Iconographic Tracking: A Digital Research Method for Visual Rhetoric and Circulation Studies

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Abstract

Drawing on recent scholarship in the disciplines of rhetoric and composition/writing studies and communication, the author advocates for generating new methodologies and methods for studying rhetorical circulation. The author introduces iconographic tracking—a research method that employs traditional qualitative and inventive digital research strategies to investigate the circulation, transformation, and consequentiality of images across genres, mediums, and contexts. As evidence of what this method can afford, the author presents findings from a five-year long case study that employs iconographic tracking to trace Shepard Fairey's now iconic *Obama Hope* image. To help readers understand some of the theories and philosophies that undergird the method of iconographic tracking, the author also briefly introduces a new materialist approach to rhetorical study. As such, the author points in new directions for visual rhetorical study and circulation studies at large.
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On April 27, 2006, an icon was born when it materialized in Mannie Garcia's photograph of Barack Obama taken at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. This image is now familiar to those of us who closely followed the 2008 presidential election campaign, have stayed in tune with U.S. popular culture over the last few years, or simply passed the image on the street one day while walking to work. For the image[1] captured in Garcia's photograph transformed into the now iconic *Obama Hope* image created by street artist Shepard Fairey (See Figure 1). The *Obama Hope* image entered into circulation in early 2008 with intention to help then-Senator Obama become the 44th U.S. President. Today, digital manifestations and remixes of this image can be found on more than 2,000,000 websites while numerous physical renditions can be found tattooed on human bodies, plastered to urban walls, and waving at protests across the globe. As it has circulated widely on national and transnational scales and transformed diversely across form, genre, and medium, this image has played a plethora of rhetorical roles ranging from political actor to advertising agent to social critic. Today, it also widely recognized as a cultural icon and national symbol. *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl (2009) has gone so far, in fact, to deem Fairey's *Hope* poster in which the image materialized the most efficacious American political illustration since "Uncle Sam Wants You."

In this article, I offer a method for investigating how this singular image has come to lead such an extraordinary rhetorical existence as it has circulated and transformed with time and space. For some time now, scholars from

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[1] By image, I draw on W.J.T. Mitchell (2008) to define it as that which "appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction. . . ' An image is also "what transcends media, what can be transferred from one medium to another" (p. 16).

Figure 1. Photograph of Shepard Fairey's *Obama Hope* poster taken by Laurie Gries.

both rhetoric and composition and communication have studied circulation in relation to rhetoric. In rhetoric and composition, scholars such as Vicki Tolar Burton (1999), Jenny Edbauer (2005), John Trimbur (2000), Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle DeVoss (2009), Byron Hawk (2011), and Mary Queen (2008) have written about circulation to inform their studies of history, theory, writing, and transnational feminism. In communication, scholars such as Cara Finnegan (2003, 2010), Lester Olson (2004), Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2007) have done archival research to investigate the circulation of photographs, motifs, and other pictorial representations. This body of work constitutes a growing area of research we might call *circulation studies*—an interdisciplinary approach to studying discourse in motion. In circulation studies, if we can call it that, scholars investigate not only how discourse is produced and distributed, but also how once delivered, it circulates, transforms, and affects change through its material encounters. Circulation studies is important as it has helped (a) draw attention to rhetoric's dynamic movement and fluidity; (b) reconfigure theories of rhetoric and publics to account for discourse's dynamic, distributed, and emergent aspects; (c) rethink composing strategies for writing in a digital age; and (d) revamp pedagogy to account for writing's full production cycle. Scholars have also pointed toward new methodologies for studying the mobility of rhetoric, writing, and digital representations.

Research methods that actually account for circulation, especially the flow of new media images, however, have yet to be clearly articulated in formal publications. To be clear, I draw on Louise Wetherbee Phelps (2011) to define method as "an aspect of a mode of inquiry, consisting of a more or less tightly coupled constellation of strategies for dealing systematically with phenomena as objects of study, according to a tradition of inquiry and its accountabilities." As with any invention, new methods spread by emulation (Ulmer, 1994). Yet in order for a method to be replicated, scholars must not only delineate their methods in their published scholarship (L'Eplattenier, 2009) but also make transparent the methodological traditions that influence their research dispositions and methods (Phelps, 2011). Because methods to study rhetorical circulation have yet to be fully described in print, while many scholars feel encouraged to study circulation, the means to do so is still unclear. An opportunity emerges here to bridge scholarship across the disciplines to develop new methods (and methodologies) for studying discourse in motion.

In this article, I take advantage of this opportunity to articulate how empirical, digital research can make visible how new media images circulate and, in Bruno Latour's (2005b) terms, *reassemble the social*. Working against Kevin DeLuca's and Joe Wilferth's (2009) call for moving away from circulation and toward Jenny Edbauer's (2005) eco-logical rhetorical model, I introduce iconographic tracking—a method that makes use of inventive digital research and traditional qualitative strategies to account for an image's circulation, transformation, and consequentiality. In order to demonstrate this method's affordances, I describe how to enact this method and weave in sample findings from an ongoing case study that employs iconographic tracking to trace the *Obama Hope* image. I also briefly introduce a new materialist approach to explicate some of the theories and philosophies that undergird this method. Besides

being influenced by a wide range of interdisciplinary theories and philosophies[2], a new materialist approach is greatly influenced by Kevin Porter's (2006) work in *Meaning, Language, and Time*. There, Porter argued that an utterance's meanings do not exist *a priori*; rather an utterance's meanings are the consequences it has in the world. Porter claimed that his work with meaning consequentialism is intended to be a philosophy toward discourse, not a methodology. A new materialist approach to rhetorical study extends Porter's work by asking what if we take meaning consequentialism seriously? How can we study how consequences emerge during futurity as discourse circulates with time and space? While I cannot articulate this approach in full detail here, I describe it enough for readers to see how it influences the research disposition necessary for conducting iconographic tracking. My aim here is to encourage others to employ and adapt iconographic tracking for their own research needs as well as explore the potentials of new materialist research for circulation studies at large.

1. Circulation matters

In their forward to the 6.2 issue of *Enculturation*, DeLuca and Wilferth (2009) advocated for moving beyond print-oriented studies of images in visual rhetorics. Print-oriented approaches tend to culminate in the domestication of images—a taming, in Roland Barthes' terms, that limits our understanding of how images matter in the singular, immanent sense (Forward, para. 6). DeLuca and Wilferth critiqued Cara Finnegan's (2003) work with FSA photographs and Robert Hariman's and John Lucaites' (2007) work with iconic photographs for committing such taming by "erasing the singularity" of the photographs under study (Forward, para. 8). While Finnegan read FSA photographs within the context of print culture, Hariman and Lucaites read images within the context of Western liberalism. Reading images within such limited contexts shifts attention away from particular images themselves and eclipses their ontological complexity. Or, as DeLuca and Wilferth put it so provocatively, such taming "enables us to avert our eyes away from the madness, excess, and ecstasy of the singular photograph" (para. 6). To avoid such interpretive, domesticating tendencies, DeLuca and Wilferth argued for letting go of the "mindset and methods of print" and focusing less on what images mean and more on what images do (2009, para. 11). While they praised Finnegan, Hariman, and Lucaites for attempting to do something different with photographs by attending to circulation, they also argued that circulation is "dependent on habits of analysis indebted to print, calling for the studious gaze of the academic and reinstantiating the print perspective" (2009, para. 13). Therefore, rather than attend to circulation, DeLuca and Wilferth argued for studying images as events[3] to best account for an image's complex ontology and rhetorical force:

> DeLuca and Wilferth leaned on Jacques Derrida (2002) to illuminate the event:
> An event that remains an event is an arrival, an absolute arrival [*arrivance*]: it surprises and resists analysis after the fact. At the birth of a child, the primal figure of the absolute *arrivant*, you can analyze the causalities, the genealogical, genetic, or symbolic premises, and all the wedding preparations you like. Supposing this analysis could ever be exhausted, you will never get rid of the element of chance, this place of the taking-place, there will still be someone who speaks, someone irreplaceable, an absolute initiative, another origin of the world. Even if it must dissolve in analysis or return to ash, it is an absolute spark. (2002, p. 20)

As Derrida emphasized, an event is never something that can be fully captured in our analyses and interpretations, as an event is a process of *inexplicable* becoming. Simultaneously, an event is insuppressible; that which we identify as event is always unfolding into an unknown future. Conceived here as morphogenesis—"instances of evolving and ever-changing forms" (Borić, 2010, p. 64)—an event is thus also a process of *unpredictable* becoming. Even

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[2] In addition to Kevin Porter's work, a new materialist approach is heavily influenced by Louise Wetherbee Phelps' philosophical work (1988) on discourse and time; Carole Blair's work with material rhetoric and consequence (1999); Bruno Latour's work (2004, 2005) with actor-network theory; Gilles Deleuze's work (1995) with the virtual and actual; Paul Prior et al's work (2007) with cultural historical activity theory; Jane Bennett's work (2010) with vital materialism; and Karan Barad's work (2007) with agential realism; contemporary theories of rhetoric and writing; and a wide range of interdisciplinary work such as distributed cognition, process philosophies, and postphenomenology. See also "Agential Matters" published in *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media: Writing Ecology*, Palgrave, 2011.

[3] In one sense, DeLuca and Wilferth advocated for studying image events, defined previously by Delicath and Deluca (2003) as "staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination" (p. 315). Yet, just to be clear, in this essay I am responding to their discussion of image as event in their introduction to Enculturation (2009), which moves scholars to focus on rhetoric's emergent character and contingent quality (para. 2) and "the image as an event—irreplaceable and irreversible" (para. 17).

though we can try to encapsulate something we identify as event, we can never quite catch up with this dynamic unfolding phenomenon[4]. Nonetheless, studying image as event is important because it helps scholars move beyond "conflating images with linguistic phenomena" (Vivian, 2007, p. 477) and studying images as a regime of representation. Rather, images conceived as events can be studied as a dynamic network of distributed, unfolding, and unforeseeable becomings[5].

As a scholar who has been tracking *Obama Hope* for the last five years, I greatly appreciate DeLuca's and Wilferth's call for studying the ontology of singular images and accounting for an image's intense eventfulness. Images, like music, often circulate across a wide and diverse range of physical and digital ecologies once they are distributed in networked pathways (Hawk, 2011, p. 171). As images enter into new associations and transform in genre, medium, and form at seemingly simultaneous rates, divergent materializations emerge with time and space. Furthermore, as singular images and their various renditions intra-act with human and other non-human beings, a multiplicity of diverse, and often unpredictable, rhetorical consequences emerge. With the proliferation of the World Wide Web, social networking sites, weblogs, digital file hosting services, Youtube, etc., the rhetorical force, circulatory range, and dynamic transformation and transfiguration (change in functions) of images only intensify. Especially as visual things such as *Obama Hope* go viral, images do experience, as Derrida put it, "an absolute arrival" (Derrida, 2002, p. 20). DeLuca and Wilferth's call to action for studying image as event is thus a necessary move if scholars want to recover rhetoric's emergent, distributed, and contingent qualities and more fully account for images' dynamic contributions to collective life.

Studying an image's eventfulness is also necessary for addressing the complexities of visual production, distribution, and circulation brought on by a viral economy. As evident in the recent debates about two controversial congressional bills, SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protect Intellectual Property Act), our current digital landscape is characterized by "drastic changes in delivery," rising debates over intellectual property, and an ever-increasing complex politics of publication and distribution (DeVoss & Porter, 2006, p. 201). As such, scholars need to interrogate the ethical dynamics of production and delivery brought on by the Internet, especially in relation to the economies of textual and image production (DeVoss & Porter, 2006, p. 194). Scholars also need to better account for *how* different kinds of collective actions influence viral circulation on the Web. While authors and artists can attempt to account for rhetorical velocity by anticipating the third party recomposition of their own work (DeVoss & Ridolfo, 2009), they can never fully control where or how the things they produce will circulate. Things, especially in a digital age, simply, or rather complexly, flow. We need methods that can explain how new media practices enable things to experience reproduction and redistribution and thus circulate widely at viral speeds. We especially need to better account for how digital technologies, participatory media platforms, and various actor-networks contribute to the circulation and transformation of things in both digital and physical realms. In both theory and practice, then, studying the dynamic eventfulness of images is useful as it helps address the economic and methodological complexities brought on by a digital age.

I do not understand, however, how we can move away from studying circulation if we want to account for image as event, as DeLuca and Wilferth (2009) seemed to suggest. Circulation, here, refers to spatio-temporal flows, which unfolds and fluctuates as things enters into diverse associations and materializes in abstract and concrete forms. From an ecological, rhetorical perspective, images need to be studied as divergent, unfolding becomings in order to account for an image's distributed ontology. Circulation is at the heart of this process. Not only is the noetic—the intuition and feeling—that drives an image's rhetorical productions always moving (Rice, 2011, p. 12), but also, especially in an age of viral media, once produced and distributed in a networked pathway, images rapidly undergo change in terms of location, form, media, genre, and function. In addition, as rhetoric emerges from an image's encounters with humans and other entities, images are often catapulted back into flow in divergent directions and generate even more configurations. Thus, if we want to acknowledge "the amalgamations and transformations—the viral spread—of [images] within [their] wider ecology" (Edbauer, 2005, p.19), we cannot help but attend to an image's decentralized circulation.

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[4] An event under study is always influenced by a scholar's own actions (Barad, 2007; Law, 2004). As we intra-act with the things we study, our own subjectivities and actions as well as the phenomena under study are affected. In this article, for instance, *Obama Hope* acts as a representative anecdote for the ways in which images become rhetorical with time and space. As such, its rhetorical function here contributes to its circulation and consequentiality.

[5] I use the phrase "networks of becomings" to emphasize that an image does not unfold in a single-threaded, sequential, continuous manner but rather along divergent and seemingly simultaneous spatio-temporal channels.

Unfortunately, images, like other matter, are difficult to depict in flow in terms of space, time, and function. Images appear before us like buildings and books—as fixed, transitive things that have already been built and delivered[6]. As such, we have a habit of studying images much like we read books; we "skew them into [stable] objects palatable for a print gaze" in order to discover how they function in specific contexts and fixed locations (DeLuca & Wilferth, 2009, para. 13). This methodological habit of reading is deeply embedded in rhetorical study due to historical influences of representationalism (Vivian, 2007) as well as contemporary influences of semiotics (Goggin, 2004), cultural materialism (Trimbur, 2000), and rhetorico-hermeneutics (Sanchez, 2006). This reading habit is especially influenced by the rhetorical situation model, which tends to position rhetoric as emanating from or being produced within a rather static scene constituted of entities perceived to be already formed, stable, and discrete (Edbauer, 2005; Krause, 1996; Biesecker, 1989; Phelps, 1988) In visual rhetoric, scholars have simply transposed this reading practice onto images in order to decipher how images communicate and construct certain identifications and ways of seeing. While certainly exceptions exist, this habit, in fact, has come to dominate visual rhetorics (Brooke, 2009; O'Gorman, 2009; Vivian, 2007; Goggin, 2004).

This reading habit is not intrinsically linked to circulation studies, however. The problem of domesticating images, or turning them into subalterns (Mitchell, 2005), stems from the methodological tendency described above, in which conceptualized rhetorical processes are "dominated by thought patterns and belief systems of literate culture" (Haynes, 1988, p. 72). To reiterate, this deeply engrained habitus of method moves scholars to treat images as language-like symbols and stable, transitive texts, which need to be interpreted within the contexts of their production in order to explain how they function and what they are likely to mean for a particular audience[7] (Foss, 2004). Often inherent in this habitus is the belief that images, like other artifacts, are mediums of communication that lack agency unless scholars project onto images their own explanations of intention, meaning, and significance (Marback, 2008). Thus, rather than giving images "their due" (Marback, 2008), scholars tend to impose their interpretations onto images to make rhetorical sense of that dynamic and agential event which so often eludes us. In doing so, we "narrow and limit the [image's] projection" (Marback, 2008, p. 64) and end up, as Wilferth and DeLuca themselves noted, "eras[ing] the event in favor of interpretation" (2009, para. 8). If we tune into an ecological rhetorical model[8] (Edbauer, 2005) and think of circulation in terms of spatio-temporal flows, however, circulation studies actually has potential to make sense of an image's unfolding flows and the rhetorics that emerge from its diverse and divergent encounters. We simply need to reimagine how circulation studies can better account for how images exist in and contribute to wider "sphere[s] of active, historical, and lived processes" (Edbauer, 2005). Rather than move away from circulation, then, I suggest we embrace invention and study how images flow and transform to help account for an image's rhetorical becomings.

Such inventive work requires developing new methodological habits to observe how images—conceived as mediating things—undergo mass (re)composition, (re)production, and (re)distribution and rearrange collective life in ways that can be empirically mapped out. Such works also entails supplementing rhetorical analysis with actor-network theory (ANT)-inspired tracing and rich description to document how images intra-act with various human and non-human entities to produce various consequences. Such work certainly might feel strange as it demands letting go of homogenous notions of time and space and embracing both a virtual sense of duration[9] and a noetic sense of space[10] to elucidate how images become consequential as they circulate and influence people's everyday lived experiences. Such work might also feel daunting, especially in a viral economy when a new media image can be remixed, appropriated, splattered across cyberspace in a few short days. More so, such work might feel messy. Social space is an unlimited

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[6] See Chapter 7 in Collin Brooke's (2009) *Lingua Fracta*. Also see Bruno Latour's and Albena Yaneva's (2008) "Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move: An ANT's view of architecture.

[7] The habit of reading images is evident in contemporary theories and studies of visual rhetoric (Dobrin & Morey, 2009; Foss, 2004; Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003) and "textbooks" used commonly in our classrooms (Wysocki & Lynch, 2007; Hesford & Brueggemann, 2006; Alfano & Obrien, 2007).

[8] An ecological rhetorical model, as Jenny Edbauer (2005) explains, is "one that reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process" (p. 13).

[9] By "virtuality of duration," I draw on Byron Hawk (2011) quoting Tiziana Terranova to mean "the qualitative change that every moment brings not only to that which moves, but also to the space that it moves in and to the whole into which that space necessarily opens up" (2004, p. 51).

[10] I draw on Jeff Rice's (2011) work with Henri Lefebvre (1991) to emphasize that "'spaces are produced' as a variety of forces come into contact with one another on an everyday basis" (p. 11). These forces include institutional, economic, political factors that construct a network or set of networks, yet also "non-instrumental or non-structural modes of communicative organization: feeling, sensation, and intuition" (p. 12). A noetic sense of space also perceives space as a path, rather than a fixed place of meaning" (p. 11).
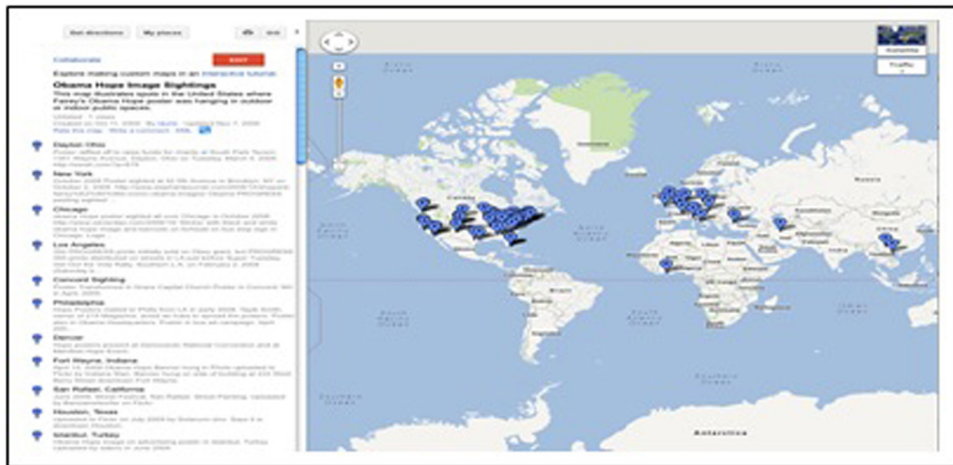
Figure 2. *Obama Hope* sightings across the globe, screenshot created by Laurie Gries, Copyright 2011. Google. Reprinted with Permissions.

and unaccountable set of social spaces (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86); therefore, one can never hope to fully account for the eventfulness of a single image. Yet, as Kristie Fleckenstein, Clay Spinuzzi, Rebecca Rickly, and Carole Papper (2008) drew on sociologist John Law to point out, "if researchers wish to understand a world (or an activity in the world) that is complex and messy, 'then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways', in ways that are complex and messy" (p. 391). Circulation studies offer an opportunity to make such complex and messy moves in our scholarship. We simply need to build on each other's research and fully develop and explicate methods and methodologies to help us to do this messy work. The method of iconographic tracking and the new materialist approach introduced here are intended to do just that.

2. Iconographic tracking in theory

Iconographic tracking is a method specifically designed to empirically account for how images flow, transform, and contribute to collective life[11]. Iconographic tracking employs traditional qualitative and inventive digital research strategies to (a) follow the multiple transformations that an image undergoes during circulation, and (b) identify the complex consequentiality that emerges from its divergent encounters. In terms of qualitative research, iconographic tracking deploys strategies such as questionnaires and interviews to collect, organize, and triangulate data. During latter stages of the research process, approaches such as CHAT (Cultural-Historical Activity Theory) also help discover how an image becomes rhetorical in nuanced ways via its intra-actions with people and various technologies. However, new digital technologies create opportunities to invent new research methods such as iconographic tracking. The rise of visual search engines, such as Google Images and TinEye, in addition to social media sites, such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter, especially are useful for tracking images. Data collection and organization tools such as Zotero in conjunction with mapping and visualization tools such as Google Maps can also be useful in aggregating, visualizing, and making sense of data (See Figure 2). Inspired heavily by ANT, iconographic tracking thus largely relies on digital research strategies to account for how an image circulates, transforms, and affects consequences across time and space.

To account for an image's ontological complexity, iconographic tracking takes a new materialist approach. This approach, in simplest terms, attends to a thing's rhetorical becomings by heavily focusing on *futurity*—the strands of time beyond the initial moment of production when consequences unfold as things circulate, enter into diverse kinds of relations, and transform across form, genre, and media. In terms of iconographic tracking, this approach advocates for conducting empirical research to make transparent what happens to not only a singular image but also the people

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[11] I chose to call this method "iconographic tracking" because it is designed to elucidate how things become rhetorical and iconic in the sense that they become readily recognized and culturally and/or politically significant to a wide cultural group. With its potential to trace phrases, concepts, headlines, etc., iconographic tracking may prove useful to a wide range of circulation studies. Yet, with its ability to elucidate how new media images, this method proves especially productive for visual rhetorics.

and other entities it encounters. This "happening" certainly occurs before and while an image is being produced. The intuitions, desires, and abstract and concrete inspirations driving an image's rhetorical productions are already in flow and must be acknowledged in order to account for an image's eventfulness. Yet, a new materialist approach pays special attention to an image's collective experiences after it is initially produced and begins to circulate. Iconographic tracking thus begins research *in media res* of an image's rhetorical life span.

A new materialist approach also advocates for thinking intuitively about visual rhetoric. As Henri Bergson (1946/2007) helps us understand, to think intuitively is to perceive reality as change itself (p. 22). In such perspectives, immobility is only an abstract moment: "a snapshot taken by our mind of a mobility" (p. 22). While intelligence is concerned with the static and makes of change only an accident, intuition, Bergson insisted, sees everything as change. Bergson also claimed that intuition is bound to duration, which can be thought of as growth, evolution, "an interrupted continuity of unforeseeable novelty" (2009, p. 22). While networked, communication technologies that compress time and space complicate such virtual notions of duration, it is still useful to think of reality as constituted by an entangled web of creations, or becomings, each moving toward something new. Thinking intuitively about visual rhetoric, then, perceives new media images as undergoing divergent change and movement—a dynamic web of rhetorical becomings, as pure event. As such, a new materialist approach encourages scholars to think of images as being relatively composed. This disposition requires scholars to acknowledge an image's unfolding transformations, differentiations, and variations.

Thinking intuitively about visual rhetoric also entails acknowledging the shifting consequences that unfold as an image circulates. According to a new materialist approach, an image's rhetorical meaning is determined by the unpredictable consequences that emerge in its various occasions of use. An image's meaning is never stable. Before landing on this page, for instance, *Obama Hope* has become wildly consequential as it shifts from, among other things, an illustration to propaganda to a genre of critique to a touchstone for copyright law and remix. These consequences will only continue to propagate as this image lives on beyond this moment. Already new consequences, and thus meanings, are forming as I type this article and new folks encounter the image on their own. Tomorrow, even more consequences will materialize. We can only be open to tracing such multifaceted meanings by thinking intuitively about visual rhetoric, especially in an age of viral circulation. Thus, in essence, thinking intuitively is an exercise in attending to the futurity of things it helps form the habitus of method necessary for attending to the open-ended rhetorical becomings that so often go invisible in much visual rhetorical scholarship.

Besides Bergson's work, a new materialist approach is also heavily influenced by Jane Bennett's work with vital materialism and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory in that it pushes scholars to study images from an ecological perspective as event-making *things*. As Bennett (2010) explained in *Vibrant Matter*, things have power to shape reality as they become entangled in complex relations with humans and other non-human entities. Too often, we miss the opportunity to acknowledge the force of things because we assume they are inert tools used by human agents to whom we typically credit with full-blown agency. Yet, Bennett drew on Latour, among many others, to insist that if studied with an ecological sensibility, we can recognize thing-power—the capacity for things working alongside humans in various associations to effect change even as they all have different degrees of power. One kind of change deemed important from a new materialist perspective is a thing's ability to reassemble the social. As Latour (2005a) explained, "thing" as defined in the English dictionary originally designated a type of assembly. Still in such use in many Nordic and Saxon nations, "thing" signifies an issue that brings people together even as it may divide them in the process (p. 13). Latour (2005a) revived this etymology to emphasize that divisive matters bring people together just as often as agreed-upon matters (p. 13). In thinking about images as eventful things, then, we are not only reminded of rhetoric's ability to induce cooperation, as Kenneth Burke emphasized, but also to induce assemblage (and reassemblage). In this sense, things, such as *Obama Hope*, become rhetorical, in part, as a consequence of their ability to materialize change and reassemble collective life.

In addition, thinking about how rhetoric emerges from human relations with eventful things cultivates attention to what Latour calls "matters of concern." As matters of concern, things are acknowledged as dynamic, complex entanglements that often change right before our very eyes as they experience new associations. As Latour (2005a) acknowledged, things do not "have the clarity, transparency, obviousness of matters-of-facts; they are not made of clearly delineated, discrete objects..." (p. 13). Rather, borrowing from Heidegger, things are complex, dynamic gatherings that cannot be easily identified nor understood as they are mediating, assembling, gathering many more folds that could be detected if considered to be already delivered (Latour, 2004b). However, as matters of concern, things force us to embrace uncertainty and pay close attention to the things with which we are so closely enmeshed (Morton, 2010). Such

disposition also challenges us to acknowledge how things acquire thing-power to mediate all kinds of matters—political, emotional, psychological, relational, familial, etc.—via their dynamic relations. As matters of concern, researchers conducting iconographic tracking may not be certain as to how this mediation occurs, but that is precisely the point. In wondering how things become rhetorical, scholars are encouraged to seek out the dynamic, consequential, unfolding mediated activities that enable rhetoric to emerge and affect reality. Rather than be certain that this thing is rhetorical in this way and this time and space, then, researchers try to empirically discover how an image becomes rhetorical in diverse ways as it circulates, enters into new associations, and affects a multiplicity of consequences.

3. Iconographic tracking in action

While such theories and philosophies of a new materialist approach help articulate the research disposition necessary for conducting iconographic tracking, I turn now to describing how to enact this method in different phases and on different scales[12] so that others may put it to practice for their own research purposes. Iconographic tracking begins by taking a macro-scaled, digital approach to collect a large data set using basic search engines with image search capabilities. A big data set is necessary so researchers can identify patterns and trends in an image's shifting form, medium, genre, location, collective engagement, and consequentiality. In initial stages of research, the data set largely consists of images saved in JPEG or PDF form in desktop files as well as screenshots of websites made possible through software platforms such as Zotero. The goal of this initial research phase is to collect as much data possible before conducting data mining and a close study, or microanalysis, of that data. Data hoarding, then, might be an appropriate term to describe this initial phase of research.

In order to generate a large data set, it is important to not only think intuitively about the image under study, as suggested by a new materialist approach, but also to embrace a spirit of discovery as described in Guy Debord's (1958/2006a) theory of *dérive*. The practice of *dérive* entails drifting, letting go of ones motives, and letting oneself be drawn by the psychogeographical effects that emerge as one wonders through an urban or cyber landscape. When engaging in *dérive*, one might find oneself drawn back again and again to certain places deemed significant for one reason or another. Yet, in order to take advantage of the constructive potential of *dérive*, one has to remain open to chance and unpredictability. *Dérive*, as conceived by Debord in the 1940s, was practiced in urban landscapes in order to undermine the spectacle of consumerism at the heart of class struggles in France. Therefore, in terms of 21st century digital research, using this technique is far removed from its intended purpose. Yet, Debord claimed that on a general level, psychogeographical refers to "any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery" (Debord, 1955/2006b, para. 2). During iconographic tracking's initial research phase, this spirit of discovery is vital as it helps a scholar remain open to an image's intense, unpredictable, and divergent eventfulness. Scholars must resist the temptation to set down one particular research path so early as to preclude multiple research paths from appearing before them. Instead, scholars let go of their research motives to follow an image's diverse transformations and let themselves be drawn by the psychogeographical effects that keep drawing their attention. Through such practice, scholars can discover data that they might never have stumbled upon had they proceeded down a single research path too early.

Once a significant amount of data has been collected, a second phase of research begins—assembling data into a collection. Scholars can think of the assemblage strategy at work here as data mining—a process of sorting through massive amounts of data to locate patterns, trends, and relationships. Data mining is advantageous because trends and patterns, which might not otherwise "be perceptible" (Brooke, 2009, p. 104), often become apparent, providing information that can be used to generate new insights. Data mining often entails generating key terms, or tags, which function to make relationships and trends visible. As researchers identify associations between images, peoples, organizations, etc., they can begin to create a personal database, or collection of patterned information significant to their research goals.

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[12] Phases are described to help readers develop a chronological sense of how this method works. Using the camera as a metaphor, scales can be thought of as research enacted with different lenses. At the macro-level, researchers use a wide angle lens to observe and locate a large data field to discover as many trends or patterns in an image's transformations and consequences as possible. At the meso-level, researchers use a zoom lens to narrow the focus and identify specific transformations and consequences, which may entail the involvement of multiple actor-networks. At the micro-level, researchers use a super zoom lens to zoom in each of the involved actor-networks to see how people, technologies, and other entities intra-act with an image to learn more about an image's design, composition, production, distribution, circulation, transformation, and consequentiality.

To assemble a data collection, software such as Zotero can help create folders to store and organize evidence of identified trends or patterns. For organization purposes, it is especially useful to title folders with relevant terms that indicate an image's transfiguration (changing functions) and to create tags indicating different transformations in terms of media, location, genre, etc. For instance, data mining revealed that in addition to becoming a strong political actor in the 2008 election, the image has also become a number of other rhetorically powerful things[13]:

- A commodity fetish as evident in the "eBayification" of *Obama Hope* as well as its mass commodification (See Figure 3)
- An advertising strategy used to sell everything from campaign paraphernalia and haircuts here in the U.S. to banking services in Turkey and China (See Figure 4)
- A new genre of social and political critique called Obamicons
- A touchstone for contemporary debates about fair use and remix
- A commemorative theme (See Figure 8)
- A transnational sign of protest as evident in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements (See Figure 5)
- A social network generator as evident in its role in the Obama Art Movement and a number of smaller collectives such as the Obama Street Art Group.

To assemble evidence of such consequentiality, I created different folders titled names, such as *Commemoration, Critique, Art, Copyright Debate*—tag names for the patterns of consequences identified during the initial data collection stage. To organize data, I simply tagged the web source in Zotero with terms indicating its form, media, location, genre, etc. and stored it in the appropriate file until I could go back later to study the source in more detail. It is important to save microanalysis of data in the folders for latter stages of research; far too often, researchers are inclined to draw conclusions before enough data has been collected. This phase of research thus requires scholars to only look at data long enough to assemble folders and generate key terms and tags that can be used as new search terms in the next phase of research.

Once folders with data are established and organized, the next phase of research, which demands a meso-scaled approach, begins. This phase simply entails taking a narrower, controlled approach to diversify and expand the data collection by using new search terms to follow both visual and verbal threads in relation to each transformation and rhetorical consequence identified during the data mining phase. It is useful here to utilize a diverse range of search engines, especially visual search engines such as TinEye and Search Cube, as well as search engine options to narrow search by video, shopping, blogs, etc. During this phase of research, it is also productive to explore different social media sites such as Flickr, Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter as well as other independent organizations made accessible via the Creative Commons.org website. After collecting new data in relation to previously identified trends, researchers can simply data mine and organize new data, generating new folders if need be. Even though research during this phase is more narrow and controlled, it also demands staying open to finding as much data as possible and thus moving back and forth between tracking an image in both visual and verbal form and assembling and reassembling data into appropriate folders. This third phase of iconographic tracking can thus be described as a recursive process between tracing, data mining, and assembling a collection. This recursive process generates and organizes data so that scholars can decide which collectives[14] they want to investigate on a micro-level scale during the next research phase.

This meso-level approach is particularly useful for locating an image's specific remixes and unintended consequences as well as particular networks of collectives in which the image has played a major role. For instance, during my initial research, I noticed *Obama Hope* being remixed to create spoofs of the *Obama Hope* poster and social critiques of Obama and other politicians. Parodies are obviously not a new means of critique. However, new digital technologies afford opportunities for amateurs to create, publish, and distribute social critique at viral speeds, making possible, in part, what Henry Jenkins (2006) has dubbed a "participatory culture." Research at the meso-scale revealed that early on in 2008, tutorials, plugins, and ready-made solutions began surfacing on the Internet so that anyone could create their

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[13] By "things," I write from a new materialist perspective to emphasize an image's thing-power (Bennett, 2010).

[14] I draw on Bruno Latour to define collectives as being constituted by human and non-human actors as well as concepts, animals, institutions, etc. It is a term that rejects bifurcation of nature and culture and instead signifies "everything but not two separated" (Latour, 2004a, p. 59).

Figures 3–5. Different transformations and rhetorical functions of *Obama Hope*. *Obama in Ghana: Bag*, Monde Perso. Copyright 2009. *Blue Mosque and Obama*, Matthew Shaw, Copyright 2009. *Hopeless*, Joan Pantsios, Copyright 2011. Reprinted with Permissions.

Figure 6. Example of Obamicon. "Her Name was Neda," Shahab Siavash, Copyright 2009. Printed with Permissions.

own spoofs in the style of the *Obama Hope* poster[15]. Such remixes, now commonly known as Obamicons, became so popular during 2008 that the Paste Media group created Obamicon.me, a media platform and social networking site where users can create and respond to each other's Obamicons. Today, such Obamicons can be found making various kinds of critique and delivering all kinds of persuasive messages on the Obamicon.me website, Flickr, blogs, Facebook, professional websites, and online news sites. As such, if we think of genres as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations (Miller, 1984), the *Obama Hope* can be said to have sparked a new genre of social and political critique.

Consider Iranian graphic designer Shahab Siavah's Obamicon as just one example of this new genre and its unintended national and transnational consequences (See Figure 6). In this Obamicon, which was uploaded to Siavash's Flicker site, nuclear symbols shine in Obama's eyes and the Obama Campaign logo found in *Obama Hope* is omitted from Obama's lapel. The word "Hope" has been replaced with the words "Her Name was Neda" with a small depiction of Neda Agha-Soltan's blood-streaked face appearing in a circle centered between the words. According to Siavash, Obamicons, as a genre and a new media form, enabled him to communicate a specific opinion[16]:

> We here in Iran think that President Obama has forgotten about Democracy and acts of barbarism of the Iranian Regime against people of Iran & only thinks about Nuclear Danger of IRAN. I added two Nuclear icons in his eyes in this poster and also wrote "HER NAME WAS NEDA!" to remind Obama that NEDA... was an innocent person... WHEN the Iranian regime CAN kill an Innocent person from its own country, it easily can KILL thousands of Americans if they reach Nuclear bomb capabilities... Restrictions and prohibitions against regime don't affect [the regime]..., only buy them TIME... Obama should destroy this regime so BOTH we have FREEDOM and USA has confidence. (Personal Communication, November 6, 2009)

Creating such Obamicons and uploading them to sites such as Flickr is a productive way for graphic designers such as Siavash to make their voices heard[17]. In Iran, Siavash explained, he and others feel scared to speak out and against

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[15] Apple has recently created a Hope Poster Photo Filter that enables people to turn their own photos into posters displaying their own messages.

[16] With permission and approval of translation, I have edited Siavash's original words to be more easily comprehended without distorting the meaning he tried to convey.

[17] As reported in Octavia Nasr's (2009) *CNN* article "Tear Gas and Twitter," Internet service is still in its infancy in Iran; broadband and wide wireless coverage is slow and not always reliable. In addition, landlines, mobile phones, and emails are not trusted in fear of messages being traced. Sites such as Flickr and Facebook "offer the world a unique voice: free, unfiltered and very different from what the Islamic Republic of Iran's media propaganda offers viewers and readers."

"the Iranian regime." Social networking sites such as Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and even the Obamicon.me website[18] have become safe havens to voice concerns and be heard in the international media.

The beauty of iconographic tracking's meso-level research is its ability to discover such reproductions and unintended consequences. These discoveries open up divergent research paths necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of an image's eventfulness. However, as in the case with Obamicons, such research must be followed up by a micro-scale investigation. At this scale, researchers zoom in on specific collectives to determine how an image intra-acts with humans, various technologies, and other entities to undergo and spark change. Such micro-scaled investigation entails attending to seven interrelated material processes[19]—composition, production, transformation, distribution, circulation, assemblage, and consequentiality. Mapping out these processes helps discover how many different happenings, desires, peoples, technologies, collective actions, etc. come into play during an image's rhetorical becomings. By investigating how these processes overlap, it also possible to see how a singular image undergoes recomposition, reproduction, redistribution, and reassemblage—all processes that intensify the flow, transformation, and consequentiality of not only a particular image but also its derivatives. These processes of study are not taken up in a linear, chronological fashion. Yet, in order to generate complex, messy, ontological accounts of how images circulate and become rhetorical with time and space, all these interlaminated processes must be attended to in a single case study.

4. Research on a micro-scale

Composition refers to an image's rhetorical design while production refers to the techno-human labor involved in bringing a design into material construction. When studying an image's composition, researchers investigate the noetic drives for rhetorical design as well as how content and form work together to make possible identification and persuasion. Scholars also explore how design relates to the five other material processes. For example, researchers may ask: What ideas, inspirations, feelings, etc. already in flow motivated this designer to create a particular image? How does the rhetorical design create potential for rhetorical velocity and/or transfiguration? And perhaps, most obviously, how does rhetorical design influence people to (re)assemble? To address such questions, rhetorical and semiotic analyses are useful strategies. Yet, especially when images are remixed by people from different cultures or in ways that prevent a message from being unclear, it is not always easy to tell why particular images are recomposed in certain ways, what designers intend, and/or how they designed and produced their reproductions. Qualitative research strategies such as questionnaires and interviews are useful here, and social media sites such as Flickr, Facebook, and Myspace, make it is possible to easily gain access to designers such as Siavish. Such empirical investigation helps identify emotions, thoughts, and actions to help explain why an image was re-composed in particular ways. Locating information about production, as evident in my research with Siavash's Obamicon, also helps discover what activities, people, technologies, institutional infrastructures, and bureaucratic forces are intra-acting to bring an image's design into material reality.

Transformation is studied by paying attention to how a circulating image changes in terms of design, form, medium, materiality, genre, and function as it enters into new associations. With the advent of the Internet and the expansion of participatory culture, in which remix is a foundational vehicle for communication (Lessig, 2008), images transform at lightning speeds and in diverse ways. One only has to perform a simple Google Image search of *Obama Hope* image as evidence of how contemporary images can transform widely across different forms, mediums, and genres at viral rates. In terms of form, materiality and medium, while an image such as the now iconic pepper spray meme largely changes across digital manifestations, other images such as *Obama Hope* often transform in a wide spectrum of physical manifestations in addition to digital ones. For instance, by 2009, the *Obama Hope* image had been cross-stitched by thread, carved onto pumpkins, spray painted onto large fields of grass, and constructed out

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[18] Interestingly, when Pastemedia recognized Obamicon.me was becoming a much used space to voice Iranian perspectives and/or garner support for Iran's Green movement for Democracy, Pastemedia made it possible to create and upload Iranicons to the website. Iranicons depict images in the *Obama Hope* style yet in the colors of Iran.

[19] In "Studying Visual Modes of Public Address," Cara Finnegan (2010) identifies five approaches to analyzing images, which together, she argues, creates "*a way of seeing* [her emphasis] the role of visual images in public culture." These approaches include: production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception. While the six material processes I identify are different in many ways, I am indebted to Finnegan's work as it has helped me think through the material processes I describe here. I recommend readers taking a close look at Finnegan's article.

Figure 7. *Gratitude*. Copyright 2012. Photograph by Patter Hellstram. Mural by Lucas Long. Reprinted with Permission.

of a wide range of materials—colored credit cards, Lego bricks, dried beans, and pennies just to name a few. Such detectable change in form alone makes it evident that images often undergo not only viral circulation but also viral transformation.

Studies of transformation are especially useful in tracking how images undergo change in ways unanticipated by the "original" image's designer and spark unexpected consequences. In early 2008, for instance, a PDF of *Obama Hope* was made freely available for download on Fairey's Obey website to increase chances for the image's mass reproduction. Within a short time, Obama supporters were posting reproductions of the image in offices, outside metro stations, and on Facebook, among other locales, proliferating the poster in ways and places that one single organization could never achieve on its own. The image was also being painted onto bottle caps, sewn onto sweaters, and created into mosaics to support for Obama. In such cases, *Obama Hope* reproduced to serve Fairey's intended functions, and in many renditions, *Obama Hope's* design barely transformed. Yet the image has transformed in ways that only those very familiar with the image would even recognize and become consequential in ways far different than Fairey undoubtedly imagined. *Obama Hope*, for example, just recently transformed when it materialized in a mural Lucas Long designed as an ode to his school and in honor of recently deceased schoolmate—a far cry from the image's original intent of garnering Obama support (See Figure 7). Attending to such transformations makes evident how unforeseeably rhetorical and influential *Obama Hope* has been since entering into circulation. Attending to such transformations also helps elucidate how this image continues to circulate in diverse forms and genres as it takes on conjunctive and disjunctive roles.

Circulation, to be clear, is largely beyond a designer's control, unlike distribution, which is a deliberate process. While circulation becomes visible by tracking an image's nonlinear, divergent, and unpredictable flows, distribution can be studied by zooming in on the intentional strategies deployed to disseminate an image as well as the intra-actions between involved humans and nonhuman entities. With its ability to identify interlaminated activities involved in collaborative work, CHAT is useful in studies of distribution, especially when a tangled web of collectives is involved. This approach is particularly productive when coupled with Malcom Gladwell's (2002) epidemiological approach recently explored by Kristen Seas (2012) for its theoretical applications in rhetorical study. Via such research, it is possible to learn how mobility (including viral circulation) is achieved as well as how an image unfolds as it materializes in abstract and concrete forms. It is also possible to identify an image's ability to induce assemblage—a process of "bend[ing] space around itself" (Latour & Callon, 1981, p. 286) that occurs as people and other entities engage with an image for various reasons.

Distribution studies of *Obama Hope*, for example, have been especially useful in discovering how U.S. citizens assembled around the image to help it become a powerful political actor in the 2008 election. The different strategies and interlaminated activities implemented and undertaken by Fairey, Yosi Sergant, and others to distribute posters, stickers, etc. depicting the *Obama Hope* image are too numerous to detail here. However, it is possible to see how mass distribution was achieved (and thus how circulation was escalated), in part, by zooming in how Fairey and Sergant utilized different connectors' abilities to build social networks around them. In Los Angeles, for instance, several store owners threw fundraisers in which *Obama Hope* posters were used to both entice people to the events and sold to raise funds for Obama. In Philadelphia, on the other hand, folks such as Tayyib Smith, creator of a magazine called *215*, played a significant role in putting together a team to distribute *Obama Hope* posters and stickers both in the city and surrounding rural areas. Together, Smith and other volunteers distributed close to 7,500 pounds of Fairey posters. Still in other areas such as Fairey's childhood hometown of Charleston, Fairey donated posters to local volunteer groups. Beginning on October 11th, every week up until the November 4th election, every person who completed a canvassing

Figure 8. Photograph of *Obama Hope* Remix. *There's Still Hope*. Copyright 2011. Photograph by Doran. Reprinted with Permissions.

shift or a phone-banking shift was entered in a drawing for an Obama poster. Such grassroots intra-actions with the *Obama Hope* poster are just one example of how even in the final stages of the election, *Obama Hope* could induce people to assemble and take action.

Mapping out such interlaminated distribution activities helps explain how *Obama Hope* was able, in part, to become an influential political actor in the 2008 election. To develop a more complete sense of how *Obama Hope* helped Obama achieve victory in the 2008 presidential campaign, several different collectives, including Obama's official campaign, need to be researched on a micro-scale. And in order to gain a sense of how *Obama Hope* went viral and become iconic in such a short amount of time, even more collectives need to be investigated. For example, a Flickr group arose in which individuals posted and discussed photographs of *Obama Hope* in various manifestations and geographical locations across the globe. A collective also emerged to find the reference for the *Obama Hope* image—a hunt that sparked heated debates about copyright in the blogosphere and led to a lawsuit between Fairey and the AP Press. And still another collective formed now known as the Obama Art movement, of which *Obama Hope* was a quintessential player. These collectives, all of which helped accelerate the image's circulation and intensified its consequentiality, are just a few of many that have left traces of activity across the World Wide Web that can be empirically mapped out. To account for an image's complex and diverse eventfulness, micro-scale investigation of as many of such collectives as possible is necessary.

Micro-level investigation is also necessary to recover an image's consequentiality, which, in turn, sheds light on how images become rhetorical as they circulate, transform, and affect change via their multiple encounters. From a new materialist perspective, as noted above, an image's rhetorical meaning is derived from the consequentiality it sparks in the world. Thus, alongside researching all the material processes discussed thus far, iconographic tracking works on a micro-scale to identify the diverse consequences that emerge from an image's exterior relations. Consequentiality is accounted for by zooming in on the varied associations images enter into and identifying how divergent rhetorical consequences materialize via these intra-actions. In order to account for an image's eventfulness, it is important to study both intended and unintended consequences as well as investigate as many consequences as possible to recover the nuanced ways an image contributes to collective life. In such investigation, rather than confine studies of an image's consequences to a specific context, then, scholars try to account for how different contexts are generated via an image's intra-actions and emergent consequential actions.

Since entering into circulation, the consequentiality of *Obama Hope* has been intense to say the least. As already demonstrated, in its manifestation in Obamicons, murals, and other genres, the image has become rhetorical in ways far different from its original intent as a campaign poster. Many of these and other consequences, such as its use to critique Obama and even Fairey himself, have, in fact, been antithetical to its imagined positive use. Some consequences such as the debates it has sparked about fair use and the value of remix have been long lasting while others such as its protest against Muammar Gaddafi have come and gone. Perhaps, most surprising is how the *Obama Hope* image is still materializing today in posters and stickers to protest against unfair economic practices in the Occupy Movement (See Figure 8); in Obamicons to criticize Rush Limbaugh's anti-feminist accusations about Sandra Fluke; and in editorial cartoons and magazine covers (such as the *New Statesman*) to comment on Obama's current re-election and political status. Like the iconic Energizer Bunny©, the *Obama Hope* image is simply a rhetorical tour de force whose consequential impact just keeps going and going. While iconographic tracking, like any method, can never fully account

or keep up with this image's eventfulness, it can at least help recover some of the most visible ways that a single image has influenced and continues to shape collective life.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate iconographic tracking's potential by including a small sample of findings from my own research of *Obama Hope*, which up to date has yielded a 50,000-word case study about this single image's eventfulness. I have tried to describe the method in enough detail so that others may take it up for visual rhetoric research. In addition, while the methodological approach guiding this method needs to be more fully explicated, I have tried to make transparent how a new materialist approach's might inform circulation studies at large. I conclude by discussing a couple other points worth thinking more deeply about.

A new materialist approach's greatest potential, I believe, is its capacity to empirically account for how rhetoric constitutes our material realities. In *The Ends of Rhetoric*, John Bender and David Wellbery (1990) pointed out that we can no longer conceive of rhetoric as it was conceived in ancient Greece or in Enlightenment-era Europe. In today's day and age, they claimed, "Rhetoric is no longer the title of a doctrine and a practice, nor a form of cultural memory; it becomes instead something like the condition of our existence" (p. 25). Bender and Wellbery specifically challenged us to think in terms of rhetoricality, which positions rhetoric not as a "specialized technique of instrumental communication," but rather as "a general condition of human existence and action" (p. 38). While this challenge is enticing, this conception of rhetoric is difficult to accept when we cannot envision how rhetoric actually constitutes the material conditions of our daily lives. Yet, what we learn in taking a new materialist approach to track an image such as *Obama Hope* is that rhetoric is a distributed process whose beginning and end cannot be not easily identified. Like a dynamic network of energy, rhetoric materializes, circulates, transforms, and sparks new material consequences, which, in turn, circulate, transform, and stimulate an entirely new divergent set of consequences. It is, in simple terms, a distributed network of becomings in which divergent consequences are actualized with time and space. As such, rhetoric is all around and within us; it permeates our lives, reassembles collective space, and shapes material reality in all kinds of diverse ways.

While such permeation might seem impossible to visualize, iconographic tracking illustrates that a new materialist approach can help delineate the divergent processes of rhetorical transformation. Certainly, the entire complexity of rhetoric cannot be mapped via this empirical approach (It would be silly to presume that any research approach could). However, iconographic tracking does make transparent how rhetoric unfolds with time in a constellation of dynamic networks, where rhetorical situations are blurred, initial intensions are often left behind, and agency is distributed amongst humans, technologies, and our material worlds. Such visibility is theoretically productive, as it creates the empirical conditions necessary for developing a deeper understanding of how things are not only (re)designed, (re)composed, (re)produced, (re)distributed, (re)transformed, and re(circulated) in a viral age but also how they generates a wide range of unforeseeable consequences as they (re)assemble our collective lives.

To bring this article full circle, a new materialist approach also has potential to invigorate circulation studies across rhetoric and composition and communication. As previously noted, scholars working on rhetoric in relation to communication, anthropology, material culture, theory, composition, history, transnational feminism, and visual culture have been attending to circulation in diverse ways for some time now. Even still, circulation studies has yet to reach its fullest potential for a couple different but related reasons. One, a clear definition, such as the one I offer in the introduction, has yet to be offered to help this subject area materialize as a shared tradition of inquiry. Two, the methodological framework and research methods necessary to study rhetoric in motion still need to be developed and distributed. As such, circulation studies is an emergent area of study ripe for theoretical and methodological attention. In this article, I have tried to contribute to this area of study by identifying a productive methodology and method for studying the eventfulness of new media images. My hope is that the new materialist approach and the method of iconographic tracking will motivate others to put their intellectual energy into this exciting area of research.

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