2.

A Four-Folded Rhetorical Agency

Let’s stock up at one theoretical storehouse in particular, a statement which may yet turn out to offer the last word on the slippery and fluid topic of rhetorical agency. Admittedly, “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean,” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s now-canonical essay of 2005, runs through so many considerations as to imply countless features, or aspects, or dimensions of rhetorical agency. Yet the multiplicity resolves into just a few thematic clusters, and these, upon closer examination, turn out to involve only four central considerations.

Rhetorical agency involves a certain interiority, and this is the theme that Campbell addresses in her references to subjectivity, i.e., to the private, though socially-framed “condition” of the agent construed as a thinker and perceiver, and not only as a producer and/or recipient of communication (3). But rhetorical agency also involves a certain exteriority, and this must have to do with the materiality of the actually existing world—including, of course, the human corporeality which acquires “identities related to gender, race, class, and the like.” That’s not all there is to the sense in which rhetorical agency is enmeshed in a reality external to subjectivity. Someplace beyond the rhetorical agent is a system of public resources, referring, on the one side, to structures of “institutional power” and, on the other side, to structures of symbolicity, linguisticality, invention, artistry, and so on (Campbell 1). These collective assets point to the externality of convention. Still, not even the subjective, the material, and the conventional put together are enough to account for rhetorical agency proper. There must also be a place or moment for that slippage through which rhetoric, as abstract, symbolic action, comes to participate in concrete, historical action. The label which Campbell adopts for this slippage is transcendence—a term implying rhetoric’s role in creating change, and emancipatory change, at that (8).
So we’re discovering the notions of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality to be adumbrated in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s own “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” (2005). Yet it’s not as if Campbell is the only theorist to have engaged these terms, or to have highlighted their interplay. It’s just that she’s the only theorist to have so noticeably gathered all four of them into the one place, at least implicitly acknowledging their mutual imbrication in the constitution of rhetorical agency. While each of the four terms might cover an array of more technical meanings, we should at least address their baseline usages. That’d be in the interest of keeping the denotations apart, of protecting them from dissolution into one another. For if we inspect the concepts at stake in “subjectivity,” “conventionality,” “transcendence,” and “materiality,” we find that these are not, in fact, synonymous, but clearly distinct.

The term “subjectivity” does gather up the conditions, properties, and qualities, the constructs and perceptions, belonging to the mind, rather than to whatever might lie beyond the mind. Certainly, there are disagreements as to the constitution of this interiority, which might today be understood either as that sovereign subjectivity held to have proliferated during modernism, starting circa 1650, or else as that subjected subjectivity held to have entered the scene with postmodernism and poststructuralism, or even as that ambiguous subjectivity (held to be socially-constrained in some ways but left free in others) posited in existentialist, phenomenological, and hermeneutic visions of the self. Still, those disagreements don’t impinge upon the basic distinction between interiority and everything else.

It’s conceivable that there might be nothing but mind. Yet there does remain a counter-conception, and this is to argue for the existence, in addition to mind, of something at least external enough to matter. The counter-conception invokes an outer dispensation, one whose spatiotemporal features (including those of our own resistant-and-malleable corporeality) often require us to engage them in a manner other than by merely thinking about them. The term *materiality* then refers to those conditions pertaining to the Great Outdoors (Meillassoux 7).
For, even if materiality itself were a projection from interiority, it might just as well be way over yonder in the “worldwide world” (Lee and Stenner 108, but also see Scarry 3).

At the same time, it’s evident that the spatiotemporal features of the non-interior world include the other people, just as it’s evident that we ourselves, regardless of how much interiority, how much subjectivity we may have to our credit, do not interact with those spatiotemporal features on an exclusively ad hoc, let alone arbitrary basis. To the contrary, we routinely collaborate, in a regularized rather than chaotic manner, with the disparate components of that outer dispensation. But the available means for collaboration (ranging all the way from the grammatical resources upholding our capacity for predication, to the guidelines we adopt for interchanges with others—and not only with human others) are not, in fact, synonymous with our subjectivity, nor are they synonymous with any features of the external world. Instead, they highlight the always-revisable relationships, the bridges, between the interior and its counterpart.

This latter consideration is worth elaborating, given that, with the entrance of a Nietszchean hermeneutics of suspicion (see Ricoeur, 1970, or, more wickedly, Greene, 1998), every conventionalized “truth,” and about anything from communicative reference to sociality as such, seems unmasked as a collective imposture, a deception “binding for all” (Nietszche 146). Sure, as Nietzsche does emphasize, to be caught in a lie would leave a speaker vulnerable to the same risk as just anyone bypassing the “established conventions,” this being the risk of embarrassment upon exposure (143). But to concede the point about transgression is not to concede that all of conventionality is imposture.

We don’t view conventional medicine, or conventional mortgages, or conventional welding techniques, or conventional religion, or conventional warfare as if these belong merely to the conventional wisdom. Instead, we classify them with practices, which, rather than reducing to any “established” proprieties, frequently remain among the efficacious, if not necessarily optimal expedients for (as we say) getting things done. So convention, as in the conventionality of prac-
tice, remains halfway between the negotiated and the ineluctable. To the extent that it’s revisable, such convention may seem arbitrary. But to the extent that it’s practicable, then it can’t be so arbitrary, after all. To the contrary, it’s an interface between people and a world not built entirely to their specifications.

It does seem that collaboration can take place only with the aid of a shareable repertory for making connections, for mediating between interiority and exteriority. So, at least in the context of rhetorical transaction, “convention” refers neither to a unidirectional constraint that’s imposed, as by an autonomous subject, upon the merely hapless world, nor, of course, to a unidirectional constraint that’s imposed, as by an autonomous world, upon the merely hapless subject. Insofar as it describes the adoptable means for interaction, convention is a term for those variable but non-arbitrary styles of linkage between subjectivity and materiality.

Already, we can see that subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality are three entirely unassimilable considerations. If there were only subjectivity, then we wouldn’t ever interact with anything other than our own minds, in which case we wouldn’t be so very much preoccupied with the concept of materiality. On the other hand, if there were only materiality, then we wouldn’t be preoccupied with any concepts at all. So, just as the concept of subjectivity argues that there’s materiality, the concept of materiality, in turn, argues that there’s subjectivity, and then neither of the concepts is optional. Meanwhile, if there’s subjectivity on the one side, materiality on the other, and if the two sides have to be linked in a regularized, non-arbitrary manner, then the concept of convention isn’t optional, either. Instead, “subjectivity,” “materiality,” and “conventionality” are equally mandatory, and this is for the reason that each of the three terms has to remain separable from its others in order to connect them.

But when it comes to the concept of “transcendence,” we discover that the latter cannot be contained by or subsumed under the three, equally mandatory terms we’ve considered so far. The transcendent is that which exceeds any ordinary limits, whether of subjectivity, or of materiality, or of conventionality, or of all three put together. In a quite common usage, tran-
scendence might refer simply to excellence — to a certain going beyond all expectations. But transcendence might also describe the shift from contradiction or opposition to dialectical resolution; or the shift from aggregation to mereology (such that parts are then related to wholes, and vice versa); or the shift from quantity to quality. So the most important consideration is that “transcendence” always signifies a radical departure, and a desirable departure at that, from whatever there already is. Therefore, that we do have this concept, this term for exceeding ordinary limitations, argues that transcendence cannot be coterminous with subjectivity, or with materiality, or with conventionality, or even with their collocation, but must instead be different from all three, as well as different from their intersection. In that case, “transcendence” is as mandatory as “subjectivity,” “materiality,” and “conventionality,” regardless that it’s other to them, too.

Of course the four terms are related. Subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality are related in the manner of co-requisites, and transcendence is related to them by exceeding their limitations. Still, all four terms are related through their difference. It’s a difference marking, over here, the otherness intervening among subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality, and, over there, the alterity of change itself. For if alteration can be transformative, and not only recuperative, then change is what exceeds the constitution of everything.

Tetradic Due Diligence

At this stage, we can say (along the lines developed by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell) that rhetorical agency always involves some subjectivity, some conventionality, some materiality, and some transcendence, and we can add (along the lines developed by us) that these four terms — which now become the four constituents of rhetorical agency — are distinct, mandatory, irreducible, and folded together. In fact, we can say that these are so disparate and concomitant as to be axiomatic. But, in that case, rhetorical transaction must be bound up simultaneously with (a) the interiority of speakers and listeners, (b) the exteriority of the world they share, (c) the means of linkage available
for connecting the interiority with the interiority, and (d) rhetoric’s capacity to make things otherwise. We can use this axiomaticity, or simultaneity, to protect the constituents of rhetorical agency from dissolution into one another. For if rhetorical agency is the folding-together of four quite separable constituents, each conceptually different from the rest, then all four of them do have to participate in the rhetorical agency being theorized.

Even so, to say that the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency are irreducible (and distinct, and mandatory) isn’t to say that they’re given. For example, while rhetorical subjectivity would refer to the interiority of the rhetorical agent, it hardly seems likely that the interiority attributable to speakers and listeners at the time of, say, Aristotle, or of the mid-sixteenth century logician Peter Ramus, or of the baroque-era Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, or of the enlightenment rhetorician Richard Whately could be identical with the interiority attributable to listeners and speakers today. What goes for rhetorical subjectivity must also go for the other three terms: neither rhetorical conventionality, nor rhetorical transcendence, nor yet rhetorical materiality can have stood still during those long stretches between the ancients, the earlier moderns, and us. Instead, each must continuously have become other than itself, while remaining itself anyway.

In short, if the four constituents of rhetorical agency do remain irreducible, then their irreducibility, so far as concerns their manifestation in rhetorical transaction, ought to be a proleptic, rather than a backward-glancing sort of irreducibility. They ought to be irreducible in the sense that they’re processual, or emergent, or produced. For that reason, it does seem that a “productive” rhetoric, whether conceived as epistemic, constitutive, articulatory, or something else, must actually be producing the co-constituents of rhetorical agency as such.

So it’s by way of rhetoric’s productive irreducibility that we arrive at the epithet “four-folded.” Certainly, this terminology (this network) borrows from Heidegger. He’s the philosopher who holds that every thing, including any mode of communication, is entangled in four realms simultaneously, bespeaking earth, sky, mortals, and gods (see, for example, Poetry,
Language, Thought 175-175). In consequence, the label itself (that cyborg, that alliance) is also beholden to Graham Harman (2007), whose unpacking and reworking of the Heideggerian concept has proven so illuminating. It’s further indebted to none other than Thomas Rickert (2013), who, in putting the fourfold to extensive rhetorical-theoretical use, does survey, and critique, and redeploy (see especially his Chapter 7) such understandings of that construct as are available from Heidegger, Harman, Bruno Latour, and others. So, already, it’s possible to envision some implications for an articulation between (on the one side) earth, sky, mortals, and gods, and (on the other side) the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality, just as it’s possible to envision some implications for rhetoricity as a “thing” whose work is to stay — in other words, to preserve, protect, promote — the fourfold.

However, those are not the implications to keep uppermost in mind, not during the present investigation into rhetorical agency. That’s because, according to Heidegger himself, the fourfold can always be approached as a “simple onefold,” in which case its disparate constituents might yet be read in terms of the “self-unified” (Poetry, Language, Thought 176). Sure, it’d be one thing to explore so simple a onefoldedness in the context of Heideggerian philosophy. But it’d be quite another to do so in the context of contemporary rhetorical studies, where theory, if the work of Ronald Walter Greene (2009) be any indication, seems already to have arrived at a onefold much more than simple enough.

At any rate, although Heidegger does devote “The Question Concerning Technology” (1954) to a critique (a warning against the modernistic perspective which would view everything as “standing-reserve,” as exploitable), he also emphasizes that even “Enframing” — or, let’s say, the very most tendentious style of perspective-adopting — should be understood as a mode of revealing (23 ff.). What’s of interest here is the suggestion that any unconcealing along those lines would be an aesthetic: a paradigm for teaching us how reality (at least, how a certain reality) works, how all of it fits together, and how we ought to behave while we’re in it. To be sure, it would also
be ontotheological— in a nutshell, self-referentially circular— quite as Heidegger holds to be characteristic for all of western metaphysics (see Thomson’s essay unpacking that indictment). But the point is that any such aesthetic would further become the establishment not only of an *environment* (disclosing the properly ontological existence of everything) but also of an *imperative* (disclosing the properly ontic response to everything). In that case, once we see that it’s possible to begin with aesthetics and then move to ontology, rather than necessarily the other way around, we arrive at some choices as to which environment-and-imperative, which tendentious perspective, within which to be located.

In Heidegger’s essay on technology, the options are binary: Either let everything be unforthcoming (such that it’s to be excavated scientistically), or else let everything be fruitful (such that it’s to be dwelt with poetically). But, instead of making for the sunnier side of the opposition, let’s pursue the sense in which to adopt any tendentious perspective—scientific, poetic, agnostic, or whatever—is to adopt both an environment and an imperative, in other words, to adopt a medium.

Now, when Marshall McLuhan (1964) says that the medium is the message, he means at the very least that the material-and-conceptual infrastructure for communication (spoken, written, digitized, grammatical, neurophysiological, and so on) supplies the initial condition of possibility for the message. So it’s hardly surprising that the consensus among media ecologists today is that the medium is not only the message but also the environment (the context, the setting, the Burkean scene, the Heideggerian enframing) within which the message must grow (see Strate 128). Still, that’s not to say the medium is only the environment—and obviously not, for it’s also the message. It’s, in short, a contribution, an intervention, for better or worse, into whatever’s already there. That’s why McLuhan refers to every technology, and to every mediatization, as an “outering”— an utterance (99).

So we’re finding, if not an equivalence, then an exceedingly strong family resemblance between the Heideggerian account of tendentious perspective-adopting and the media-ecological account of mediation. On the one hand, the environment is the
outering of an imperative, and, on the other hand, the imperative is the uttering of an environment. True, Heidegger, in the essay on technology, discusses only two imperatives, each attaching quite faithfully to its own environment. But the later McLuhan (1992), with his son Eric, attends to no fewer than four imperatives, all of them attaching, almost polytheistically so, to any built environment that there could possibly be. These are the tetradic laws, the quadruply heterogeneous commandments, which every enframing, every technologization, every mediatization keeps uttering simultaneously: Enhance (this)! Reverse (that)! Retrieve (the next thing)! Obsolesce (the other)!

By putting together these ideas from Heidegger, from McLuhan, and, not to forget, from Kuhn, we can arrive at a version of four-foldedness suitable for theorizing rhetorical agency. For, when we do come to look around at the four quarters of contemporary rhetorical studies, we’ll see that each of them is a paradigm that mediates, enframes, aestheticizes rhetorical agency in its own way. Each of them constitutes (globally) its own world, its own tendentious perspective. Yet each discloses (locally) its own possibilities for reversing, for retrieving, for enhancing, and for obsolescing.

But, in that case, shouldn’t we be looking for something rather more complicated than a fourfold—at the very least, for a sixteenfold—with all the attendant ratios and relations that such a grid would bring into view? Well, maybe so, but not until rhetorical agency has stopped looking so promiscuous and protean. For now, it’s first things first, and all we need at present is to fold rhetorical agency into four. That’s because rhetorical agency inheres in its terms, the most important of which are found together anyway.

Wherever we go, there will always be subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality. It’s just that they will be configured differently in the four different quarters within contemporary rhetorical studies. In each of those four assemblages, we will find this, that, the other, or the next of the terms being pulled into the center, where it becomes the planet, even as the three remaining terms are pushed to the periphery, where they become the satellites. So, in the interest of theoriz-
ing rhetorical agency anew, we’ll reflect upon the four terms that structure every present-day version of rhetorical agency.

Disaggregating a Constitution

For simplicity’s sake, let’s agree that numerous treatments from within rhetorical studies, not only that from Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, do recognize there to be something subjective, and something conventional, and something transcendent, and something material about rhetorical agency. And, if the four terms are conceptually distinct, then they ought to be theoretically separable as well: Nietzsche does say, after all, that individual “concepts” can be “as bony and eight-cornered as a dice” (147). Unfortunately, our present discussions seem to leave us conceptualizing rhetorical agency as too fluid, gelatinous, and non-cornered for us to understand how rhetorical transaction would actually articulate with genuine social change.

What, then, ought we to expect from theoretical discussions addressing the concepts of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality? Why, we should expect each of the terms to be treated as contributing something which is not, in the final analysis, the same as the contribution of the others. In other words, whenever rhetorical agency is speaking, its co-constituents must be speaking, too, each of them adding its own heterogeneity to the conversation. That’s how the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality could remain distinct, mandatory, and irreducible, each playing its own role in the four-folded constitution of rhetorical agency. It’s also why we should think of their irreducibility as an ongoing emergence into difference, and not at all as the return of the given.

If we were to start viewing its four constituents as both irreducible and emergent, rhetorical agency would stop seeming so protean, slippery, fluid, and homogeneous. To the contrary, it would start looking four-folded, internally heterogeneous, participatory, and dynamic. Furthermore, rhetorical agency would begin traveling in more than just the one sense. While it would prove mobile in crossing all sorts of social loca-
tions (remaining accessible to agents regardless of their positioning), it would also prove mobile in continually becoming other than itself. But, then again, to see it that way, we’d first need a suitably rhetorical view of rhetorical agency, and of its four co-constituents, as simultaneously irreducible and emergent.

A Willfully Productive Rhetorical Agency

Such a perspective is available in an essay treating all of action, including rhetorical action, in terms of an ongoing will to matter. The essay is Nathan Stormer’s “Encomium on Helen’s Body” (2009), and among its most important “provocations” is that which concerns the purposive quality—the rhetoricity—of action in general (220). For, as the author observes,

The media that connect one to another, the materiality of objects that signify, the embodiment of perception, the messages interpreted from the rest of nature (from genetic codes to animal behavior)—all...confound the issue of “what is rhetorical action” and beg us subtly but significantly to alter the question to “what is rhetorical about action?” (224)

In this passage, Stormer is referring to the tendency of everything to participate in a world (as in the proclivity of media to forge connections, the inclination of objects not only to signify but also to remain material, the predisposition of bodies to perceive, and the propensity of even the rest of nature to generate messages), and this is the very tendency that he’s opting to call the “will to matter” (220). So, if rhetoric also tends to participate in a world, then rhetoric can be said to express the will to matter, too.

Yet the vector that Stormer is describing isn’t limited to the will to power, to knowledge, to truth. Rather, it’s broader, more promising and capacious than these, for it includes such wills among its internal differentiations. Indeed, the will to matter, which Stormer derives by reworking concepts from writers ranging from Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche to
Judith Butler, might also be known as the general, even universal “desire to persist” (220). And, as Stormer does explain, this is an imperative to flourish, not independently from others, or in spite of them, but with their interactive, mutually transformative aid. Thus the will to matter includes a will to “recognition,” and a will to change as well. It’s the impulse to make a difference, even an intensive or self-reflexive difference, just so long as the difference matters. So, if the tendency to make a difference is rhetorical, and if this is, furthermore, a tendency to change in the process of making a difference, then all of action, and not only rhetorical action, is, indeed, rhetorical.

Stormer’s reading of all action as rhetorical (pushy but responsive) offers us a new way to think about the vaunted productivity of rhetoric itself. While rhetoric can still remain productive in that it’s epistemic, constitutive, articulatory, and so on, rhetoric can now become additionally productive in that it’s continually producing itself anew, continually enduring even as it adapts to changing circumstances. And if we do make the conceptual transition from the willful persistence of rhetorical action to the willful persistence of rhetorical agency, we can say that such agency is productive not only in its tendency to make things otherwise, but also in its tendency to adapt in response to the very changes it produces.

By now, we are better positioned to think of rhetorical agency as made up out of four axiomatically distinct, mandatory, and irreducible constituents. All of these constituents seem capable of furnishing us with some formerly-occluded evidence of rhetoric’s productivity—of rhetoric’s quadruple will to matter—since each of them (persistently) does remain itself even while (adaptively, interactively) becoming otherwise. And the four constituents of rhetorical agency can no longer be taken for granted, for they look to be under production, too. Their axiomaticity becomes a question, on the one side, of the more general will to matter, and then, on the other side, of the theoretical and practical work required to keep each of the four constituents durable enough to persist, but interactive enough to adapt.

By the same token, once we take Stormer’s insight seriously, it’s no longer “a matter of preference” as to which philosoph-
ical assumptions are to play which part in keeping rhetorical agency four-folded (Cherwitz 10). To the contrary, in a rhetorical-theoretical world where the will-to-matter is the will to make subjectivity matter, the most important philosophical assumptions in town are those which protect the axiomaticity of the subjective. The same logic applies to the other three rhetorical-theoretical worlds. There, the will-to-matter becomes, respectively, the will to make conventionality matter, or else the will to make transcendence matter, or else the will to make materiality matter.

So, while the broader challenge is for us to conceptualize the mechanisms through which rhetorical transaction might conduce to social change, there’s also a more immediate task. It’s not merely to reframe the co-constituents of rhetorical agency as both persistent (or irreducible) and mutable (or emergent), but, beyond that, to explain how they are produced with the aid of rhetorical agents as such. On the theoretical side, therefore, we’ll adopt an investigative method undergirded by a philosophical commitment. It’ll be a commitment, in this case, to explaining the ongoing production of an irreducibly four-folded rhetorical agency. And then, on the practical side, we’ll look for evidence showing that rhetorical agents can participate in the production, too.

Our method will be consistent with the assemblage theory utilized in a number of social-scientific and other fields (Wise, 2005; Phillips, 2006; Marcus and Saka, 2006; DeLanda, 2006; Venn, 2006, Srnicek, 2007; Livesey, 2010). Thus the investigative framework for the project as a whole will derive primarily from the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, a thinker often invoked in contemporary rhetorical studies (see, for example, Barnett, 2005; Edbauer, 2005; Stormer, 2009; Greene, 2009; or Kephart and Rafferty, 2009).

**Assemblage–Theoretical Resources**

As Graham Livesey explains, the concept of assemblage derives from the English translation of *agencement*, referring, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, not to any finished product, but rather to the very “processes of arranging, organizing, and fit-
ting together” (18; see also Dosse 43). So “assemblage” (which, if rendered as *agencement*, would resonate all the more ambien
tly with “agency”) retains a participial force, signaling that disparate elements are becoming related, forming a collectivity with emergent functionalities of its own.

However, as deserves underlining, the assembled bits and pieces are never symbolistic alone. Deleuze and Guattari do say that even “desire” is an assemblage, clarifying that assem-
blages don’t have to be objects in a purely physicalist sense (*Kafka*, 56). Yet a Deleuzian *transcendental empiricism* posits that assemblages aren’t made up exclusively of signs (or ideas), but include “sub-representative” (or “extra-propositional”) experiences, these latter remaining excessive, irrecuperable (see Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*).

It’s important, therefore, that rhetorical scholars understand “assemblage” as referring to “inter-relationships” between “ele-
ments” which are emphatically “heterogeneous” (Venn 107). For were we to view rhetorical agency’s four constituents as, at base, homogeneous — in the way of mere ascriptions, notions, representations — then we’d be unable to conceptualize them as separate from and irreducible to one another. They would seem to dissolve into the very significations that rendered them accessible. If so, we’d be left thinking that none of these co-
constituents could actually be itself, but could only be the sim-
ulacrum of itself, and we’d remain mystified as to how rhetori-
cal transaction could ever contribute to any social change. We should therefore view any assemblage not as a homogeneous stretch of ideation, but, instead, as a collective facility within which disparate participants, not all of them tied to human subjectivity, happen to be collaborating to produce something.

Rhetorical agency is a coalition of just that kind, its most salient functionality (though not always by design) being to produce some genuine social change. Yet rhetorical agency is a *quadruple* assemblage. It’s made out of four other alliances, networks, or cyborgs, every one of them extant within a differ-
ent quarter of contemporary rhetorical studies. And the four assemblages, the four “landscapes,” are populated by an array of theorists, critics, and practitioners, all gathering and deploy-
ing resources for the willful production of this, that, the other, or the next of rhetorical agency’s four constituents.

That’s how we can account for both the persistence and adaptability of rhetorical agency, the qualities that Nathan Stormer associates with the will to matter, and with all of action. We can explain these in terms of the work that the various theorists, critics, and practitioners must be doing to ensure that each of the co-constituents of rhetorical agency does, in fact, remain persistent and adaptable. Still, in framing rhetorical agency as assembled, we should keep in mind that any assemblage (together with, let’s add, any sub-assemblage it might be surrounding) is characterized simultaneously by “territorial sides,” which “stabilize it,” and by “cutting edges” of “deterritorialization,” which “carry it away,” such that it’s able to endure even as it’s able to grow (Deleuze and Guattari, ATP, 88). These “processes that stabilize/consolidate and destabilize/dissolve (respectively), the identity of the assemblage,” do explain how the co-constituents of rhetorical agency, each associated with a different quarter within rhetorical studies, can persist while also changing (Palmås 3).

For assemblages are made up out of terms (or parts, or components) which, though they may be linked under a “dominant relation,” do not reduce to such a relation (Baugh 36). Instead, the terms can migrate between assemblages, between alternative dominant relations, always retaining some of their own functionality. Indeed, with respect to any assemblage, the relations holding the terms together are “external” to the terms, these latter evading containment by any structure, configuration, or relation within which they’re implicated (Colebrook 5). On the one side, a “whole” persists as an ostensible totality (as molar) for so long as its “parts” are held together in a particular relation. On the other, the constituent terms do retain their own transportable powers.

In short, even such seeming totalities as rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality can be viewed as made up of (molecular) bits and pieces. Their components may, in principle, bring their own character along with them, migrating beyond their familiar borders, and interacting with yet other bits and pieces
under an altered, perhaps unprecedented “dominant relation” (Baugh 36).

We’ll therefore read each of the four constituents of rhetorical agency as belonging to a different theoretical-and-practical landscape, a terrain whose “dominant relation” is sometimes being reinforced, but sometimes becoming unsettled. We’ll posit, and attempt to demonstrate, that the local theorists, critics, and practitioners are sometimes reterritorializing, but sometimes deterritorializing the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, of conventionality, of materiality, of transcendence (Baugh 36). So there’s our hypothesis as to the reason for which the constituents of rhetorical agency would stay axiomatic, distinct, mandatory, and emergent. It’s also our reminder that rhetorical agency might remain just as quadruple as the preceding extrapolations from Heidegger, McLuhan, and Kuhn would suggest.

Yet there is one more assemblage-theoretical precept to adduce, and it’s that the assemblage, network, or cyborg (or else alliance, mesh, association: the near-synonyms abound) isn’t identical with what we study. Instead, it includes our interference with what we study (see especially Mol, 1999). Michel Callon, for instance, has emphasized that an agencement is the object of the investigation as interwoven with the report on the investigation (see Palmås 2). The assemblage, drawing together some kinds of agency while giving rise to others, is therefore what emerges “in connection with” what we say about it—from our statements together with the contributions, affordances, resistances supplied by all the other constituents folded into a provisional, mutable unity (Phillips 109). Thus the act of accounting for any of these networks, cyborgs, alliances is an intervention into the very processes that bring the collectivity into being.

**Triangulation**

We’ll need some examples to show how rhetorical transaction really could involve the ongoing persistence-and-transformation of the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency. And since we can’t expect, say, “self-organization” to explain everything,
we should drop to a level concrete enough to register the work
performed by local actors. Let’s continue drawing on Karlyn
Kohrs Campbell’s essay of 2005, which already attends to some
particularly germane evidence, that is, in the form of a speech
attributed to the African-American rhetor Sojourner Truth.
For, if we gather up all of this work of Campbell’s, folding it
together with the explanation provided by one of Campbell’s
own sources, the historian Nell Irvin Painter, we discover a
way to verify that rhetorical agency resides not just in the pro-
nouncements of rhetorical theorists, but out there in the world
as well.

Here, to start with, are some facts. As Painter, a scholar
of African-American history, points out, it’s the consensus
that, in her speech of 1851, Sojourner Truth has actually—
by means of speaking—“inserted black women into women’s
reform” and, in the process, “reclaimed physical and emotional
strength for all women” (“Difference” 140–141). So, before
the speech, black women are not, for all intents and purposes,
really part of the women’s reform movement of the mid-nine-
teenth century. After the speech, they are. Yet the speech of
1851 doesn’t merely reflect a social change already occurring at
the time. To the contrary, it helps enact, realize, or materialize
the social change, creating some non-trivial infrastructure for
the social change as such. The speech itself is an insertion of
black women into women’s reform, as well as a reclamation of
physical and emotional strength for all women.

So, since the facts can confirm that rhetorical agency exists,
the really worthwhile endeavor from now on is to explain
where it comes from and how it operates. In the following
chapters, therefore, we’ll situate the Sojourner Truth speech of
1851 in four different theoretical-and-practical frameworks.
That way, it will become caught up within such movements of
reterritorialization and deterritorialization as can produce a
variegated, mobile rhetorical agency.

However, we’re confronted with an important methodolog-
ical difficulty. For there isn’t a Sojourner Truth speech of 1851.
There are only alternative paraphrases, performances, produc-
tions of this conjectural artifact, some less substantive than
others. Nevertheless, if we’re to understand how our exem-
plary rhetorical practitioner could, in 1851, have inserted black women into women’s reform, we’ll obviously need access to her speech.

Our solution to the methodological difficulty is to undertake some triangulation, as by looking to the intersection where the most substantive traces of the speech agree. It’s to juxtapose alternative accounts of what Sojourner Truth must have said (attending to their correspondences, side-stepping their divergences), thereby arriving at an equivalent for the otherwise hypothetical speech. In short, we’ll be constructing an evidentiary text much like a bibliographical or literary recension, since that does seem a good way for us to document, i.e., from a rhetorical perspective, the concrete activity of a practitioner whose work would clarify the nature of rhetorical agency itself.

What we’re given to think of as the Sojourner Truth speech is actually the choice we make when we privilege one out of two renditions. The better known rendition, and to this very day, is “a fiction created some twelve years after the event” by “an ambitious white woman,” Frances Dana Gage, a journalist-activist who had served as president for the women’s rights convention where Sojourner Truth spoke (Campbell 9, 13). Campbell relies extensively on the version from Gage to support her own propositions about the perverse and protean nature of rhetorical agency. Her rationale for nurturing this simulation (so replete with fabricated details as to add up to a “characterization…not supported by other accounts”) is that it’s “longer and more frequently cited” than its counterpart (12, 17).

Now, it’s not as if we ought to defenestrate the Frances Dana Gage version of the speech, the version which Campbell is turning into a case study of rhetorical agency as such. To the contrary, it’s that, since the Gage rendition is already there, what with its being so frequently cited and so on, we ought to be triangulating as much of it as we can. Indeed, so far as concerns the central claims which Gage reports, and which Campbell repeats for our benefit, it’s at least conceivable that Sojourner Truth could have made them all.

So, yes, let’s concede that the Gage version is the one in which Sojourner Truth’s persona is the more memorably “dra-
matized,” such that it does at least help us grasp that image of herself which the historical speaker is known to have deployed during her public appearances of the mid-nineteenth century (Painter, “Difference,” 151, 154). But if so very many of the details as reported (including, evidently, most of the fireworks) are Gage’s fabrications, then we should not be allowing her rendition to serve as our sole source on the speaker’s rhetorical agency, or — by extension — on everybody else’s. For we wouldn’t want rhetorical agency itself to be a fiction promulgated by a certain mid-nineteenth century journalist, no matter how much of an activist the latter must have been.

Fortunately, another eyewitness, Marius Robinson, did publish (just a month after the event, and not, as in the case of Frances Dana Gage, twelve years later) a version of the speech that’s almost as lengthy, just as interesting, and, according to the experts on Sojourner Truth, much more trustworthy than the version which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell portrays as epitomizing rhetorical agency. So, rather than settle for tracing all of Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency to Gage’s imagination, we can trace at least some of it to an evidentiary text to be built in collaboration with Marius Robinson himself.

Of course, according to the Robinson account, reprinted in Nell Irvin Painter’s book, the closest analogue for the world-famous “A’n’t I a woman?” (which we’ve inherited directly from Gage) takes the form not of a rhetorical question, but of a flat-out declaration: “I am a woman’s rights.” Yet it’s Campbell’s own use of “I am a woman’s rights,” the line which scholars now take to encapsulate the speech as a whole, that contextualizes our project of triangulating for rhetorical agency in the first place. For the theorist herself is the one citing that supplementary line, that flat-out declaration, as verifying that, even if Sojourner Truth never did ask whether she was a woman, she must still, in her speech of 1851, have said something to that effect. That’s precisely as documented by this parallel statement, this “I am a woman’s rights,” from an eyewitness whom Campbell chooses to leave anonymous.

So we should treat Marius Robinson as an informant not only with respect to what Sojourner Truth would have said in 1851, but also to what she wouldn’t have said. In this way, even
Marius Robinson can participate in the processes by which rhetorical agency is assembled. But, to triangulate properly, we should take some care to discount any attributions appearing only in the Gage version of the speech, and emphatically not in the version that's by far the more “reliable,” the one from Marius Robinson (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 174; see also Lerner 59; King 137–139; Fitch and Mandziuk 18, 74). Those would be the attributions which, precisely because they belong to the fictionalized Gage rendition, we should hesitate to accept at face value, even if they do include all the makings of a quite chimerical rhetorical agent.

According to Gage (an anti-slavery feminist), but not according to Robinson (an anti-slavery clergyman), Sojourner Truth, at the woman’s rights convention of 1851, speaks in a dialect most obtrusively marking her as African-American. She integrates a paradoxically and perversely authentic use of the “n-word” (Campbell 13). She notes that she’s never in her life been helped into carriages or pampered in any similar respect (with the implication that, whatever she’s accomplished, she’s accomplished entirely on her own). She refers to her experience as a mother who has seen most of her thirteen children sold off into slavery, not to mention as a woman who, in her own person, has been forced to “bear de lash” (10). She uncovers her right arm all the way up to the shoulder, specifically in order to show her tremendous muscular power. And she directs certain witheringly pointed asides, one after another, at these hecklers, these “traditional male religious authorities” who, infiltrating and even overrunning her immediate audience, have established “a scene of great tension and hostility,” right here at the 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio (9). Yet Marius Robinson (who, having once been tarred and feathered at the hands of an angry, anti-abolitionist mob, ought to remember at least the part about bearing the lash) doesn’t corroborate any of these details at all (see Baker).

Yes, such details would obviously be speaking to realities faced, on the one side, by nineteenth century abolitionists and women’s rights activists and, on the other side, by the historical Sojourner Truth, together with, in Campbell’s turn of phrase, her “slave sisters” (14). Even so, our methodological difficulty
can’t be surmounted by any rehearsal of the preceding. The problem is that the very most memorable details from Gage’s account — the obtrusive dialect, the close-to-thirteen children sold away, the bearing of the lash in person, the uncovering of a laborer’s arm to the shoulder, even the patriarchal-and-racist hecklers are all missing from the Marius Robinson version of the speech, appearing only in the fictionalized version from Frances Dana Gage. So those must be the features that add up to the “characterization…not supported by other accounts” (Campbell 12). And this remains the case even if Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is bent on treating those same memorable details as if they can help us theorize the way in which rhetorical agency would actually work.

Yet we are not left with the fabricated Gage version alone, for we also have at our disposal the considerably more reliable version from Marius Robinson. Let’s proceed by reflecting on the overlap between the two accounts, including the manner in which each of them helps disclose the very thesis of the hypothetical speech. In Gage, as we know, it’s “An’t I a woman?” and, in Robinson, it’s “I am a woman’s rights.” Now, the “I am a woman’s rights” (from Robinson) does seem functionally interchangeable with the “An’t I a woman?” (from Gage). This means that we can with some justification look to “I am a woman’s rights” as an alternative formulation of “An’t I a woman?” (in other words, of whatever it was that Sojourner Truth must have been claiming). We can then ask which particular features, dimensions, or realities of rhetorical agency the various parts of this flat-out declaration might be engaging.

After all, Gage and Robinson — both of them eyewitnesses, evidentiary sources — do agree in some noteworthy ways. Among the points of agreement is that the Sojourner Truth speech is about gender, a theme clearly accessible through both “An’t I a woman?” and “I am a woman’s rights.” In addition, the reality of race functions inarguably as a condition of possibility for the statement as a whole. The speech also addresses “work, mind, and biblical precept” (three central “aspects” of nineteenth-century “women’s identity”), in this way refuting “all of the major arguments (biological, theological, and sociologi-
cal)” then available “against woman’s rights” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 126; Campbell 12).

What’s more, in connection with the argument as to “mind” (belonging to a nineteenth century debate over whether women and African-Americans were intelligent enough to deserve full membership in the social), there’s also a kind of second-order agreement. For Robinson and Gage do, together, corroborate the role in the speech of a curious analogy, this latter again concerning the intellect of the marginalized. It’s the celebrated analogy of the pint and the quart, which must therefore be playing an important part in the communicative transaction.

Finally, there’s something else, separate from anything stipulated in the catalog above. Its presence is palpable in both the Gage and Robinson versions (that is, in both “A’n’t I a woman?” and “I am a woman’s rights”), each of which refers, though each in a different way, to the corporeality, indeed, the sheer physicality at stake in the delivery of this famous if hypothetical speech. Let’s provisionally refer to the unknown quantity as *embodiment*, employing that term as a placeholder for one or another conception of materiality.

These several elements go together in a thematic bundle, and the “I am a woman’s rights” from Robinson clearly serves as a more useful guide to the contents than does the “A’n’t I a woman?” from Gage. It’s a bundle, a package establishing rather precisely (Mikhail Bakhtin might say, “chronotopically”) which utterances, which details really do have to be included in Sojourner Truth’s hypothetical speech. Although we can describe the package as the core of the speech, there is a sense in which it’s a lamellation as well. For the speech is assembled out of layers — of “race,” “gender,” “work,” “mind,” “biblical precept,” the pint-and-quart analogy, and something quite like “embodiment.” All of these lamellae must lie at the core of Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency, since they do lie at the core of her speech. And, as we’ve seen, they’re also articulated with “I am a woman’s rights,” which is the capsulation, the thesis, the handle for the speech itself. So we’ll posit that “I am a woman’s rights” (which, again, expresses Sojourner Truth’s message at least as concretely as does “A’n’t I a woman?”) collo-
icates all the points of departure required for investigating the constitution of rhetorical agency as such.

By now, we have at our disposal not only an assemblage-theoretical approach, but also some evidentiary materials to which to apply the approach. So what we should do next is firm up the agenda. We’ll wish to undertake a systematic investigation of the Sojourner Truth speech in keeping with the activities of reterritorialization and deterritorialization that are taking place within the four landscapes of rhetorical agency.

**An Investigative Itinerary**

Let’s agree, for heuristic purposes, that the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights” must refer to the rhetorical agent in its aspect as the subject. Still, if the remaining string of terms — “am a woman’s rights” — were there in the manner of a glorified appositive, and all in the interest of self-expression, then nothing much could happen as a result of the speech. For this would be an utterance from someone who, in 1851, is attending a convention the very purpose of which is to generate the women’s rights that don’t, at this moment, exist.

In that case, noting that the speaker’s subjectivity, identity, essence, or status can’t, not automatically, help her insert black women into women’s reform, let’s try to put that fact to use within the methodology for the study. Let’s structure the investigation in such a manner as to take seriously each of the four terms in “I am a woman’s rights,” discovering what they can contribute to Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency. (Or, to put it another way, let’s frame each of them as an agent, an informant, speaking on behalf of one or another assemblage of its own.)

Treating the “I” as pointing to the social-structural landscape of agency, we’ll accompany Sojourner Truth to a place where an axiomatic rhetorical subjectivity will look to be coextensive with rhetorical agency itself. Unfortunately, and in direct consequence, we’ll soon find that just about everything she highlights in her speech will, under rhetoric’s constitutive turn, seem to disappear into a sort of social-and-linguistic loop.
But we will still have to address an “am,” a “woman’s,” and a “rights,” and, as suggested above, these are not to be written off as elaborating the condition, no matter how “unavoidable,” of an “I” who is only a subject (Campbell 3). So we’ll treat the “rights” as pointing to the axiomatic role in agency of the conventional, and therefore as directing our steps to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape. We’ll then become better placed to account for rhetorical transaction as conducing to genuine social change, for rhetoric will come into view as a mechanism for leveraging shared values in the interest of making things otherwise than they are.

Yet we’ll be left wondering why someone’s agency should be so dependent on a conventionality which, in privileging the shared values holding the group together, would tend continually to override, even to efface, the alterity of the group members themselves. And we’ll have to consider that rhetorical conventionality, even in the form of shared values, would still need supplementation by something else, something as irreducible to rhetorical conventionality as to rhetorical subjectivity.

So we’ll treat the “am” of the statement not as registering some sort of consensus, but rather as registering the diachronic and emergent character of human existence, i.e., as invoking the axiomatic role of rhetorical transcendence. The “am” will thus lead us all the way into the existential-transversal landscape of agency, where it’s an authentic claim to life, quite untrammeled by any shared values, that counts for everything. And then we’ll see that our exemplary practitioner, in deploying the life-affirming resources folded into her speech, is acting to operationalize rhetorical transcendence, as by producing some genuine social change.

Yet, as we’ll notice, the existential-transversal landscape will, ironically enough, be populated by many local residents who themselves keep overlooking the full force of anybody’s “am.” These will be those theorists who, in tacitly assuming that rhetoric is purely epistemic, cannot help but view transcendence as ordinarily immanent to consciousness. So they will remain bedeviled by the difficulty of conceptualizing transcendence as separate from a socially-determined subjectivity. For that reason, we will have to go so far as (gratuitously) to
participate in some assemblage-theoretical intervention, guiding certain of the local agents to additional resources available within their own landscape of agency. With the aid of yet another local theorist, the material phenomenologist Michel Henry, we will undertake to show that the inhabitants of the existential-transversal landscape needn’t locate transcendence within human interiority, but, to the contrary, can locate it within human exteriority instead.

Even so, we will be left with another of these nagging questions, this time, as to the improbability of thinking that rhetorical transcendence (in animating genuine social change) could really involve so little as some authentically human subjectivity, some authentically human conventionality, and some authentically human corporeality, all of these sutured to an authentically human claim to exist. For an answer, we’ll move on to treat the “woman’s” as pointing to the axiomatic role in agency of the material, and, for that reason, as pointing to the material-semiotic landscape of agency. There, it will turn out that nothing is merely authentic. Instead, whatever exists — whatever seems “given” — will prove to be produced, and always from somewhere in the midst of things.

But material-semiotic production will not be symbolistic production alone, regardless that so many rhetorical theorists might prefer to treat it that way. So, when we do reach the material-semiotic paradigm, we’ll have to undertake yet another intervention. We’ll attempt to show how Sojourner Truth, our exemplary rhetorical practitioner, is enabled — with the aid of her radically heterogeneous allies — to produce a new reality, not out of nothing, but as the material-and-relational output of a quite unprecedented assemblage.

This latter will remain compatible with the most important themes bundled into Sojourner Truth’s speech of 1851. For we’ll see that “race,” “gender,” and “biblical precept” are strata (social territories) whose bits and pieces our exemplary practitioner is gathering and connecting as she speaks. The speaker and her auditors will then start collaborating, constructing an alliance with unwonted functionalities, these latter conducive to genuine social change. Thus even the exemplary rhetorical agent will participate in building a meshwork, a cyborg capable
of enacting, or realizing, or materializing rhetorical transcendence itself.