words, comment authors on “Autogynephilia” address systems of domination in a way that invites transformational belief change and that encourages a view of gender and sexuality as constantly in-flux.

Whereas Chapter 2 was concerned with the content of the video, module 2, this chapter focuses on module 5 to see how its authors address systems of domination and in what way embodiment figures into their composing. As I outlined in Chapter 1, this study seeks to isolate and analyze the following elements of a *Contrapoints* video page in order to understand what possibilities arise out of this unique, online composition:

1. Wynn’s dynamic bodily presence on screen in the video as it plays
2. The way she addresses systems of domination
3. The way comment authors address systems of domination
4. The way the comment conversations address bodies/embodiment/gender/sexuality

In Chapter 2, analysis of “Beauty” reveals a connection between the first of these two features; Wynn’s bodily presence shifts as her rhetoric about oppression shifts. I find a similar connection between features three and four through analysis of the comments. Comment authors indicate their own shifting participation in dominant gender and sexual norms as a way to refute oppressive theories about gender and sexuality. The conclusions from Chapters 2 and 3 provide detailed understandings of modules 2 and 5 that I will combine in Chapter 4 using assemblage theory.

It is admittedly impossible to completely isolate analysis of the comments section from the video given that the content of the video provides the jumping-off point for comment conversations. While this chapter will refer to and explain parts of Wynn’s video, my aim is not

to understand Wynn’s rhetorical choices but to understand the rhetorical choices of the comment authors. A body of comments on a YT page involves numerous purposes, modes, contexts, languages, and, of course, authors who are connected to one another in manifold ways. If, following Benson, we take the whole YT video page to constitute the composition, then the contributions of the viewers—in the form of written comments, replies to comments, and reactions in the form of likes and dislikes—must be treated as text on the same level of importance as the video in this ever-shifting composition. Given our acceptance of commenters as co-authors, an analysis of the rhetorical moves of the video alone is insufficient to understand how the video page speaks to powerful systems. When we look at the YT video page as an assemblage, it means that researchers look at the relationship between all parts of the composition in order to better understand its consequences and outcomes. This chapter offers a focused look at the comments so that we can hypothesize what capacities arise out of the relationship between the comments and the video. Table 3.1 identifies the boundaries of the case under scrutiny in this chapter.

<p>Boundaries: Of what does the case consist for the purposes of this chapter?</p> <p>What is/are the phenomena under consideration?</p>	<p>a. <u>Spatial boundaries</u>: Modules 2 and 5 of the “Autogynephilia” video page</p> <p>b. <u>Temporal boundaries</u>: 48:54 minutes of video content and 7,272 comments (those posted between publication date, Feb 1, 2018, and Oct 7, 2020)</p> <p>c. <u>Relational boundaries (relationship of researcher to content)</u>: viewer and observer rather than participant user</p>
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Table 5 Chapter 3 Boundaries

3.1 Methods

Recall that Reid uses the term big-data assemblage to describe many of the digital compositions scholars find themselves now studying. The comment module itself can be described as a big-data assemblage given that it facilitates the authoring of infinite comments, displaying only a small number of the many hundreds, thousands, and in some cases millions of comments left on any given YT page. Analysis of the comments module, then, calls for unique empirical methods. My resulting methodology for drawing conclusions about the comments module is best described as a linguistic ethnographic approach that applies insights from network analysis, marrying fieldwork methods with goals found in network science. While I take up this discussion at greater length in Chapter 5, it bears acknowledging that academic research of YT comments is a nascent enterprise and that there is a need for more fine-grained articulations of methods for this kind of work in RWS. YT comment analysis occurs in multiple disciplines for an array of purposes, each instance using disparate methods (Möller, Davis, Dubovi). As I prepared to undertake comment analysis for this project, I first looked to the field of RWS to find existing frameworks for such an endeavor. Despite finding a few helpful articles, I did not locate previous work in this field that matched the nature of my inquiry. Using several examples from research on YT comment analysis writ large, I cobbled together a process that was based in existing scholarship but, to my knowledge, was not previously articulated. Upon completion of my initial work with the large set of data, I found Mike Thelwall's chapter in the social science volume *Analysing Socia Media Data and Web Networks* which outlined a "network approach" to YT comment analysis. I found that my initial work aligned with Thelwall's suggested methods for the network approach, and his chapter filled an important gap in my thinking about methods, pushing me to further develop my findings.

Reflection on my process afterwards shows that the data collection and interpretation took place in two major parts: first, the initial characterization of the data using linguistic ethnographic methods and, second, the contextualizing of findings from the first step by looking at the YT page's metadata. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, this mixed-methods, two-part approach is appropriate for case studies in RWS that focus on a very small sample size of video pages and that seek to understand features of compositions like those under study in this project.

Several studies of YT comments use a fieldwork lens to interpret the online space of YT and other social media sites (Georgakopoulou, Riddick). Instead of looking at the comments section as an object of study, these researchers see social media spaces as fields in which they embed themselves to observe and collect data. As such, the methods resemble those of linguistic ethnographies in which researchers study "written texts and people's practices around these texts" for a variety of purposes, including to "uncover how powerful discourses are circulated and accepted" (Copland et al. 53). The most appropriate method, adapted from linguistic ethnography, for drawing conclusions about the comments is the "corpus analysis" which involves "[running] a number of analytic programmes" on a large body of texts to find patterns or characteristics (55). Using the program Nvivo, I performed a corpus analysis on the 7,323 comments that had accumulated on the video page "Autogynephilia" between its publishing and October, 2020. Following linguistic ethnographic practice, I used Nvivo to identify words that appeared most frequently in the comments as well as to perform a number of "KWIC (key word in context)" analyses. I used a grounded theory approach for the KWIC analyses, coding each instance of a particular word within the comments in categories that developed and solidified as I worked through the data (Thelwall 81).

The concept of nexus analysis from ethnography guided the choices I made as I identified key words, coded comments, and built categories for further study. My aim in performing a comment analysis here was not to, as Georgakopoulou says, “provide an inventory of all semiotic resources or participation frameworks” in the body of comments (164). Rather, my aim was to uncover evidence within the comments of authors addressing systems of domination or discussing and reckoning with the embodied experience of gender and sexuality. An ethnographic study uses a nexus analysis when studying broad, systemic social or political issues, such as racism, and approaches data collection from the premise that “there is always far too much to know for anyone to decide *a priori* what is important or relevant to the study at hand” (Scollon and Scollon 616). Rather, one begins with an act of racism or oppression and “[builds] out from there” (619). In other words, one begins collecting data related to that act and works with the data to seek understanding. A nexus analysis does not begin with preset categories to apply to data and does not begin with assumptions about where one might find examples of oppression; it begins from the source and gropes its way towards discovery of patterns or answers. This describes my own method for seeking out evidence of conversations with and about powerful systems. Given that the video about which authors were commenting explicitly named and explicated oppressive ideologies around gender and sexuality that come from dominant systems, I went into the comment analysis looking for conversation about these dominant views. I did not, however, presuppose how commenters would react to the dominant ideologies, instead letting the patterns emerge as I worked with the data.

As Thelwall notes, however, these basic analyses are insufficient if the researcher’s aim is to understand more broadly the themes of the composition and the community that forms within a comment section. Looking at the frequency of words and noticing the way commenters

use important terms does not speak to the effects of comments on the larger composition. He suggests looking at the comments not as a list of disparate chunks of text but as a body of texts within a network, connected in numerous ways including via replies and author relationships. This approach is better able to “capture the entirety of the discussion relating a video’s comments and reveal underlying patterns in those discussions” (81). Thelwall achieves this using the software Webometric Analyst which extracts comment data from YT pages and automatically generates visual representations of several features: commenters with most posts, number of replies to comments, commenters who are subscribed to one another’s channels, commenters subscribed to common channels, and more.

After analyzing the comments of “Autogynephilia” using a linguistic ethnographic approach, I sought a way of contextualizing my findings by considering the relationship of a certain category of comments with the larger body of authors. At the time, I was not aware of the Webometric Analyst software that generated network maps of YT users in ways that demonstrate relationships between authors of the YT page. However, I began to look at metadata available in order to understand how categories of comments related to the body of comments as a whole, and I noticed a connection between a category of response and the number of likes the comment received. Thelwall’s and others’ uses of network analysis to draw conclusions about large bodies of online compositions informed my choice to push my own analysis further (Jackson et al). Using basic Microsoft Excel AutoSum features, I was able to generate lists of the comments with the most likes and the most replies. I found that key comments I had discovered during my several passes of coding important terms were represented in the list of most-liked.

I began my analysis of the comment data with a word frequency search and found the word “feel” and its variants appeared 1,108 times making it the 10th most frequently used of all

words in the corpus. Given my focus on the way embodiment intersects with digital composing, I found this word a relevant entry point into the data. I therefore proceeded to code all instances of the words feel, feels, feeling, and feelings, developing categories for how the words were used as I worked through the data. At the same time that I was reading comments to fashion categories that reflected different uses of feel, some of which provided evidence of commenter's relationships to their own bodies/embodiments, I was actively seeking evidence of commenters relationships to dominant systems. Ultimately, the categories I built around the word feel did not lead me to any particular conclusion but instead allowed me to notice other comment patterns related to embodiment and systems of domination. These insights spawned additional KWIC searches, leading me to the conclusions I present below.

In their 2018 chapter "Fieldwork and the Identification and Assembling of Agencies," Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg perform a rhetorical analysis of online public forums. Just as they found when analyzing the forums of the website *Science Buzz*, the discourse found in the comments of the "Autogynephilia" page is "messy;" however, patterns did emerge. Also in line with Grabill and Pigg's conclusions was a great deal of evidence in the comments of "identity performances." Grabill and Pigg's analysis found that the identity performances on the *Science Buzz* forums took the form of young women posters self-disclosing their age and gender. They did so in a way that leveraged their rhetorical agency on the forums.

My analysis shows that *Autogynephilia* comment authors performed their identities via self-disclosure of the details of their gender and sexual identities. For example, many commenters led with phrases such as "As a cis, bi, man" or "As a trans woman." This led to a range of rhetorical effects. First, like the young women on the *Science Buzz* forum, identity performance on the "Autogynephilia" page served "as catalysts for more conversation," and,

importantly, the content of that conversation centered on the authors' embodied experience of gender and sexuality (113). Second, gender and sexuality self-disclosure took the form of testimonials that affirmed the importance of Wynn's message for cisgender folks. Lastly, I found that in some cases, identity performance represented a flag that primed other comment authors for how to respond. As the final part of my analysis demonstrates, commenters overwhelmingly "liked" comments by cis people who expressed movement away from transphobia as a result of the video and comments. Taken together, these findings begin to answer the questions that animate this chapter. As the video page changes over time through co-authorship by commenters, more complex and nuanced articulations of gender and sexuality emerge prompting audiences to consider their own embodiments and develop identities that reflect their preferences rather than parroting those of dominant systems. Furthermore, comments add support for video claims, and over time, the "like" and "dislike" feature of the YT composition has the power to coalesce and amplify major themes and ideas of the page as a whole.

This chapter does important work that will allow us to read module 5 as a network assemblage. In Chapter 4, I use Manuel Delanda's *A New Philosophy of Society* to argue that the YT comment section is a network assemblage. An important feature of networks that DeLanda highlights is solidarity; in order to understand the properties and capacities of the network, one must first ascertain the level of solidarity present in the network. Chapter 3 provides important insights about the community of comment authors that will lead to Chapter 4 conclusions about solidarity. By coding and charting a percentage of the top most-liked comments, one can notice consensus among ideas and track some of the salient themes of the network over time. Not only does this uncover important variables to plug into an assemblage theory reading in Chapter 4, but it also suggests one possible method for making sense of a big-data assemblages.

3.2 Comment Analysis Findings

As I will show, my comment analysis uncovered some patterns in the way that commenters disclosed their gender and sexual identity. They did so for the purposes of:

1. Refuting norms of gender and sexuality upheld by some mainstream scientists and academics and advocating for a more fluid conception of the embodied experience of gender and sexuality
2. Expressing the evolution of their own beliefs about gender and sexuality

These findings demonstrate both how these authors address dominant systems and how the authors invoke embodied realities in their compositions. Furthermore, findings give us evidence of the stability of the network beliefs, allowing us to draw conclusions about the video page assemblage in Chapter 4.

II.I Refutation of dominant norms and advocating for in-flux-ness of gender and sexuality

The subject of a great deal of the comments is the disparity between accepted norms of gender and sexuality and the reality of people's actual experiences of them. Comment authors signal their gender and sexual identities in order to add evidence to Wynn's assertion that these embodied features of human existence are different for everyone and are subject to change over time. This comment topic comes from one of the major arguments of Wynn's video in which she refutes Blanchard's claim that some trans women are autogynephilic. Part of her refutation of the theory requires a discussion of the features of cis women's sexuality versus those of trans women. This discussion is not meant to posit essential characteristics of either group but rather to demonstrate how Blanchard tends to pathologize sexual behaviors when trans women report taking part in them while failing to recognize that many cis women engage in similar behaviors. Blanchard and Bailey, for example, suggest that when some trans women report that they find

sexual pleasure in their own female form, they belong to a category of deviant sexuality and that their desire for transition stems entirely from this sexual deviancy. Yet Wynn points out that it is common for cis women to experience arousal as a result of their own femininity and that they are in fact encouraged to do so by some mainstream publications like *Cosmo* (25:33). Wynn's aim in this conversation is, in part, to shed light on the wide range of sexual behaviors that people of all genders engage in, behaviors that are not necessarily recognized by dominant systems such as the medical and psychological institutions to which Bailey and Blanchard belong.

Many comment authors push Wynn's discussion further by offering anecdotal evidence of their range of sexual behaviors that may not conform to what is expected given their gender identity. In a typical post focusing on this topic, an author tends to flag their gender and/or sexual identity and then explain a personal feature that contradicts dominant, mainstream views of how someone with that identity ought to experience gender or sexuality. For example, one author begins his comment with "I'm a straight cis male." He continues: "And you know what? If I could somehow become a sexy young woman without too much trouble, I'd totally give it a go and indulge in as much lesbian sex as I possibly could. Does that make me an autogynephiliac, and a creepy pervert? Possibly. But I'd be willing to bet a large number of straight cis males would say the same, if they were being honest." Here, the identity self-disclosure serves to demonstrate that despite his male gender and his heterosexuality, he does not conform to Blanchard or Bailey's characterization of masculine sexuality. He frankly reveals a sexual desire to have sex with women as a woman and suggests that others with his similar gender and sexual identity might feel the same. He does not express a desire to *live* as a woman, however, which Wynn notes is a better characterization of trans women's reasons for transitioning. This author's comment serves to underscore Wynn's demonstration in the video that the kinds of behaviors

Blanchard and Bailey suggest are deviant in trans women are perhaps more widespread in cis people. While Wynn makes these points about cis sexuality, many cis commenters like these perform their gender identity in such a way to support Wynn's assertions and lend additional evidence to her position.

Another comment author also begins by announcing her gender identity saying: "I'm a cis woman." She goes on to explain that much like Bailey and Blanchard might characterize an autogynephilic trans woman, she feels a version of self love. She says: "I'm kind of in love with myself. I love my mind, my heart, my strength, my vulnerabilities... I love my face, and how soft my body feels... It's not erotic, but it is sensual. And I can't see anything but good in that." (elipses appear in original). Rather than self-disclosing her gender for the purposes of speaking with authority about cis femininity, she shares that she is cis in order to demonstrate the flaws in Bailey and Blanchard's argument. Her identity performance in the comment adds to the mounting body of evidence in this YT composition that one's sexual behaviors and feelings do not correlate with or explain one's gender identity.

While the previous two cis authors performed their identities in support of Wynn's hypothesis that sexual behaviors are idiosyncratic across all genders, some trans women comment authors reported that their experiences of sexuality during- and post-transition were much different from Wynn's characterization of her own in the video. While one could take these comments as rebuttals to Wynn's arguments, I interpret them as complementary to the overall aims of the video and in keeping with the previous commenters. Wynn ultimately hopes to show that sexuality is incredibly variable across all people regardless of gender; therefore, Blanchard and Bailey's attempts to craft explanatory theories of transgenderism based on sexual behaviors is not just misguided but is an act of singling out trans women for behaviors that many

people exhibit. In other words, any comment that discusses the wide range and variety of sexual and gendered experiences provides additional evidence to support the idea that gender and sexuality are fluctuating, fluid characteristics, differing across groups and individuals.

One trans commenter explains that they have not experienced any real “psychological change” due to Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) unlike Wynn who describes the way HRT led to a change in her sexual psychology. Wynn talks about the way that taking female hormones decreased her desire for sex and changed her patterns of arousal; whereas she was once aroused by visual cues and the “lustful” desire for physical connection, she finds that, when on estrogen and spironolactone, she is aroused by emotional connections and feels less interested in visual cues (21:51). While the author does not directly announce their gender in the way that other commenters do, one can reasonably infer that this person is trans given their program of HRT and its results. This commenter, in contrast to Wynn, notes that “[a]ll that’s changed” after HRT “is an A cup as [sic] turned into an AA cup and my testicles have shrank [sic] enough to tuck in quite comfortably!” There are nine replies to this comment, and in one, the author expresses the importance of talking about the range of experiences trans people have with HRT:

[T]here’s no one universal trans experience, we’re all coming at this from wildly varying backgrounds and medical histories, and we all relate to ourselves a little differently. HRT having psychological and emotional benefits is common – hell, I need HRT just to feel human at all, let alone feminine – and its been extremely significant for Contra, which is why she tends to talk about it in such strong terms. But for plenty of other trans folks, like yourself, the differences are mainly physical, and I definitely think that needs to be acknowledged more when we talk

about what transition means for us....I think we need to embrace and celebrate this individual variance just as much as the things we share with each other.

Like the original comment author, the author of this reply does not state their gender or sexual identity but gives enough clues to support the conclusion that they are a trans woman. By referring to their HRT experience and to their “need” to feel “feminine,” they signal their gender identity for two purposes. First, the gender signal builds credibility with the original commenter by underscoring their common experience. The replier uses the pronouns “we” and “us” in a way that includes both authors in the community of “trans folks” so as to build trust in order for their message to be best received. Secondly, the replier capitalizes on that credibility in order to emphasize the importance not just of recognizing “individual variance” within the community but of honoring and valuing it. These comments add to an ever-growing corpus of evidence from both the video and the other comments that, regardless of one’s gender, one’s lived experiences of sexuality are different and are constantly in-flux. In the video, Wynn narrates how her HRT changed her embodied experience of sexuality in such a way that it might now be better characterized as conforming with general patterns of cis female sexuality; she does this to show how her sexual feelings do not align with Bailey and Blanchard’s characterizations of trans women’s sexuality. The author of the original comment talks back to Wynn, adding evidence of her own experience of sexuality as a trans person undergoing HRT, and the author of the reply affirms that difference as a fellow trans person and “celebrate[s]” diverse embodiments.

These examples demonstrate a subset of the authors on the “Autogynephilia” page who enact identity performances that signal their gender and sexuality as a means of not only affirming Wynn’s conclusions but also of pushing those conclusions further. Comment authors use these identity performances to give them credibility to talk back to transphobic theories

circulating in dominant discourse, but they also use this credibility to add to and develop more nuance to Wynn's and commenters' understanding of gender and sexuality. Wynn gets the conversation started with the story of her own sexuality which matches what she and some describe as a cis experience, but the comments demonstrate an even wider range of experience for both trans and cis people.

One of the findings of this study is that *ContraPoints* authors, including Wynn and the commenters, compose in such a way that foregrounds the in-flux-ness of their embodied experiences using the ever-changing medium of YT. Not only do these examples support these findings, but they also begin to point toward some cohesion at the level of beliefs within the comment network. DeLanda refers to this as stability, and it is a characteristic of a network assemblage that produces solidarity, or that which is needed for networks to join social justice movements. The second major finding of the comment analysis also provides some reason to believe that the network of commenters of module 5 of "Autogynephilia" exhibits stability.

II.III Evidence and affirmation of belief change

Through the month-long process of searching and coding the corpus of comments multiple times, I found overwhelming expressions of thanks directed toward Wynn for her thoughtful, compassionate, clear, intelligent, entertaining, and educational video. A more fine-grained analysis of the thankful comments revealed a subset in which authors announced their cisgender identity and acknowledged their limited perspective on trans issues, their lack of resources for learning more about the trans experiences, and their newfound beliefs and attitudes about trans people as a result of Wynn's explanations. In these cases, the comment authors perform their gender identities to underscore the educational and or transformative content of the video. They provide immediate testimony that the evidence Wynn offers in her video disputing

Bailey and Blanchard's theory is convincing. The evidence of changing beliefs will be critical for my reading of the YT video page assemblage in Chapter 4. More importantly, commenters offering thanks to Wynn who signal that they are cisgender give evidence that the message is reaching a critical group: members of society at large who are often beholden to dominant, cis-normative discourse of gender and sexuality, discourse clearly informed by "sinister fringe theories" propagated by some academic, scientific, and medical institutions.

There are three main features of this kind of post:

1. A signal of the author's gender and sometimes sexuality
2. Some expression of thanks
3. A statement reflecting their lack of knowledge about trans issues prior to watching the video and reading the comments and/or a statement expressing a change in attitude from transphobia or ignorance to more inclusive thinking.

For example, in one comment, an author said:

Dont wanna do the whole "you're so brave" [sic] cliché, especially as a cis straight dude, but I really think this is great that you've shared your experience to help really explain this shit and I really hope it helps people understand this shit. I know it has strengthened my understanding. i've always loved ur vids and been watching for like a year and i think this one is one of your best and most important

The author reveals that his gender identity is cis male and that he is heterosexual. He refers to a trend in the comments of calling Wynn's video "brave," revealing that he is a reader of the comments as well as a video watcher. Despite wanting to avoid posting "cliché" comments, he nevertheless expresses a kind of thanks to Wynn by insinuating that he, too, agrees

that she was “brave” to reveal details about her gender and sexual past in order to counter transphobic theories. Finally, indicates that he has learned something new and “important” which “strengthened” his “understanding” of the trans experience.

The comment is remarkably similar to many others including the following:

These videos are so incredibly helpful, (stretch audio) ""as a straight cis man"", to understand other folks' experience. Your thorough examination of arguments (not shying away from pretty much anything) are solid. The amount of public self-examination is just remarkable and incredibly brave. Geez. Thanks very much for making these, CP.

The same three features are present here: indication of the comment author's sexual and gender identity, appreciation for the video, and assertion that the content was helpful and educational. Additionally, the comment author also uses the word “brave” to describe Wynn's frankness with the details of her gender and sexual development.

Other comments from this category reveal even more features of the comment author's identity which serves to demonstrate the potential reach of Wynn's message. One author identifies “as a cis white male in the South” adding a regional specificity to our knowledge of him. He admits to having “pretty limited personal interaction with trans men or women” but explains that “by coming to know a bit about” Wynn through this and other videos on the channel, he “feel[s] that a greater potential for a much deeper and more fully dimensioned capacity for caring and compassion for trans people and their experiences has opened up.” Readers assume that by “the South,” the comment author is referring to the Southern region of the United States given that Wynn is American and most other international commenters find ways to indicate that they are inhabitants of other countries. I read the addition of his regional

provenance here as a rhetorical move that demonstrates the power of Wynn's video. The South is presumed to be a stronghold of institutional oppression against minorities of many types including, of course, racial but also sexual and gender. To perform his Southern identity in this comment adds evidence to the composition as a whole that Wynn's refutation of Bailey and Blanchard's theory is strong and persuasive, even to those most exposed and susceptible to transphobic ideology, and that the video page has the capacity to change beliefs of those who interact with it.

While the previous comments come from cis straight males, there are similar kinds of comments from cis authors with differing sexualities. One author writes:

I'm becoming a big fan of yours, as a gay man I always thought I was sympathetic enough with other members of the LGBTQ community but watching yourself expose all that personal information about your sexuality made me realize I'm still deeply ignorant (most of my friends are gay men after all). You are right, a lot of cis people like me are cheering this effort of yours and I hope trans people will eventually appreciate it too.

The comment author signals that he is "a gay man" and indicates a personal connection to what he calls the LGBTQ community. It seems that his identity performance here is meant to, first, demonstrate the existence of common ground between Wynn and himself. Yet he expresses surprise at his lack of knowledge about a group of people who are ostensibly a part of the community with which he identifies, and he thanks Wynn for educating him and his fellow cis peers on trans issues. His identity performance, then, also serves to expose an unexpected knowledge gap. In other words, whereas one might assume allyship and understanding between folks within the LGBTQ community, the comment author uses his identity to reveal epistemic

shortcomings; nevertheless, he suggests that Wynn's videos have the capacity to fill those gaps not just for cis straight people but for others with marginalized sexual identities.

Taken individually, the sentiments these authors express are encouraging, but it is difficult to make sense of the interplay between these kinds of comments and the other ideas discussed in Module 5. Out of all 7,323 comments, I found 368 instances of cis-identity self-disclosure, and of those, 122 fit into the category described above. In other words, this type of comment, while identifiable as a pattern, only occurs .01% of the corpus. However, in examining exemplary responses from this category, I found that a particularly strong example had received 849 likes. This stood out to me given that most comments have no likes. In fact, the average number of likes over all 7,323 is 32.7. I therefore undertook an analysis of the "like" function of the comment section which represents another form of co-authorship on the YT page. My findings strongly suggest that this genre of comments is more broadly meaningful to the composition than their frequency suggests.

Using the Microsoft Excel auto-sum feature, I calculated the top 30 most-liked comments out of the corpus. Of the top 30 comments that received the most likes, four comments belong to the "cis expression of thanks and evolution of ideas" category. The Table 2 shows the top most-liked comments by posting date, number of likes, and comment category. Despite appearing in such a small percentage of the whole body of comments, it is clear that co-authors of the "Autogynephilia" page welcomed and affirmed the phenomenon of cis appreciation for Wynn's video and the evolution of cis beliefs and attitudes about trans folks. For example, the comment that got the second-most likes—recall that Wynn's initial comment at the original time of publication received the most—belongs to this category. The author wrote: "As a straight cis dude, the coolest thing about this was the deep insight it offered into perspectives I can never

personally understand. Thanks Contra!” Over five thousand co-authors used the like function to demonstrate agreement, appreciation, and affirmation of this heterosexual man’s response of gratitude for Wynn’s video.

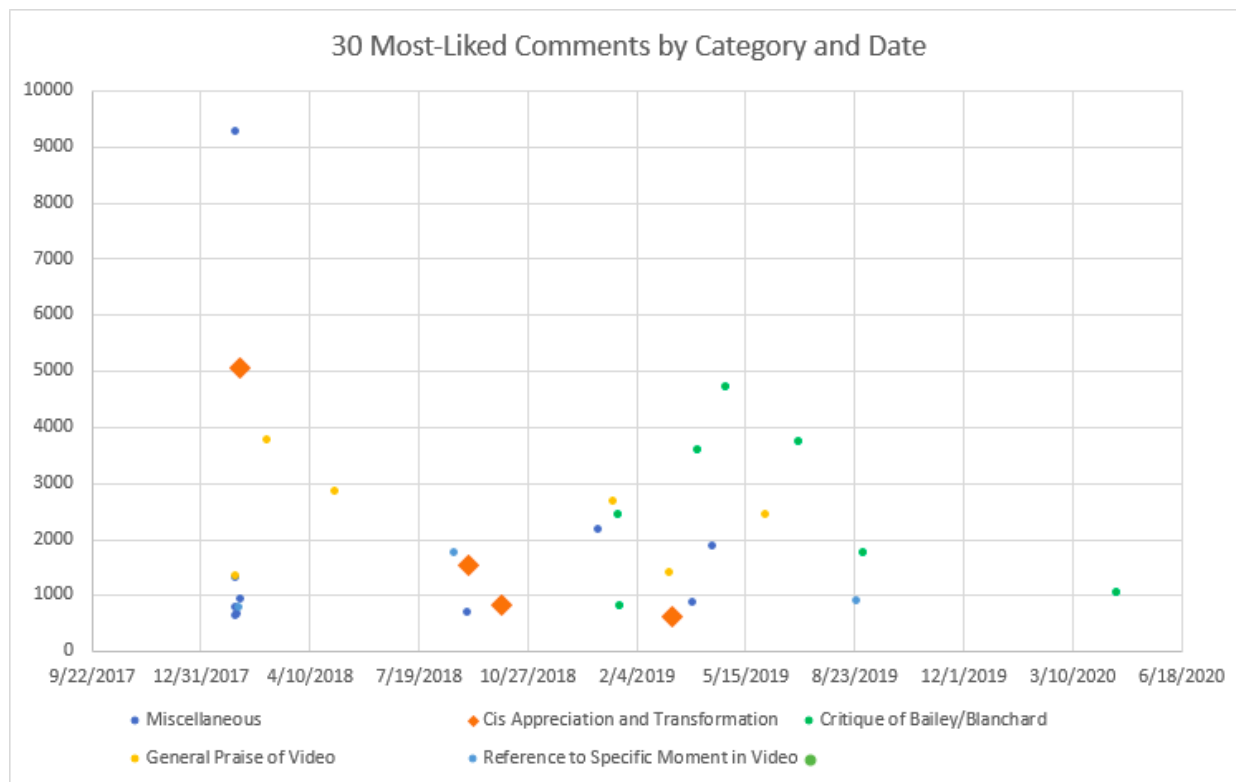


Table 6 30 Most Liked Comments by Category and Date

Both the fifteenth and twenty-third most-liked comments come from the “cis expression of thanks and evolution of ideas” category; furthermore, whereas others in this category say that the video simply helped them learn more, these two explicitly assert that Wynn’s video fundamentally changed their views. Each comment author discusses that their beliefs about trans women aligned with the TERF ideology. TERFs believe that because trans women do not experience the same kinds of oppression as cis women, they cannot be considered women in any meaningful sense. Given that Bailey and Blanchard assert that trans women are really just men who have a particular set of sexual fetishes, it is clear that this theory is one of many pernicious views that supports and fuels TERF ideology. Armed with the academically-supported theory

that trans women are actually men who achieve sexual arousal only by thinking of themselves as women, TERFs and other transphobic people may continue to feel justified in their rejection of trans women as women.

Wynn parodies this TERF ideology in the video via the character of Abigail Cockbain, a recurring personality who appears in several videos on the channel. Abigail is a cis feminist who sports a black beret and, as we learn from the video “Degeneracy,” equates the rise of transness and androgyny with the collapse of society. In part twelve of “Autogynephilia,” Wynn stages “The Autogynephilia Trial of ContraPoints” in which “Judge Bailey”—Wynn dressed in a long curly gray wig and a judge’s robes—presides, “District Attorney Cockbain” serves as prosecutor, and ContraPoints, or Wynn, is the defendant. As the subject on trial, ContraPoints wears a hospital gown, underscoring the exposed and humiliating way that trans women are subject to disproportionate levels of scrutiny relative those with other gender identities. After Abigail forces Contra to account for and discuss in great detail her sexual experiences and motivations, Abigail exclaims, “You don’t have the oppression experiences that cis women have!” (44:57). Shortly thereafter she adds, “Your Honor, the defendant does not bleed. I find that pretty conclusive” to which Judge Bailey responds, “As do I. Guilty as charged,” and bangs her gavel deciding ultimately that ContraPoints is a man (45:25). In the trial scene, Wynn uses dialogue and characters to dramatize TERF beliefs and her responses to them. In other parts of the video, she discusses the lack of scientific rigor in Bailey and Blanchard’s work, enumerates logical arguments against their positions, and provides personal anecdotes to counter the theories.

Whether it was the trial scene, some other form of argumentation, or the overall impression the video leaves as a result of all its rhetorical moves, these cis comment authors demonstrate that their beliefs transformed as a result of the video. The fifteenth most-liked

comment is from a cis woman who writes: “I now realize I was transphobic in my opinions. I was ignorant and shallow focusing on my own experience and my own oppression as an absolute determinant of what it is to be female. I’m proud to call you a sister :* Much love from the eastern block.” While this international co-author neither announces her gender identity nor characterizes her pre-“Autogynephilia” opinions as belonging to TERF ideology, readers can infer she is a cis woman. The co-author, like the character Abigail, insinuates that before the moment of commenting, she too “focus[ed]” on female “oppression experiences” as being that which allows a person to be considered a woman. Yet her mind changes, and she welcomes Wynn as “a sister,” implying her acceptance of Wynn as a woman. 1534 YT co-authors liked this comment, demonstrating some positive sentiment towards this transformation of beliefs from transphobic to accepting of trans women *as* women.

In the 23rd most-liked comment of the corpus, displayed in Figure 7 and discussed briefly above, the author expresses a similar transformation to the one in the 15th most-liked. The author, who immediately identifies herself as a “cis-woman,” goes into greater detail about her pre- and post-“Autogynephilia” beliefs. She notes that while she had vowed not to “misgender” a trans person, she had decided to quietly reject trans women as women without displaying these ideas too openly. She had a feeling that her beliefs were exclusionary, and so she avoided talking about them with anyone which allowed her ideas to “[remain] problematic and perhaps most frustratingly, unchallenged.” She found her way to “Autogynephilia” not because she was looking for a challenge to her TERF thoughts but because of her enjoyment of Wynn’s other videos. Ultimately, she, like the previous comment author, began to see the futility and hurtfulness of denying trans women the status of womanhood. She thanks Wynn for the video and wishes her “love and support from a new (and still learning) ally. <3”

3.3 Comment Analysis Discussion

I chose this video page for comment analysis because of the way it represents a direct address to “systems of domination.” Wynn’s intended audience is, in part, her followers which one might categorize as already on board with Wynn’s beliefs and arguments; however, both comment analysis and the logics of YT video circulation suggest that this assessment of her audience is not entirely true and that the target audience for Wynn and her commenters’ messages is much broader. First, testimony from several example comments show that *ContraPoints* devotees and/or those sympathetic to trans issues still lack knowledge or are not necessarily aware of the harm certain beliefs cause. As the author of the 23rd most-liked comment noted, she came to *ContraPoints* because of her enjoyment of previous content and accidentally stumbled on the realization that her beliefs were hurtful. In this sense, even by addressing her own core audience, the subject of this video could be said to directly address systems of domination given the way transphobic ideas are woven into dominant discourse even among those supportive of LGBTQ persons, like one commenter brought up. Secondly, as Benson explains, YT users find a list of “related” or “suggested” videos in Module 6 on the YT page (73). The list is autogenerated by YT based on “semiotic resources” such as “thumbnail image, title, channel information” and more (74). This means that YT users may find *Autogynephilia* in their list of suggested videos even if they have never subscribed to or seen a *ContraPoints* video before. This suggestion may pop up just by watching videos involving any topic explored in the *ContraPoints* channel at large—fascism, capitalism, environmentalism—or by subscribing to or viewing videos on channels that other *ContraPoints* subscribers participate in. In fact, *New York Times* journalist Kevin Roose suggests that many leftist YouTubers, including Wynn, purposefully “hack” the suggested videos algorithm in order to promote their

videos to right-leaning viewers. He writes that “by talking about many of the same topics that far-right creators do — and, in some cases, by responding directly to their videos — left-wing YouTubers are able to get their videos recommended to the same audience.” In these senses, the “Autogynephilia” is a perfect object for studying the way composers with diverse embodiments address systems of domination; in this case, the dominant system is transphobic cis- and heteronormativity.

A huge finding in the comment analysis was the consistent self-disclosure of authors’ gender and sexual identities as prefaces to or integral parts of their comments. Analysis shows that these identity performances are an important part of the way comment authors addressed dominant systems. In some cases, comment authors signal their identities for the purposes of demonstrating to Bailey, Blanchard, and their supporters that human sexual behaviors vary wildly regardless of one’s sexuality or gender. When cis authors write these kinds of comments, they use themselves as examples to show that widespread understanding of what counts as “normal” cisgendered sexual behavior is too narrow and that much of what Bailey and Blanchard might characterize as deviant sexuality in trans women are in fact features of cis people’s sexual lives. Trans authors write these posts for similar and other reasons, both to contradict a Bailey-Blanchard characterization of their sexuality and to expand understanding of trans sexuality for a public with a narrow view.

In other types of comments, disclosure of identity serves as a form of testimony that demonstrates the persuasiveness of Wynn’s argumentation in the video. Unlike the former type of comment, these authors do not appear to be speaking *to* dominant systems as much as displaying evidence of *having once had* ideas that originated in dominant discourse. Some authors who were ignorant of the issues Wynn describes, or perhaps even originally hostile to the

position for which she advocates, include evidence of their cis identities to attest to the powerful, transformative ideas they find on the video page. Their comments seem to say: “Against all odds, even I came away from this video with a transformed understanding of the trans experience.” Comment analysis shows that not only are the medium and message of module 5 always in-flux, but so are the beliefs of those who compose the network of coauthors.

While some might respond that the comments in which cis people express thanks and evidence of evolving ideas are not appropriate examples of YT authors addressing systems of domination, I assert that looking at these comments within the context of the comment rating system gives some evidence that they are. Benson argues that “any action that modifies the content of a YouTube page potentially counts as an interactional turn” that contributes to the development of the page. Among the actions he says “count” are “rating videos and comments” (87). In other words, to like a comment is an act of co-authorship. While my analysis does not have the data to determine which users clicked “like” on any comment, it is reasonable to believe, given the diversity of people who posted comments, that this diversity would hold for comment-raters. In this case, a person with a marginalized sexual or gender identity who clicks the thumbs up button on these comments from cis people are speaking *to* folks who belong to dominant gender and sexual groups. A like or dislike is nevertheless a form of addressing another author regardless of how unclear the semantic meaning of that address may be.

Just as Reid notes, determining how to interpret big-data assemblages like a YT comments section will be an important goal of future work in RWS. These kinds of online compositions only appear too messy or “noisy” to extract meaning because we have yet to “[develop] new analytic tools” capable of making sense of them (39). I argue that this chapter reveals at least one possible hermeneutical tool for big-data assemblages. While I discuss this

more in Chapter 5, for now I will assert that the “like” or “thumbs up” function creates additional opportunities for rhetorical activity on the YT page in the form of affirmation of the video or comment. The function of the comment-rating is, in part, for the page’s co-authors to endorse a particular reading or interpretation of the page as a whole. Over time, the more a comment is liked, the more it amplifies the comment’s message, and the more plausible it is that the authors of the page endorse that viewpoint. Therefore, I argue that the most-liked comments on a YT page at any given time represent some of the salient themes of that page. Benson admits that the video is the “basic semantic unit on which pages are based” (50). He reminds us, however, that the meaning of the page is not limited to the contents of the video but evolves over time as a result of comments. He notes that “[a]s users begin to add comments, the semantic content of the page develops.” My analysis suggests that one way to begin to understand the semantic content of the page is to look at the comments that get the most traction in the form of likes and dislikes. If we accept this view, then it appears that one important purpose of the “Autogynephilia” page is to incite and encourage transformation from transphobic, cisnormative attitudes to trans-inclusive attitudes and to encourage a view of gender and sexuality as fluid across groups and individuals.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter, focusing on module 5, revealed both the attunement to embodied experience of gender and sexuality and the in-flux-ness of the beliefs of *ContraPoints* co-authors; the *ContraPoints* comment module facilitates the composition’s constant evolution over time just as the semantic content of the comments endorses constant evolution of beliefs in response to arguments, evidence, and personal testimony. The next chapter uses assemblage theory in order to understand the unique properties and capacities that arise out of the

relationship between modules 2 and 5. It asks: what are the effects of a composition in which there is in-flux-ness at the level of rhetorical activity in the video *and* in the comments section of a YT page. When we read the YT video page as an assemblage, we are able to draw conclusions about how these two modules relate to one another and speculate about how the video page assemblage might lead to other consequences as it relates with larger assemblages such as the YouTube channel, site, and the wider world of online and offline activity.

4 ASSEMBLING THE YOUTUBE VIDEO PAGE

In Chapter 1, I discussed “Men” as a way to demonstrate the richness of *ContraPoints* video pages, pointing out four features of the video page that are of interest to RWS scholars:

1. Natalie Wynn’s dynamic bodily presence on screen in the video as it plays
2. Her manner of addressing systems of domination
3. Co-authorship in the form of comments on the page
4. The conversations within the comments about bodies/embodiment/gender/sexuality

In Chapter 2, I addressed the first two elements through an analysis of “Beauty” then analyzed “Autogynephilia” in Chapter 3 focusing on the final two elements. In both analyses, I found evidence that authors on *ContraPoints* pages foreground their embodied experiences when composing in response to oppressive, dominant discourse around gender and sexuality. In this chapter, I make claims about the cumulative effects of this dynamic, co-authored, online composition. To study how composers with diverse embodiments address systems of domination, I return to “Men” in this chapter to articulate the strategies for and the outcomes of a *ContraPoints* video page that intervenes in dominant norms of gender and sexuality.

In pursuit of conclusions about embodiment, online composing, and oppression, this study has confronted the difficulty inherent in reading, interpreting, and studying ever-shifting online texts. One difficult question that has arisen is: How might researchers find meaning in a page that is multi-faceted, ever-growing, and includes a seemingly infinite amount of information? Information, or data, comes from the video’s author, the semantic content of the video itself, from comment authors and the information they leave continuously, from the human-generated but ultimately non-human algorithms that populate suggested viewing, and more. Alex Reid likens the experience of interacting with these kinds of big-data online texts to

“having a conversation in a giant stadium before a concert.” Rather than getting a clear “message” from one’s interlocutors in such a conversation, “the collective result is something more like a buzzing noise” (39). Reid argues, and I agree, that an important task for RWS is to develop strategies and tools for making sense of these digital, online, multi-authored texts that involve large amounts of shifting data and that come from human and nonhuman authors, given their ubiquity and increasing centrality in socio-political life. To do so, Reid suggests turning to assemblage theory.

In the introduction to their edited collection, *Assembling Composition*, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Stephen J. McElroy take the concept of assemblage from the fields of art and critical theory, adapting and reframing it to fit the needs of RWS. The works in their edited collection treat assemblage theory as means for understanding something larger about composition—from the ontological to the practical to the pedagogical. For Yancey and McElroy, assemblage, at its most basic, is both the process of putting together existing “materials” *and* the new work that arises from this process (4). Reid, without overlooking the first sense, focuses on the latter of these senses, working from Manuel DeLanda’s reading of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of assemblage in order to understand compositions that involve “the role of technologies and other nonhuman entities in our shifting digital compositional context” (27-28). His approach provides a way to accomplish the aim of this chapter, which is to put together, or to assemble, our insights from previous chapters about the disparate parts of the YT page in order to draw conclusions about the whole page. Furthermore, it offers a means of putting together the seemingly disparate elements that this project hopes to unite, following Bratta and Sundvall’s call for research; considering the process and product that emerges from the interaction between

embodiment, digital composing, and addressing systems of domination as an assemblage allows us to identify its unique properties and capacities.

Both DeLanda and Reid base their work on Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of assemblages from *Milles Plateaux*, a highly abstract and ever-shifting work; the book itself is written to mirror the structures and processes they elucidate within. DeLanda's *A New Philosophy of Society* captures, concretizes, and adds to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage which Reid in turn uses to theorize online compositions that incorporate, generate, or rely on big-data. Deleuze and Guattari, and DeLanda following them, describe and defend an ontology which conceives of the objective reality of some entity—be it organic, inorganic, social, political, human, non-human etc—without claiming that the entity possesses essential qualities. To make such a claim is to imply that a whole has “relations of interiority” which means that the qualities of the parts lead necessarily to the qualities of the whole. Rather, Deleuze, Guattari, and DeLanda hope to show that the parts which make up some entity are constantly shifting and changing in response to their relationship with the other parts of the whole and with parts outside of the whole (DeLanda 10). An assemblage is the name of such an entity. Rather than having “relations of interiority” like the “organic wholes” of Hegelian metaphysics, for example, assemblages are wholes that possess “relations of exteriority” (10). This means that it is not the inherent “properties” of the parts that make up the assemblage that constitute it but “the actual exercise of [the] capacities” of the parts (11).

I begin with this admittedly abstruse prelude in order to highlight the compatibility of the aims of assemblage theory with those that inform this current study. To recompose marginalized identities means to resist scholarly approaches that essentialize, rigidify, and concretize concepts and to reach instead for frameworks capable of registering continuous evolution. To see a person

as essentially male or female, for example, on the basis of the nature of their parts is to ignore the host of factors outside of the person that come to bear on their being, factors that ebb, flow, and change. Assemblage theory asks us to consider the whole suite of material realities that make up an entity and to see that entity as continuously subject to processes that simultaneously work to stabilize and destabilize it. Not only does this approach fit particularly well when studying embodiment and composing—which, as Wysocki and many have pointed out require attending to the materiality of composition—but it also suits the study of dynamic online texts, often called “digital.” A reading of the YT page as an assemblage, therefore, is justifiable from the disciplinary perspective of RWS with its focus on “becoming” rather than “being” and its emphasis on revealing and understanding material elements of composing. Such an approach is also aligned with transgender theory which understands gender identity as contingent rather than essential.

Another advantage to using assemblage theory is that it gives us a way to theorize multiple authorship, including the contributions of nonhuman entities. The case study may have begun as one that asks how Wynn composes; however, the study has found that contributors other than Wynn, including users who write comments and the authors who write the code which composes the video player, must be considered authors in their own right. While decentering and multiplying authorships is nothing new to computers and writing studies, assemblage theory makes space for conceiving of the nonhuman role in rhetoric and writing. This space-making is aligned with the projects of scholars such as Diane Davis and Laurie E. Gries whose work looks at pre-linguistic conditions for rhetoric and the role of the nonhuman in rhetoric respectively. This is an important thread to pull out of the question the Bratta and Sundvall ask given that to compose with “digital” technology necessarily implies coming together with these external tools

which involve a pre-linguistic and nonhuman element: the human-generated but algorithmically executed digital apparatuses (nonhuman) that populate interfaces and layouts in which to communicate (prelinguistic) and that produce streams of words, visuals, and other forms of information. Assemblage theory is a tool for harnessing all the parts that enter into composing these digital texts and systematically considering the effects that emerge from this whole.

What I find by using this theoretical approach is that any given YT video page assemblage has unique capacities to foster communities that may become part of social justice movements; yet it also shows that these compositions have properties likely to thwart the creation of such communities. In the case of *ContraPoints*, assemblage theory shows us that these compositions foster reflection rather than set an agenda for reform. In this chapter, I focus on the video page assemblage “Men.” I conclude that, due to Wynn’s ever-shifting, non-dogmatic rhetoric, to the diversity and independence of the voices on the comments module, and to the constant change of the page over time due to its in-flux-ness, this YT video page assemblage is not highly likely to produce the solidarity necessary for the formation of the types of communities necessary for social justice movements. “Men” does have the capacity, however, to encourage viewers to examine their own gender and sexuality and to do so in conversation with others. The “Men” assemblage, furthermore, *is* capable of fostering some levels of group solidarity that may be coalesced and funneled into movements depending on the interactions of “Men” with other assemblages.

DeLanda's work on assemblage theory is the key to my findings given that it provides a way to map conversations about systems of domination onto complex, multimodal, online texts. While it is not necessary for a composition that "addresses systems of domination" to connect directly to social justice movements, uncovering and shedding light on instances of oppression

must precede such movements. These compositions, therefore, may hold some seeds of liberation movements, movements that are instrumental in recomposing marginalized bodies/embodiments. DeLanda's work on interpersonal network assemblages offers a plausible theory for what properties are needed for those assemblages to enter into social justice movements.

To arrive at these conclusions, I start in section I by describing and illustrating the theory more concretely using DeLanda and Reid's work. In the subsequent three sections, I describe three separate assemblages: the module 2 assemblage, the module 5 assemblage, and the YT video page assemblage. I do this in keeping with DeLanda's method in *A New Philosophy of Society*. He begins by describing the individual as an assemblage and widens his scope, moving to more and more macro scales to understand how smaller social assemblages lead to larger and more complex ones (18). Similarly, the YT page is made of smaller assemblages while itself being an assemblage embedded within a matrix of larger and larger assemblages; it is a constitutive part of the larger assemblage of the YT channel which exists within the assemblage of the YT website, and so on. This chapter hopes to draw conclusions about the function of a YT page within the *ContraPoints* oeuvre. While Benson enumerates 7 distinct modules—or assemblages—on any given YT page, it is outside the scope of this study to consider each of them; for the purposes of this study, I will consider modules 2 and 5 as constituting the YT page.

My method differs from DeLanda's in one important way. His project involves describing one social assemblage with an aim of understanding how the interaction of those same kinds of assemblages give rise to more complex ones. He describes the assemblage of the individual person and from that is able to map assemblages that arise out of the interaction of multiple persons. My project, on the other hand, looks at the whole that emerges from two

heterogeneous assemblages. I cannot, therefore, simply describe one assemblage and then turn immediately to the larger whole that comes out of interactions between those same assemblages; in other words, I cannot describe the video module as an assemblage and then describe the interaction between multiple video modules given that each YT page has only one. Therefore, my method involves separately describing each distinct assemblage and only then hypothesizing what properties and capacities arise as a result of the interaction between them.

4.1 Assemblage Theory Framework

Reading a YT video page as an assemblage requires understanding more concretely what makes up an assemblage. Table 8 illustrates my integration of DeLanda and Reid's articulation of the elements of an assemblage and demonstrates the variables I will consider when reading the YT video page assemblages. Reid, following Deleuze and Guattari, describes an assemblage as having "two axes. The first axis has objects, actions, and relations on one end, and on the other end what might be loosely termed expressions" and are sometimes referred to as "incorporeal transformations" (30). Expressions, as DeLanda will emphasize, should not be taken primarily to mean linguistic turns of phrase or even to necessarily indicate symbolic meaning (DeLanda 12). Instead, what Reid and DeLanda mean by expressions or transformations might better be understood as qualities or consequences expressed by the objects, actions, and relations. As the reading will show in the subsequent sections, the first axis of a YT assemblage will chart both the human and nonhuman elements involved in composing a YT video page.

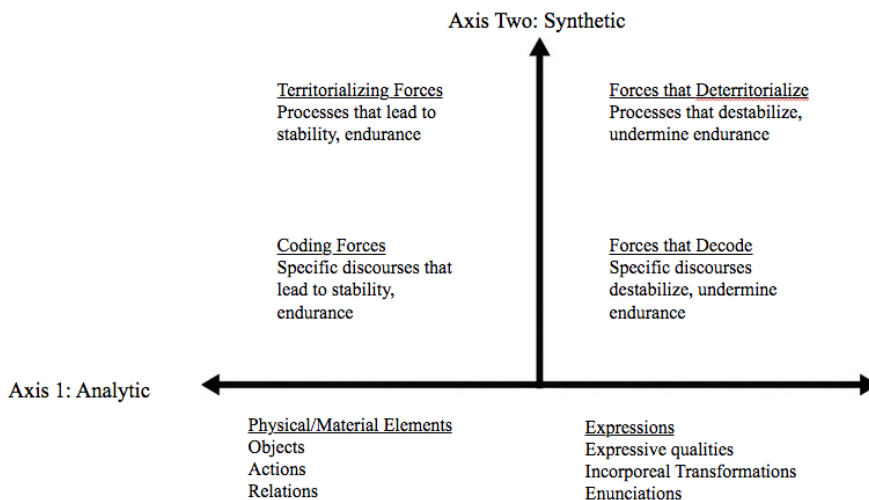


Table 7 Features of an Assemblage

Reid uses the example of a river to render the idea of assemblage more concrete, enumerating the parts of a river that correspond to the more abstract concepts the make up the first axis. Table 9 maps this assemblage. On one end of the axis, a river is made up of material objects and actions—water, land, flow—as well as expressions—it may “[mark] a boundary between nations” or “[shape] the movements of animals that drink and feed at its shores” (30). Expressions, here, do not refer to what the river says or how it asserts its own agency; rather, the river’s expressions occur as a result of its qualities and the way those qualities manifest. Both Reid and DeLanda underscore that specific linguistic discourse is not a major feature of this first axis. DeLanda takes up “conversations” as another example assemblage, noting that the objects on the first axis include, of course, the people engaging in the talk; yet the expressions are not limited to “the content of the talk” and include para linguistic qualities such as “bodily expression,” tone, choice of topic, and more (DeLanda 12). When Reid reads the composition classroom as an assemblage, he notes that the “expressive qualities” include “the hardness of the

seats, the dull hum of the fluorescent lights, or the dustiness of the chalk” rather than the topics of conversation that take place in the classroom (32).

Reid continues describing the features of an assemblage, noting that the second axis charts “two general tendencies” of the objects and expressions represented on the first axis (30). One tendency is toward what Deleuze and Guattari term “territorialization” and the other, “deterritorialization” (29). Territorialization, generally speaking, describes the process by which the collection of objects, with their expressivity, interact in patterns that repeat and solidify over time, creating an assemblage that tends toward stability. Deterritorialization, on the other hand, describes the processes that interrupt and destabilize the patterns of interaction between the objects. To return to river, the collection of objects, actions, and expressions that we think of as a river interact in such a way that leads to territorialization, or stability and consistency of the river. For example, when a river is highly stable, or territorialized, we know it to move uniformly in one direction, to be a reliable marker of various boundaries, and to generally display similar characteristics over time. Yet other forces serve to deterritorialize the river, or introduce instability and threaten to dismantle the river, such as droughts or human intervention that reduces the amount of water available for flow (30-31). When conversations are highly territorialized, it means that their “spatial boundaries” as well as “non-spatial” characteristics are clearly defined; in other words, the literal places in which the conversation takes place and the rules and patterns that govern the exchange are uniform (DeLanda 13). Processes that deterritorialize a conversation might include one interlocutor’s loss of tact or failure to abide by the give and take normally associated with the particular conversation type. The territorializing and deterritorializing forces of modules 2 and 5 will overlap in some cases and be distinct in others, as the reading bears out in subsequent sections.

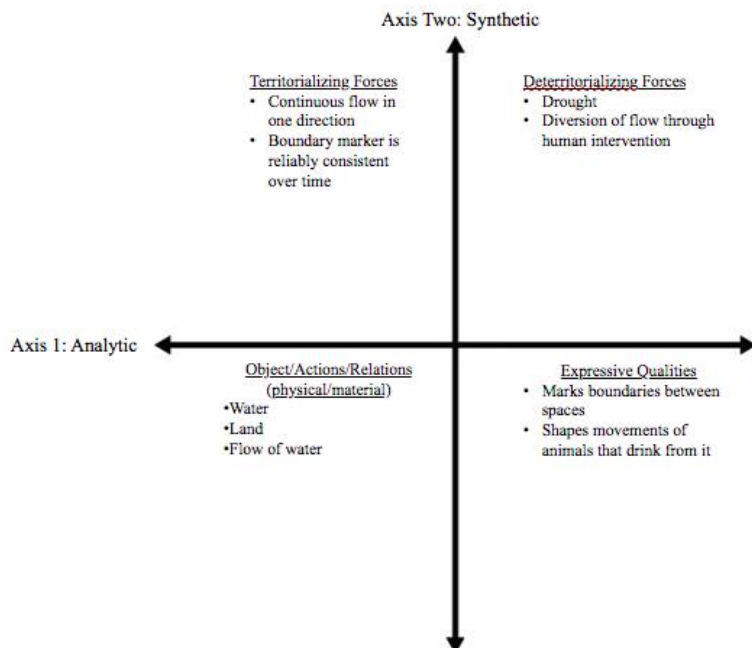


Table 8 River Assemblage

Finally, there is a third axis which accounts more robustly for the role of language and symbolic meaning, at least in the case of human or social assemblages. Conclusions from Chapters 2 and 3 will come into play on this third axis in assemblage theory readings of the YT modules and video page. DeLanda's addition to Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of assemblage theory is the inclusion of "an extra axis" to the conceptual map of an assemblage (19). The first axis, DeLanda calls "analytic" insofar as it involves analyzing the assemblage at hand, breaking it down "into its different parts," and noting "a material or expressive role to each component." The second axis, however, is "synthetic" in that it describes how "a whole emerges from its parts" via the process of territorialization—and of course accompanied by the inevitable deterritorialization (14). What DeLanda calls a third axis is a second layer of synthesis which complements the work of territorialization but which DeLanda insists on distinguishing. The second layer of synthesis, he explains, happens through the intervention of "specialized expressive entities such as genes and words" (14). He writes that:

[i]n assemblage theory, these two specialized expressive media are viewed as the basis for a second synthetic process. While territorialization provides a first articulation of the components, the *coding* performed by genes or words supplies a second articulation, consolidating the effects of the first and further stabilizing the identity of assemblages. (15)

For our purposes, DeLanda's contribution to Deleuze and Guattari is to carve out a meaningful space in which to understand the role of human symbolic meaning in the stabilizing and destabilizing of an assemblage. Territorialization and deterritorialization are, for DeLanda, "nongenetic and nonlinguistic," whereas coding and decoding happen as a result of "expressive media," or genetics and language, which are specialized "functional" means of expression different from the expression discussed earlier. He uses the example of "modern bureaucracies" as an assemblage to make concrete the distinction between coding and territorialization. Such a bureaucracy, perhaps governmental in nature, becomes stable and sharpens its identity over time through territorialization as well as coding. The process of territorialization gets at the largely nonlinguistic ways that this kind of institution rigidifies over time, including its spatial presence, the creation and sustained existence of buildings and procedures, and more. Coding, on the other hand, refers to the ways that concrete, semantic meaning of words leads to the bureaucracy's permanence, perhaps in the form of "constitutions spelling out the rights and obligations associated with each formal role" within it (15). DeLanda distinguishes the two synthetic processes in order to decenter human symbolic meaning from our analyses of an entity's ontology. It is not the case, he insists, that words and linguistic meaning "constitute the defining essence of that machinery" (15). They are but one element in the analysis of the assemblage as a

whole. Reading the YT page in this way that decenters human agency is aligned with the goals of Gries' new materialist ontibiography.

While Delanda does refer to this second synthetic process of coding and decoding as constituting a third axis of an assemblage, he also describes it as a “second articulation” of the stabilizing and destabilizing that occurs on the second axis (15). In the examples that follow in the book, he does clearly separate his analysis of coding and decoding from that of territorialization and deterritorialization, but the purpose of this separation is to make certain that rigid linguistic meaning is not given an overinflated role in explaining the emergence of assemblages (46). For this reason, I choose not to represent this process in Figure 1 as a third axis but as another tendency registered on the second axis.

From this complex model of an assemblage—its various parts, expressions, and tendencies—arise certain “properties and capacities” (Reid 31). This chapter hopes to hypothesize what properties and capacities arise out of the YT video page assemblage. Anyone with enough time could produce a complete list of its properties, or characteristics, based on the assembled parts, but there is no way to predict in advance its full suite of capacities, or its “possibilities for action.” What determines an assemblage’s capacity in any given moment is its “relations with an among assemblages” (31). A conversation, for example, always has the properties of involving two or more interlocutors and taking place in some space; yet a conversation sometimes has the capacity to incite war, for example, if it is related or connected to complex governmental assemblages, or sometimes has the capacity to build a coalition between groups if it interacts within active social assemblages.

Following DeLanda’s method for describing an assemblage in *A New Philosophy of Society*, for each YT assemblage I discuss, I will enumerate its elements along each axis, ending

by articulating what processes are involved in its coding and decoding, or the second synthetic process. From there I will speculate about the YT assemblage's properties and capacities.

4.2 Reading Module 2 as an Assemblage

In this section, I start by describing any given YT page assemblage and then turn to "Men," concluding that it is only loosely coded and somewhat territorialized. While the module 2 assemblage of "Men" has the capacity to create new beliefs, we will see that the likelihood of its exercising that capacity increases when module 2 enters into relations with module 5.

The objects and actions that make up the video player are, at their most basic, the coding language that manifests as the multimodal text which allows for users to play, pause, and control the video in other means. See Table 10 for an illustration of the module 2 assemblage. Also on the list of objects and actions are the labor involved in the creation and uploading of the video as well as the person who does that labor. This module also includes the viewer of the video, their time and attention, as well as the apparatuses on which the video is played. Module 2's "expressive qualities," to use Reid's term, are of course the actual content of the video including the images, colors, and symbols used in the video; the expressive qualities extend further to include the buttons and symbols on the actual player such as the play button, the draggable red circle along a line on the bottom indicating the video's place-in-time, and the other clickable features that alter the way the content of the video gets expressed. Furthermore, we must include expressions such as the module's brightness, clarity, and the sounds and noises that play and their various dynamics. Lastly, I will mention that expressive qualities extend to the feelings and impressions the viewers experience in their interactions with the video and the player and the authors experience in the creating and uploading.

The processes that lead to the enduring stability of Module 2 are, first, the continued functioning of the servers on which the data making up the video and the code making up the player is held. Other processes, such as broken links and erroneous coding for example, may end in the destabilizing or deterritorialization of Module 2. Another important factor in the stability and durability of Module 2 as a usable assemblage is its standardized spatial location on the YT page and visual layout of the various controls: in other words, the presence of the player in the same area of the page and the appearance of the controls in the same place on the player each time a user revisits the page. The opposite—erratic and unpredictable shifts in layout—undermine this module’s stability. It is also important to note the way the content of the video influences the module’s synthesis. The author’s labor in creating themes and links between works on the channel, as well as in maintaining a presence on YT or in the public more broadly, is another force that leads to Module 2’s durability. The video player becomes a fixture to which viewers may return again and again depending on the extent to which the channel’s author remains an active curator of existing content and creator of new content that relates to that of the player in question. If the channel author is actively working and if that work is visible within the YT community or larger circles, it contributes to the stability and endurance of the videos within Module 2 given that they serve as the primary reference points for that author’s work. Similarly, the author’s withdrawal from the community, removal or ignorance of the brokenness of links, or creation of works that lack thematic cohesion may serve to deterritorialize any given Module 2.

One thing we see immediately upon analyzing the component parts of Module 2 and enumerating the processes by which they are synthesized is the distributed nature of agency in terms of actions that constitute the module. This composition arises out of the labor and material contribution of programmers and code writers working for YouTube as well as the video author

or authors and the viewers themselves; furthermore, this composition involves the energy expended by computing apparatuses in order to send and receive signals and store data over time. The distribution of this agency, while always the case in compositions, digital or otherwise, is heightened when the composed assemblage exists on a digital hosting platform and can be accessed by infinite users.

Finally, we must enumerate the processes by which the components of the module are coded or decoded: that is, the ways in which specific discourses serve to further rigidify or concretize the meaning of the assemblage. In the case of a module 2, this means considering the discourses taken up in the content of the video. The more direct the purpose of the video and the more uniformly some discourse is expressed, the more deeply coded, or tightly synthesized, that module is. Other linguistic processes that yield a more stable, fixed module 2 are the relevance of the topic taken up and the recognizability of the video's genre. If the content of the video is more nuanced and abstract or perhaps reveals truths that undermine some accepted, dominant discourse, the assemblage is less tightly synthesized and therefore less highly coded.

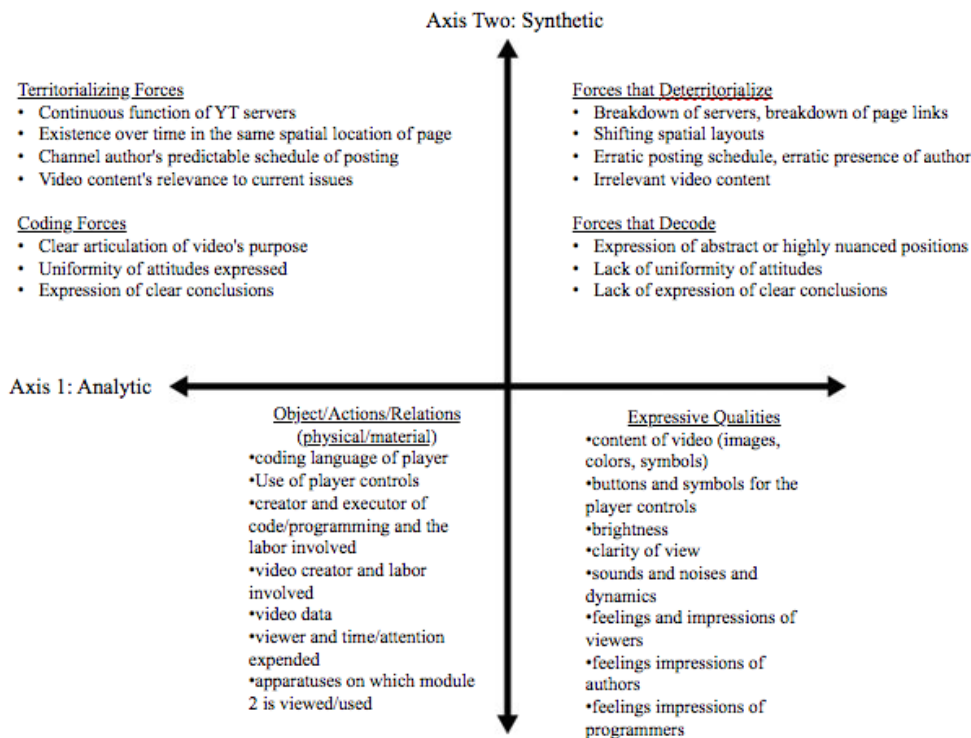


Table 9 Module 2 Assemblage

Out of analysis and synthesis of module 2's parts, we can hypothesize some of its capacities. Of course, the full suite of capacities, that is the possible effects of some assemblage, are infinite and only come out of the specific material realities of all its parts as well as the assemblage's interaction with other assemblages. Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate about some possible effects of module 2 given our relatively thorough articulation of its properties. First, we can say that the module has the capacity to impart ideas to viewers. I use DeLanda's sense of idea as a phenomenon that begins as a sense impression, not as a linguistic proposition, and that has differing levels of intensity (49). At the level of ideas, it's possible to hypothesize that the module has the capacity to create emotional responses in the viewers: e.g. to entertain, to upset, to delight, to scare. The module also has the capacity to create beliefs in viewers; beliefs, according to DeLanda, should be understood as "an attitude toward a proposition" (52). If one

takes it that beliefs are capable of leading to action, then if Module 2 can impart beliefs, it follows that it may also cause someone to act: to take the beliefs that they gathered from the video and modify their own behavior as a result. Lastly, I will mention that Module 2 has the capacity to generate income for YT, for the video author, and others.

In the specific assemblage of module 2 on the YT page, “Men,” most of the elements on the first axis remain the exact same as for any YT page; however, we can add some specificity to a list of its expressive qualities, noting the details of the video’s content in terms of images, colors, and symbols and speculating about what feelings might arise out of those who create or watch it. Just as in “Beauty,” Wynn displays her body in a variety of shifting costumes and sets in “Men,” corresponding with her shifting rhetorical positions regarding dominant discourses about gender and sexual identity. She begins clad in a structured suit jacket with a delicately polka-dotted silken ascot around her neck. See Figure 8. She wears an elegant, wide-brimmed black fedora, explaining that her “wardrobe notes for this video say ‘MRA (Men’s Rights Activist) femme fatale’ and ‘fedora but make it fashion’” adding, as a last sartorial inspiration, “school shooter realness” (:57). This takes place in front of a white marble wall lit in pale pink.

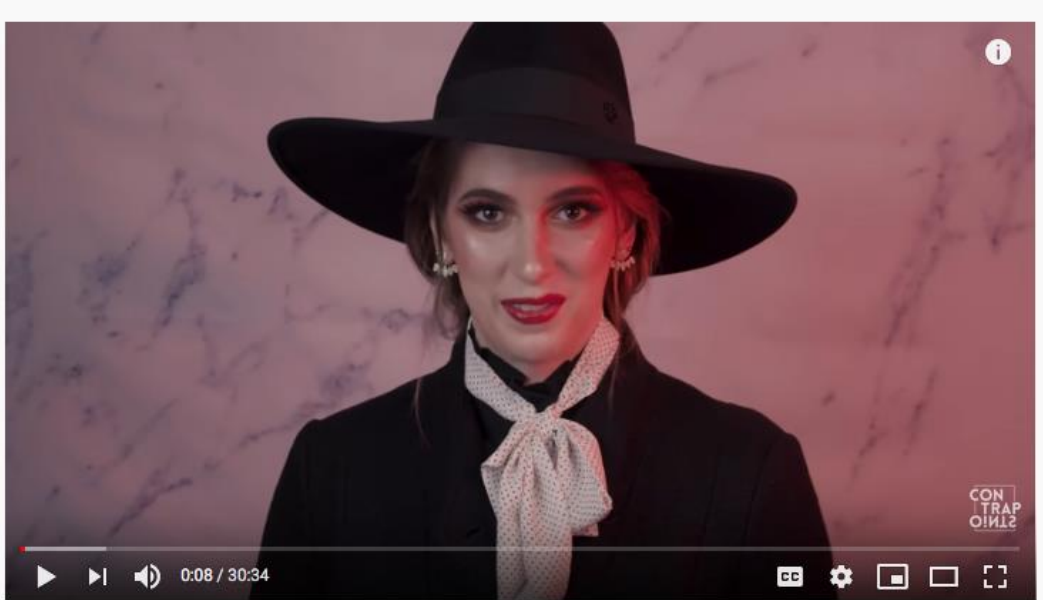


Figure 8 Men Opening Look

The only other set for the video is akin to the Enlightenment Salon in color scheme and texture: mahogany, maroon, velvet, silk screen, and more. Natalie, stretched on the chaise-longue, is dressed in a black, strappy bra and underwear set with garters holding up thigh-high stockings, and she wears black heels.

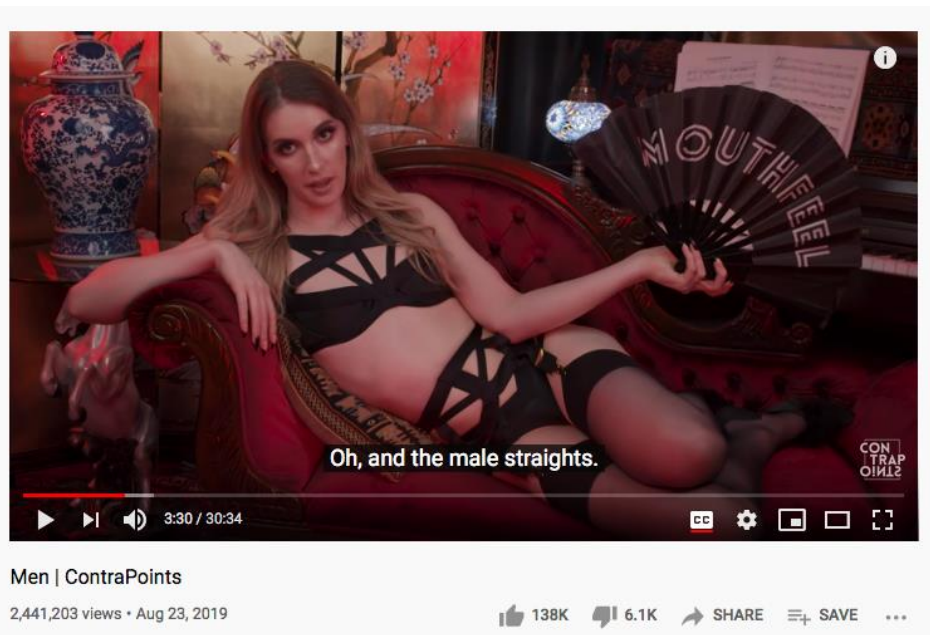


Figure 9 Men "Pandering to the Male Gaze/Gays" Look

Well over halfway through the video, her outfit changes once again. She returns to the chaise in a shimmery peach lingerie costume which provides more body coverage than the previous look.



Men | ContraPoints

Figure 10 Softer Men Look

She wears a silk dress-like nightie underneath a robe with sheer, feathered sleeves.

Without connecting the looks to any specific discourse, these colors, images, and symbols could easily arouse a variety of feelings in the viewers and in Wynn. Viewers may feel aroused, intrigued, amused, ashamed, offended, empowered or any number of sentiments. Wynn may also experience a range of emotions included but not limited to empowerment, worry, vulnerability, fear, euphoria, and others.

Like axis 1, much of axis 2 remains the same for a mapping of “Men” as it does for any module 2 on YT. The specific processes that might lead to territorialization of “Men”’s module 2 include Wynn’s consistent activity on her channel: adhering to a predictable schedule of producing and uploading videos to create new pages. Furthermore, the exploration of themes and topics in “Men”—issues of gender identity presented on the backdrop of the trans experience—as well as the organization and presentation of its content are similar to the other videos in her

oeuvre. This reinforces and strengthens the comprehensibility of her works, leading viewers to easily accept and return to the video given its stability at the level of genre and ideas. There is some variability in the content from other works, however, that might affect the impressions left on the viewer. Unlike most of her other videos, Wynn does not use characters to present views, instead serving as the constant narrator throughout *Men's* 30-minute runtime. While perhaps a minor deviation, it represents a potential deterritorializing force as some viewers may not easily recognize it as a valid entry in her oeuvre given her heavy reliance on characters to express a range of ideas in most other videos.

To understand how “Men” is coded on the second axis, we look to the specific discourses that get taken up in the video and consider their clarity of purpose. The dynamism of visuals and arguments do not lead to fixed or stable interpretations of her work; in this way, module 2 of the “Men” YT page is not highly coded. Like in “Beauty,” in “Men,” Wynn explores harmful, dominant discourse around gender and sexuality as a starting point, finding ways to accept, subvert, undermine, and grapple with it; in other words, she enters into a rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle. “Beauty” rhetorically oscillates between acceptance and rejection of patriarchal discourse around feminine beauty, and “Men” interacts similarly with patriarchal discourse around the concept of men’s rights. In the video, Wynn asserts ways in which some women do receive some benefits under patriarchy that are not available to some men, and she compassionately recognizes the ways in which men are harmed under patriarchy. She thereby validates and accepts some MRA rhetoric. Yet she thoroughly decries the destructive and dangerously sexist agenda that results from such rhetoric in alt-right contexts. She articulates a hope that men will collectively work towards the formation of a version of masculinity that is a palliative to the current model while recognizing the structural limitations

and lack of cultural resources needed for achieving this. Wynn, therefore, finds points of commonality with, critiques, and subverts dominant discourse around MRA.

Furthermore, like in “Beauty,” Wynn’s bodily presentation is in-flux, changing in strategic ways that prime viewers to consider different positions. As she enumerates the points on which she is sympathetic with some of the foundational MRA claims, she wears lingerie meant to seduce and arouse her male viewers saying “Look, the video’s about men so I’m trying to be attractive to men. Am I doing this right? Is this what men like?” (4:12). Later in the video, she changes into a softer, more feminine lingerie set covering more of her body; in this section, she addresses men in a more earnest way, neither sympathizing with them nor castigating. While she presents as a woman the entire time, she often refers to her prior experiences as a man, further emphasizing the in-flux-ness of identity that mirrors the in-flux-ness of her arguments.

From a reading of “Men”’s module 2, we see that it is a loosely coded and somewhat territorialized whole. These conclusions help generate meaningful hypotheses about its capacities. We said that any given module 2 may have the capacity to impart ideas, create beliefs, inspire action, and generate income. Given that ideas, in our interpretation, are sense impressions, we can be certain that “Men” has a strong capacity for imparting ideas. Furthermore, the view count along with Wynn’s listing of patrons at the end of the video lets us know that “Men” also has a strong capacity to generate income. Yet the less coded or territorialized the assemblage, the less forceful it may be in its capacity to create beliefs or inspire action. Wynn’s nuanced arguments do not lead to clear, discreet sets of beliefs or action agendas. She does end with an appeal to men to “find each other in the comments” and start a conversation about what positive masculinity may look like; thus, there are ways in which viewers can take her work and translate it into beliefs and actions. Nevertheless, the lower degree

of coding and territorialization may damper these capacities. Similarly, they may change the capacities altogether and result in unforeseen consequences depending on module 2's relations with other assemblages.

4.3 Reading Module 5 as an Assemblage

Having looked at module 2 and understood its properties and capacities, we now turn to module 5. While the method of reading module 5 as an assemblage will remain the same—enumerating each of its elements and processes along the two axes that make up and assemblage—the module's unique nature requires bringing in additional terminology from DeLanda in order to fully capture its properties and speculate about its capacities. I assert that module 5 is best understood as what DeLanda calls interpersonal network. A network is an assemblage, and its parts are conversations. A network arises out of numerous conversations which “are repeated with the same participants, or with overlapping set of participants” (56). The comment module has these features, and so I will offer a reading of it as a network; however, it is important to recognize that DeLanda's account in *A New Philosophy of Society* takes physical human bodies and their face-to-face copresences as the necessary basis of not only networks but of conversations, seeing “communication technology” as a unilaterally deterritorializing force (13). Some might question my reading of a fully digital network as a DeLanian interpersonal network, but I argue that his account is capable of accounting for digital interactions regardless of his intent. Published in 2006, *A New Philosophy of Society* was borne of a time when information technology and social networking was much less robust and accounted for relatively minimal human interaction compared to in-person encounters. As I will show, his terminology and concepts are flexible enough to capture digital as well as in-person networks. My DeLanian

reading of module 5 shows that it, like module 2, is only loosely coded, or exhibits low rates of solidarity.

Analyzing and drawing conclusions about the properties and capacities of *Men's* module 5 assemblage requires some specific terminology about networks from DeLanda; in particular we need to understand the properties of density, stability, and solidarity which means understanding what a link is for DeLanda. Among the material objects and actions on the first axis, DeLanda says an interpersonal network necessarily includes people as well as “links” which describe the connection between the people (56). Also included are the time and energy that the people invest in the connections they form as well as the emotional and material support they provide. For module 5 on a YT page, people in the network consist of comment authors and authors of replies to comments. This axis also registers their time spent reading and replying to other authors as well as the emotional labor they expend to offer support, affirmation, or censure, for example, to their coauthors.

Description	Properties
Links: connections between people or entities that comprise a network	<p><u>Strength</u>: frequency of interaction between linked entities/intensity of emotional connection between linked entities</p> <p><u>Presence</u>: ease of access to linked entities</p> <p><u>Reciprocity</u>: responsiveness of each linked entity to the other</p>

<p><u>Networks</u>: assemblage composed of multiple people or entities connected by links</p>	<p><u>Density</u>: level of connectivity between indirect links in a network</p> <p><u>Stability</u>: level of cohesion in attitudes towards entities in a network or toward network values</p> <p><u>Solidarity</u>: a measure of the level of density and stability</p>
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Table 10 Properties of links/networks from DeLanda

DeLanda identifies three specific properties of links within a network that will come to bear on the overall properties and capacities of the assemblage: varying degrees of strength, presence, and reciprocity. This is enumerated in Table 11. The strength of the links depends on how often the people within the network interact and the level of emotional investment between people. A strong link will be one with high “frequency of interaction” and one in which there is intensity of emotional sharing. Links that are highly present are ones in which there are few barriers to the others within a network. Reciprocity refers to “the symmetry or asymmetry of the obligations entailed by the link” within a network. High degrees of reciprocity between links means that people routinely and thoroughly respond to, help, and support others to whom they are connected; low degrees of reciprocity, then, suggests that one person expends more time and energy fostering connection than the other that makes up the link. These characteristics of links make up some of the expressive qualities of the assemblage. Other expressive qualities "include a large variety of nonlinguistic displays of solidarity and trust” (57). Some that DeLanda cites are

“having dinner together,” or “going to church” or “sharing of adversity” (57). Also on the list of expressive qualities are displaying “items capable of serving as a badge of identity” (57).

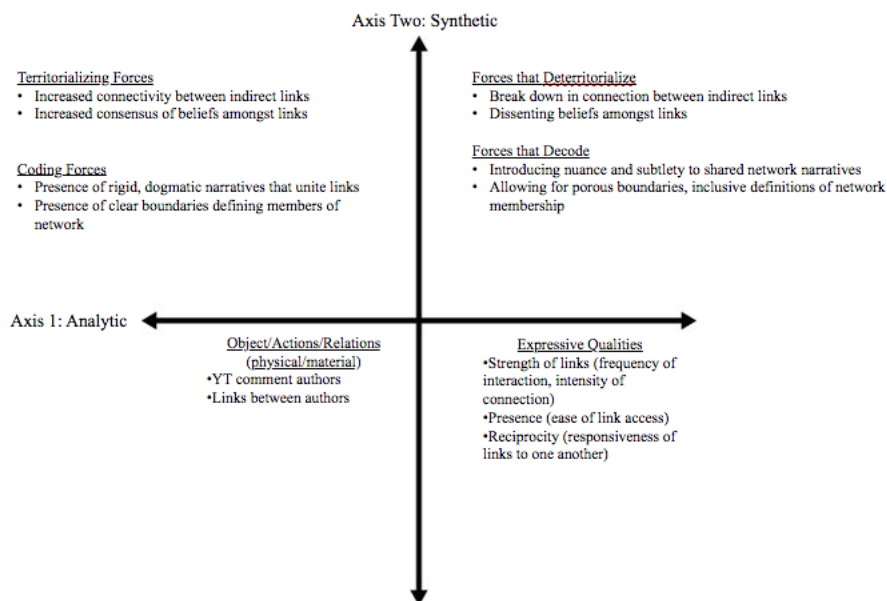


Table 11 Module 5 Network Assemblage

What makes DeLanda’s articulation of assemblage theory particularly well suited for analysis of a YT video page is the way that the YT network in module 5 possesses a built-in shared story in the form of the video in module 2; the content of this “story” affects the comment network assemblage, modifying its properties and capacities just as the content of the network modifies the properties and capacities of the video player. Until this point, I have sketched these modules as separate assemblages for the purposes of teasing out necessary terminology and concepts involved in a network assemblage. In what follows, I consider the video page assemblage that arises out of the interaction between modules 2 and 5 in *Men*. I suggest ways in which it is coded and then hypothesize about its capacities.

4.4 The YT Video Page Assemblage

From a reading of the video player module as an assemblage in section 4.2, we found that it has the capacity to create emotional responses and beliefs in its viewers and, perhaps, prompt individual viewers to action. The comment module assemblage, demonstrated in section 4.3, has the capacity to coalesce a community around some shared goal, a community that, given a clear set of shared stories and identity categories, may have the solidarity necessary to enter into a social justice movement. The YT video page itself is an assemblage that has these modules as two of its constitutive parts. Having established their capacities in the previous two sections, now we can understand how they relate to one another as a video page assemblage. The interaction between the video player and the comment module means that the capacity of module 2 to create emotions, beliefs, and actions augments considerably; the potential for the exercise of these capacities expands, given that there is a forum for discussion about the ideas, emotions, and beliefs the video module generates and a means of connecting with others who are interested in those discussions. Similarly, the capacities of the comment module are altered when the network is connected to the video player. Benson calls the video the “primary semantic unit” on the YT video page as it is visually the most prominent and as it serves as the text that generates conversation in the comments section. The video’s content “introduces specific discourses” into the YT video page assemblage that activates certain capacities for those involved in the comment network (Reid 33).

Reid uses the example of a classroom assemblage to explain the way that an assemblage’s capacities change given the introduction of such discourses. A classroom is made up of many parts and actions and is subject to processes that lead to its cohesion or lack thereof. When filled with “members of a club” for example, its capacities are different from the

capacities that arise when it is filled with graduate students in a physics seminar led by a professor (33). If the club was made up of militant leftists planning a disruptive rally, the discourses used interact with the classroom assemblage in such a way that gives it the capacity to foment a pro-union movement. This is not a likely capacity of the classroom assemblage interacting with discourses in a physics seminar.

Similarly, the specific discourses taken up in the video fundamentally change the capacities of the comment network. In “Men,” Wynn addresses dominant discourse around men’s rights. As we saw from Chapter 3, discourse around gender and sexuality in Wynn’s videos, among other effects, primes viewers and comment authors to reflect on their own gender and sexual identities. Just as the assemblage of a classroom, the people inside that classroom, and the discourses used within “[turn] people into students and professors,” the YT page “Men” turns those who visit it into a collective of beings with sexual and gender identities. The video on the page activates these aspects of their beings, prompts them to notice these characteristics; the comment section provides a space to collectively reflect on these characteristics.

While the resulting YT page assemblage has infinite possible capacities, one of those capacities is to form a strong community with clear boundaries and beliefs; such communities might then become a part of social justice movements. As for “Men,” however, the way the discourse operates in the video does not meet the criteria for the kinds of shared stories that foster the solidarity necessary for a community to form. This chapter has shown that module 2 of “Men” is neither highly territorialized nor highly coded rendering its message nuanced and creating conditions for a plurality of interpretations and comments. Solidarity requires clearly articulated positions on issues and widespread agreement on those issues within the network. Yet Wynn’s rhetoric, as we examined in Chapter 2, is constantly in-flux. The arguments in her videos

do not offer reasons that lead to clear conclusions. Furthermore, although future network analyses must confirm this, it is likely that the links in module 5 of *Men* are not very strong and lack high rates of reciprocity. This makes it less likely that the network is stable, or exhibits cohesion in viewpoints and attitudes towards others in the network. While there may be high rates of density, these factors, along with the shifting rhetoric of the shared story uniting the commentary within the network, make it unlikely that a very strong sense of solidarity exists of the network. In other words, the properties of the assemblages on the YT page when relating with the specific discourses of Wynn's video likely do not yield the capacity to create a community that is able to enter a social justice movement; however, the relations between assemblages and discourse give rise to other capacities. It is still the case that the video module gives may impart ideas and beliefs, and as comment analysis showed in Chapter 3, it is also the case that many viewers shared and developed their beliefs by authoring and responding to comments. Further research, using the assemblage theory framework paired with network analysis, can begin to discover some of those capacities.

Wynn's aim, given the nuance and shifting nature of her rhetoric, is not to dogmatically propose an agenda for trans rights and recruit activists to carry out a plan for achieving social justice. She does address systems of domination but does so in ways that promote reflection rather than impart specific viewpoints. While there are scenarios in which the YT video page may be effective for galvanizing communities, assemblage theory reveals that this video page assemblage is more likely to have a strong capacity for generating reflection about complex topics. The shifting visuals and rhetoric prime viewers to recognize Wynn's own shifting gender and sexual identity; they take up these ideas, apply them to their own identities, and begin conversations with other viewers in the comment module. Evidence from the comments suggests

that comment authors both agree with *and* extend the critiques of dominant discourses Wynn offers in her videos. This chapter demonstrates how, given her nuanced aims, the YT platform is well suited for Wynn's content. It allows her to address systems of domination in a way that promotes conversation rather than demanding a strict program of change. Furthermore, there is some evidence of cohesion and stability on the networks of Wynn's YT pages; some levels of solidarity formed in these networks and may be strengthened and used in other ways as these YT assemblages enter into relations with other assemblages, on YT or elsewhere.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how one might use assemblage theory to analyze a dynamic, online composition that includes massive amounts of information, and it provided a means of connecting multiple strands of an inquiry. Over four chapters, the study sketched how the coauthors of *ContraPoints* leverage their own embodiment as a strategy for addressing oppressive dominant norms, and it asserted some of the potential outcomes of this kind of composition. In the next chapter, I reflect on what the field of RWS can take from this study of *ContraPoints*. I discuss how the field can build on this study's perspectives on digitality, its articulation of the rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle, and its use of assemblage theory to help orient the discipline towards recomposing the marginalized. Lastly, I focus on Reid's question: "How do I make rhetorical and compositional decisions if I view my purpose as operating within a big-data assemblage rather than authoring a unique message?" (38). I see this question as an important one to consider alongside—or within—the one that animates this study. To answer "how do authors with diverse embodiments compose with digital technologies to address systems of domination" requires reckoning with the way that these technologies alter any

author's sense of agency in composing and understanding the role that coauthors and nonhuman entities play in making meaning. Analysis of YT pages as assemblages points to what kinds of properties a composition ought to have for solidarity and community-building and therefore suggests how authors might make choices given the distributed nature of agency within an assemblage.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The original aim for this study was to explore and describe the various means by which the YT channel, *Contrapoints*, authored by Natalie Wynn and by those who contribute to the pages of her channel, address systems of domination. In pursuit of this purpose, I have also drawn some conclusions about trans embodiment, online distributed performances, the nature of authorship, and various modules of a dynamic online space; furthermore, I have used assemblage theory as a method for connecting these features and hypothesizing about the consequences of a composition that includes the features. While Chapter 4 offers a specific, contextualized reading of the way *ContraPoints* uses embodiment and dynamic online tools to intervene in oppressive discourses, the study also contributes more broadly to RWS scholarship in three ways. First, my work demonstrates the power and necessity of bringing trans studies to RWS scholarship; work in trans embodiment and trans epistemology affords valuable, rich scholarly perspectives that must be included in RWS if we are committed to Bratta and Sundvall's ethical project of recomposing bodies/embodiments of those in marginalized groups. This demonstrates the way the field's relationship to issues of embodiment has changed since Arola and Wysocki brought the concept to the fore in the early 2000s. Second, in its use of assemblage theory, the study offers the field a way to move into the post-digital, allowing scholars to study the dynamism of

online texts without positing fixed distinctions between the real and the virtual. Lastly, I suggest that new technology, such as Webometric Analyst software discussed in chapter 3, can enhance current RWS work in circulation studies; these technologies can help compose within or interpret any big-data assemblage, and my research shows that they can be of use in composers' invention strategies and in future scholarly analysis.

5.1 Transing RWS

Bratta and Sundvall's original call to research emphasized the need for RWS scholars to engage in work that allows for the recomposition of bodies/embodiments of those who belong to marginalized groups. For them, this means refusing to "reduce the human body to any object" (4). Instead, scholarship must register the particularities of the bodies/embodiments of all rhetors, not just those "of particular white men" which Karma R. Chavez argues is the "actual body" "on which all rhetorical studies is based" (244). In her essay "The Body: An Abstract and Actual Concept," Chavez shows that, historically, rhetorical studies has indeed paid attention to the body of the rhetor but that this abstract, universalized body was assumed to have the trappings of a white, able-bodied man. The assumption in scholarship that there is *a body* is not just unjust in its effective exclusion of the plurality of actual bodies which affect rhetorical activity but is also, according to Chavez, a "reductive and totalizing move" which "enforces and animates systemic oppressions" (248).

Studying the embodied rhetorical performances of trans authors, as this study shows, is especially poised to prevent the reification of the assumed white male body that Chavez warns against. In watching Wynn's work and engaging with the comments from trans authors, audiences and researchers are confronted with the material reality of bodies/embodiments that

radically defy historical assumptions about “the body” that laces rhetorical scholarship (Chavez 248). Not only does the study of trans authors disrupt oppressive assumptions, but it creates space for the diverse members of this group to (re)compose themselves. Trans studies scholar Blas Radi notes that much research done by cis people about trans folks has the tendency to result in “epistemic objectification” of the trans folks insofar as they are not seen as “bearers of relevant understanding, but only as objects and instruments of analysis” (48). Radi says that scholarship must “counterbalance the epistemic marginalization of trans* people by acknowledging their subjectivity and epistemic agency” (53). This study accomplishes Radi’s charge by starting from the idea that the authors of *ContraPoints* are bearers of unique understandings that the field of RWS not only lacks but needs. Bratta and Sundvall’s mandate to recompose and Chavez’s insistence on recognizing rhetors’ multiple bodies/embodiments marries well with the aims and methodologies of trans studies.

Furthermore, studying works by trans authors illuminates unique rhetorical invention practices that both align with RWS values and represent means of advancing disciplinary knowledge specifically around the interpretation of compositions involving big-data. Trans studies scholar Ace J. Eckstein describes the practice of “transing” to argue that trans men’s YT channels defy linear notions of time in a way that “resists aggrandizing cis standards of gender and embodiment” (24). While it bears mentioning that Eckstein’s claims about the “spatio-temporal fluidity” of representations of trans embodiment on YT align with my own claims about in-flux-ness of trans embodiment on YT, I hope to highlight the role that transing plays in Eckstein’s work in order to argue for its relevance to RWS (26).

Whereas “trans,” Eckstein says, “is a site of discipline,” “transing,” according to Susan Stryker, Paisley Currag, and Lisa Jean Moore, “is a mode of invention, a way of intervening into

dominant ideologies of bodies, gender, time, and space” (31). Transing, then, is a means by which one might recompose bodies/embodiments of trans folks who have been decomposed by dominant ideologies. Stryker, Currah, and Moore define transing as “a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being and that allows for their reassembly” (30). I suggest that this definition of transing strongly suggests that trans theorists Stryer, Currah, and Moore see gender itself as an assemblage, and that transing is both a territorializing and deterritorializing force. This adds more nuance to my Chapter 2 conclusions. I suggest that Wynn’s rhetorical decomposition-recomposition struggle is evidence that recomposing oneself means, at times, identifying with given dominant norms, at other times, rejecting them. Instead of entirely dispensing of the notion of “having a body” as Bratta and Sundvall suggest, the practice of transing allows individuals to play with their own self understanding of gender, assembling ideas of bodies/embodiment into ever-shifting structures that reflect the complicated reality of their experiences.

If RWS hopes to recompose the plurality of bodies/embodiments of rhetors overlooked by history, trans studies not only affords the discipline a new practice of rhetorical invention in transing—composing as an act of assembling oneself contingently, allowing for in-flux-ness at the level of body/embodiment—but also further justifies the logic of adopting assemblage theory as a method for analyzing compositions. Trans studies shows us that theorizing the embodied composing practices of real rhetors requires an ontology of contingency, and assemblage theory delivers this ontology. This project makes it clear that a trans studies lens—unique from the queer lens—offers more than just a diversity of perspectives that satisfies some moral imperative; rather, it affords a methodology and points towards methods necessary for

recomposing those in marginalized groups. The field cannot accomplish Bratta and Sundvall's aims without the trans lens.

5.2 From Digital, Multimodal Composition to Big-Data Assemblage to Network Analysis

To adopt assemblage theory entails, following Reid, seeing digital multimodal compositions as big-data assemblages. In chapter 4, I enumerate several reasons for RWS to shift their perspective in this way. Looking at dynamic, online compositions as big-data assemblages allows scholars to:

1. Resist essentializing the features of any given composition, including composers' bodies/embodiments
2. More fully register the contributions of multiple authors in any given composition
3. More fully register the role of nonhuman elements in any given composition
4. Resolve contradictions or meaning-collapse in the concept of digitality and instead highlight the most salient consequence, of digitality: its in-flux-ness
5. Recognize the distributed nature of agency in composing practices

Having demonstrated the first three of these consequences with some detail in previous chapters, I will discuss the implication for future scholarship of numbers four and five.

Recent RWS scholarship has presaged a theoretical turn to the post-digital, not because what we informally call "digital" is no longer important or relevant but because of its deep imbrication with all features of bodily existence (Boyle et al.). This study affirms these conclusions and carries them further, demonstrating that it is no longer possible to carve out a specific disciplinary space for research about that which is digital given the leakiness of the

distinctions between the digital and the not-digital. By digital, as Bolander and Locher remind is, we might mean: that which is opposite of analog; computer-mediated tools; the novelty of the media; being located online as opposed to offline; existence in communication networks, and more (2). Studying big-data assemblages means that it is no longer necessary to use the digital distinction because of how all these features can be captured in an assemblage theory reading. Understanding these works as big-data compositions allows RWS to fold digitality into our analysis as a distributed native feature of composition and not as a variable to isolate for study.

As I note above, a rejection of the term “digital” in favor of a theoretical orientation that embraces assemblage theory highlights the distributed agency inherent in any composition but especially in those incorporating big-data. Reid makes this same recognition and asks an inevitable question for RWS scholars who adopt the assemblage theory perspective, wondering, “How do I make rhetorical and compositional decisions if I view my purpose as operating within a big-data assemblage rather than authoring a unique message?” (38). While there are perhaps infinite ways to respond, I suggest that methods used in this study lay the groundwork for and point toward development of some helpful strategies to make rhetorical choices as a coauthor of a big-data assemblage. One answer this study points to is that composers and scholars can use emerging technologies to learn more about the features and concerns of coauthors; this allows one to leverage meta-knowledge about audience and purpose to make meaningful interventions in big-data assemblages.

The concept of network analysis has existed in rhetoric and composition scholarship for some time and has been complicated and called into question as online media and connectivity has augmented over the last few decades. Circulation studies, perhaps better than network theory, capture the dynamic kinds of interconnectivity that rhetoric and composition scholars hope to

understand, refusing to presume the stability of pieces and actors in a network. Yet some specific software may nevertheless provide some useful information about the way online compositions circulate; while this information does not exhaust what scholars want or need to know about the different audiences that a composition reaches, it can nevertheless add some useful dimensions to an assemblage reading. As I discussed briefly in Chapter 3, some network analyses use software to mine data about connectivity amongst nodes and links in any given network in order to generate graphic depictions of that connectivity; these data and images provide information needed to measure properties of a network such as its strength, density, stability, solidarity, and other features that figure into assemblage reading. For example, in his study of a YT video address by Barack Obama, Thelwall uses “Webometric Analyst Software” which takes the “information about comments and commenters” provided by YT and “re-presents them as a series of networks surrounding the videos” (73). From these network representations, one is able to hypothesize about “who is most interested in the video and how demographically diverse the population of commenters are” as well as “the extent of interaction between commenters, as well as the tone or nature of that interaction” (74). In order to understand the capacities of a network assemblage, not only researchers but composers might be able to use this information. In essence, this software, and others like it, exploit the availability of data and the use of technology to deliver detailed knowledge about the rhetorical situation of some big-data assemblage. While not exhaustive of everything a researcher or composer might want to know about the context of their communication, such analyses extend what any one human may be capable of ascertaining about that context alone, providing important information about who is having certain conversations and with what tenor. Given the ease with which these publicly available software generate network representations with crucial information about network relationships, I suggest

that such software could be used in the composing process. When a composition instructor asks students to consider their audience for some composition, part of the consideration strategy could include use of specific software such as Webometric Analyst.

At present, these software lend themselves particularly well to studying and composing the kinds of big-data assemblages on social networking sites (SNS) that hope to make interventions into dominant systems. In the article, “Trans Youth and Social Media: Moving between Counterpublics and the Wider Web,” Ole Jenzen asserts that “SNS are technologies of both the self and the community” that facilitate the “formation of” subversive “LGBTQ youth communities” who discuss and negotiate their identities in opposition to the LGBTQ identities offered by mainstream media (1632). While not operating entirely outside of the ideology of the “dominant online public sphere,” SNS provide a way for marginalized groups to foster likeminded communities that question mainstream norms around gender and sexuality (1631). SNS, then, are productive sites for recomposing bodies/embodiments and defying dominant systems. Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles for example, identify these kinds of SNS communities as counterpublics, and they demonstrate the power of combining network and discourse analysis to understand how counterpublics compose. In their study of trans activist Twitter, they assert that:

The theories and analytic methods of network science allow us to capture and parse the large and ever-growing corpus of evidence of trans women’s advocacy online.

Transforming online discourse into networks of individuals linked by communication acts makes it possible to understand the interconnected nature of online conversations, while also whittling down an overwhelming volume of data to a manageable size. (1873)

Emerging software from network science allowed them to identify and extract important tweets for subsequent “in-depth discourse analysis” which led to their conclusions about the “digital labor” represented by the tweets. (1873).

RWS can build on their own disciplinary strengths by incorporating the use of some specific software from network science. These software represent one additional tool that might allow scholars of rhetoric to cut through what Reid calls the “buzzing noise” of big-data assemblages in order to understand the rhetorical situation and some of the salient themes of the assemblage, providing an entry point for application of more traditional methods of rhetorical analysis (39). While the big data assemblages of SNS may currently be the most relevant site for the use of these software, Reid envisages a strategic morphing of our current, more traditional forms of composing into big-data assemblages; not only would this shift make the use of these software even more pertinent, but it may significantly augment traditional composing’s current capacities (38).

To achieve the project of recomposition, the field of RWS must truly reckon with the plurality of bodies/embodiments of composers as well as the rapidly shifting terrain of online composing. This means embracing the new reality of big-data assemblages with their buzzing noise, reaching for the tools we have to make sense of them, and continuously developing new ones. For my own scholarship and teaching, this means, first, abandoning the digital/non-digital distinction in favor of an understanding that our bodies/embodiments are always in relation to technology in some way. Second, it means adopting the trans lens in order to notice the way that gender structures my own thinking and influences my language use. Lastly, it means conceiving of compositions and composers as assemblages that move toward stability but are never fixed, are always shifting and are therefore always capable of fundamental changes.

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