CIRCULATION, WRITING, AND RHETORIC

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ENTANGLEMENTS THAT MATTER
A New Materialist Trace of #YesAllWomen

Dustin Edwards and Heather Lang

Look only at the movements—and they will bring you to matter.
—Brian Massumi (2002), Parables for the Virtual

This chapter focuses on the circulation of #YesAllWomen, and it takes a curious approach in attending to its movement. In line with recent work in circulation studies and new materialism, we seek to open up #YesAllWomen to give it status as a viable actor that has amassed a kind of vibrant force via its ongoing circulation in material spheres far wider than its point of origin. In providing a descriptive account about how and where #YesAllWomen has circulated, in being open and attentive to its rhetorical becoming, we disclose some of its material consequences. In doing so, we aim to intervene in the study of digital activism, and specifically, the emerging practice known as hashtag activism. We argue that the emergence of key hashtags within the past few years—#BringBackOurGirls, #BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #NotYourAsianSidekick—deserve more attention than matter-of-fact arguments (i.e., the revolution will, or will not, be tweeted). Instead, we contend that tracing the circulation of such hashtags, as well as treating them as rhetorical things, helps to unravel material complexities within the broader assemblages that animate their becoming. In other words, more energy should be invested in exploring how the circulation of a hashtag comes to matter.

In this chapter, we first attend to the ways in which digital activism has been theorized in media studies under the rubric of network theory. Drawing on but also complicating this work, we show how a new materialist framework might be leveraged to better approach the material, affective, and agentive significance of #YesAllWomen—an affective thing, as it moves through rhetorical ecologies to provoke new material realities and affect other bodies via its circulation. In doing so, we show the complex and ever-changing rhetorical life of #YesAllWomen, demonstrating that while #YesAllWomen, as an activist hashtag assemblage made up of many lively actors, may not have a clear-cut goal or argument, it nonetheless has material consequentiality and affective intensities worthy of extended study. Through its circulation, #YesAllWomen has come to matter in both senses of the word.

NETWORKED DIGITAL ACTIVISM: BEYOND THE REVOLUTION WILL (NOT) BE TWEETED

Since its emergence, digital activism has taken on many names—hashtag activism, slacktivism, armchair activism, clicktivism, hashtag feminism—and it’s little surprise as to why: political pundits and cultural theorists alike have proffered radically opposing arguments about the political efficacy of activist sentiments that gain resonance in digital domains. Some critics see digital activism as undangerous, apolitical, and arhetorical. Malcolm Gladwell (2010), for example, famously claimed that the revolution would not be tweeted because the networks facilitated by digital activism function based on “weak ties” to other actors in a network, encourage low-risk involvement in social movements, and lack a hierarchical structure that is integral to achieving activist goals. Others have understood activist networks differently, seeing a network as more than its digital-material reality, and instead refer to the technologies of the network—its interfaces, screens, and fibers—but also the information, power, media, and actors distributed throughout the network.

Working from this more capacious understanding of digitally facilitated networks, some writers (Castells 2013; Lievrouw 2011; Rheingold 2002; Shirky 2008) have moved beyond initially negative and simplistic evaluations of digital activism. In doing so, these scholars argue that participating in an activist network requires actors to develop and employ subcultural literacies that must first identify the status quo—sifting through information, power, media, and actors—and then operationalize against these factors. In this way, networked activism has the power not only to affect the status quo but to become intertwined with it so that alternative views can be recognized. Networking via social media platforms has also provided activists with tools for organizing face-to-face interactions such as sit-ins and flash mobs. Manuel Castells (2013) even sees the potential for new kinds of social movements to emerge from digitally networked activist organizing such as #Occupy, much of which is facilitated, circulated, and archived by hashtags. As Castells writes,
“what matters is the process, more than the product. In fact, the process is the product. . . . This is the true revolutionary transformation: the material production of social change not from programmatic goals but from the networked experiences of the actors in the movement” (144).

In all, the explicitation of digital activism via a networking framework has yielded rich understandings of the ways in which actors transcend and manipulate time and space to create complex discursive environments. When at all, the hashtag itself figures into networking theory most often as a categorizing function or a node in a specific network, exchanging power and information with other nodes and actors in that network (e.g., Thrift 2014; Ganzer 2014; Woods 2014). For Castells, hashtags are primarily theorized as being in service to human agents’ face-to-face organizing, while Gladwell, for all his criticisms of Twitter, never even mentions the word hashtag. In other words, hashtags are rarely considered as actors within movements. Nor does this research recognize how the hashtag produces affects in bodies, human and nonhuman. Though attending to a broader constellation of actors, the application of network theory to digital activist studies is often more attuned to how networks can support human agents’ engagement with technology and one another rather than tracing, following, or being attentive to the tag itself. Moreover, network theory is unable to account for what happens when a tag reaches a point of expressivity outside its well-defined activist network, as #YesAllWomen did after redeploying across new media and platforms—from Twitter to Tumblr, from Facebook to e-books, bracelets, and rallies—bringing its histories and influences into new spheres and gaining new momentum and meaning. Viewed in this way, we come to see that hashtags are more than data, more than metatags, more than a smooshed up string of comprehensible words. Hashtags are curious rhetorical things.

To call a hashtag a thing is to call out its materiality, relationality, and affectivity. Thus, in our analysis here, we turn to new materialism, because, more so than network theory, a new materialist framework allows us to examine hashtags as actors in their own right, to account for their ability to affect and produce affects in a diverse range of other bodies inside and outside of their networks of origin. New materialism also allows us to understand that the circulation of a hashtag is made possible by a broader assemblage of lively elements (affects, data flows, economic exchanges, material infrastructures, and so on). New materialism, then, provides a framework—a kind of methodology—for approaching the entanglement of such emerging and distributed materialities and the affectivity they induce and produce.

Our approach here is informed by Laurie Gries’s (2013, 2015) iconographic tracking method. Grounded in new materialist theory, we find iconographic tracking useful for hashtag circulation research, as it allows researchers to follow the circulation of hashtags outside Twitter archives. As Gries (2015) mentions, researchers employing iconographic tracking utilize Guy Debord’s concept of the “dérive” early on in the research process, using multiple search tools to trace and be open to the circulation of an object under study. We also draw on Derek McCormack’s (2015) discussion of following things in nonrepresentational research in order to attend and respond to the sometimes surprising trajectory of things. In our case, following and tracking #YesAllWomen by using search tools from social media applications (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.), along with other web-based search functions (Google, Bing, DuckDuckGo, Amazon, etc.), revealed that although #YesAllWomen was certainly borne out of communicative actions on Twitter, its subsequent spread and circulation has reached material spheres far wider than Twitter. We find this approach more attractive than big data corpus analyses because it allows us to approach—even if in a fragmented and reduced way—complexity and mess. This approach also allows us to account for the ways in which we, as bodies ourselves, also have become entangled with the movement.

THE CASE OF #YESALLWOMEN

On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger shot and killed seven people, including himself, and injured thirteen others in Isla Vista, California. Before the rampage, Rodger uploaded several videos to social media sites claiming that he had been sexually frustrated and isolated for much of his life as a result of being ignored by women. As Rodger’s misogynistic digital life became more exposed, a new conversation about the treatment and perception of women in the public began to emerge. One such conversation was catalyzed by #NotAllMen. Though #NotAllMen was already a well-established tag on Twitter in 2013, the tag gained traction after the Isla Vista killings as men sought to distance themselves from acts of violence against women. In response to the overwhelming #NotAllMen presence, @gildedspine, under the pseudonym “Release ‘Kaye’-raken,” tweeted, “. . . Has there been an #YesAllWomen tag yet?” Twenty-four hours later, more than 1.2 million tweets had been added to #YesAllWomen. In the days that followed, #YesAllWomen answered #NotAllMen with an animate concatenation of responses, demonstrating that, while not all men are guilty of acts of violence, all women are vulnerable to them.
This (rather tidy) origin story, as we aim to show in the sections that follow, is just one part of YesAllWomen’s complex lifespan—or to use Gries’s (2016) terminology, its sense of rhetorical becoming, which can be understood as a circulatory process whereby things change and transform as they connect with other entities as they move throughout time and space. In other words, as YesAllWomen spreads—from social media accounts to course syllabi, blogs, and clothing—it experiences a rhetorical life, jolting other bodies, both human and nonhuman, into rhetorical action. In this process, Gries notes, following Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of “intra-action,” all entities are mutually transformed. YesAllWomen, as such, is more a complex entanglement of various materialities than a discrete object to be delivered. To more fully acknowledge its complex entanglement, then, we deploy three new materialist concepts—thing-power, affect, and assemblage—to acknowledge how YesAllWomen’s circulation prompted new material realities across diverse genres, material artifacts, and affective responses.

Concept 1: Thing-power

A refrain: hashtags are curious rhetorical things. From one perspective, this claim may not seem novel or productive. Hashtags have, in a relatively short amount of time, exploded as a famous, if not infamous, cultural-technological form. With such an explosive entry, the ubiquity of hashtags no doubt marks a curious cultural and technological moment. Yet from another perspective, such a phrase allows us to capture the generative function of hashtags. That is, in some sense, hashtags allow human rhetors to be curious, to chase down, to follow, to be inventive. From a rhetorical standpoint, we might think of hashtags—especially those that gain mass traction in broader publics—as vibrant, circulating, and affective topoi: on-the-move places to be tapped into, appropriated, and spread further, gaining resonance or not by virtue of a complex entanglement of many temporal and material forces.

We invoke the concept of topoi (typically translated from the Greek as “place”) in two interrelated ways. First, we draw on Carolyn Miller’s (2000) rereading of the Aristotelian concept to suggest that hashtags come to represent places where new forms of argument, persuasion, and identification can be established. For Miller, topoi are devices that teeter between the known and the unknown. Topoi are inventive “borderlands” where rhetors “hunt” for novel uses: “vantage point[s]” that can “reveal or make possible new combinations, patterns, [and] relationships that could not be seen before” (142). In this sense, hashtags, especially those that circulate widely, are things to think from—that is, they can come to represent relatively known vantage points (or, perhaps better, vantage points in becoming) wherein human rhetors can invent anew. In the case of YesAllWomen, the hashtag has become a generative topos of healing and anger—a “place” of sharing, affirming, and resisting the systematic worldwide oppression of women. It also became a point of contention for many—a “place” where anti-feminist sentiments were espoused and critiques about race and class were articulated.

The second way we invoke topoi more fully embraces the “nonhuman turn” in the post-humanities (see Grusin 2015)—that is, hashtags, as shifting topoi, become vibrant and mobile inventive places of affectivity in their own right. Apart from being invention devices for the world (for human actors), hashtags become inventions of the world (emerging from a co-constitutive and mutually transforming entanglement of becoming to affect a host of rhetorical bodies). From this generative perspective, we argue that YesAllWomen has amassed its own kind of thing-power, its own inventio; it has come to be a vital actor—a mobile topos—that has provoked new materializations, transformations, andcomings. In Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Jane Bennett (2010) designates the concept of thing-power to capture “the curious ability for seemingly inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). From a rhetorical standpoint, Gries’s (2015) work with “Obama Hope” shows how thing-power can be leveraged to understand how, once delivered, a thing gains a life of its own via a process of circulation. In essence, says Gries, a thing acquires the agentic capacities to affect and produce affects as it circulates through rhetorical ecologies. While we might think of YesAllWomen as a tag generated by a single human rhetor, we maintain that it has since become an important rhetorical thing in its own right, spurring rhetorical and material change as it has traveled, and continues to travel, throughout time and space.

To make this claim more concrete, let us consider the concluding sentence from Sasha Weiss’s (2014) piece in the New Yorker. “YesAllWomen,” she writes, “is the vibrant revenge of women who have been gagged and silenced” (emphasis added). Significant here is the action in Weiss’s sentence, which portrays the hashtag as vibrant, as opposed to the human actors who use it. We find such an anthropomorphized statement perceptively accurate, as it acknowledges YesAllWomen’s ability to affect other bodies, nodding toward its (over)abundance, accumulation, and magnetism. To this end, as Bennett (2010) notes, a dash of anthropomorphism “can help reveal . . . vitality” (122), and, as such, can allow us to capture the affective force of things.
In amassing thing-power, #YesAllWomen has circulated widely to animate multiple transformations and provoke other material objects. For one, #YesAllWomen provoked demonstrations and gatherings: rallies were held in Seattle, New York City, Portland, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, circulating #YesAllWomen in corporeal form as it was painted on flesh and poster board. #YesAllWomen has also appeared on clothing, jewelry, bumper stickers, rocks, pavement, chalkboards, and even iPhone cases. Products bearing the #YesAllWomen moniker vary in their production scale from mass-printed T-shirts sold by third-party retailers to hand-stamped bracelets sold by crafters on Etsy. In another transformation, #YesAllWomen was partially archived and distributed as an e-book on June 3, 2014, after Amazon.com partnered with the blog Thought Catalog to e-publish #YesAllWomen: A Collection, which featured a smattering of #YesAllWomen tweets and original essays written by Thought Catalog contributors. Though the Amazon.com page for the book indicates that all proceeds are donated to the National Organization for Women, the publication of the book points to the generative power of a hashtag like #YesAllWomen as well as some of the more complex economic entanglements that hashtags become a part of—a point we will return to below.

#YesAllWomen also became a memetic thing susceptible to rivalry, remix, and variation. In Memes in Digital Culture, Limor Shifman (2013) argued that a viral object (be it a video, photo, or joke) should be understood differently from a memetic one. For Shifman, virals denote a single unit that spreads at rapid rates, whereas a meme is “always a collection of texts” (56). In other words, a viral object transforms into a meme when many people appropriate, imitate, and alter the viral object for other uses. Though the digital-material infrastructure of a hashtag differs from the common understanding of memes in everyday vernacular (an iconic image with remixable text), #YesAllWomen certainly has memetic attributes. As it gained rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009) in the days and weeks following its arrival on Twitter, #YesAllWomen spurred new hashtags: some emerged with similar connotations and meanings, others focused on critiquing the movement, and still others parodied the massive, sprawling cultural phenomenon that became #YesAllWomen. Some derivatives and responses include

- #YesAllFeminists
- #YesAllPeople

As we see it, these transformations were all animated by #YesAllWomen’s thing-power, its affective capacity to move the other things and other bodies it encounters. In the process of animating and transforming other digital-material objects, #YesAllWomen has experienced, and continues to experience, a rhetorical becoming far beyond its point of origin. It has morphed and shifted, becoming, among other things, a wearable fashion statement, an important barometer for born-digital activism, an object of mockery and critique, and a topos for experiencing anger, frustration, and hope. As such, thing-power captures how #YesAllWomen has triggered a panoply of material offshoots.

Concept 2: Affect

As we have argued, #YesAllWomen is an affective and affecting thing. As #YesAllWomen circulates, it carries with it a wide variety of affects: sharp feelings of anger, unease, discomfort, shame, frustration, and hope, ways of relating and encountering, forces that are felt but not easily articulated. Affect, understood here, can be thought of as a kind of surging pulse that moves through and among bodies of all kinds to accumulate, pass through, or gum up, provoking sensations, attachments, and intuitions as it circulates. The circulation of affect is “always passing through, but is never located” (Chaput 2010, 20). In this regard, affect is what Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes as “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation.” Affects work “not though meanings per se but in the way they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social wordings of all kinds” (Stewart 2007, 5). In rhetorical studies, scholars such as Catherine Chaput (2010) and Jenny Edlbauer (2005) suggest that the circulation of affect—thought of as a moody atmosphere, an affective ecology, or the habituated movement of everyday activities—is a better way to conceive of a rhetorical situation: not static and bounded but moving, affecting, and infecting. We find this especially true in our age of spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), where networked things travel at rapid rates across media platforms, stirring affective intensities as they go. A closer look at the way affect moves helps us recognize that #YesAllWomen, as an affective thing, provokes, agitates, and incites as it encounters other bodies in its circulatory pathways.

In many ways, especially in its early rhetorical life, the circulation of #YesAllWomen existed as an almost purely affective endeavor,
materializing in many tweets that expressed national healing in the
wake of tragedy as well as those that conveyed agitation, demonstration,
and the narrativization of the ongoing threat of violence (especially
against women). And, unlike other activist tags (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls
or #Kony2012), #YesAllWomen did not seek to effect on-the-ground
change; there was no call to mobilize armies or governments. Rather,
in a similar vein as Castells’s (2013) discussion of activist networks, the
goal of #YesAllWomen is to establish a conversation, to engage in the
processes of a better world.

In attending to the affective dimension of #YesAllWomen, we neces-
sarily call attention to that which exceeds representation, which poses
a problem when it comes to rendering affectivity into our research. At
this non-representational impasse, we turn to McCormack (2015), who
notes that lists can be an effective means of approaching affective phe-
nomena in research. He writes, “lists are valuable because they afford a
way of going beyond the conventions of certain kinds of representations
by refusing the demand of narrative solution” (95). Unable to provide a
narrative solution, then, we instead offer a list of #YesAllWomen tweets
that may help readers approach, or feel themselves into, the affective
swells of the movement.3

- “I shouldn’t have to hold my car keys in hand like a weapon &
check over my shoulder every few seconds when I walk at night
#YesAllWomen”—@SophiaBush

- “#yesallwomen because apparently the clothes I wear is a more valid
form of consent then the words I say”—@nitubelugu

- “Feminism isn’t about making women stronger. Women are
already strong. It’s about changing the way the world sees that
strength.”—@ColS_Foundation

- “#YesAllWomen because even a taped confession admitting to raping
me wasn’t enough to put him in jail.”—@jessismiles_

- “Because the man who got my grandmother pregnant and left
her was considered a catch, but she was considered a whore.
#YesAllWomen”—@Manda_like_wine

- “Because a lot of you are reading these and thinking ‘ugh, yea, we
get it. Calm down.’ #YesAllWomen”—@anaglish

- “#YesAllWomen because of nights where friends confess to having
been raped as if it’s just part of life they expected”—@anisegross

These tweets demonstrate the fear, anxiety, validation, indignation,
reflection, defensiveness, and trauma of those involved in #YesAllWomen,
though they represent only a small fraction of the sentiments and messages
shared over #YesAllWomen’s continuing lifespan. Limited though
they may be, they demonstrate that affect accumulates: it is already pres-
ent in any social field, but it also intensifies as more and more bodies
move throughout an ecology. In other words, although affective ecolog-
ies are already pulsing with affective intensities, further affectivity is
produced, shifted, and transformed by the circulation of things and bodies
within its reach. The circulation of #YesAllWomen may have emerged with a particular affective force, but as the tag circulates fur-
ther—affecting more and more things in its wake—its affective registers
and intensities change, ebb and flow, hum and screech.

It is worth noting that not all responses were in the service of growing
#YesAllWomen. Our tracing of the circulation of #YesAllWomen revealed
that resistance to #YesAllWomen was just as affectively charged, as men
defended themselves against accusations of misogyny, women pushed
back against the need for feminisms, and others criticized #YesAllWomen
supporters for hijacking a national tragedy as a soapbox for a political cam-
paign. Nevertheless, we hope the list above captures some of the intensity
present in the early stages of #YesAllWomen’s rhetorical becoming. But
we also acknowledge that creating this list also constitutes an erasure or
sense of unbelonging. As McCormack (2015) notes, lists separate, but
they also gather. This list separates select tweets from the #YesAllWomen
milieu and is in no way representative of the movement as a whole. But
by the same token, these tweets, along with our tracing of #YesAllWomen,
suggest that affect swarms and piles up through repetition and accumula-
tion, folding some responses into the force of the hashtag, while other
affectivity could not be adequately attached to the tag.

In this way, affect also tells us something about exclusion and larger
histories of oppression. For instance, Sara Ahmed (2004) discusses the
notion of “stickiness” as a kind of contact zone among bodies, objects,
and signs. For Ahmed, stickiness helps explain how things begin to
accumulate value within an affective economy—how, for instance, an
American flag picks up and accumulates various historical and cultural
attachments. Stickiness, Ahmed tells us, can be thought of in two ways:
first, as a kind of binding effect (the effect of accumulation and repeti-
tion), and second, as a kind of blockage (the inability of an object to
acquire new affective value). In short, Ahmed’s theory allows us to ask,
broadly, what sticks? What histories, bodies, and associations get picked
up as #YesAllWomen circulates? What sticks (and doesn’t stick) to the
rhetorical becoming of #YesAllWomen?

Examining #YesAllWomen through Ahmed’s “stickiness” demonstrates
that the histories, ideologies, and discourses of #YesAllWomen didn’t sim-
ply appear—instead, the tag cataloged women’s experiences through an
ongoing process of circulating new stories and recirculating stories that had already been shared. Indeed, as Ahmed (2004) writes, "What sticks 'shows us' where the object has traveled through what it has gathered onto its surface" (91). A brief history of #YesAllWomen reveals a variety of struggles for stickiness in founding a born-digital activist movement. First, in the wake of the Isla Vista killings, human actors—largely women—struggled to find a place to stick their stories of injustice in the first place. Thus, Kaye’s initial inquiry, as to whether or not #YesAllWomen existed, serves as an attempt to move toward an object of affectivity, an object or thing of stickiness. As we know, #YesAllWomen did stick, but hashtags are curious rhetorical things—open to transformation—and what sticks is not always what participants intend. As the tag continued to circulate, it was susceptible to hijacking and derailing from a variety of users. Some trolled the tag and the users posting it without contributing much meaningful discourse. Others expressed their concern that focusing on women minimized issues of global violence or encouraged essentializing all men as violent, resulting in the creation of #YesAllPeople.

Some elements, however, as Ahmed notes, are blocked or prevented from sticking to objects of affectivity. In the case of #YesAllWomen, the heavy emphasis on gender inequality may have inadvertently blocked discussions of race. Some critics pointed out that people who brought issues related to race into #YesAllWomen were accused of derailing or detracting from the conversation, which, in effect, limited the bodies that could stick to the tag and belong to the greater force of the movement. Others claimed that the seriousness of some experiences, such as survivor narratives, was trivialized by their inclusion with more superficial (and largely white feminist) concerns, such as those about the portrayal of married women in TV sitcoms. Internet users responded by tagging criticisms of #YesAllWomen with the derivative tag #YesAllWhiteWomen and a revival of the tag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Many of the tweets tagged in these responses call for more conversations that include intersectionality and demonstrate that women of color are disproportionately affected by many feminist issues, such as domestic violence and wage inequality. In other words, because some ideas are more apt to stick than others, hashtags—particularly #YesAllWomen—can silence voices just as easily as they can amplify them.

Concept 3: Assemblage

So far we have argued that #YesAllWomen has amassed a kind of thing-power in its ability to affect other bodies and propel further rhetorical and material action. Such action is made possible partly due to the circulation of affect. It follows that if we permit #YesAllWomen to amass thing-power, if we attribute a kind of vibrancy to it and acknowledge its affectivity, we might recognize how some hashtags become key actors in their abilities to, at least in part, shape the greater collectives they form. But how can we approach these greater collectives? For Bennett, thing-power is just one way of understanding her vitalist sense of agency. A more complete view, Bennett (2012) explains, is bound up in the notion of an "agentic assemblage," where these animating things coalesce to "form noisy systems or temporary working assemblages" that "enact real change" (231). Bennett (2010) describes agentic assemblages as "ad hoc groups of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (23), where distinct elements have agentive—or, perhaps better, affective—qualities but so too do the mass assemblages that each element encounters. Agency, thus conceived, is distributed, entwined, and emergent. From a rhetorical standpoint, a concept like agentic assemblage provides a framework to approach a collective of circulating, intra-acting parts. In other words, the hashtag, like the hashtag’s "original" author, is just one part of the story—the others include images, algorithms, interfaces, human bodies, and so on.

The notion of assemblage acknowledges the "living, throbbing" materiality of #YesAllWomen (Bennett 2010, 23). From one perspective, this acknowledgment lets us recognize that hashtags are more materially complex than we often care to notice. Historically, the most direct connection to the current use of the hashtag originated in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as way to name conversation channels (Zappavigna 2011). The typographical mark was, of course, used prior to IRC and the web—for example, the symbol (also known as the octothorpe, pound sign, or hash symbol) is found on typewriters and touch-tone phones. Although it has been said to originate as a shorthand mark for "pound in weight" in ancient Rome (Houston 2013), within the last decade, the symbol was adopted on Twitter—first, as a kind of user-born way to group like messages together, and then, as a formal feature built into the architecture of the platform (they have since spread to other platforms, including Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram, to name a few).

From this perspective, hashtags are inline metadata (data about data), clickable and searchable tags that categorize messages and thereby help users navigate databases. The hashtag’s function and its relationship to databases, however, are more complex than this simple definition suggests. As Paul Dourish (2014) explains, databases are themselves objects of various materialities: "assemblage[s] of hardware,
software, data representations, diagrams, algebras, business needs, spatial practices, principles, computer languages, and related elements.” The same holds true for data generated via mobile technologies. As Jason Farman (2015) unravels in his tracing of a Foursquare check-in, once cell phones reach signal with cell towers, the remaining journey of the flow of data takes place “entirely through the material, hardwired, tangible infrastructure of the hardwired Internet” (48). Farman’s takeaway is that, although digital and mobile data travel through material infrastructures, the majority of the process is imperceptible to humans, as both “human-to-technology” and “technology-to-technology” interactions are taking place (49).

To complicate matters further, hashtags are deeply entangled in corporate structures, made possible by the tech companies of Silicon Valley, which deploy proprietary algorithms, platform interfaces, and data marketing practices as a way to sustain connectivity for users and monetary longevity for those who build them into their architecture (van Dijck 2013). In other words, as Tarleton Gillespie (2015) notes, “platforms matter”—not only in terms of their interface architectures but also in terms of their politics, their boosting mechanisms, their censorship procedures. To put it another way, data (and metadata) are sway by another actor in a hashtag assemblage: the platform itself, according to “its algorithms, the imperative of its business model, and the enforcement of its community guidelines” (Gillespie 2015, 2). In this way, interactions on platforms, whether we want to admit it or not, are caught up in a neoliberal enterprise or as circulating exchanges that fuel what Jodi Dean (2005) has called communicative capitalism.

Adding yet more complexity to its assemblage, #YesAllWomen circulated in ways that might seem antithetical to its original impetus and, in the process, changed the compositional makeup of its broader assemblage. As mentioned previously, many human actors co-opted or repurposed the tag in an attempt to digress, interrupt, or derail the rhetorical velocity of #YesAllWomen. Users tagging tweets with #YesAllCats, for example, parodied #YesAllWomen in an effort to demonstrate their disapproval of the messages included in the tag. The tweets in #YesAllCats were largely remixed from real tweets posted to #YesAllWomen, with the degree of transformation varying from one tweet to the next. One tweet posted by @KirillWasHere capitalizes on the popularity of resisting victim shaming in #YesAllWomen by sharing a photograph of two cats in bikinis captioned “#YesAllCats Still not asking for it.” Others have made divergent uses of #YesAllWomen itself. For example, when searching for the tag on Instagram, we noted #YesAllWomen was deployed in everyday selfies that had nothing to do with sharing stories about women’s vulnerability in public spaces. Yet another instance of #YesAllWomen’s divergent circulation involved its presence on anti-feminist Tumblr pages. In more recent tracings of #YesAllWomen, we noted that it circulated in spheres that vehemently critiqued Hillary Clinton in the wake of her 2015 presidential bid announcement. Taken together, we certainly can see that the broader makeup of #YesAllWomen—from the material infrastructure of the Internet, to the politics of social media platforms, to the human actors divergently using the tag—is messy, entangled, and always in becoming. In all, the ever-changing elements within assemblages matter a great deal, as they impinge upon what gets circulated and what does not—or, as previously discussed, on what can be hunted for. While we have focused on a hashtag that circulated at viral rates, many other hashtags fizzle out as soon as they’re composed. Part of our overarching argument is that achieving virality requires more than “good” rhetorical and delivery knowledge. While rhetors may take some steps to compose for widespread circulation—such as designing for remixability (Ridolfi and DeVoss 2009), seizing kairotic moments (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel 2012), understanding digital economies (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), or keying into affective intensities (Gries 2015)—achieving virality is never a sure bet.

Our research tracing the circulation of #YesAllWomen revealed that certain sentiments—notably, the misogynist “fan pages” of Elliot Rodger—were censored and taken down by Facebook. The affective thing of #YesAllWomen, then, is shaped as much by what we allow to circulate as what is removed from circulation—not blocked or unconsciously un-stuck, but purposefully struck from the circulation record. Indeed, censorship policies, trending algorithms, material infrastructures, celebrity endorsements—all of these things impact the circulation of #YesAllWomen. The notion of agentic assemblage recognizes that the materiality of #YesAllWomen has certainly “acted”—perhaps not in matter-of-fact ways (i.e., women experiencing fewer instances of sexual violence as a result of #YesAllWomen), but instead, in more mundane and ongoing ways (including changes to platform censorship policies and new practices of born-digital activism).

CONCLUSION
We write this chapter at the one-year anniversary of #YesAllWomen. At this time, the tag continues to circulate and generate new dialogue, products, and attachments. The initial energy that swelled up around
the tag has settled, but the residual matter—the archived tweets, the Buzzfeed compilations, and #YesAllWomen: A Collection—remain. In this chapter, we have argued that all of this matter demonstrates that #YesAllWomen, through its process of rhetorical becoming, became more than a string of words and more than a communicative fad. Rather, we have attempted to explore #YesAllWomen as a dynamic and agentic entity made possible by ongoing acts of circulation. To do so, we have employed three new materialist concepts that, as we hope is clear, work in concert. Thing-power names the vitality a hashtag can amass as it continues to circulate among bodies; affect refers to the felt responses and reactions that give a hashtag its cultural weightiness; and assemblage concerns the myriad material elements that converge and accumulate to make circulation possible. Taken together, these three concepts allow us to see how, over the course of #YesAllWomen’s becoming, many rhetorics emerged in response to its materially complex, always unfolding entanglement. Sometimes they are somewhat easily named (i.e., public discussions about race, gender, and sexual violence or conversations about feminism and digital activism), but sometimes they are more difficult to represent (i.e., feelings of pain, dis/comfort, or un/belonging).

Though our study is limited in scope, we believe our approach is useful for tracing and following the development of other activist hashtags. Indeed, we already catch glimpses of thing-power in #WhyISaid, which establishes a narrative for survivors of domestic violence; we cannot deny the affective haunt of #ICantBreathe as it memorializes Eric Garner and critiques police brutality; we giggle and gasp (and sometimes sigh) at the assemblage of video, text, and individual and organizational actors in #IceBucketChallenge. Understanding born-digital activist movements through a new materialist lens frees us of clean-cut progress narratives and demands complex understandings of rhetoric on the move. Consequently, we should take hashtags seriously. We should seek them out, trace their circulations, and see where they arrive and what they do. In the process of doing this work, we can avoid oversimplifying the role of the hashtag—as metadata and as agent—and avoid proclaiming the wholesale success or failure of hashtag movements. Instead, we can recognize that the circulation of a hashtag is more complex, unfolding in a process of becoming and caught up with an entanglement that is often invisible, but remarkable in the cultural values it can uncover.

Notes
1. We follow Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter’s discussion of methodology here. For Sullivan and Porter (1997), as far as we see, methodology is distinct from method. Methodology, in other words, designates not some preformed categorical way to do research but rather a flexible overarching theory to guide inquiry and action.
2. Though, to be sure, some hashtags function as irreverent or ironic markers. See Alice R. Daer, Rebecca F. Hoffman, and Seth Goodman’s article in Communication Design Quarterly Review for a discussion of what the authors call “metacommunicative tags” (Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman 2014).
3. These are publicly available tweets that were cataloged in Ella Ceron’s (2014) #YesAllWomen: A Collection.

References
Ceron, Ella. 2014. #YesAllWomen: A Collection. New York: Thought Catalog.
In June of 2014, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced a new initiative focusing on girls in the developing world. USAID’s Let Girls Learn (2014) is a response to President Barack Obama’s Executive Order 13506 mandating that US federal and foreign policy offices respond to issues that impact girls locally and globally. The USAID campaign seeks to promote girls’ education worldwide, noting the significant disparity between the numbers of girls and boys attending school and attributing that disparity to the proliferation of child marriage, poverty, maternal and infant mortality, and unemployment in the so-called developing world. On the Let Girls Learn website, visitors will find a close-up sepia image of a young girl of color and a banner quoting President Obama: “The best judge of whether or not a country is going to develop is how it treats its women.” Further down the webpage is a public service announcement-style video in which a series of celebrities explains why it is that “we” US citizens need to commit to educating girls. It begins with one celebrity stating, “In Nigeria hundreds of young girls were kidnapped while they prepared for their final exams at boarding school.” Another continues: “In Pakistan a girl was shot for insisting that she has a right to learn.” Yet another adds: “In Haiti a girl who couldn’t afford to go to school showed up anyway. She showed up every day until she could stay.” The PSA then slowly shifts to the positive effects of education: it “unlocks” a girl’s potential, it helps ensure children’s survival and health, it increases her income (“up to 25 percent”), and ultimately promises that an “educated girl will invest that income into her family, her community, her country.” These statements quickly summarize and, at times, draw from stories told on the