



Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward A Typology of Transformative Work

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Abstract

Since it entered the critical lexicon in composition and rhetoric, *remix* has become an increasingly popular topic for scholarly work and pedagogical focus. Despite its pervasiveness, remix remains a cumbersome and overwhelming conceptual category. As such, this article has two interconnected purposes: To develop a pliable and useable framework for understanding the rhetorical significance of remix, and to begin to chart some of the major types of remix writers compose today. I open by arguing that the rhetorical concept of imitation (*imitatio*) can serve as a malleable frame both to understand the rhetorical importance of remix and to help map the many ways in which remix writers accomplish their rhetorical goals. After developing this frame, I offer a four-part typology of remix: assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play. Finally, I close by providing strategies for teaching and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Allow me to start with four scenarios:

1. A composer compiles a video using several already-existing materials, including images, film footage, sound bytes, music, animations, and so on. The final text, though patched together from many different source texts, is a coherent five-minute argument that claims political change cannot happen by simply voting for a particular candidate.
2. A YouTube user constructs a capitalist critique using an already-made video advertisement. The composer does not shoot any original clips, nor does the composer add an original voiceover. Once complete, the composer does, however, provide a radically different message than the original advertisement by inserting alphabetic writing in strategic moments throughout the video.
3. A presidential nominee makes a comment during a nationally televised debate that sparks a meme-generating frenzy. Within minutes of this occurrence, several texts are made, distributed, redistributed, modified, and re-modified—all relying on variations of the original phrase uttered by the nominee. The widely circulated phrase becomes a famous—if not infamous—catchphrase of the election season.

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4. A student designs a standardized test with mock reading passages, questions, and directions that calls into question the current fixation on standardized testing in primary and secondary schools in the United States. By playing with the typified genre conventions of standardized tests, the student asks her readers to interrogate the values and actions of the current testing system and the political contexts in which they emerged.

These scenarios, as our current vocabulary would have them, likely fall under the conceptual umbrella of remix—that is, each explicitly builds upon or repurposes already existing material. Taken together, these scenarios, each real pieces of writing that have impacted real audiences, show the rhetorical potential of *transforming*¹ already-existing materials into new texts for new audiences. My point in sharing these scenarios is not only to emphasize commonality but also to demonstrate difference. Indeed, remix has come to signify a wide range of meaning and practice. Take the above scenarios as cases in point: the first composer assembles an argument by strategically compiling several already existing texts into one coherent narrative; the second radically repurposes a single text to offer critical commentary; writers in the third scenario share, update, and intervene in the rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012) of an already circulating text; and the fourth composer playfully refashions a common genre for the purposes of critique. In effect, these texts—each a kind of remix—are distinctive in purpose, delivery, design, and style.

Similarly, remix has come to represent an expansive range of meaning in computers and writing scholarship. Recent work has positioned remix—as a concept, as a practice, as a genre, as a method—in wide and varied ways: as a means to enter and participate in political exchanges (e.g., Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), as a method of making arguments, solving problems, and effecting social change (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Kuhn, 2012), as a way to participate in communities (Jenkins, 2009; Stedman, 2012), as a research and conceptual method (e.g., Palmeri, 2012; Pough, 2010; Yancey, 2009), and as a theoretical frame to view culture, authorship, and intellectual property (e.g., DeVoss & Porter, 2006; Lessig, 2008; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). In short, remix is a loaded term. It has, nevertheless, emerged as an increasingly significant writing practice in digital culture. Although scholars have importantly noted that remix need not only refer to the digital (e.g., Delagrange, 2009; Hesse, Sommers, & Yancey, 2012; Palmeri, 2012), the relative ease of manipulating material in the ever-expanding digital archives hosted online, coupled with the possibility for mentorship and participation in community networks, has allowed remix to flourish in digitally mediated contexts. From the emergence of online remix communities, such as Vidders.net, TotalRecut.com, and ccMixter.com, to the rise of remix artists of public intellectual renown, such as Jonathan McIntosh and Elisa Kreisinger, it appears remix has secured itself as an enduring and profound practice worthy of continued inquiry. It is perhaps because of its relatively quick ascendance to such heightened popularity in scholarly pursuits and public spheres that remix remains a cumbersome, if not overwhelming, concept.

How might we better harness the pedagogical usefulness of remix in more accessible and illustrative ways? If we are to accept remix as a valid and important composing practice, one that has the potential to teach a wealth of rhetorical knowledge for a digital age, we need to further develop and refine approaches to discuss the many nuances involved in transforming already existing material. A possible way to reconcile the sprawling posture of remix in writing practice is to develop a typology that begins to delineate the rhetorical distinctions among types of remixed compositions. Here, I work toward such a typology by outlining four varieties of remix—assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play—in an effort to alleviate confusion about a term encumbered with excessive meaning.

In addition to relieving obfuscation, writing specialists would benefit from developing a remix typology for two other interconnected reasons. First, a remix typology does valuable work in asserting the often-touted epistemological commitments that undergird the fields of rhetoric and composition and computers and writing. These commitments, predicated on values of collaboration (e.g., Lunsford & Ede, 1992), sharing (e.g., DeVoss & Porter, 2006), and problem solving (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007), suggest that we need to lend serious consideration to the task of teaching what constitutes meaningful and productive authorship in a digital economy of writing. Such a task, as many scholars have argued (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Howard, 1999; Lunsford, 1999; Robbins, 2003), involves reconceptualizing notions of originality and ownership that have persisted since the Romantic era, and replacing them

¹ I use “transformative” for two key reasons: first, to signal that this work has new rhetorical purpose, and second, to argue that this work adheres to fair use guidelines. As Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi (2012) noted, work that is transformative—that is, work “recontextualized and re-presented for a new purpose, and to a new audience” (p. 81)—is more likely to be deemed fair in U.S. courts.

with, to echo Andrea Lunsford (1999), “a new rhetoric of authorship, one that rejects the naïve construction of author as originary genius or as entrepreneurial corporate entity, without diminishing the importance of agency, and of difference, to the lives of working writers” (p. 534). To delineate a typology of remix embraces these social and ethical commitments, and, in turn, provides a needed foundation for writing in a remix culture.

Second, a remix typology can be used as a powerful pedagogical tool. As Henry Jenkins (2009) asserted, “schools remain hostile to overt signs of repurposed content[. . .] and they often fail to provide the conceptual tools needed to analyze and interpret works produced in this appropriative process” (p. 57). This typology addresses this dismissal. It suggests that remix practices can be used to accomplish many ends (i.e., offer critique, participate in publics, propel arguments to new audiences, and so on) and, as such, that variations of remix engender different rhetorical, composing, and ethical issues. A typology provides teachers and students of writing with a heuristic that serves to guide them through the process of composing transformative work. To this end, it can also emphasize the need to design and compose with an eye toward the potential for future remixability, an increasingly important delivery concern that a series of publications has called “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012).

Although this article aims to map the differences among remix practices, the rhetorical variations of any typology would benefit from an overarching frame, one that affirms the rhetorical, social, and ethical benefits of composing transformative work. My argument proceeds from the acknowledgment that the practice of remix—culling, stitching, merging, and redeploying texts from one’s culture—is not new. As I will show, rhetoricians have been practicing and theorizing remix, or something akin to it, for thousands of years under the frame of imitation. Thus, by recalling noteworthy practices, metaphors, and theories from rhetorical traditions, I argue that imitation, if reimagined and remediated for composing in digital contexts, can serve as a pliable framework for understanding the rhetorical significance of remix. It likewise can help build a typology of remix. As scholarship has shown (Lanham, 2012; Muckelbauer, 2003; Pigman, 1980; Porter, 2005), variations of imitation—indeed typologies of imitation—have existed throughout history (i.e., compilation, paraphrase, reproduction, inspiration, and so on). The task now is reconfiguring these typologies for a digital age.

We also need to unpack the significance of imitation. In classical rhetoric, imitation (*mimesis/imitatio*) was deeply connected to invention, style, memory, ethics, and being. It is in this sense of imitation that we should position remix within our classrooms today. This frame situates remix practices as inherently rhetorical, suggesting that composers have a myriad of choices, concerns, and constraints to consider before, during, and after they construct their texts and disperse them throughout varied distribution networks. Further, it celebrates a sort of community stockpile from which composers can continuously invent and reinvent. In this way, the move to locate remix practices within the classical Greco-Roman sense of imitation works to displace the headlock of the lone genius creating texts *ex nihilo*. As remix so clearly demonstrates, we do not create texts out of nowhere but we build them through the discovery of other texts (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007). Finally, to position remix within a revived frame of imitation encourages a sense of ethical mindfulness. It positions remix writers as producers, evaluators, and collaborators, and thereby demonstrates that responsible textual production matters, that the materials of remixes have histories, and that remixed texts might themselves be repurposed. In other words, it positions remix as a process whereby rhetors are productively and ethically—not haphazardly—working with other texts, communities, and people.

In this article, I employ two methodological approaches. In the first half, by surveying historiographical work on imitation theory and practice, I seek to recast imitation for a digital age. In so doing, my aim is to forge a relationship between remix and imitation to emphasize how the rhetorical considerations of imitation (i.e., invention, ethics, and collaboration) are integral in expressing and advocating for the usefulness of remix practices today. My methodology for this section is informed by recovery work in writing studies that aims to re-theorize rhetorical concepts for a digital age (e.g., Brooke, 2009; Porter, 2009; Welch, 1999). In the second half of the article, I establish a four-part typology of remix by analyzing what I consider to be particularly illustrative cases that highlight fundamental distinctions among the four types of remix practices. By close reading a representation of each type of remix, I work to provide a set of nuanced terms and concepts to consider when teaching and composing transformative work. Because remix is necessarily entangled in matters of ethics (i.e., negotiating how—and if—to reuse texts), Heidi McKee and James Porter’s (2009) rhetorical-casualistic framework also informed my analysis. Although McKee and Porter’s framework was intended to aid Internet researchers in contemplating and working through ethically complex cases, I see great value in extending their approach to the classroom. For McKee and Porter, such a framework entailed identifying and testing against “cases about which there is common agreement” (p. 24). As McKee and Porter explained, these agreed upon cases, also known as paradigmatic cases, serve as clear-cut examples against which more difficult cases can

be compared. Here is where the work of rhetoric—of comparison, of inquiry, of action—comes into play: “rhetoric is [a useful art for] resolution of conflict, for negotiation of differences, and for analysis of tough cases (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 12). Taken together, then, rhetoric and casuistry provide a lens through which ethically perplexing examples of remix can be grappled. My hope is that the cases offered here are representative of paradigmatic cases of remix today—that is, the intent is to offer individual cases that serve as exemplars not only for distinguishing remix approaches, but also for considering how to tease out the ethical uptake of others’ work.

2. Recovering imitation: Situating remix rhetorically

To say imitation has a complex and diverse history would be an understatement. Theorists, practitioners, and pedagogues have developed and deployed imitation in many (sometimes disparate) ways, at times promoting it as a central basis for invention and art, while at other times bemoaning it as a derivative and unsophisticated mechanical approach. As such, like any recovery work, to adopt imitation in a modern sense is to submit a *partial* interpretation.² Although imitation today is often stripped of its rhetorical, social, and inventive heritage,³ scholars have argued that imitation once played a central role in rhetoric education and thought (Clark, 1957; Corbett, 1971; Murphy, 2012; Sullivan, 1989). The significance of imitation rests on early observations from classical thinkers, including Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle, each of whom observed that humans tended to model those they admire (Bender, 1996). Moreover, most contend that imitation was part of a larger *process*—not merely a skill-and-drill exercise—that prepared students to be ethical and well-informed citizens. As Dale Sullivan (1989) put it, “imitation was more than a simple-minded approach to teaching rhetoric: It was an integral part of the classical mindset which held great respect for the accomplishments of the past and saw in imitation a basis for ontology, art, political action, and ethics” (p. 14). It is this collaborative approach—more than particular training exercises—that we should yoke into discussions of digital remix. In particular, I want to suggest that the process of classical imitation, that is, the connections to be made among imitation, invention, and community, is valuable when discussing the significance and importance of remix within our composition classrooms today.

Although most historiographical accounts of imitation often begin with Roman rhetoric, likely because rhetoricians such as Cicero, Quintilian, and others further systematized it, imitation has its roots in the Greek *mimesis*. Several scholars (see, for example, Crowley, 1985; Haskins, 2000) have explained that *mimesis*, from its very origin, was a vexed concept, and thus have offered complex historical accounts connected to both rhetorical and poetic traditions, exploring how Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle treated *mimesis* in their rhetoric and poetic treatises. Largely, most noted that *mimesis* in antiquity dealt with poetic artists imitating nature (Crowley, 1985; Haskins, 2000; Sullivan, 1989). In other words, the project of *mimesis* involved replicating reality by mimicking its features—that is, under poetic mimetic theory, art is always an imitation, one that can never genuinely reproduce reality. Sharon Crowley (1985) and Dale Sullivan (1989) both noted that it was not until later in the classical tradition that imitation became prominently known in its highly rhetorical sense: rhetors studying, memorizing, internalizing, recalling, and recasting models. Scholars typically referred to this process as *imitatio*, not *mimesis*, as it was the Romans who more overtly developed this rhetoric theory. Typically, then, scholarship on *mimesis* often, but not always, related to literary work (i.e., Erich Auerbach’s [1953] *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*), whereas scholarship on *imitatio* often engaged rhetorical practice.⁴ Largely, I will refer to the latter.

To begin a historical recovery of *imitatio*, it is important to clarify an unfortunate translation issue—imitation, as it was practiced in the Roman rhetoric tradition, did not always mean reproducing exact replicas of models. In fact,

² In this way, I have come to value James Berlin’s *Octalog* (1988) statement on historiography: “All histories are partial accounts, are both biased and incomplete. The good histories admit this and then tell their stories. The bad attempt to dominant the past, pretending at the same time to be mere recorders of the facts” (p. 12).

³ Scholars point to romanticism, scientism, changes in technology, the racial politics of the 19th century, and, more recently, expressivist and cognitivist composition pedagogies as factors leading to the fallout of imitative pedagogy and practice (Farmer & Arrington, 1993; Howard, 1999; Wilson, 2003). The romantic formulation of “author as genius” is perhaps the most pervasive account for imitation’s decline (Howard, 1999; Randall, 2001; Sullivan, 1989).

⁴ Though, as John Muckelbauer (2003) asserted, perhaps these disciplinary boundaries have outrun their usefulness. The neat divides between poetic *mimesis* and rhetorical *imitatio* might serve to further split imitation from invention. It remains, nevertheless, a favorable way to taxonomize imitation.

Edward Corbett (1971) noted that “imitate” in our current lexicon is perhaps the wrong verb to account for the process the Romans practiced, and instead suggested the verb “emulate” is perhaps a more useful signifier. As Corbett described it, “imitation asked the student to observe the manner or pattern or form or means used by a model and then attempt to emulate the model” (p. 244). Crucially, imitation, for the Romans, was part of a process that asked rhetors to navigate, decipher, and critically examine a cultural reservoir of knowledge, components of which were to be redeployed to fit the occasion of future speech acts. All parts of this process, not just the final emulation of texts, were important. As James Murphy (2012) put it, imitation was “a carefully plotted sequence of interpretive and re-creational activities using preexisting texts to teach students how to create their own original texts” (p. 54). Murphy’s description was striking, as it resembled rationales many contemporary theorists provide when justifying the practice of remix. The purpose of imitation is not to produce highly derivative or plagiaristic work, but rather to construct new work based on preexisting models. The same has been argued for remix (see especially Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007).

To further understand the significance of imitation and to thus draw forward practices useful for today, it is helpful to examine the writing instruction students practiced as part of the Quintilian-influenced Roman education system. James Murphy (2012) found the process of imitation included seven steps: reading aloud, analysis of the text, memorization of models, paraphrase of models, transliteration of models, recitation of paraphrase/transliteration, and correction of paraphrase/transliteration. Donald Leman Clark (1957) limited the process to three central steps: memorizing models, translating from Greek to Latin, and paraphrasing. For the purposes of relating imitation to remix, I want to focus on—and revive—three steps: analysis of the text, memorization, and paraphrase. These three practices, if reimagined for present-day composers, closely resemble the process of inventing, composing, and distributing remixes.

The first component, analysis of the text, asked students to literally dissect given texts: “The immediate intent is to show the student how the author made good or bad choices in wording, in organization, in the use of figures, and the like” (Murphy, 2012, p. 55). This activity, Murphy explained, was not unlike the practice of “close reading” commonly employed in English studies today. As a beginning stage in the process, we see that imitation is not simply the rehashing of authoritative texts; rather, the practice asked students to be critical of the texts they encountered.⁵ For the memorization approach, students were taught to memorize great works not to repeat them verbatim but to, as Quintilian (2006) remarked, “set before our eyes the excellences of several, that different qualities from different writers may fix themselves in our minds and that we may adopt, for any subject, the style which is most suitable to it” (10.2.26). This approach can be considered a “storehouse” method—that is, students were asked to retain the works of great authors in order to recall their best words, figures, and phrases, all of which were to be used in future rhetorical situations to fit the particular occasion of a given speech. This storehouse, if externalized, remediated, and reimagined for modern-day composers, is not unlike discussions of building a public domain inspired by an economy of sharing (see DeVoss & Porter, 2006; Lessig, 2001).⁶ Finally, with paraphrase, the production aspect of imitation, students were asked to redeploy and restructure models, allowing for a “personal style in narration” (Murphy, 2012, p. 58). All of these steps, as I see them, are essential for composing effective remixes today: first, reading widely and critically, then gathering and collecting materials, and finally, repurposing and redeploying selected materials. It is by no coincidence that many prominent rhetoric theorists have used variations of the metaphor of a bee transforming pollen into honey to conceptualize such a process (Pigman, 1980): just as the bee collects pollen from several flowers to be transformed into honey, the writer assembles materials from several sources to be amalgamated into a single work. The composer as an industrious and transformative bee no doubt serves as a potent metaphor for remix.

As this process shows, imitation is highly connected to the rhetorical canon of invention. Karen Burke LeFevre (1987) famously defined invention as a social act “best understood as occurring when individuals interact dialectically with socioculture in a distinctive way to generate something” (p. 33). Although LeFevre did not explicitly mention imitation in her argument, her positioning of invention as a social process whereby individuals work dialectically with

⁵ Mary Minock (1995) made a similar argument, suggesting a postmodern imitation pedagogy as a “kind of serious play” that pushes students to locate “authoritative” texts within their unconscious memories (p. 502). The goal, for Minock, was not merely to recall authoritative texts from one’s unconscious but to potentially transgress and challenge those authoritative texts.

⁶ Although I do not have the space here, a much deeper discussion on digital memory would prove useful. For instance, Colin Gifford Brooke’s (2009) work on retheorizing memory as persistence might productively complicate my discussion. In his ecological approach, Brooke likened the act of “practicing” memory, what he called persistence, as an act of bricolage—taking bits of information from disparate sources to forward a new rhetorical object. As such, a more developed treatment of memory would efficaciously add to any discussion of remix and imitation.

society and culture, is, as I see it, highly aligned with the classical mindset of imitation. As [John Muckelbauer \(2003\)](#) pointed out, to see imitation as a mode of invention forces us to recalibrate the often-asserted understanding of imitation as the task of a writer mechanically replicating a model. Instead, we should see imitation as inventive action—that is, as paying attention to the “*movement* through which [a] model is encountered” (p. 88, my emphasis). Indeed, if we are to gain anything from recalling classical imitation, we should foremost approach the process of inventing transformative work as a movement through complex ecologies.

The undergoing of this movement, moreover, has the potential to inspire ethical effects. Robert [Terrill \(2011\)](#) argued that an imitation pedagogy cultivates what he called a productive “form of duality” that “encourages students to divide their attention between the exemplar and their own rhetorical production” (p. 297). In other words, imitation pedagogy calls on students to set themselves in relation to others as they closely analyze and emulate others’ texts. In the process of doing so, Terrill claimed that students learn valuable resources for democratic citizenship. For Terrill, the constant outward thinking required of an imitative pedagogy called on students to be, in Terrill’s words, “extraordinarily culturally literate” (p. 308). To put it another way, asking writers to be mindful of the movement of invention—the material, social, temporal, spatial, cultural aspects of textual construction and distribution—calls on them to be in dialogue with, and thus attentive to, the multiple stakeholders and competing interests of a given argument or idea. In terms of remix, evaluating texts—along with the sociocultural contexts from which they arise—and then theorizing about how those ought to be remixed becomes an exercise of ethical mindfulness.

So far I have spent considerable time discussing the significance and process of imitation in classical rhetoric. My aim in doing so is to pull out useful concepts, metaphors, and practices to better situate the purpose and need for teaching the rhetorically complex practice of remix. To position remix within the framework of imitation suggests remix is neither a new nor an unsophisticated composing approach. It implies that the *process* of constructing remixes is just as—or even more—important than the finished “product.” In addition, it suggests rhetoric has long held a relationship with what we now call remix, and that past orators and language theorists have spent considerable time theorizing about how imitation can be leveraged pedagogically and rhetorically. With this framework in mind, my focus turns to the problem with which I began this article: how to begin to chart the various types of remix.

3. Mapping remix practices: Toward a typology of transformative work

Drawing upon and aggregating both recent scholarship and prominent remix practices, I present a four-part typology to parse out digital transformative work: assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play. The typology at which I arrive is hardly my own; it borrows from the rich line of scholarship on remix within rhetoric and composition, and pulls from work in critical theory and media studies. Although this typology categorizes many types of remix (see [Table 1](#)), it in no way claims to be exhaustive. Moreover, individual texts may cross borders and be categorized in multiple ways—for example, a YouTube video may compile various film clips of a particular television show (assemblage) but repurpose them in a way that offers a nuanced critique of the show’s patriarchal themes (reappropriation). In keeping with a rhetorical-caustic approach ([McKee & Porter, 2009](#)), this typology seeks to lay out rather clear-cut exemplars of ethically *productive* forms of remix. Another consideration, which is outside the scope of this article, would examine, like much contemporary scholarship does, the transgressive and, in many ways, unproductive form of imitation for a modern economy of writing: plagiarism (for extended discussions, see [Eisner & Vicinus, 2008](#); [Howard, 1999](#); [Randall, 2001](#)). My hope, however, is that the cases offered here might help teachers and students puzzle through more ethically challenging types of remix.

The proposed typology is intended to be a starting point for talking about the wide-ranging rhetorical effects of remix. That is, exploring this typology within composition classrooms is one possible way to introduce the various rhetorical purposes—both subtle and overt—of remix. After discussing some of the key differences, similarities, and purposes of each type, students can decide what they want their text to accomplish, whom they want their text to reach, and how they want to achieve their rhetorical goals. To explicate a heuristic to teach the major remix types practiced today, the following section discusses how we might pedagogically begin to describe and explain each type. As such, each genus of the typology includes 1) a brief description, 2) a few common rhetorical purposes, and 3) a discussion of pertinent theory and scholarship. To further account for these distinctions, I return to the scenarios I posed at the start of this article to narrate how each type operates at a conceptual and rhetorical level.

Table 1
Typology of transformative work.

	Description	Common Rhetorical Purposes	Exemplary Case
Assemblage	Building a new text by compiling, aggregating, and juxtaposing a combination of already existing texts	Builds arguments by pulling (often disparate) materials into one coherent narrative or text; Reveals reoccurring or perhaps undetected themes	“You Can’t Vote-In Change” political video remix
Reappropriation	Slightly altering an existing text and/or reclaiming or “taking back” already existing texts	Shows power relationships; Inverts/challenges dominant discourse; Offers commentary or critique	“GoForth and Destroy Capitalism” advertisement commentary
Redistribution	Sharing and updating an already circulating text	Reaches new audiences; Expresses opinions and/or mobilizes collective action	“Binders Full of Women” meme
Genre play	Deploying a text that blends, repurposes, or moves in and out of genre expectations	Disrupts how we commonly view the world	Student-designed standardized test

3.1. Assemblage

Assemblage is a method of composing wherein a composer builds a new text by gathering, repurposing, and redeploying a combination of already-existing texts. Remixers using this approach often weave together a coherent narrative or argument that does not necessarily correlate with the ways in which the source texts were originally deployed. To put it another way, assemblage can be likened to the common metaphor used to explain imitation: a bee collecting pollen from multiple flowers to be transformed into honey. Assemblage is perhaps the most widely recognized method of remix; it fits nicely with the “taking old texts to build something new” stock definition provided by many popular sources (i.e., [Lessig, 2008](#); [Ferguson, 2010](#); [Gaylor, 2009](#)). In writing studies, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber (2007) defined assemblages as texts “built primarily and explicitly from existing texts” (p. 381). Henry [Jenkins \(2009\)](#) helped to narrow this definition by providing a useful description of what I consider assemblages: “[the] creative juxtaposition of materials that otherwise occupy very different cultural niches” (p. 57). Importantly, Jenkins mentioned that materials may be—and are very likely to be—disparate.

For a prime example of assemblage, I examine remix artist [Elisa Kreisinger’s](#) “You Can’t Vote-In Change,” a video remix published on YouTube in 2009. In this work, Kreisinger argued that social change must happen by people’s movements, reasoning that the ever-present promises made by U.S. politicians are inept methods of enacting social change. To make her argument, Kreisinger used a series of presidential ads and campaign speeches from past U.S. Presidents. The materials she gathered, snippets from the campaign speeches of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, were all carefully selected clips that verbalized the “changes” each president claimed to implement upon taking office. After Kreisinger selectively compiled these clips, she mixed in an audio clip from an unidentified political analyst, which stated, “Historically, whenever important issues of peace and justice had to be solved, they were not solved by electing one party or the other. They were solved by people’s movements.” As these words were vocalized, news footage rolled that showed scenes of social demonstrations and protests. From here, Kreisinger replayed, in an almost robotic tone, the words “you can’t vote-in change,” stitching the phrase together from various sources. As these words were being repeated, Kreisinger used an image of a burning match and a massive crowd of people running through a street to imply citizens must ignite change on their own terms. In effect, Kreisinger pulled in source material from a wide range of sources—each with its own historical, social, political, and rhetorical connotation—for the purposes of building a coherent and well-supported argument.

3.2. Reappropriation

Reappropriation involves making tactical changes to an existing text (or set of texts) to signal resistance or offer a critique of the original text or the concept for which it stands. That is, reappropriation is often used to challenge, invert,

counter, or draw attention to oppressive discourse.⁷ As such, composers using reappropriation tactics typically play on or with source materials to expose oppressive, harmful, or problematic ideologies. To explain how reappropriation works rhetorically, I borrow concepts from critical and rhetorical theorists, namely Judith Butler's (1997a, 1997b) concept of resignification and Kenneth Burke's (1954) notion of perspective by incongruity. That is, I see reappropriation happening in two key ways: first, a "taking back" of an oppressive text or term, and second, a re-using of a text to expose its damaging effects. Butler's work elucidates the former—how the reclaiming of a potentially oppressive or injurious term can often work to signal resistance. Working from the Althusserian notion of interpellation, Butler (1997) argued, "the terms by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose.. but these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originally subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open" (p. 38). Thus, by embracing a term—accepting it, altering its meaning, and then redeploying it—a rhetor has the potential to gain agency to resist oppressive discourse. As an example of the potential of reappropriation, Butler has turned to the word *queer* and the movement to recast the originally oppressive word into one of resistance. In an interview conducted by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham (2000), for example, Butler detailed an experience she encountered walking down the streets of Berkeley wherein a passerby harassingly shouted from a car window, "Are you a lesbian?" In the interview, Butler explained how she accepted the term in the affirmative, which shocked and stunted the person whom asked the question. Of her acceptance of the term, Butler stated, ". . .it was a very powerful thing to do. It wasn't that I authored that term: I received the term and gave it back; I replayed it, reiterated it" (p. 760). The power Butler claimed in this moment stemmed from a reappropriating of a word—and of a larger social, cultural, and historical practice—aimed at excluding, disenfranchising, and harming the one it interpellates. Hence, Butler illustrated that purposefully reusing a word (or, I would argue, a text) can be a powerful means of resistance.

While Butler showed how embracing a term and turning it on its head is a powerful rhetorical act of resistance, Burke's (1954) "perspective by incongruity" explained how re-positioning source texts can serve to *expose* oppressive discourse. For Burke, perspective by incongruity involved breaking "piety"—what Burke described as "the sense of what properly goes with what" (p. 74). In Burkean terms, piety, as Julia Allen and Lester Faigley (1995) explained, does not signal religious connotations; rather, Allen and Faigley described the rhetorical practice as such:

By juxtaposing incongruous ideas, Burke says, we "shatter pieties." In other words, by juxtaposing one ideological correctness together with another, of a different ideological stripe, the two call each other into question. And it is more likely that the less powerful one will act upon the other in such a way as to reduce its power; the piety will thus be shattered. (p. 162)

In terms of remix, then, a composer might redeploy and slightly modify a text to call attention to the original message's ideological stance.

As a prime example of how a remix composer reappropriates a dominant, primary text, I focus here on a Levi's advertisement distributed on YouTube, and a subsequent remake of the ad. In 2011, Levi's released an advertisement with undertones of activism, protest, and revolution. The original ad, part of Levi's "Go Forth" campaign, featured video clips of young people demonstrating and reacting against tacit oppression, which was especially evident near the end of the ad when a young person raised his arms in apparent protest while solitarily facing a wall of heavily armored figures. Providing a voiceover for the advertisement, Charles Bukowski's poem, "The Laughing Heart," was read in its entirety. The advertisement ended with the Levi's logo. A month after the advertisement was released, YouTube user "go4thREVOLT" published a reappropriated version of the Levi's ad. The video, which used the same voiceover, images, and video, added new alphabetic text to challenge themes presented in the original ad. The text read: "Capitalists have stolen the whole world from us. Poetry and protest, even riots, become advertisements for products. Our bodies, our moments of joy, are flattened into images that impoverish our lives. Now their system is collapsing. Let's tear it down. Go forth and destroy capitalism" [punctuation added]. In Butler's formulation, the remix artist here performed a "taking back" of the phrase "go forth" to resist a text that used a subversive tone to sell a product. In other words, through the act of accepting yet recasting the phrase, the remix artist was able to claim a sense of agency. Further, in Burkean parlance, the juxtaposition of the added words with the original ad called the rhetorical effect of the original text into question. The goal for the reappropriation, in Burke's terms, was to reduce the ad's power, to shatter its piety, by suggesting the images of the advertisement did not match the practices of capitalism.

⁷ This rhetorical tactic is hardly new. The 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass is a prime example of a rhetor who used appropriation to challenge oppressive views of the dominant culture (see for example, Bacon, 1998; Bizzell, 1997; Miller & Quashie, 1998).

3.3. Redistribution

Redistribution refers to sharing or adding to an already existing text for the purpose of reaching a new audience, offering an updated message, and/or spreading a text further. The chief appeal of redistribution involves drawing on the rhetorical force of a shared and common text, one that is already in circulation.⁸ It may seem odd to include redistribution within a typology of remix, as, especially upon first glance, redistribution does not seem to deal with the laborious act of transforming work (i.e., vigorously repurposing a text from multiple source texts); however, as Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri (2010) have suggested, the rhetorical act of making *subtle* changes to widely circulating texts is an increasingly important practice for digital composers today. Moreover, as many scholars have pointed out (Porter, 2009; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012), making distribution and delivery choices is a complex and highly rhetorical endeavor that requires writers and designers to have a certain kind of rhetorical knowledge. As such, I include redistribution, which involves redeploing updated texts in new ways and to potentially new audiences, within this typology.

In recent work, many rhetoric scholars have offered valuable contributions to the relatively nascent theorizing of how texts are circulated in digital publics. For instance, James Porter (2009), working from Douglas Eyman (2007), classified a key aspect of delivery by exploring two interrelated concepts: distribution and circulation. Distinguishing the two, Porter noted, “Distribution refers then to the initial decision about how you package a message in order to send it to its intended audience. Circulation refers to the potential for that message to have a document life of its own and be re-distributed without your direct intervention” (p. 214). Whereas Porter’s interest rested in the rhetorical act of the initial rhetor, and the decisions she makes to distribute her message, my focus here is what happens *post*-distribution, when the original message is already in circulation: How will a new rhetor redistribute the text? What will she add to the text? How will she alter its circulatory path?

Although circulation rightly has been positioned as a fleeting, recursive, and affective phenomenon (e.g., Chaput, 2010; Edbauer, 2005; Gries, 2013; Warner, 2005), many scholars have contended that rhetors can develop the needed rhetorical knowledge to prepare for the complexity of texts in motion. An especially useful framework to account for circulation is the notion of rhetorical velocity, what Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss (2009) described as “[a] conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time..” Although it is often used to discuss how individual rhetors can anticipate how their texts might be appropriated and redistributed, I find rhetorical velocity to be a useful concept for thinking about how rhetors might *intervene* in the circulatory paths of texts already in motion. Such intervention, borrowing from David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel (2012), necessitates the need for rhetors to be “kairologically inventive” by responding to a given situation in a contextually specific and culturally appropriate manner (p. 11).

As an example of redistribution, I recall a discursive moment that occurred during the second 2012 Presidential debate between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. During the debate, the Republican nominee Romney used a phrase that within minutes became an Internet sensation, spurring iterations of the expression to be distributed and re-distributed on social media, blogs, news programs, and eventually even as a category on *Jeopardy*. The phrase: “binders full of women.” The expression was uttered in response to a question about women and pay equity, wherein Romney recalled the experience of appointing members to the Massachusetts cabinet. Disappointed with the lack of women applicants Romney stated, “we took a concerted effort to go out and find women who had backgrounds that could be qualified to become members of our cabinet. I went to a number of women’s groups and said, ‘can you help us find folks?’ And they brought whole binders full of women” (Romney, 2012). Within minutes, the phrase went viral, jolting writers and designers to irreverently memorialize the event on the social web. More than a memorialization, though, the “Binders Full of Women” memes often included sharp critiques of both Romney’s stance on social issues as well as broader social and political issues. In other words, the phrase offered rhetors a common launching point from which they could offer their own opinions on political and social issues. For instance, one comment on the “Binders Full of Women” Facebook page read, “Gov. Romney clearly misspoke. What he meant to say was that his platform wants to bind women to the 19th century” (<https://www.facebook.com/romneybindersfullwomen>). Another Facebook group, “Binders Full

⁸ It resembles what we would today call a meme. As Geoffrey Carter and Sarah Arroyo (2011) have noted, “memes differ from dialogue in that the goal is not to come to consensus or resolve a problem once and for all; rather, the goal is to create more content with which users will connect and invest more time in re-purposing, thus participating in spreading ideas and making them more complex” (p. 296).

of Women: And Other Subjects Best Left Unbound,” has mobilized to discuss inequity in contemporary politics and culture. The “Binders Full of Women” phrase, in effect, became (and arguably remains) a shared *topos* through which rhetors could both express their beliefs and mobilize collective groups for action. And to do so, rhetors needed to kairotically intervene in the rhetorical velocity of a text that was already in wide circulation.

3.4. Genre play

Genre play can be defined as constructing a text that blends, repurposes, or otherwise moves in and out of genre expectations. Signaled by phrases such as “remixing the book,” “remixing the essay,” or “remixing traditional scholarship,” genre play refers to the ways in which rhetors playfully re-conceptualize reified norms, working both within and against those socially constituted ways of doing and knowing. As Carolyn Miller (1984) famously noted, genres are best understood as forms of social action—meaning that the emphasis for studying genres should be on typified *use* rather than particular forms. Years later, Anis Bawarshi (2000) noted that genres are both functional and epistemological: “they help us function within particular situations at the same time they help us shape the ways we come to know these situations” (p. 340). In other words, genres, for Bawarshi, played a constitutive role in our social activities. As such, playfully altering a genre convention can either call into question how such a convention became valorized in the first place or invite readers to re-experience what might be conceived as an otherwise banal convention. This rhetorical practice, then, has the potential to interrogate and potentially change the ways in which, to borrow from Bawarshi, we come to know situations.

There are many ways to play with genre conventions. Common ways include using conventions that typically fall outside of the genre (e.g., writing one’s own poetry within a scholarly work) and writing content that does not quite match genre expectations (e.g., a professor including intimate details of his or her personal life on a course syllabus). Although parody and irreverence are common ways to play with genres, they are not the only strategies writers use. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a classic example of a text that played with genre expectations, at once blending poetry, creative non-fiction, autobiography, spiritual texts, sketches and drawings, and theory. Anzaldúa’s text played with many things—design, form, content—to invite readers to experience, if even in a fragmented and partial way, what Anzaldúa called a mestiza consciousness. This was one of the key rhetorical moves of what I am calling genre play: the intentional move to disrupt how we commonly view the world through the conscious and playful act of repurposing the (often mundane) genres we read and view every day.

For an example of genre play, I turn to a text constructed by an eighth-grade student who designed a mock standardized test to critique the rigid, inartistic, ablest, classist, and pressure-inducing qualities of New York’s testing system (Strauss, 2013). The student made her argument by using the design and genre conventions of standardized tests, which included directions, reading passages, and multiple-choice questions. The student composed a message, however, that highly transgressed the norms of the test genre, keeping with its typical form but radically changing its typical content. Instead of the “usual” reading passages eighth-grade students might expect, the student wrote a pointed letter of critique against standardized testing. For example, the reading passage of her faux test began as such: “I am not fond of your tests. They do not show you who I am, or who my teachers are” (Strauss, 2013). The passage continued in a similar fashion, providing reasons why the focus on testing invoked anxiety and was biased towards certain learners. Similarly, the student wrote questions that scrutinized the objectives of the test—for example, one question asked, “Which group of individuals struggles with the test the *most*?” With answers that included “teachers,” “young people,” and “children with special needs,” the student succinctly critiqued the testing system by playing within—yet against—the genre expectations of standardized tests. What made this powerful as a rhetorical strategy was that it called into question the social and political contexts from which the test genre emerged (Miller, 1984) and simultaneously asked readers to question how the genre works functionally and epistemologically (Bawarshi, 2000).

4. Implications for teaching and research

The overarching purposes for this article have been twofold: first, to situate remix rhetorically by drawing on theories and pedagogies of imitation, and second, to isolate and explain common types of remix. These two go hand in hand. In order to explain the central needs and uses for remix, which are both productive (i.e., solving a problem or attempting to effect change) and pedagogical (i.e., learning more about ourselves and others), we need a durable yet malleable theory. And in order to make this theory more usable—that is, more productive and more pedagogical—we need to

start to chart the ways in which this theory does work in the world. Hence, a revived theory of imitation serves as a pliable frame from which remix types—*assemblage*, *reappropriation*, *redistribution*, *genre play*, and still others—can emerge.

4.1. *Situating remix rhetorically*

How do we begin teaching remix in writing classes? There are, of course, several responses to this question (see, for example, [Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009](#); [Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010](#); [Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009](#); [Ray, 2013](#); [Stedman, 2012](#)). I will sketch another possibility here. First, as Dubisar and Palmeri noted (2010), it is important to remember that students will have varying levels of comfort and knowledge when it comes to analyzing and composing remixes. That is, some students might have experience with both consuming and producing remixes, while others might have little background with remix or think of the concept as belonging solely within the realm of music. As such, I suggest first laying a strong foundation for how—and, more importantly, why—composers use remix methods. As many scholars have noted ([Jenkins, 1992, 2009](#); [Kuhn, 2012](#); [Lankshear & Knobel, 2011](#); [Stedman, 2012](#)), the reasons for remixing are varied and situated: from recutting a television series to include oppressed or silenced voices/bodies to repurposing video to participate in political debates about copyright and intellectual property. Discussing some of these reasons would be useful in developing an impetus for remixing—after which, students can begin to think about the reasons they may want to remix, and thus how they might go about inventing, constructing, and distributing their remixes. Here is where the process and theory of imitation and the typology can simultaneously come into play: after sketching some possible needs for and uses of remixing, students can begin to think about the process of making their own remixes. What would constructing a remix entail? What texts will be (re)used? What purpose will their remixes serve? What communities will their remix impact? How will they distribute their remixes? These questions, and still others, can be used to spark discussions and writing activities that address some of the rhetorical concerns of imitation—e.g., deciphering a vast bank of texts, materials, and genres, and attending to the ethical dynamics of repurposing public work.

4.2. *Teaching (with) the typology*

As students begin to outline and plan their remixes, they will likely need to start conceptualizing what kind of remix they want to make and what kind of work they want it to do. Do they want to build an argument out of a multitude of other texts (*assemblage*)? Do they want to reuse or “take back” a particular text, image, metaphor, or concept (*reappropriation*)? Do they want to use an image, phrase, meme, concept, etc. that is already in wide circulation to make their argument (*redistribution*)? Do they want to play with the conventions of a particular genre to draw attention to something absurd, outlandish, or problematic (*genre play*)? After teasing out some of the possibilities, students can think through some of the potentials and constraints of the various types of remix presented in the typology. As such, embracing critical pedagogy approaches, I imagine productive classes happening *after* the introduction of this typology. Students can ask: Is anything missing? Should we place more value on some remix approaches over others? How might certain communities value some approaches over others? In answering these questions, and still others, I imagine the initial typology might itself be reassembled—expanded, morphed, hierarchized—to account for the concerns of students and the ever-evolving digital and material spaces they inhabit. From here, as students begin composing their remixes, it may be useful for students to record and track the texts they are considering using in their remixes. Such documentation, much like the dissection of texts Roman rhetoric students used to practice ([Murphy, 2012](#)), should offer a detailed analysis of the texts students wish to refashion and a rationale for their redeployment. In this way, students are asked to make strategic and mindful choices about how their remix will impact potential audiences. This document, moreover, shows that effective remixes are not developed by happenstance—rather, they are carefully constructed and are highly attuned to the sociocultural dimensions of the materials they use and the contexts from which they arise.

4.3. *Considerations for teaching and research*

There are a number of issues to consider when teaching and further developing this typology. I focus on three here: issues with stabilization, potential for unethical use, and issues of intellectual property. It could be argued that trying to pin down remix practices—that is, trying to isolate and explain common rhetorical moves used by remix

composers—works to stabilize what is otherwise a fluctuating and evolving practice. I am sensitive to this argument. Our goal should not be to offer some “Master Guidebook” of remix. Such a move would ignore the sociocultural nature of writing. Rather, we should aim to offer writers—some of whom may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the concept of remix—an entry point for discussing how to reuse already existing material.

Another issue that deserves merit is the claim that remix cannot—should not—be taught in college classrooms. As literacy scholars Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2011) have noted, learning new literacies (like learning how to remix) often entails a community and identity dimension that cannot be easily recreated in the classroom. To add to this, scholars and critics have noted that remix risks losing its subversive power when it gets institutionalized (Coppa, 2010; Manovich, 2009). These are issues that we cannot take lightly. As many within composition and rhetoric have noted, though, there are ways to bridge both what students do outside of the class and what they do within it (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Stedman, 2012; Yancey, 2004). To this end, by situating remix within a frame of imitation and offering “paradigmatic” cases such as the ones presented here, we are in a much better position to responsibly teach and troubleshoot ethics of use. Still, these positions warrant careful scrutiny in writing classes and further discussion in future research.

Lastly, let me address the elephant in the room: intellectual property. Teaching remix practices, especially if final projects will be delivered in online, public venues like YouTube, automatically implicates students in a legal realm. As such, teaching remix should undoubtedly involve teaching intellectual property, and especially teaching writers how to navigate copyright concerns—both in terms of avoiding copyright infringement and responding to feckless copyright takedowns. Indeed, scholars have increasingly called on writing teachers to be aware of intellectual property issues as they pertain to writing and, particularly, digital writing. These have included, among much other important work, teaching students how to conduct fair use analyses (Rife, 2007), situating writing in terms of the value it adds to communities (DeVoss & Porter, 2006), and using and building local codes of “best practices” (Aufderheide & Jaszi, 2011). These are all important ways to teach students the basics of intellectual property and how to avoid copyright infringement. What I would like to suggest, too, is that by situating remix as a rhetorical concern linked to an ethical and collaborative-minded theory of imitation, teachers already begin to lay a strong foundation for teaching the importance of fair use.

Like all writing, remix practices will continue to evolve over time. The social and material means by which remixes get constructed will be subject to constant change, making remix an unstable practice to chart. This, however, does not make the practices of today any less important. My hope is that this article does not close doors to thinking about remix in exciting and new ways. On the contrary, my hope is that it begins to situate remix in a position of potential endurance, change, and growth.

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