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## Composition Is the Ethical Negotiation of Fantastical Selves

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This article addresses an impasse between rhetoric and composition practice and theory. On one hand, from the poststructural through the posthuman, our most vigorous theories challenge classical notions of selfhood and agency. On the other hand, from institutional assessment through writing about writing, composition's most vigorous practices entail fairly traditional ideas about selfhood and agency. This piece crosses over the impasse by suggesting that "self" and "agency" are vital fantasies for composition, and that negotiating these fantasies is an ethical process. At its heart, I argue, composition is any ethical, collective working out of these fantastical concepts that helps adaptive individuals more freely emerge.

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**B**ecoming the selves we are at each moment means negotiating constraints, inventively encountering limits within and in environments. This way of putting what it means to *be a becoming self* marks, I take it, a central, emotionally coherent assumption for rhetoric and composition. To be sure, the field challenges the notion of a unitary self, articulates the ambiguous forces of desire in creativity, and questions whether divides between selves and environments are conceptually meaningful in the first place. Quite a lot, in fact.<sup>1</sup> And at the end of most days, each feels herself to be somebody

CCC 70:2 / DECEMBER 2018

in particular, *really*. In both our pedagogy and our scholarship, the somebodies that we interact with collections of students and readers on the presumption that those somebodies may leave classrooms and texts, more or less distinct from one another, in some way each more capable of negotiating constraint: more (troubledly) free.<sup>2</sup> For those persuaded by the critiques of agency and the self that filled the latter third of the twentieth century, and for those now finding intellectual resonance in postcomposition, network theory, material rhetorics, or object-oriented ontology, this presents a disjunct. Composition theory and practice are not in accord on selves and agency.

This essay urges an understanding of the latter concepts as intertwined *fantasies* and of ourselves as a field devoted to their ethical negotiation. Since composition cannot help but be the negotiation of fantastical selves, we should decline Casey Boyle's recent invitation to "reframe rhetoric's current habit of humanist, reflective practice toward" a "*posthuman practice*" (534). Not because the practices he offers are unhelpful, but because posthumanism—by contrast with the chastened humanism I here suggest—cannot account for the activity of those urging it. In short, the time has come to kick away the ladder of posthumanism. Rather than hoping to found ourselves after humanism, rhetoric and composition can (and perhaps cannot not) entail collectively performed, individuating negotiation of what it means to be *somebody*. This requires both distinguishable selves and some sort of agency for those selves, fantastical though both concepts surely are.

### Compositions' Difficulty

*Composition* today helplessly means one or more of at least four things, none entirely gelling with a worldview that rejects the unitary self and its agential architecture. Composition is (1) the practice of composing, (2) the field or discipline studying that practice, (3) that practice as a teaching subject, and (4) the profession or institutional network cohering around (1) through (3). Equally, *a composition* is the social object produced whenever composing occurs (by whatever assemblage). In all but this last, thoroughly objective sense, composition *directly* requires agential selves of one sort or another: composers, researchers, teachers and students, and professionals or institutional subjects (even as it also proceeds from and through whole heavenly hosts of other nonhuman beings). All these meanings are mean-

ingful only insofar as, in practice, we take composition's agential selves seriously, not as mere illusions.

Composition—and the researching, teaching, learning, and administration of it—doesn't matter if we subscribe wholeheartedly to the judgment that composers are *not* moderately distinct from one another and are *not* more or less creative agents. And yet, we cannot theoretically justify the idea that we, ourselves, are, in ourselves, simply who we are—nor the idea that our actions are, simply and solely, willfully our own. As Boyle rightly puts it, “any individual (be it a human or nonhuman) is not an essential subject or object compelled to adapt to external factors”; rather, “individuals emerge from and with and as practice” (541). The trouble is that we also *cannot help but feel* ourselves to have more individuality than this and *cannot help but feel* the weight of others' distinctness from us. After all, the posthumanist *inveighs, urges, explains*. Such rhetorical stances are only sensical with respect to something like moderately distinguishable somebodies who enact something like agency.

This essay starts from the difficulty inhabiting all four of the compositions delineated above, and compositions' difficulty is not easily resolved. What we take the world and those peopling it to be is, when thinking systematically, at odds with both quotidian experiences of self and senses of self that are necessary for the fourfold enterprise of composition.<sup>3</sup> The tension is especially marked in research at the nexus of feminism, critical theory, and poststructuralism (and its successors), where attunement to the intensities of personal experience, commitment to transformative pedagogy, and rigorous critiques of the human subject meet. Some such tension—between who or what we think we are and who or what we *have* in some way to be—is central to composition generally. Cheryl Geisler frames the difficulty in teaching terms: “the post-modern agent creates problems for rhetoric as a teaching profession, problems that I firmly believe we need to take seriously” (“Teaching” 109). While Geisler is surely correct, we might also feel she does not go far enough; most logically consistent ways of theorizing the agent (as overdetermined, multiple, divided, an effect of power, an assemblage, etc.) make trouble, not only for one, but for all four senses of composition. It is perhaps for this reason that one popular response to the contradiction between our theories and our practices of selfhood has been to underscore the primacy of practice. Only in better practices, that wager goes, can we hope to find new resolution to founding contradictions.

The approach is nicely exemplified by Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie's call for a practical sensitivity to theoretical quandaries. For such a sensitivity, Kirsch and Ritchie caution, mere "I-talk" can resolve our dilemma no better than the discarded view from nowhere: "It is not enough to claim the personal and locate ourselves in our scholarship and research" (8). Rather, attunement to the theoretical tensions with which we live must transform our practices in an ongoing, ever-negotiated fashion. In the practice-approach they urge, "We move forward with the awareness that we can only approximate an understanding, noticing the multiple and contradictory positions researchers and participants occupy, complicating and politicizing our investigation, valuing the individual and the local" (10). Only in this way can our theories emerge as ethically collective in a deep sense, perhaps even capable of overcoming apparent contradictions with practice. Practical attunement to contradictions between our theoretical and practical commitments, on this view, is our best hope for doing ethical research.

Practice seems preeminent, too, in some intensely theory-oriented takes on the contradiction. For instance, the word appears a striking 203 times in Boyle's "Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice"—less frequent only than *of*, *the*, *and*, *a*, *to*, *as*, and *in*. (But why should it not? After all, you'll find plenty of the titular "fantasy" in this essay.) The trouble with Boyle's "posthuman practice" is that, for all its invocations of "practice," "posthumanism" functions in the essay as an effort to resolve an unresolvable theory/practice contradiction on the plane of theory. Rhetoric and composition practically need something like "selves" and something like "agency," risible though the concepts look from a certain theoretical angle. We can't escape an at least Protagorean rhetorical humanism, though that humanism need not be celebratory.<sup>4</sup> And so we must come to think of all these concepts in somewhat the way we have come to think of "rhetoric," which is not *sometimes* at stake in but rather *problematically infusing* all of our activities. We can do so by understanding the specific work of composition as the negotiation of fantastical selves. The notion of fantasy helps us live with a tension that we cannot actually resolve.

"Fantastical selves" here is dual: On the one hand, as a unitary concept, "the self" is a fantasy—to be distinguished from both fiction and illusion—to be negotiated in all composing. On the other hand, composition as a field of teaching and research, and as a profession, calls for negotiation of the disparate and collective fantasies of selfhood that emerge in particular

situations of composing. We negotiate our own fantasies of selfhood as we compose, and, as a field, we are charged with aiding and understanding others' negotiations of their fantastical selves. I thus use the word *negotiation* in a dual sense, too: both to navigate fixed constraints, as one negotiates the bends of a river, and to willfully but not unconstrainedly refashion loose constraints within a quasi-fixed context, as one negotiates a contract.<sup>5</sup> In so arguing, it will become clear, I take issue not with many of the paths to which Boyle would direct our attention, but instead with the posthumanist reframing he urges.

We cannot quite (and need not) consider the work of composition in terms of posthuman practice. Rather, we should inscribe the very practices Boyle presses upon us under the sign of a chastened humanism. Chastened humanism ruefully accepts both that an awful lot of lousiness attends all human endeavors and acknowledges with relief that humanity *tout court* is not nearly as grand or important a thing as some of our number have at times supposed. This is a way of thinking about human persons that fully accepts most of the assemblage view, but that makes few large claims about the metaphysics of selves, agency, and so on. Importantly, chastened humanism starts from a deeply rhetorical commitment: frameworks for thinking should be able to account for their own status as addressed discourse, always negotiating the limits of audiences both actual and invoked, structured by the particular sorts of limits that shape at any given moment the human animals by and (mostly) for whom they are composed. Chastened humanism is one way of naming what I take to be a deep orientation in rhetoric and composition, still active when disavowed. A chastened humanism sees in composition the ethical negotiation of fantastical selves and urges concerned, careful, at once both collective and individuating *effort*, labor whereby fantastical selves and agency become more real.

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I am not making an argument about what selves and agency *are*, but rather about what *sorts of things* they *are for us*. They are fantasies that we need. Indeed, on the view suggested here at the outset, that we become ourselves in inventive negotiation of constraints within and in environments, there would seem to be selves (more or less pregiven insides, oriented out) and there would be environments (the outsides that surround those selves).

Negotiation, if this were a good enough starting point, would then be what selves do with the environments in which they find themselves—as, for example, students and teachers negotiate classrooms devised by architects and administrators. But if the twentieth century (or the pre-Socratics) taught us anything at all, from quantum physics to posthumanism, it was surely that a clean, once-and-for-all demarcation of insides from outsides is not theoretically viable. Indeed, that lesson is doxastic within the critical humanities broadly, even as we continue to talk and think in ways that undercut our own critique.

In articulating a notion of the self as fantastical and of composition as the ethical negotiation of fantastical selves, I am looking first at the *kind of concept* the self is for composition and then at composition's *particular stake* in selves. Composition, I suggest, is deeply concerned with adaptation,<sup>6</sup> and I turn to ego analyst Heinz Hartmann for a notion of fantasy as adaptive in detailing how composition studies fantasizes “selves” and “agency.” Drawing then on physicist Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and Diane Davis's *Inessential Solidarity*, I reiterate the implausibility of older notions of the agential self: here in terms of fundamental rhetoricity. Finally, I argue that *ethically negotiating fantasies of agency—itself the negotiation of fantastical selves—is the basic work of composition*. In other words, I conclude, the fantasy of agency is both an emergent and a recursive property of the fantastical self that composes, a property whereby composition's fantastical self negotiates for itself some fuller, and perhaps better, reality. To clarify the ethical stakes, I read all this through Marilyn Cooper's “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted” (as a representative of contemporary doxa on selves and agency).

### **Fantasies of Self and Agency**

“Fantasy” works here as an overarching theoretical frame for living with, naming without having to resolve, a tension that is likely unresolvable. A fantasy is something we feelingly need to treat as real, and that we hence refuse to submit entirely to judgment. Unlike illusion or fiction, fantasy is that which we can claim is false but cannot know is false—not because its truth or falsity is unknowable per se, but because *we need to not know in case it may be so*. Drawing on Octave Mannoni, Slavoj Žižek presents fantasy as having the structure *je sais bien, mais quand-même* (I know very well, but all the same)—that is, the structure of refusal to wholeheartedly

submit to judgment a sense of or attitude toward or picture of the world. According to Žižek, fantasy, like belief, “can thrive only in the shadowy domain between outright falsity and positive truth” (108). In articulating selves and agency as fantasies here, however, I rely not on Žižek but on his master’s nemesis, Heinz Hartmann.

Hartmann’s developmentalism (for which he was excoriated by Lacan—so strongly that, though few today read ego psychology at all, many humanists who have read a little Lacan take Hartmann and his ilk to be anathema to coherent thinking altogether) is neatly in line with something problematic in composition. The idea of adaptation, much as many of us might wish it away, is one that composition—like psychoanalysis and perhaps more than other discourses—can’t do or be without. What Hartmann’s *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation* gives us that we can’t get from Lacanian suturing, or from post-Lacanian like Žižek, is precisely our own problem recapitulated in the discourse of the other. Hartmann’s relatively lucid, brief articulation of fantasy as being about functional development, improvement of some sort, gets at something *we’re unable to avoid wanting from composition*, no matter how much we think we know better.

With desire in mind, it is worth returning to the hope of resolving a contradiction between theory and practice in practice. What are we looking for in the research praxis Kirsch and Ritchie describe as rooted in an ethics of care? “Our research instead will need to extend to theory-generating in a self-reflexive and mutually dialogic context,” urge Kirsch and Ritchie: “Only in this extra measure of ‘care’ can our research truly be ethical” (25). We desire to remain attuned to ways in which others’ practices can shift our own, and equally we hope to listen and allow others’ practices to reshape our theoretical horizons. This can mean, as Jacqueline Rhodes powerfully demonstrates in her reflections on performative pedagogy, treating classroom teaching as an ongoing effort to develop understandings of crucial terms such as *agency* and *selves*. Recognizing the subjectivity of student composers as “a particularly textual subjectivity, one that relies on fictionalized stability in order to negotiate the power relations undergirding a writing classroom” (80), makes it possible to “assume . . . the personal on the part of teacher and student, emphasizing the situatedness of any writer or rhetor” (81). Ultimately, for Rhodes, the engaged pedagogy of radical feminism is one in which we, as composition teachers in classrooms, are *at stake*—not delivering knowledge but collaboratively building it “through

a historically situated and textually oriented approach to a consciousness of the ‘personal’ and thus to collective and networked action” (83). I value deeply Rhodes’s presentation of classrooms as sites for renegotiating—in solidaristic, lived practice, with students—our theoretical horizons. And running through Rhodes’s text, as also through Kirsch and Ritchie’s, is a version of individual responsibility that we will find also in Marilyn Cooper’s “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted.” Working to be ethical in composition seems, in each of these cases, like giving others their due, allowing ourselves to be influenced by them.

I think this is correct, as far as it goes. But it does not give us a way of living with our richest theoretical conceptions of selfhood and agency. The psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy as an adaptive mechanism for reconciling desires and world can help composition account for—and continue negotiating—the split. We move about in the world as fantastical—which is not to say illusory—selves, with fantastical agency, and rhetoric and composition can live better by accepting this. To be a self

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with agency is like being rhetorical in that we *are* these things all the time. But to say “we *are* these things” is not equivalent to saying “these concepts describe reality.” In articulating *self* and *agency* as fantasies, I am presenting these as framing ideas that we want, need, and use, irrespective of whether they adequately nominate reality. They are ways of apprehending that, were we wholeheartedly to submit them to judgment, we might have to discard—and that, somehow, help us to move around in the world anyway. As fantasies, self and agency are *instruments of negotiation*.

Fantasy is an adaptive mechanism for negotiating the simultaneous contingency and necessity of judgments about reality. Thinking of both individual persons and the species as a whole, Hartmann presents an orientation toward fantasy as “a decisive step in evolution” (58). Since the human animal must adapt to its environment to survive, like all others, but since it also adapts its environment to itself, like only some others, Hartmann reasons that a “reality principle” is insufficient for thinking about individual development. Instead, he argues, something like a “detour through fantasy” is advantageous in the process of development or maturation (16–20). For Hartmann, apprehending the world adaptively is not most fruitfully a matter

of “taking in reality as it really is,” but is rather an uptake that predicates a world within us—whether it *is* or *is not* just now—that may yet turn out to have been “reality.” This uptake, somewhere between perception and judgment, is fantasy. *Fantasy is what we do with the world inside us because we need to*, even when we’re not conscious of the need (or even of the fantasy). It is what we cannot help but make of the world for ourselves, from which we derive some satisfaction, and on the basis of which we behave in the world. Fantasy is thus not an internal and dispassionate representation of the world, but nor is it a refusal of the world; it is a needful, desiring predication, a way of making the world we need within us. A “detour through fantasy,” as Hartmann describes it, is part of ordinary human development, an element of the process whereby one arrives at a more or less shareable apperception of reality. Its primary importance lies in the way it “may fulfill a synthetic function by provisionally connecting our needs and goals with possible ways of realizing them” (18). A detour through fantasy is crucial in the invention of versions of reality that will be habitable, on the basis of needs that do not mesh with what we can judge in this moment to be real. It is this understanding of fantasy as adaptive, as fulfillingly combinatorial or synthesizing that I wish to take from Hartmann.

Seen in this light, fantasy is a mode of being toward the world that is strictly *complementary* to the comportment described as realistic. Reality, on this view, is *what-really-is* (one sees how quickly truth will get smuggled in). Fantasy nominates what is in a manner that simply does not find the same *what is* as “being realistic” does—it is oriented more toward internal needs and drives. Even without subscribing to a psychoanalytic theory of drives, we can see how fantasy’s character as affect-charged and proto-symbolically organized makes it useful in the reconstruction of “reality.” The detour through fantasy, Hartmann explains, is especially crucial for a symbolic animal such as any reader of this text: because “man [*sic*] adapts to an environment part of which has not, but part of which has already been molded by his kind and himself. Man not only adapts to the community but also actively participates in creating the conditions to which he must adapt” (31). Because “reality” for such an animal is collectively negotiated, to take it simply as given would be maladaptive. A symbolic animal requires some way of acting internally upon a constrained reality that it has received—largely in symbols and via judgments—in order to act differently in the world. We produce in turn a somewhat differently constraining

reality. Such an animal, rhetorical humanism's subject, must have "reality" within it and must be able to hesitate before rendering judgment on this inventive internal reality while continuing to act in the world.

Composition's selves and agency are the fantasies through which the field detours and upon which it works. Our need for such fantasies becomes clearer when, like Joshua Gunn discussing communication, we see these as "immanent structures without an 'outside' or extradiscursive reality" (4). Fantasy, as a structure of experience, refuses to be submitted

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to the question of whether it is "really real," is in some way correspondent to a reality that would be external to the fantasy, even as it stipulates that the world *is* a certain way. Indeed, even as we may "recognize" or

acknowledge to others (when we are conscious of fantasy at all) a given fantasy's ontic nonreality, we not only continue to form fantasies in general but quite typically *continue to be shaped by the experiential reality of the fantasy we have just named unreal*. So, for instance, I (like Gunn) see communication as a fantasy; and yet, I write here and trust you to connect in some way with what I have imagined I meant to say. The fantasy makes action possible. Generally speaking, fantasies allow us to live in and with but also beyond our facticity, beyond the thrown-ness of our being. In this, like communication itself, fantasy's mechanisms of action are miasmic, cloudy, and multiple. Through fantasy as through communication, *we are intentional together in a world of becoming*. Very broadly, then, fantasy is what makes composition possible—it brings us to make shared marks that may change what counts as reality. More specifically, self and agency are central elements of all composition's detours.

**Agency and the Self in Composition Today**

Marilyn Cooper argues that agency is a property of human selves or agents, whether we like it or not. "Agency is inescapable," she asserts: "rhetors are agents by virtue of their addressing an audience" (442). We are agents simply because we have effects, and our agency is an emergent and enacted phenomenon. Accordingly, for Cooper, a responsible rhetoric involves processes of persuasion that are at least equally processes of invitation. The challenge is "to be open to and responsive to the meanings of others, to not negate others by insisting that only [we ourselves] own the truth"

(443). Here, recognizing both agency and selves as emergent helps us take responsibility for our symbolic effectivity by communicating with a kind of uncertainty, creating social space for others. In making this argument, Cooper reads “agency” as a neurobiological fact, presenting “individual agents” as “determinate, but not determined, in an ongoing becoming driven by the interactions among the components of their nervous system and by their interaction with the surround” (428). The idea here is that the self that would be agent, the rhetor whose uncertainty is at stake in each effort to persuade or invite, is itself a negotiated phenomenon. It emerges from interactions between various determining forces without ever being quite reducible to these. So far, so good.

The concern, then, is that the negotiating self emerging in Cooper’s essay seems—in a foundational way—simply given as distinct from the environment in which it emerges. Indeed, the article’s guiding idea is that agency “is based in individuals’ lived knowledge that their actions are their own” (421). And, though Cooper is consistent in her emphasis on both agency and self as emergent—that is, determinate but not determined—this guiding idea is rooted nonetheless in an understanding of the nervous system as predetermined. In distinction from its surround, it is “an autonomous dynamic system . . . [which] creates meaning” (Thompson qtd. in Cooper 421). In short, drawing on research in neuroscience and complexity theory, Cooper’s position takes as given a more or less originary pre-self, an autonomous nervous system interacting with but fundamentally separate from its surroundings. But this view of fundamental autonomy is only coherent from the (partial) perspective of the unitary self that has emerged and has come to feel itself to be a particular and distinct somebody. The human nervous system is not first of all autonomous, but—in the long process of natality—fundamentally networked.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, what we take to be the autonomy of a nervous system is already something of a mystery. At what point (if ever), and why, does a human nervous system become a properly autonomous producer of meaning?<sup>8</sup> In the epistemic space where composition emerges as a discipline, we remain a long ways from having satisfying answers to such questions.

Now, I think Cooper’s ethical conclusions stand well enough without the putative grounding of a fully individuated and distinct nervous system. Accordingly, it is important to examine how, in turning to the nervous system, Cooper winds up making an old set of foundationalist assumptions

with a new set of neuroscience terms. The basic difficulty is that, on the one hand, any place we anchor our theory—even upon such firm terrain as the autonomous nervous system—will tend to shift more than we had

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hoped, and, on the other, we nonetheless *cannot not* weigh anchor. We need to believe in our selves. Because composing is in general the negotiation of constraints on being, and because negotiation requires something like agency and something like a self, composition *needs* to feel justified in relying on these concepts. And yet, justification always breaks down. The difficulty is irresolvable on its own terms. Our most

rigorously systematic theory building confronts something like its own “fundamental rhetoricity,” which is why I suggest we think of the notions with which we practically operate as *fantastical*. In the next two sections, I examine how this difficulty plays out in Cooper’s essay in order then to elaborate on the fantasies I take to move composition writ large.

### **Meaning Matters: Trouble with Selves**

To rehearse, then, a familiar critique, though perhaps in less familiar terms: in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Karen Barad offers a perspective that, at first, sounds like Cooper’s. Drawing on Niels Bohr’s understanding of “indeterminacy,” as well as on recent experiments in quantum physics, Barad’s theory of “agential realism” stipulates the “ontological inseparability of objects and apparatuses” (128). Objects, things in the world, cannot be wholly differentiated from the systems of reception and perception by which they are apprehended—matter itself emerges intra-actively. The basic idea is that all matter is, in a sense, meaning. That is, distinct entities emerge as distinct only in the production of effects on one another, quite irrespective of any specifically human experience. This, as object; that, as apparatus. To matter is to mean something to other matter, to have effects; to be real at all is to be agential. This has implications for our theories about the world, which—as conceptual and thus also material apparatuses—are entangled with the objects we mean to study.

For Barad, at a primitive or primary level, nothing may be distinguished in any final way from anything else. Scientific distinction drawing is no more “simple observation” than it is “social construction”; knowing (theory-building) is a mode of participation in being’s ongoing becoming. On this view, being as such is a sort of primordial becoming-distinct, in which relations precede *relata*. Entities *emerge* as distinct from one another, emerge as objects and apparatuses on the basis of the production of effects, and “agency” is the production of effects that do not have a preexisting producer. Specifically, for Barad, agency is the production of “marks on bodies”—with the understanding that neither marks nor bodies, neither objects nor apparatuses, are distinct from the get-go but are all rather a becoming-determinate and in this also a becoming-distinct. As Barad puts the crucial point, “Since individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge from their *intra-action*” (128). This is to say, again, all being is—ontologically speaking, as being—fundamentally indeterminate, becoming determinate only in emergent fashion.

This might seem to fit Cooper’s view nicely, since she holds that selves and agency are emergent phenomena. However, where Cooper posits individual and individuated nervous systems as the complete and distinct grounds for the emergence of therefore also distinct selves, Barad asks us to accept that “*agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements*” (33). Individual nervous systems cannot, in this view, simply ground emergent selves. Nervous systems are not themselves ontologically distinct entities, existing in and of themselves, out from which selves might contingently emerge. To the contrary, our very concept—“autonomous nervous systems”—is as much emergent as are the purportedly preexisting entities it names. This does not mean that autonomous nervous systems are not “real,” are “only ideas” or “social constructs.” Instead, Barad’s theory of agential realism asks us to accept as entirely real an ever-emerging world of bodies and marks on bodies and to accept that our own theories and other lenses—our apparatuses—emerge as part of that world in ways that materially exceed our apprehension. As she puts this, “the logic of Bohr’s own argument undercuts the conception of the apparatus as a static and bounded laboratory setup” (161). We thus ought not to see our theories and frameworks for producing meaning as static and given, grounding in any final sense. In place of grounds, Barad

offers a vision of apparatuses as “a dynamic set of open-ended practices, iteratively refined and reconfigured” (167), such that the goal of science becomes “to understand which specific material practices matter and how they matter” (168). *Being* is here rhetorical all the way down. To return to Cooper and neuroscience, we have to see the very idea of an autonomous nervous system as a set of practices for measuring and distinguishing between human (and other) bodies. Real, certainly, and legitimate enough much of the time, but hardly firm ontological ground.

If autonomous nervous systems cannot offer solid ground on which to construct a theory of agency, the ethics Cooper puts forward is also called into question. Cooper urges a “pedagogy of responsibility” by which we can “help students understand that writing and speaking (rhetoric) are always serious actions . . . that their effort can contribute to the effort to construct a good common world only to the extent that they recognize their audience as concrete others with their own spaces of meaning” (443). Responsibility, on this view, is a matter of accountability for our effects on and collaboration with others. But the understanding of effects-on-others we are to inculcate in students is contingent on the conceptual apparatuses that make nervous systems seem fundamentally autonomous.

Barad’s agential realism, by contrast, both troubles conventional notions of responsibility and urges a kind of constant attention to ethical concerns. As she has it, ethics is “not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (393). Ethics, responsibility for our own mattering, is not something extra we do or think about if we are especially fine individuals—it is *a conscious intensification of the ontological condition for the intra-active emergence of ones and others*, objects and apparatuses. Because “even in our becoming there is no ‘I’ separate from the intra-active becoming of the world” (394), the way in which we become who we are is as at once both apparatus and object, self and other. As we take up the reflection performed by the selves we are, attunement to the ethical character of our own, ongoing emergence is a matter of scientific integrity. Responsibility, from the perspective of agential realism, simply is co-emergence at the most fundamental level. A pedagogy of responsibility would thus need to foster consciousness of something more than the otherness of our others. It would need to turn toward the very fantasies at stake in our sense of ourselves as distinct.

By contrast, consider Cooper's rejection of Carolyn Miller's description of agency on what she sees as ethical grounds. In "What Can Automation Tell Us about Agency?" Miller characterizes agency as "the *kinetic energy* of rhetorical performance . . . positioned exactly between the agent's capacity and the effect on an audience" (147; qtd. in Cooper 438). Her point is that an appropriately systematic approach to agency will recognize it as inhering not in persons or static situations, but in events, processes of rhetorical fluidity. Agency, for Miller, is attributive and exists between persons: "To produce kinetic energy, performance requires a relationship between two entities who will attribute agency to each other" (149). Cooper rejects this because, as she says, "deeds are always done by someone, and replacing the doer of the action . . . with an amorphous force like kinetic energy leaves us with no basis for assigning responsibility for actions" (438).<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, this seems reasonable; practically speaking, at the level of the classroom, we can hardly act as though the prompts we assign and respond to were not the (complexly negotiated) responsibility of various individuals, nor as though the voices in the classroom were all one, formless—and not only because most of us are institutionally required to assign grades. While that reasonableness is practical, it is not (as Cooper suggests it should be) theoretically grounded or grounding.

To think in Barad's terms, in naming "autonomous nervous systems" the grounds for selves and agency, we intervene in and determine being in a way that bespeaks the (tendentious) materiality of our theoretical frameworks. As a conceptual apparatus, "autonomous nervous system" is co-emergent with the effects produced by the object to which that concept points. In Cooper's case and those of the neuroscientists on whom she draws, the "individual" that would ground an emergent self and an emergent agency is itself produced in an ongoing way by our framing of it. What is at stake here, then, is a *fundamental rhetoricity in being*: a helplessly responsible becoming-determinate. This emerges clearly in Diane Davis's account of agency, which urges us to think even such apparently distinct objects as autonomous nervous systems in a deeply relational, fundamentally rhetorical manner.

### **Fundamental Rhetoricity: Trouble with Agency**

Ethics and agency, in the fundamental rhetoricity account, are unavoidable. Ethics is less a Kantian "what you should do" and more the owing effectiv-

ity of how you keep on coming to be. Building on Emmanuel Levinas's and Avital Ronell's articulations of a fundamental response-ability at the core of any experience that would be human (though not only human), Davis argues that "any sense of the freedom to choose is already an effect of this excessive responsibility" (102). The ability to respond lies at the heart of ethical agency, but the self who "has" this ability is grounded nowhere, is hardly a unity or "self" at all. Differentiating Levinas from Heidegger, Davis challenges the latter's insistence on the "resolute choice" of the solitary self in its being-toward-death as the ground for all authenticity and concern for others. She questions whether a true "sense of integrity is available to Dasein, and therefore whether resolute choice is ever an option for it" (96), forwarding the Levinasian position that becoming an individual is only ever becoming as response to an other within a network of other others. This is becoming-self in a helplessly one-sided relation with an otherness so other that "I can have *no* core, no 'virginal integrity,' and therefore no heroic potential, no possibility for the triumphant overcoming that Heidegger describes" (102). In short, as Davis has it, there can be no solitary *I* that would confront its own death and, in so confronting, become capable of deep responsibility toward and concern for others. To the contrary, any *I* that emerges in the world does so in a way that must owe less—less, fundamentally, in its *I*-ness—to a central nervous system that could "autonomously" be toward death than to a structure of relationality that is both ethical and rhetorical.

In calling Levinas's fundamental relationality of being rhetorical, Davis develops a notion of agency that hinges on "the face-to-face relation as a kind of persuasion before speech" (177–24). To be *someone* is to be *persuaded into being*, to be called by the other who makes one's agentiality at once possible and impossible. Agentiality is possible because one comes to be in responding, addressed by an other and taking up the call, brought into being as a response to the other's constraining and enabling Saying; a self is agential because it is *capable of responding*, is *response-able*. But agentiality and selfhood are impossible because dispersed or disfigured beyond recognition by the infinitely expanding multiplicity of others and others' others to whom one owes one's very oneness, to whose calling or potential calling—whose Saying—one not only *must respond* but also, impossibly, already *is a response*. This is the ethical situation of fundamental rhetoricity. Implicitly rejecting any such situation, Cooper would ground emergent selves and their emergent agency in pre-given, autonomous

nervous systems that negotiate equally pre-given surrounds. Selves, as Cooper—and we all, in practice—would have it, negotiate environments on the basis of clear distinctions between, at the very least, central nervous systems and their surroundings. But selves, as Davis and Barad and Levinas and Bohr would have it, impossibly emerge, impossibly cohere, impossibly act as intra-active components of the relational, rhetorical miasma that is being in its ongoing becoming.

### **Composing's Agential Selves**

Something like *agency* and something like *self* predicate a world that rhetoric and composition needs. They are two of our founding fantasies. In one sense, this is not particularly novel and certainly not specific to our field. Nietzsche, to take a salient instance, urged in the notes collected and translated as *The Will to Power* that we not take too seriously our need for unifying concepts: “We need ‘unities’ in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist. We have borrowed the concept of unity from our ‘ego’ concept—our oldest article of faith” (§ 635, 338). Half-rejecting the Kantian understanding of a subject as the locus of appearance for a world of objects,

Nietzsche would have it both ways. On the one hand, he acknowledges, our very thinking requires of us some sense of the unitary self; on the other, that sense of self as unitary ought,

**Being complementary to reality's judgments, fantasies are not traded in for realities but rather are retooled as we move through the world they help to shape.**

at best, to be taken with a grain of salt. *This having it both ways is the essential structure of fantasy.* For our disciplinary purposes, it suffices to say that there is no *composing* in a world without creative capacity, without a feeling of agency, without something like faith in our selves—even as we practice skepticism about the integrity of those selves.

We *ought* to want enabling fantasies, and we ought also to make their negotiation central to our practice at all levels. This starts by distinguishing fantasy from fiction. Where *fiction* marks what we say relative to shared awareness that our saying is not veridical (even as it might be “true” in some grander sense), *fantasy* marks what we, strictly speaking, desiringly *need* to be the case, whether it is or not. We do not know whether our senses of self and agency are fictional—we refuse really to know, because composing calls for a world of creative capacity.<sup>10</sup> And while that capacity

may or may not be real in the grandest sense, it cannot appropriately be called *fictional* or *illusory*.<sup>11</sup> We cannot truly surrender our fantasies of self and agency. Being complementary to reality's judgments, fantasies are not traded in for realities but rather are retooled as we move through the world they help to shape.

Indeed, "debunking" fantasies as illusions is neither effective nor entirely desirable. As Kenneth Burke observes in "The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking," the would-be debunker places herself in a difficult situation: "In order to knock the underpinnings from beneath the arguments of [her] opponents, [s]he perfects a mode of argument that would, if carried out consistently, also knock the underpinnings from beneath [her] own argument" (147). Burke is not explicitly addressing fantasy, but what are these "underpinnings," protected only by the debunker's inconsistency, if not founding fantasies such as agency and the self? Debunking is an excessive form of argument, critically consistent to the point of rendering itself unable to proceed at the very level of judgment it privileges. What Burke does not note here, but certainly could have, is that the affective force of basic fantasies rarely disappears as a result of debunking.

Because fantasy occupies an intermediary position between perception and judgment, it is easy to imagine that we need to replace our fantastical commitment to selfhood with good, solid, critical judgments. But this is a sort of category error—judgment is for reality, but fantasy is not opposed to reality as are fictions and illusions. It is complementary to reality. Accordingly, we don't come to terms with reality better by debunking our fantasies and replacing them with something like right reason. Fantasies, on the whole, are about as responsive to debunking as ideology is to straightforward, content-based critique. The question, rather, is *what we are to do with our fantasies—in composition studies, our fantasies of self and agency*. We can reject the predications of a given fantasy, but the need expressed by the fantasy does not disappear. Indeed, seen from one angle, all composing of any sort is an effort to better come to terms with the world through ongoing negotiations of self and agency.

So, we cannot (now with Cooper once more and with psychologist Daniel Wegner, whom she approvingly cites) determine that agency is "real" but that the "conscious will" we attribute to it is "an illusion" (439). To the contrary, we should recognize that some notion of "consciousness" and some notion of "will" are *indispensable elements* of the fantasies of self

and agency we need. Consciousness and will belong in our fantasies, and any definition of the self or agency that cuts them out misses the chance to take up a more crucial question than that of definition: what should we *do* with these elements of fantasy? For instance, accepting that agency and self are key fantasies for composition might recall us to the Levinasian structure of response-ability Davis outlines. We might want to say to ourselves, our students, and our fellow citizens, “Responsibility is not a matter of freedom; your capacity (and desire) to effect change is already a function of your inescapable responsibility, and not the other way around. You are obligated to respond in the way that you are obligated to age” (Davis 112). Here, we would use the fantasy of consciousness to reshape a fantasy of will. Similarly, with Barad (and still more with Nietzsche), we might want to urge something like panpsychism: a sense of the world as feelingly, almost sentiently becoming, each thing emerging as what it is by virtue of its proto-intentional marking and being marked by all the rest of the world—all emerging pressingly, feelingly, intra-actively. From both perspectives, we might leverage various elements of our fantasies to urge reflection on the response-able, intra-active intensities of becoming that we are.

Or else we might want, with Raúl Sánchez in “Outside the Text: Rethorizing Empiricism and Identity,” to retool our fantasies around other constitutive elements entirely. Arguing that a once-strong divide between the concepts of a (theoretically rich) “subject” and a (practically locatable) “writer” has been largely superseded by technological developments, Sánchez urges a return to *identity* as a key term for the selfhood composition studies needs. Identity, in his neo-empirical conception, contributes to “a new theory of the writing-subject” (242) by helping to name the rhetorically vibrant “convergence of time, space, and linguistic code *at* the production of a text” (244). The resulting (fantasy of) identity, per Sánchez, should help us take up questions about the empirical acts and moments of writing that have been largely out of fashion since the demise of think-aloud protocols. I think Sánchez’s framework for retooling the fantastical apparatus of the self for a better composition is promising—although he himself concludes by suggesting that it may be bootless. My engagement here, however, is situated at a different conceptual level altogether. Rather than suggesting specific improvements upon our fantasies of self and agency, I want to attend to that ameliorative impulse itself.

## What Do We Do with Our Fantasies?

Composition—more than most other disciplines—is (and ought to be) dedicated to the ethical negotiation of fantastical selves. We are concerned with the *good* composition of what Cooper, loosely following Bourdieu, calls “*dispositions*”: those tendencies toward activity that we are and that, though already structured at any given moment and tending to structure our futures, are yet susceptible of change. We are concerned, specifically, with fostering and challenging fantasies of complexly individuated creative capacity. In the composition classroom and in thinking about composing, and even when urging posthuman practices, we are negotiating fantasies of self

**Compositionists habitually ask composers to negotiate their senses of self and experiences of agency with an eye to the (social) good.**

and agency. We are not all always happy about this. But regardless of whether we take ourselves to be improving bad student writing, helping composition producers

succeed in future markets, producing good citizens, understanding the act of writing, making writing machines, or something else entirely, our basic orientation is toward the good in composition, where that “good” is ineluctably social, responsible in one form or another.

Compositionists habitually ask composers to negotiate their senses of self and experiences of agency with an eye to the (social) good. We ask them to bring to light and engage with their own beliefs about what it is to be in the world. Whether focused on ideology critique or grammar, creating websites and videos, or doing ethnographic research, when it comes to teaching, composition is a realm in which fantastical selves must be negotiated. Not discarded—again, fundamental fantasies *can't* be discarded; that's what makes them fundamental—but negotiated. In this negotiation, however, we are not psychoanalysts, and our work is not the traversal of fantasy. Our students have not contracted us to help them in their working through, though we may meet five times a week. Ours is not the psychoanalytic cure, but the *collective negotiation of fantastical selves*. Where the basic work of psychoanalysis is working through in dyadic situations, via unrelenting analysis of the transference relation, composition has as its basic work the shifting of unworkable, and the development of newly adaptive, fantasies of self and agency, relative to always emerging socialities. We are concerned with how composers adapt *well*—at once effectively and, in some ethical sense always still to be defined in conversation with those same compos-

ers, appropriately—to their environments and adapt their environments to themselves. And we are consistently engaged in negotiating what such effectivity itself will mean. What can and should adaptively count as being someone in particular, and what can and should count as creative activity, is what we are collectively determining in composition research and teaching.

In its broadest sense, then, composition is the negotiation of constraints on being. Hence, as a teaching discipline, composition involves inviting students to wiggle their senses of self to adapt (to) a wide variety of desires in writing and other compositional media. As a research discipline, composition requires us to discern, discuss, and where possible actively transform our own, our students', and others' senses of the agential selves and scenes of composing. In this latter task, from assessment research to rhetorical theory, we come to articulate *value* in general terms. After all, to note that certain fantasies are unavoidable is not to resign ourselves simply to perpetuating them. Since fantasies are desiring, needful predications, conditioning our behavior in the world, both how and what we fantasize matter. To say that self and agency are fantasies is not to say that all fantasies of self and agency are equally viable. Rhetoric and composition is concerned with negotiating *good* fantastical selves and with discovering *good* ways of accomplishing such negotiation.<sup>12</sup>

Where is the decision on the goodness of our fantasies of self or styles of negotiation to be made? In the classroom, the armchair, the administrative meeting? As a discipline, composition necessarily negotiates between the knowledges and practices produced in these and more domains of activity. And we have gotten pretty good at recognizing that fact. As Kirsch and Ritchie make clear, it is not ethical—or even possible—for us to simply talk among ourselves, determine what we believe are acceptable fantasies of self and agency, and then to set about imposing those fantasies on students. Most in rhetoric and composition can agree. Indeed, Boyle suggests something of the sort when he concludes that the “central ethic for a rhetoric framed as *posthuman practice* is to exercise the humble, open-ended claim that *we do not yet know what a (writing) body can do*; after which, we attempt to find out, repeatedly” (552). Indeed, we do not know. And yet, we cannot help but fantasize knowing. After all, we also *do* wish to shape students' desires in ways that exceed the emergent dynamics of any particular classroom. Neither individual instructors nor WPAs, for instance, typically hope students will leave courses on critical

analysis with a punk rock sense of self (“All alone I’ll be an empire, with no mortgage and no rent,” as Bad Religion put it). To the contrary, regardless of whether studying and teaching composition with a primary focus on critical analysis, civic engagement, multimodality, rhetorical traditions, genre development, audience awareness, or even personal expression, we all emphasize some broadly social consciousness, some awareness of the intersectionality of emergent selves. And, in our disciplinary identity (spread out among various individuating bodies), we are finely attuned to the negotiative character of such intersectionality.

Composition, in all its activity, centers and orients toward negotiation between senses of self, constraints internal and external to those (fantastical) selves, and the possibilities of enacting creative capacity in a shared world. All composers perform such negotiation, since all composition

**Composition, in all its activity, centers and orients toward negotiation between senses of self, constraints internal and external to those (fantastical) selves, and the possibilities of enacting creative capacity in a shared world.**

occurs relative to the shared space of symbol systems written through our selves: as much so for the composing silently accomplished while reading a poem as for the outward-facing compositions of Facebook profiles, YouTube channels, and academic tomes. Roughly speaking, moreover, composition scholars *do* want students to negotiate the particular ideas of self and agency that we, as researchers, put forward, even as these ideas themselves remain in contestatory and negotiative flux. Whether overtly or not, we ask students to treat composition as an ethical negotiation of fantastical selves, negotiation undertaken relative to larger notions of responsibility, the good, or the true. As a mechanism for negotiating what the world will be, we apprehend our fantasy as intrinsically ethical, though of course not all fantasies are equally good. The detour through fantasy owes everything to the very social world whose reality it sets aside in order to change that world, and selves and agency are central elements of that world for composition. We ought even perhaps to regard rhetoric and composition’s particular breed of negotiation as the very heart of what *agency* itself would mean: *a nexus of constraint, capacity, consciousness, and will, from which selves emerge, always with the structure of an obligation.* “Composition” would thus be the fourfold name for disciplined attunement to this agency, emerging in the ethical negotiation of fantastical selves.

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## Notes

1. I am concerned here to make an argument about *how we conceive of our conceptions*, not about those conceptions themselves, and so do not directly join those debates. The touchstone texts are many, but include, in addition to those engaged in this article, at the very least Crowley, Dobrin, Faigley, Rickert, and recently those such as Daniel, Boyle, and Rivers. Obviously, once you leave our disciplinary enclosure, the conversation grows exponentially louder and more varied. Equally, I leave to the side useful ongoing conversations about the relation of composition to rhetoric. For a recent instance of same, see Detweiler.
2. See one description of troubled freedom and some of its political entailments in Allen (“Troubled”).
3. Assemblage- and object-oriented approaches to composition wish for more than can sustain their own wishing when they suppose that adherence to the fifth sense of “composition” noted here sidesteps the theory-practice contradiction at the site of selves and agency. They are able to so suppose only by remaining unable to account for their own activity as nexuses of constraint, capacity, consciousness, and will (i.e., as selves, however fantastical).
4. Steven Mailloux details such a Protagorean humanism nicely throughout the essays of *Rhetoric’s Pragmatism*, chapter three especially. See also Allen (*Ethical*), as well as John Belk’s compelling cashing out of rhetorical humanism as administrative philosophy and strategy both.
5. For this sense, consider Roger Fisher and William Ury’s *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*, a classic of legal and business negotiation. There, negotiating is “a fact of life . . . a back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed” (xi). Negotiation names the back-and-forth between two or more sides that *are not yet fixed* in at least some of their aims, though others of their aims may constitute a fixed context.
6. Adaptation of arguments to audiences, adaptation of selves to genres and the desires of other selves, adaptation of particular situations and ecologies to better accommodate arguments, audiences, selves, desires, and genres that precede and emerge within them—to name only a few instances.

7. Consider Daniel Siegel: “Our subjective lives emerge from mental states that are exquisitely sensitive to social interaction. . . . as open, dynamic systems, we are composed of lower levels of subcomponents as well as being ourselves sub-components of the larger systems of social connections in which we live” (212). Human brains and nervous systems are not “autonomous” but “autonomic”: not self-regulating, but self-managing. The emergent self is a managing property of a distinguishable—but not intrinsically and of itself distinct—nervous system, in the womb and out. The findings are clear in this regard; human nervous systems are co-emergent, co-regulative. To ascribe “autonomy” to them would necessitate redefinition of the very term.

8. The contrary view is evidenced by the complexity of affect’s social flows; we share neuronal activity, pheromones, and so much more, as Teresa Brennan cogently argues.

9. Carolyn Miller is onto something her critics have missed, and by no means leaves us bereft of accountable persons; she stresses repeatedly that agency is something we ascribe to one another, and urges us to “examine the attributions we ourselves are willing to make and work to improve the attributions that (other) empowered groups are willing to make” (153). This effectively relocates agency from the eventual transaction to the thus agential selves involved.

10. Although writing, if we reduce this simply to marks on pages, might well occur where there are neither selves nor agency: in a world of “machine writing,” as discussed in Carolyn Miller and, more recently, N. Katherine Hayles. By contrast, and more in line with my view here, see Hedengren’s classically infused working together of creative writing with composition.

11. As Carolyn Miller does when she follows Celeste Condit in terming agency a “necessary illusion” (152).

12. So, what should count as “good” ways of negotiating fantasies of the self? But my aim here is metatheoretical—*not* what the *content* of our concepts should be, but rather *what sort of thing (fantasy) we should think those concepts are*, and what this implies about us as a discipline or field of study.

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