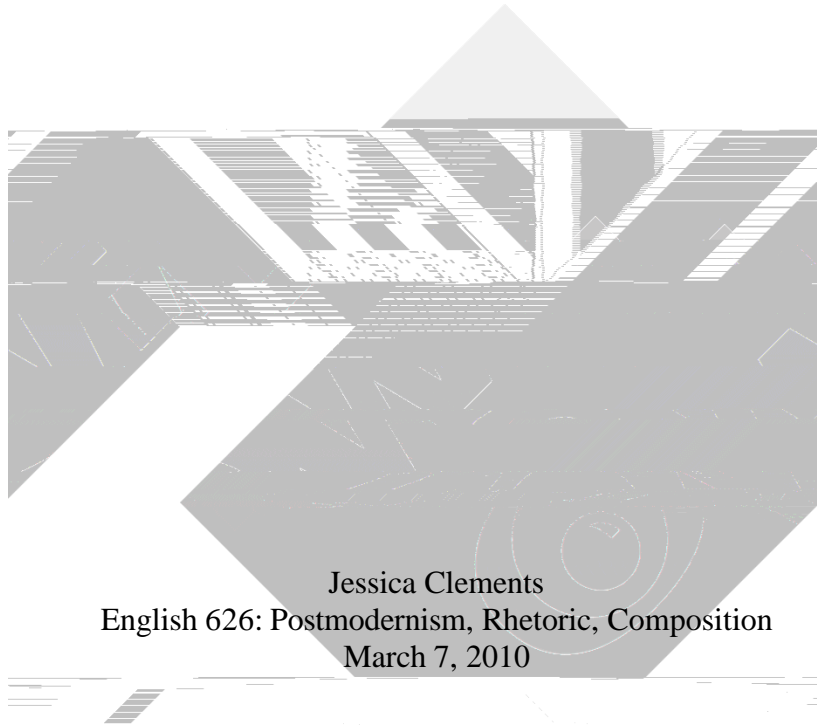# MOVING "NETWORKS" INTO THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM
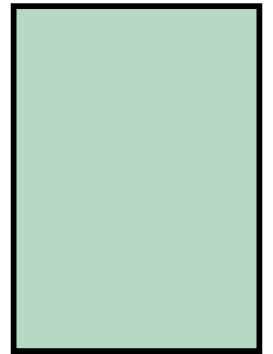
Jessica Clements
English 626: Postmodernism, Rhetoric, Composition
March 7, 2010

In *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Jodi Dean argues that "imagining a rhizome might be nice, but rhizomes don't describe the underlying structure of real networks,"[1] rejecting the idea that there is such a thing as a nonhierarchical interconnectedness that structures our contemporary world and means of communication. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, on the other hand, argue that the Internet is an exemplar of the rhizome: a nonhierarchical, noncentered network—a democratic network with "an indeterminate and potentially unlimited number of interconnected nodes [that] communicate with no central point of control."[2] What is at stake in settling this dispute? Being. And, knowledge and power in
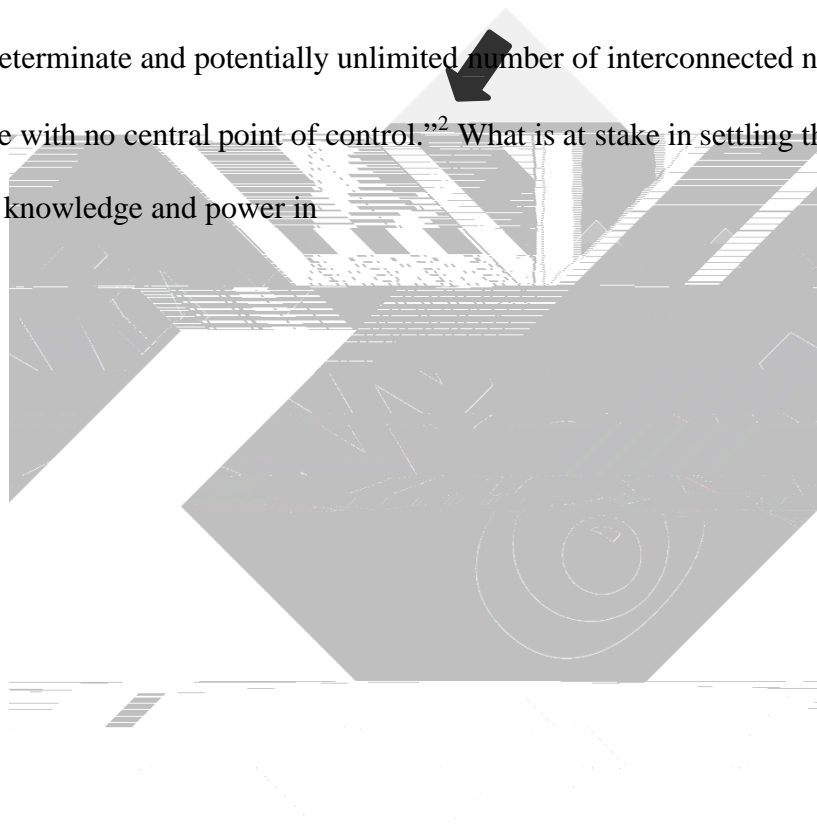
derived from Enlightenment thinking: "The project [of modernity] amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic."[3] Science, so the story went, stood as inherently objective inquiry that could reveal truth—universal truth at that. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant, believed in the "universal, eternal, and . . . immutable qualities of all of humanity";[4] by extension, "equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence . . . and universal reason" were widely held beliefs and seen as unifying forces.[5] In fact, Kant believed that Enlightenment (freedom from self-imposed immaturity, otherwise known as
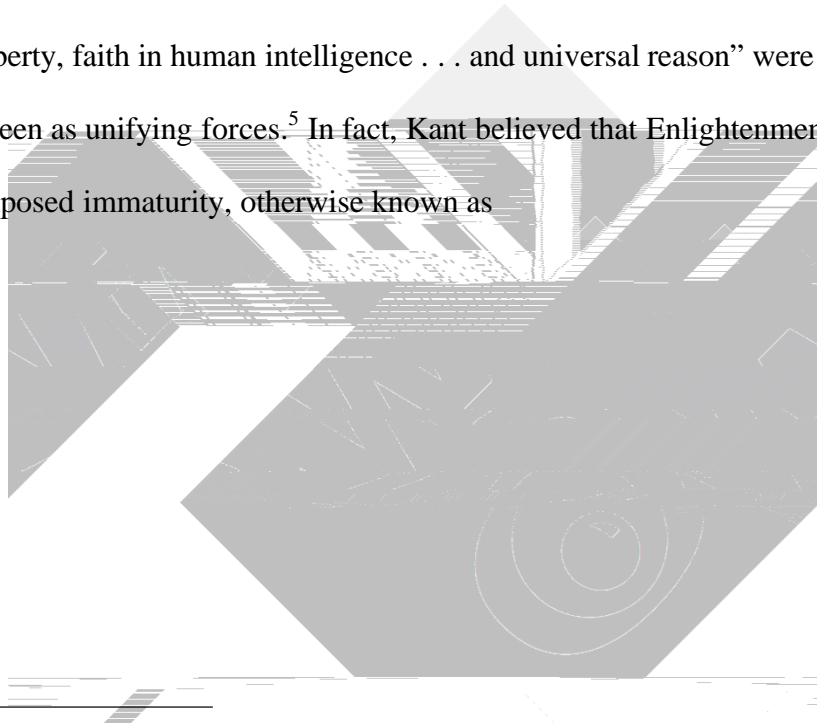
which accounted for the "unbridled individualism of great thinkers, the great benefactors of humankind, who through their singular efforts and struggles would push reason and civilization willy-nilly to the point of true emancipation."[9] Yet heroic modernists still seemed to ascribe to the overall Enlightenment project that suggested that there exists a "true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality."[10] Even the latest "high" modernists believed in "linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders under standardized conditions of knowledge and production."[11] Ultimately, modernism was about individuals moving in assembly-line fashion toward a (rational and inherently unified) common goal. This ontological understanding rested on what Lyotard would call a "grand narrative."

Lyotard sees unified Tc

toward metanarratives."[13] Lyotard is not suggesting that totalizing narratives suddenly

stopped existing in our postmodern world but that they no longer carry the same currency

or usefulness to the people creating and living by and through them. One of the key

theoretical understandings driving this change is that, according to Lyotard, postmodern

knowledge is not "a tool of the authorities" as knowledge (specifically, scientific

knowledge) may have been for the moderns; postmodern knowledge allows for a

sensitivity to differences and helps us accept those differences rather than proffers a

driving urge to eradicate or otherwise unify them.[14] Lyotard notes that science, then, no

longer has the power to legitimate other narratives;[15] it can no longer be understood to be

the world's singular metalanguage because it has been "replaced by the principle of a

plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of arguing the truth of denotative

statements . . . ."[16] Lyotard is invested in these (deliberately plural) systems, these "little

narratives"[17] that operate locally and according to specific rules, and he calls them

"language games." The modern (or, more accurately, postmodern) world is too complex

to be understood beneath the aegis of one totalizing system, one goal imposed through

one grand narrative: "There is no reason to think that it would be possible to determine

metaprescriptives common to all of these language games or that a revisable consensus

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13. Lyotard, xxiv.

14. Lyotard, xxv.

15. Lyotard, 40.

16. Lyotard, 43.

17. Lyotard, 61.

like the one in force at a given moment in the scientific community could embrace the

totality of metaprescription regulating the totality of statements circulating in the social

collectivity."[18] Paralogy, learning how to play by and/or to challenge the rules of a

specific language game is the means fit for postmodernity, not consensus, according to

Lyotard.[19] Ultimately, in his invocation of plural systems rather than a singular system,

Lyotard's attitude toward grand narratives invites a way of thinking and a way of

understanding the world with inferences of a networked logic. Stephen Toulmin, too,

tackles an understanding of contemporary sociality based on (competing) systems rather

than a singular hegemonic system.

In *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Toulmin challenges us to

consider how such different systems, different ways of viewing the world, come to hold

sway at different points in time. Like Lyotard, he suggests that we cannot simply do away

with grand narratives but that we are making progress if we interrogate how and why

they came to be as well as accede to the fact that there might be more than one way of

interpreting those seemingly domineering capital "S" Systems. Additionally, Toulmin

discounts the vocabulary of narratives (grand or not) and games and instead prefers the

term "cosmopolis." "Cosmopolis," according to Toulmin, invokes notions of nature and

society in relationship to one another; more specifically, a cosmopolis is not a thing in

and of itself (it is not nature, it is not society, it is not a story, and it is not a game) but a

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18. Lyotard, 65.

19. Lyotard, 66.

process, an ordering of nature and society.[20] Unlike the seemingly stable cosmopolis of

modernity that Kant and others present, Toulmin suggests that cosmopolises are always

in flux because communities continually converse in an effort to shape and reshape their

understanding of their ways of being in their universe. Dominant cosmopolises do

emerge to characterize a particular state of persons at a particular time, but that should

not prevent us, argues Toulmin, from reading into the dominant rather than with it.

Dissensus, then, has a place in Toulmin's postmodern understanding, too, just as in
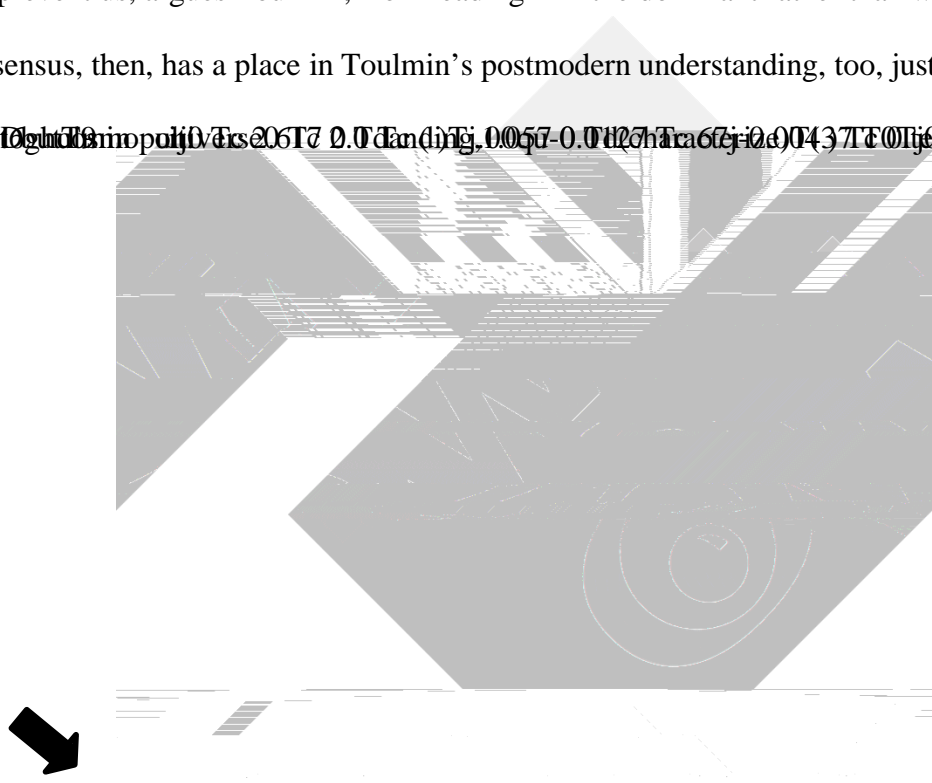
hospitals and schools (and also asylums and prisons) enact these instruments. Even architecturally, he insists, these institutions are built to "permit an internal, articulated and detailed control . . . to make it possible to know [individuals], to alter them."[24] Such systems work as networks, according to Foucault: "[disciplinary society's] functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised."[25] Yes, this represents a hierarchical network (hospitals and schools have administrators, asylums and prisons have their own care staff and guards, too), but the important thing Foucault wants us to remember is that power is never possessed; it   po23

normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties, and to render the differences useful by fixing them one to another."[29] A disciplinary society is interested in producing citizens that will *perform productively*. But, in addition to observation or surveillance and normalizing judgment, such an end can only be accomplished through examination, which goes hand-in-hand with documentation: "It engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them."[30] This turns us as individuals into "cases": "It is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc."[31] Ultimately for Foucault, "Power was the great network of political relationships among all things,"[32] and Foucault represents a powerful figure in postmodern thought because he asserts that power is what produces our reality; a hierarchical network of power is our contemporary ontology: "In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production."[33] Foucault has a

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29. Foucault, 197.

30. Foucault, 201.

31. Foucault, 203.

32. Nicholas Thomas, "Pedagogy and the Work of Michel Foucault," *JAC* 28, no. 1-2(2008): 153.

32.

grand legacy of sorts, no doubt, but that does not mean his work has not been challenged or, perhaps more accurately, extended.

Nikolas Rose, author of "Control" in his Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought, buys into Foucault's understanding of contemporary society as networked, but he does not believe we have much to gain by understanding it as a disciplinary society; rather, Rose proposes that we live, work, and breathe as a control society: "Rather than being confined, like its subjects, to a succession of institutional sites, the control of conduct was now immanent to all the places in which deviation could occur, inscribed into the dynamics of the practices into which human beings are connected."[34] We no longer need hospitals, schools, asylums or prisons to monitor and correct our activities; instead, our way of being in the world is now personally connected. We are a society of self-policing (by prompt of none other than the everyday networks in which we partake) risk managers: "Conduct is continually monitored and reshaped by logics immanent within all networks of practice. Surveillance is 'designed in' to the flows of everyday existence."[35] Rose challenges Foucault by suggesting that, in a control society, power is more potent, more dangerous, even. Rather than an institution using disciplinary intervention to correct deviant individuals, control societies work on the premise of regulation. This makes power more "effective," according to Rose, "because changing individuals is difficult and ineffective—and it also makes power less obtrusive—thus
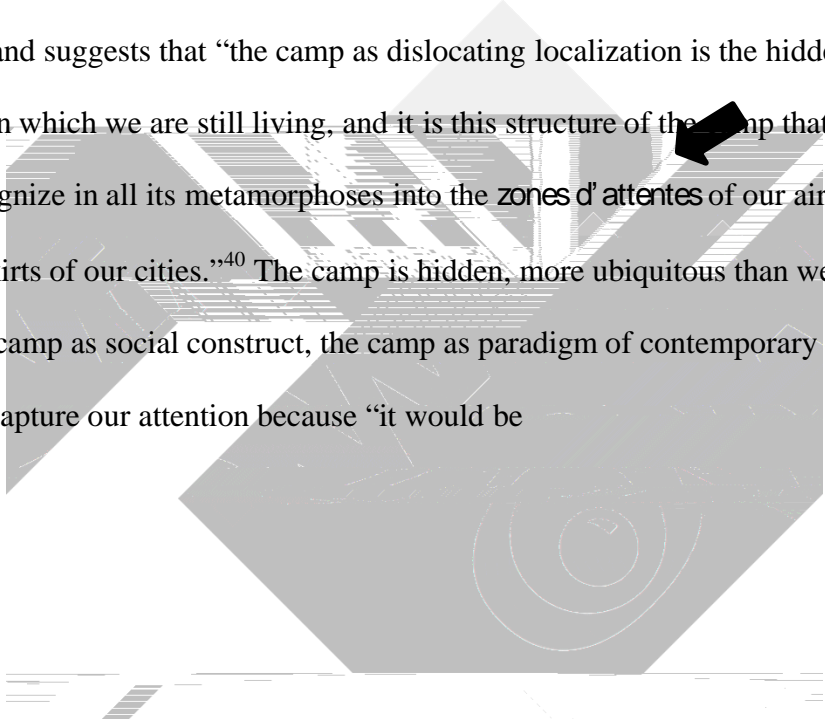
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33. Nikolas Rose, "Control," in Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 234.

34. Rose, 234.

diminishing its political and moral fallout. It also makes resistance
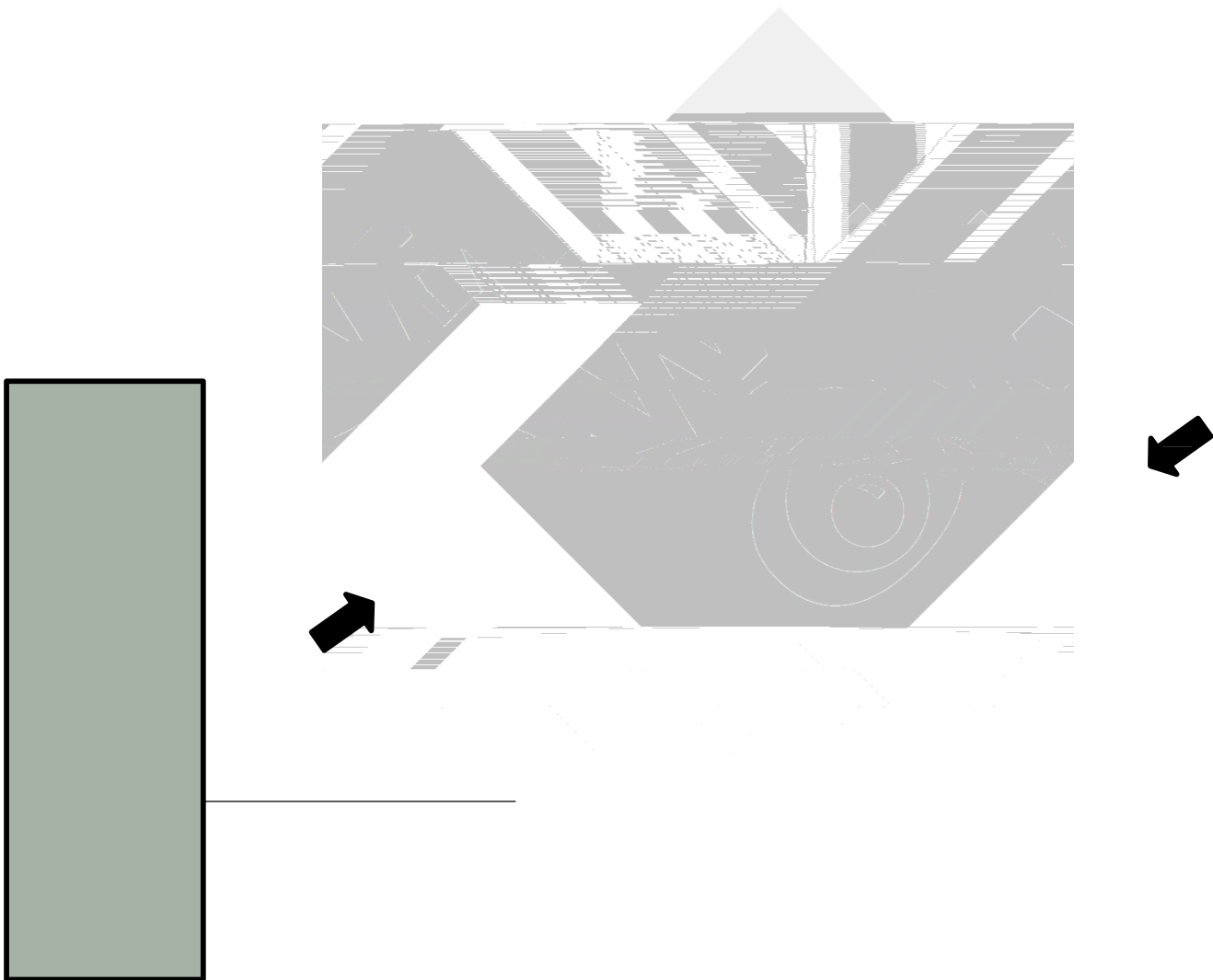
In addition to clarifying Rose's understanding of how individuals instate their own risk management (a new form of "surveillance") in noncentered, nonhierarchical (non- institutionally-sponsored) networks, this quotation also highlights the significant issue of visibility, or, rather, invisibility of said networks, which is picked up by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.*

Agamben calls for the replacement of Foucault's prison metaphor with the idea of the "camp" and suggests that "the camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the *zones d'attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities."[40] The camp is hidden, more ubiquitous than we recognize, and it is the camp as social construct, the camp as paradigm of contemporary existence, that should capture our attention because "it would be

who is stripped of the laws of citizenship and can be killed by anyone for any reason without penalty but, at the same time, that person cannot be sacrificed. It is someone who is removed of all sanctions of the law except the rule that banished that person in the first place. Homo sacer represents inbetweenness with possibility. It is to be a Mobius strip, "the very impossibility of distinguishing between outside and inside, nature and exception, *physis* and *nomos*."[42] Perhaps the most significant statement Agamben makes about homo sacer is that "if today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually hominess sacri"; we are all homo sacer.[43] Agamben, here, is deliberately augmenting Foucault by addressing the power of law. If the government denies a place for the refugee in contemporary society, and we are all refugees, where does that leave us?[44] We should be alarmed by such a realization, Agamben argues, because "in the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a *permanent* spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order."[45] Agamben sees permanency in the camp metaphor, and we can see affinities between what Agamben has to say and what Rose has to say when Agamben states that "in this sense, our age is nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to
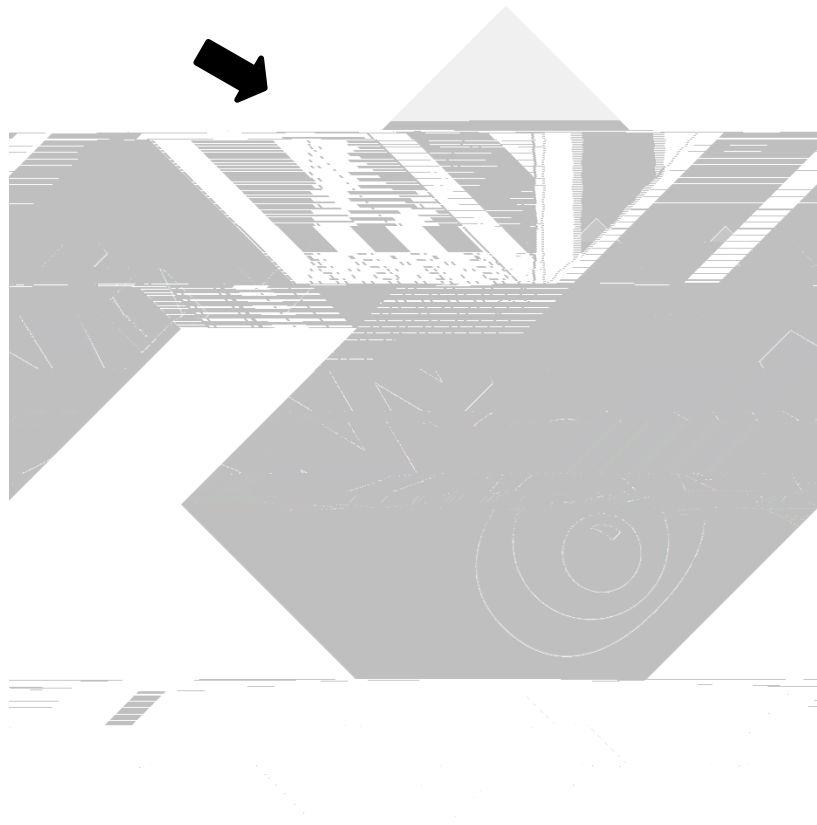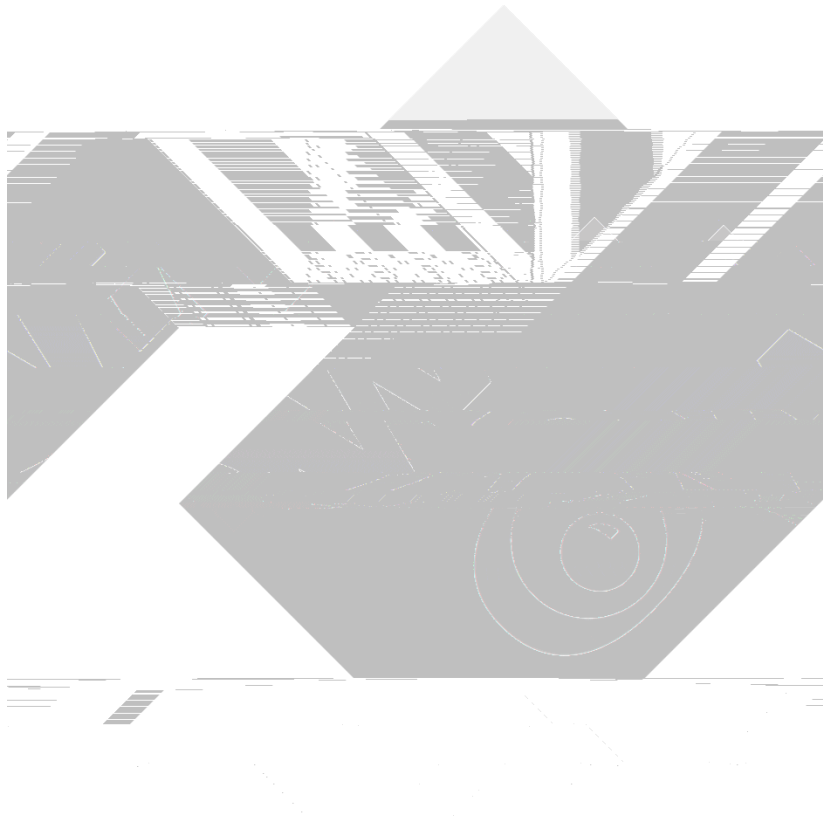
excluded."[46] We might bring in Rose to

be the material content of a discussion but also the bodily expression of attendant cues.

Material and expressive functions can be exercised individually or together and at

different places and times by the same "parts" of an

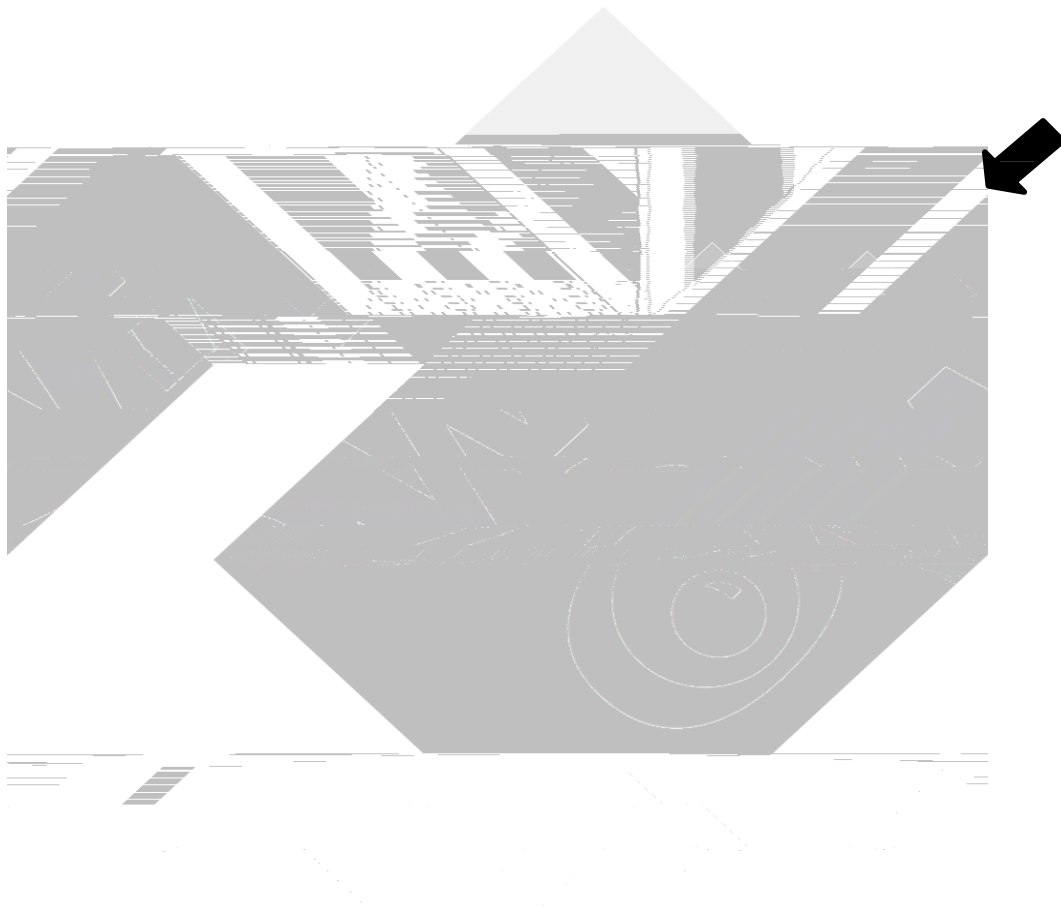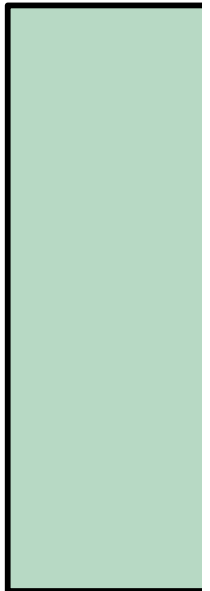to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis)agreement."[63] Further, in *Reassembling*
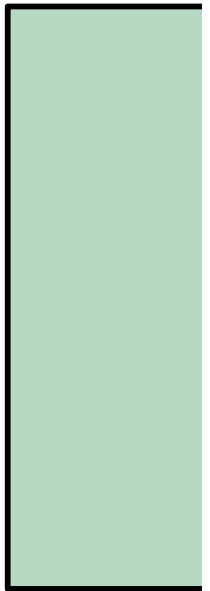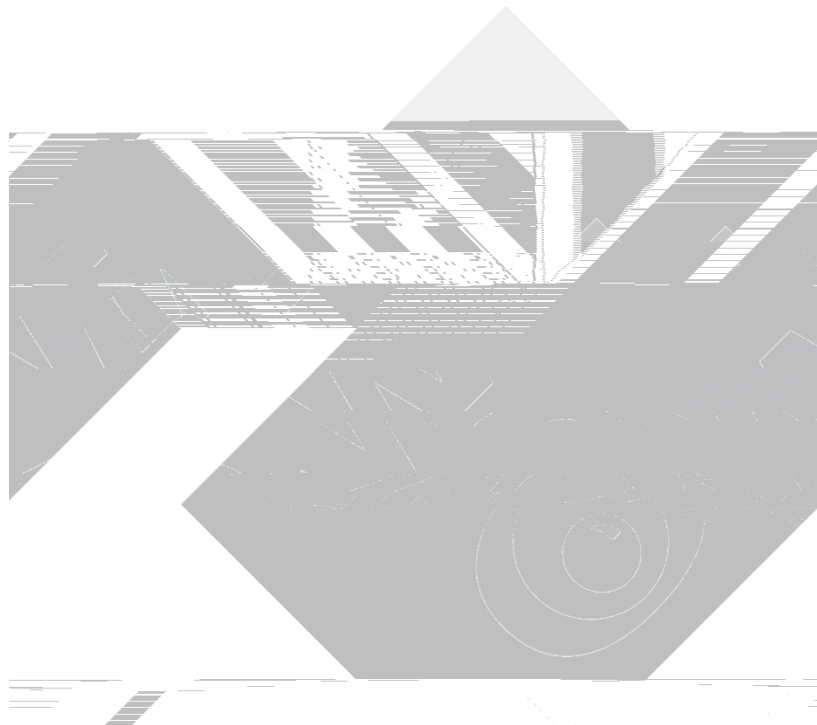
world

modern to postmodern times; this paper has also shown how these changes are paralleled

in our understanding of what it means to "write" in a contemporary world. So, when Lisa

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