

Review of Leigh Gruwell’s *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics*

Jillian Viveiros

Gruwell, Leigh. *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics*. Utah State University Press, 2022.

Segment 1—Welcome

0:00 / 2:57

Thank you for tuning in today to learn more about *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* by Leigh Gruwell.

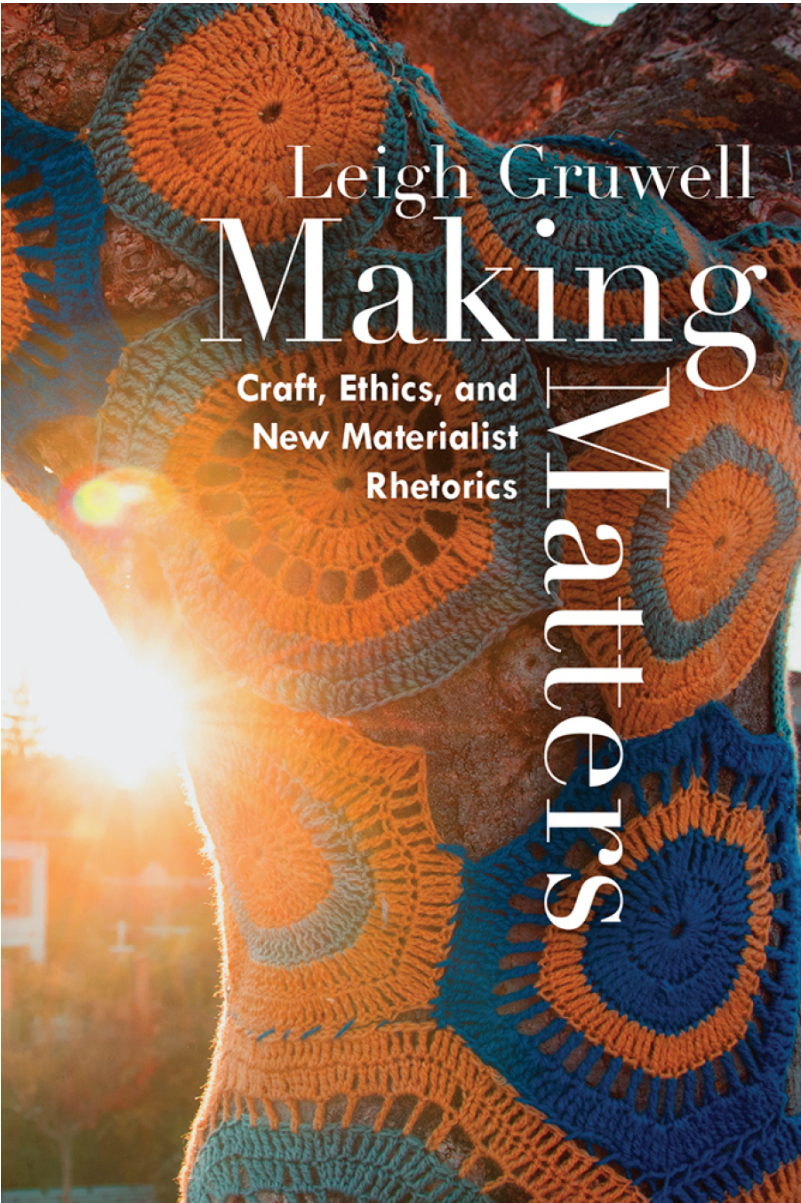
My name is Jillian Viveiros and I am a Ph.D. student in the Rhetoric program at Texas Woman’s University. This book initially piqued my interest as a self-identified crafter and sustained that interest through its sophisticated discussion of craft as rhetorical practice.

This book was published in 2022 by the Utah State University Press. Leigh Gruwell is an assistant professor of English at Auburn University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing and rhetoric. Her research centers on digital, feminist, and new materialist rhetorics as well as on composition pedagogy and research methodologies.

Although the title suggests that it is grounded in the field of rhetoric, this text has wide appeal for scholars across disciplines as varied as women’s, multicultural, and gender studies, history, sociology, and even art history and visual culture.

I’d like to provide you as a listener with an overview of how I have organized this podcast. My intention is to provide a cohesive overview of the main arguments in the text and speak to how they might support further research. As a listener, you may choose to listen to all 7 episodes of content review or simply navigate to the ones that pique your interest.

I have organized this podcast into seven segments. This [first segment](#) [\[#seg1\]](#) serves as a welcome and introduction to the structure of this podcast. The [second](#) [\[#seg2\]](#) covers Gruwell’s introduction and also examines Chapter 1, “Craft Agency: An Ethics for New Materialist Rhetorics,” which takes a deeper dive into the theoretical framework that Gruwell utilizes for her central argument. The [third segment](#) [\[#seg3\]](#) reviews Chapter 2, “Craft History, Crafting Rhetoric: Locating Craft Agency.” The [fourth segment](#) [\[#seg4\]](#) focuses on Chapter 3, “Craftivism and Material Specificity of Rhetorical Action” and Chapter 4, “Manifesting Material Relationships Online Through Ravelry.” The [fifth segment](#) [\[#seg5\]](#) examines the applications of Gruwell’s term “craftivism”



to Chapter 5, “The Women’s March, Digital-Material Assemblages, and Embodied Difference.” The [sixth segment \[#seg6\]](#) explores how Gruwell extends her discussion of craft to apply to the composition classroom in Chapter 6, “Rescuing Craft for Writing Studies.” The [seventh \[#seg7\]](#) and [Epilogue \[#seg8\]](#) segments offer a summary and closing remarks.

I wish you happy listening!

Segment 2—Introduction, “Rhetoric in the Making” and Chapter 1, “Craft Agency: An Ethics for New Materialist Rhetorics”

0:00 / 5:39

Welcome to segment 2, where I will cover Gruwell’s Introduction, and also examine Chapter 1, “Craft Agency: An Ethics for New Materialist Rhetorics.”

Gruwell opens by cleverly comparing the automated Jacquard loom to early computers in order to highlight that, although the material and the digital seem far apart, in all actuality, they are “simply different sides of the same coin” (3). She further develops this claim by drawing attention to the linguistic features of the word “digital” which simultaneously refers to “computing technologies” and our “fingers” as “digits.” This becomes central to the book’s larger claims about how materiality, as expressed through crafted products, and how the process of crafting itself comes to influence action.

The introduction houses an impressive literature review of some of the heavy hitters on the new materialist scene including Barnett, Boyle, Dobrin, Gries, and Reid. Those new to this subgenre of rhetoric will find a more detailed explanation of these principles in Chapter 1. Gruwell harnesses language in powerful ways as she begins to introduce the “assemblages that make rhetoric possible” (5). She stakes the claim early on that “rhetoric itself is complex, networked, and emergent” (5). Readers who are more comfortable with classical configurations of rhetorical ethics and actors should buckle up. Gruwell challenges readers to reconsider how “craft also calls attention to emplaced, embodied qualities of rhetorical actors and the power relationships that they navigate” (6). Gruwell closes her introduction with a succinct summary of each chapter containing its key arguments.

Chapter 1 functions as a space for Gruwell to establish the term “craft agency” an extension of the new materialist movement’s position on agency. Her somewhat brief explanation of actors and agents underscores the movement’s belief that “craft understands agency as not simply causal, effected by a singular, self-determined agent, but as the product of the intra-actions between varied rhetorical actors including humans and nonhumans” (15). Applying this principle, the things that we make and the act of crafting itself does not place us as the creator at the center of the messaging. Once the work is created and released, it takes on a life of its own, influencing further interactions and interpretations. However, Gruwell’s larger goal in this chapter seems to be her desire to advocate for “a reciprocal ethics of entanglement aimed at equalizing power relationships to making social change” (15). In this way, she acknowledges that the craft product is powerful, but its point of origin is also significant. Even more so, the process that it travels through both digitally and materially create meaning for those who interact with it along the way. For a reader who is a novice to new materialist theory, this logic can be tricky to navigate. I would recommend taking a closer look at some of the scholars that she cites early on in the chapter if the theory feels a bit complex for you as a reader. Jane Bennett’s work is highly accessible.

Those arriving at this text from other disciplines will find delight in Gruwell’s links to feminist and cultural rhetorics. She discusses how shifting our firmly rooted assumptions about what can be considered “rhetoric” have already been taken up by scholars in these fields and provides ample examples to support this. Although she mentions that “new materialism’s penchant for ignoring Indigenous thought is an act of colonial violence,” Gruwell does not devote a significant amount of space to developing this claim. However, this is completely understandable given that this is not the main focus of the chapter, but I do think mentioning some Indigenous perspectives on craft would be interesting here.

Lastly, Gruwell closes the chapter by developing a powerful call to action: “What we need, then, is to embrace new materialism’s interest in the material but to do so in a way that also sees the material as always inevitably political” (29). She grounds her own analysis of craft product and practice by exploring particular instances of entanglement between causes, people, and the things that they make. She argues that this process “thus forces attention to both the assemblages we make together, and the assemblages that in turn make us.”

Thanks for listening! Catch my next episode where I will review Chapter 2, “Craft History, Crafting Rhetoric: Locating Craft Agency.”

Segment 3—Chapter 2, “Craft History, Crafting Rhetoric: Locating Craft Agency”

0:00 / 3:42

Welcome to segment three where I will be discussing Chapter 2, “Craft History, Crafting Rhetoric: Locating Craft Agency.”

Those who study rhetoric and have struggled to explain what we do to non-rhetoric people will get a kick out of the beginning of this chapter. Rhetoric, as Gruwell notes, is a “slippery, even loaded word” (40). She quotes Plato of all people and states how he dismissed rhetoric as “cookery, mere flattery, rather than real art” (40). Even though the word gets a bad wrap as it “often becomes shorthand for deception and artifice,” those who have devoted our life’s work to it know that is simply not true. Rhetoric is argumentative practice: broad—overarching—and essential to our existence in both private and public spheres.

Gruwell, ingeniously in my opinion, ties this to how craft is a paradoxical term as well. Craft isn’t always viewed as art and neither is rhetoric. Both are art and both matter. Gruwell states that “Rhetoric and craft thus share a common incongruity: both clever and deceitful and almost always powerful, instances of either can invite suspicion and misgivings” (40).

If you don’t know much about crafting history, you are in for a treat. Gruwell doesn’t necessarily provide a comprehensive history of craft, but she hits the highlights and tells you where you can go for more of it. Her discussion of craft’s connections to femininity are a natural extension from the previous chapter’s discussion of feminist scholarly recovery work and methods. She talks about craft’s gendered history and how she sees this as a limitation to how craft is viewed and what it can do.

The most exciting part of the chapter is when she begins to connect craft to activist practice. This chapter is important to read closely because it serves as a foundation for understanding Chapter 5, when she begins unpacking the Women’s March. I found myself frequently flipping back here.

The end of the chapter gets a bit more into the weeds of ancient rhetoric which might be off putting if it is new to you. However, don’t let this be a limitation! Use Gruwell’s extensive bibliography to search up concepts that might confuse you a bit and make those organic connections for yourself. My favorite part of this section is her discussion of recent readings of Sophistic *kairos*. On page 55 she quotes Hawk, who argues that “recognizing how *kairos* ‘requires the rhetor’s ability to participate in the co-adaptive development of a situation’ feeds well into her explanation in the following chapter about the role of social media in craft assemblages and dissemination.

Keep in mind that future chapters are less focused on rhetorical theory and more focused on craft agency and craft as activism.

Thanks for listening! Catch my next episode where I will review Chapter 3, “Craftivism and Material Specificity of Rhetorical Action” and Chapter 4, “Manifesting Material Relationships Online Through Ravelry.”

Segment 4—Chapter 3, “Craftivism and Material Specificity of Rhetorical Action” and Chapter 4, “Manifesting Material Relationships Online Through Ravelry”

0:00 / 4:35

Welcome to segment 4, where I will first discuss Chapter 3, “Craftivism and Material Specificity of Rhetorical Action.” I’ll also take you on a tour through Chapter 4, “Manifesting Material Relationships Online Through Ravelry.”

Ever heard of yarn bombing? How about a knit uterus? Did you know that in 2004 people made a gigantic quilt honoring AIDS victims and placed it in front of the White House? Chapter 3 is peppered with exciting examples of crafters who participate in activism. Also known as “craftivists.” Craftivism targets both broad and narrow audiences to represents the conscious efforts of the individual to “recognize and exploit the inherently subversive potential of craft” (60). Gruwell argues that her discussion of craftivism, serves as a tool to clarify craft agency where she is focused on the complex entanglements of political action, the people who create the crafts, and those who encounter them. Readers will find a sturdy literature review in this chapter.

Her exploration of other craft scholar's work opens up an interesting place for her argument. She acknowledges the white privilege that appears to have remained rather constant in the craft movement and gently critiques yarn craftivists who co-opted language such as "graffiti" and "bombing" (67). Although I realize that printing photos in books is incredibly expensive, I would have liked to see a few more since the descriptions she provided were so vivid. There were also points where she underscored the importance of colored yarn but the photos were unfortunately in black and white. A reader wanting a more accurate representation can easily take to google to find alternatives.

I think that my favorite chapter in the book is Chapter 4, where Gruwell dives into the Ravelry community. She establishes *ethos* first by joining as a knitter and then begins to study the community from the inside out. She asks a poignant question at the beginning of Chapter 4 which she proceeds to explore through the rest of the book. While admitting that craft is still "firmly rooted in the physical... Where, then, does the digital fit in this understanding of craft?" (82). What I enjoyed most about this framing was that she does not just speak to the dissemination of crafts, but our understanding of the complex processes where we make, share, and then are transformed as a result of this process.

Furthermore, I appreciate her exploration of how the knitting community has its own problems with inclusion. She does not provide a great deal of solutions to ending these practices, but I would not expect her to in the context of this argument. At the end of the chapter, Gruwell is reaching back to her theoretical foundations in the introduction and first chapter by calling on physical things as actors. She states that "On Ravelry, physical things both construct and are constructed by digital actors" (102). Here, we have two actors, the crafters, and the crafts themselves. She even insinuates that the flawed dynamics of the knitting community are acting upon itself. Although I hate to admit it, she is probably correct on page 102 when she argues that "the digital, that is, is not somehow apart from the body or physicality more generally" for Raverly users or any of us for that matter. According to Boyle, Brown, and Ceraso, the digital is "everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, invisible and ever present" (102). As we end on this rather existential note, she reminds us that we still have the potential to play large and positive roles in social change.

Thanks for listening! Catch my next episode where I will review Chapter 5, "The Women's March, Digital-Material Assemblages, and Embodied Difference."

Segment 5—Chapter 5, "The Women's March, Digital-Material Assemblages, and Embodied Difference"

0:00 / 4:47

Welcome to segment 5 where I will be discussing Chapter 5, "The Women's March, Digital-Material Assemblages, and Embodied Difference."

There's nothing like a good story, right? Many readers will remember, for better or for worse, the day after the Trump inauguration in January of 2017. No matter where you were or how much you remember, Gruwell takes us a thoughtful journey through the women's march that occurred on Saturday, January 21, 2017. There is an ambitious amount of content in this chapter and I think that actually many *books* could be devoted to this topic. But if we think about the title of the chapter, Gruwell's main focus here is digital-material assemblage. She does focus *some* of the iconic "pink knit hats with cat ear—dubbed 'Pussyhats'" (104). However, she is more concerned with how those hats rose to creation through digital means. Assemblage means three things here: the physical assemblage of the hat by knitting it, the community that came together online to disseminate and popularize the pattern, and the physical assemblage of protesters on the day of the march. All three worked in concert to enact Gruwell's theory of craft agency. She writes of the pussyhats themselves, "Together, these artifacts signal how craft agency collapses boundaries between the digital and the physical" (104).

One of the things that I respect most about Gruwell's writing throughout the course of this book is her recognition of limitations. She spends a great deal of time acknowledging that the women's march had its critics and cites their evidence. However, she moves past this by stating that "In this chapter, then, I argue that both the successes and failures of the Women's March signal the significance of materiality in a politics of craft agency" (105). In other words, when agency is robust and working, it will be complex and have many dimensions. Some of these will be hard to manage as nonhuman agents take on lives of their own. It is then the job of responsible and sensitive humans to add dimensions, texture, and inclusivity to the mission.

My only critique of this chapter is that I would have liked to hear a bit more about the "pink pussy hat." The author devotes roughly a page and a half to the hat and how it became emblematic of the march. She also mentions how, to date, it is still

one of the most popular patterns on Ravelry. But, I wanted to hear more. Specifically more about how the idea for the hat came about, how the pattern went so viral, and how the hat might have been a tool to recruit. I think that there also could have been interesting extensions to the description of “slacktivism” here. Were there women who knit and sold these hats for profit rather than having a strong connection to the purpose?

However, this does not diminish the very unique and thorough scholarship completed in this chapter. The discussion of protest signs and their materiality was powerful and her analysis of how “their rhetorical function depended heavily on digital networks” on page 121 was well developed throughout the chapter. Gruwell lands in a powerful place by the end of the chapter and suggests a solution for more powerful and inclusive political action. She argues that by paying attention to individual bodies, assemblages (both physical and digital) and these complex interactions, we can make thoughtful predictions. Quoting Barad, she says that “a new political collective must take account of not merely the practices that produce distinctions” (129). Lastly, she says that “Such vibrant, reciprocal coalitions are necessary to create the kind of lasting political change feminist protest movements like the Women’s March, and craft agency itself, seek” (130).

Thanks for listening! Catch my next episode where I will review Chapter 6, “Rescuing Craft for Writing Studies.”

Segment 6—Chapter 6, “Rescuing Craft for Writing Studies”

0:00 / 5:52

Welcome to segment 6 where I will be discussing Chapter 6, “Rescuing Craft for Writing Studies.”

Many of you listeners out there are teachers of writing or at the very least have taken a writing class at some point. Let’s think about being on the student side for a moment; have you ever worked so hard on a paper that when you turned it in, it felt like a masterpiece that you were hesitant to hand off? You made and maybe remade every inch of with precise effort. It was a creation! This intellectual labor that you exerted is indicative of what Gruwell calls “rhetoric’s inherent craftiness” (131).

Interestingly, until relatively recently the term craft “became associated with mechanical, skills-based understandings of writing” (131). This is the type of writing language that many find cringe worthy. Terms like thesis statement, topic sentence, and evidence integration come to mind. While some of us find this fun, the majority of people do not. Gruwell speaks to how our discipline is still viewed institutionally to some extent as a gatekeeper for the university. Undergraduates must master (or test out of) the basics of writing in first year composition in order to proceed onto other more challenging courses that focus on knowledge acquisition. While I agree with this to some extent, I don’t take much offense to our discipline’s position as a gatekeeper. The work that we are doing with students is *so* important. As someone who has taught AP Language and Composition and first year composition for many years, I have had droves of students come back and tell me that what they learned during our time together set the foundation for their later success.

A sentence on page 132 struck me. Gruwell writes, “Specifically, I argue that the contemporary field of writing studies has discarded craft because it has (mistakenly) been deemed an artifact of the allegedly unrhetorical, neoromantic pedagogies of the 1970s that have been widely criticized for their tendencies to separate the ‘real’ work of writing—the inventional capacities of the individual genius—from the more mundane but teachable work of craft (that is, writing techniques and skills).”

First year composition is a special place in a student’s development. There are some students who come to us who really want to be there; they stake the claim that they feel this is the place where they will finally learn to write. There are others who are already great at writing and cherish the time to practice more. There is also a large portion of students who do not want to be there because they feel they were never good at writing and will never be. Making students understand that writing welcomes but certainly does not demand genius as Gruwell describes it. This helps to ease their pain. It takes work to *craft* compositions. It takes time, effort, and energy to refine the *craft* of writing. Scholars like Donald Murray describe beautifully as a process where we can “think of a workman who moves in close, measuring, making, sawing, fitting, standing back to examine the job, moving back in close to plane, chisel, mark and fit...” (133). However, some of these process based and expressivist pedagogies fell from favor in the 1980s when composition really took root as a discipline. As it was trying to define itself and grapple for legitimacy, we had to articulate just what we were doing behind those closed doors to teach nearly every university student. Area scholars such as Richard Young claimed that “a new classicist approach is the most pedagogically sound because it moves writing from an unintelligible, opaque process to one that can be understood and thus taught” (135). Unfortunately, this reinforces the idea that anyone can teach composition because it is a

set of concrete steps and skills. However, those of us who have taught composition know that there is an art to it; it takes time to find your rhythm.

At the close of the chapter, Gruwell calls us back to her central term “craft agency” and suggests that we reclaim it for the composition classroom. In order to do this, we should begin thinking of writing as material practice with human and nonhuman agents. We need to make students aware that they will have wide audiences and that the compositions that they are producing will take on lives of their own. Empowering them to see that their work must speak for itself, is a lesson in agency. Gruwell hopes that “concretely, craft agency would inform our disciplinary work at all levels: the pedagogical, the administrative, and the scholarly” (143).

Thanks for listening! Catch my next episode where I make some final remarks about *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* as a whole.

Segment 7—Summary and Closing Remarks

0:00 / 1:31

Welcome to segment 7, where I will provide some closing remarks on the book as a whole.

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to review Gruwell’s text. It is an exceptionally well researched and articulated argument that makes an excellent contribution to our field. Make sure that as a reader, you also take some time to go through the notes at the end of the book and glance at them as you read if you are less well versed in rhetorical theory. This is *not* just a book for people in the field of rhetoric. While it might be tricky for an undergraduate student or non-academic to grasp some of the content, this book is a worthwhile read for anyone who is curious about the larger implications of craft in our contemporary world. For academics and those engaged in research, the bibliography is a gold mine. You will find foundational new materialist texts listed here as well as interesting craft history scholarship. Gruwell’s book is worth your time and intellectual engagement.

Thanks for listening to my review of *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics*! You can order your copy of the book from Amazon or directly from the publisher.

Segment 8—Epilogue

0:00 / 2:02

Welcome to segment 8, the epilogue! Before closing this review, I would like to touch on what *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* contributes to the field of rhetoric and composition studies. It seems like our field is growing and diversifying by the minute—doesn’t it? There are folks studying the history of rhetoric all the way back to Plato and Aristotle—there are others focused solely on teaching first year composition at the undergraduate level—you might even be surprised to hear that others have dedicated their careers to studying yarn bombing. As a Ph.D. student, I have had the privilege to explore all of these different avenues through my coursework and also by observing my cohort friends who have struck out on paths of their own related to pop culture, plants, religious and political rhetorics and even mysticism. For me, what is at the core of this book is possibility. It is exciting but also scary—when we open ourselves up to studying material rhetorics, the possibilities are endless. Gruwell demonstrates this through her engaging discussion of yarn bombing, protest wear and social media posting. Our networked lives, both physical and digital, are ripe for examination and study. She reminds us that a field that once focused on oratory is now full of messages conveyed in other mediums. Gruwell’s text which is firmly grounded in theory can serve as a guidepost for scholars, both novice and experienced, to venture into examination of unconventional materials and subjects. Thank you for listening!

“Review of MAKING MATTERS” from *Composition Forum* 53 (Spring 2024)

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