

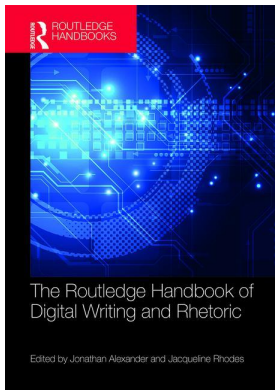
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MULTIMODALITY BEFORE AND BEYOND THE COMPUTER

Jason Palmeri

In many ways, digital writing and rhetoric has been a field oriented to the present—a field focused first and foremost on engaging *current* technological changes arising from developments in computing technologies. Yet, when we build our pedagogies and theories primarily in response to the latest technological tools embraced by a patriarchal, racist, capitalist system, we risk exaggerating the potential positive effects of new technologies while at the same time excluding the voices (past and present) of those who compose via other means (Baca; Banks; Haas; Shipka, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*). To develop and enact transformational digital writing pedagogies, then, it's necessary that we look *before* and *beyond* the computer to historicize our work. To this end, this chapter reviews and synthesizes the diverse ways digital writing scholars have recovered past multimodal pedagogies and composing practices to reimagine digital writing pedagogy in the present. In addition to making a case for how historical scholarship can enable us to rethink how we study, teach, and practice multimodal composing, I also point to directions for future work—arguing especially for the need for the field to embrace digital, multimodal methods of historiography.

The Emergence of “Multimodality” as a Keyword in Digital Writing Studies

Before articulating how multimodality has functioned as a theoretical framework for historical inquiry in digital writing studies, I first pause to historicize the *kairetic* moment of the early twenty-first century in which digital writing scholars first employed the terminology of “multimodality” to analyze how digital texts make use of diverse semiotic modes of meaning-making—linguistic, audio, visual, spatial (Ball; Kress; George; New London Group; Selfe). In articulating the value of multimodality as a theoretical frame for teaching writing in the digital age, digital writing scholars drew upon the work of the New London Group and one of its most prominent members, Gunther Kress. Although the New London Group explicitly pointed to the proliferation of digital writing technologies as an exigence for literacy teachers to pay more attention to semiotic modes beyond the linguistic, they also importantly asserted that “all meaning making is Multimodal. All written text is also a process of Visual Design” (New London Group 29); in other words, all forms of writing—whether by hand, by typewriter, or by computer—involve a combination of alphabetic and visual modes of communication. Extending this point, Kress argues that all meaning-making is multimodal because the human

body itself has “a wide range of means of engagement with the visual world. These we call our ‘senses’. . . . That, from the beginning guarantees the multimodality of our semiotic world” (184). In this sense, multimodality is as old as human communication itself, and Western culture’s tendency to privilege alphabetic text over other forms of meaning is a relatively new and limited vision of how communication works. In this way, Kress and the New London Group’s capacious understanding of multimodality as a fundamental aspect of embodied human communication opens up space for digital writing scholars to explore how our approaches to contemporary digital writing might be informed by the much longer history of multimodal composing practices.

As we revisit the historical legacy of the New London Group in the field, we should also remember that the New London Group’s work emerged from the collaborative dialogue of a group of international scholars primarily concerned with how K-12 literacy education needed to be reimagined in response to cultural, ideological, and technological shifts in an era of globalization. Given the global view of the New London Group members, their articulation of the value of multiple semiotic modes of meaning-making was deeply connected to their assertion of the value of multilingual approaches to English pedagogy that resist the hegemony of “Standard English” and indeed the hegemony of any form of English as a communication medium.¹ In this way, the theoretical framework of multimodality ultimately asks digital writing scholars to actively resist institutional hierarchies that privilege (standardized) English over other languages, alphabetic text over other semiotic modes, new media over old media, college instruction over K-12 education. In other words, the New London Group call us to imagine and enact an inclusive literacy pedagogy (K-College) that enables students and teachers to draw on a wide range of semiotic modalities, languages, and technologies in their work.

Recovering Multimodal Writing Pedagogies (K-College)

As multimodality came to prominence in the field of digital writing and rhetoric, scholars worked increasingly to historicize how past writing teachers had engaged and/or ignored non-alphabetic forms of composing in their classrooms. In one of the first articles in writing studies to reference the New London Group’s work as a rationale for teaching visual composing in the writing classroom, Diana George offers a compelling history of the often limiting ways that English teachers have engaged visual images primarily as objects for analysis or prompts to spur alphabetic writing. George demonstrates resonances between how 1960s English teachers responded to television and how contemporary teachers respond to digital multimedia texts. She also recovers the many ways in which past composition textbooks—from the current-traditional *Writing with Purpose* to the cultural studies *Ways with Reading*—have included activities in writing *about* images. Although George finds merit in these past approaches to teaching visual analysis, she argues that this narrow focus on *reading* images has unnecessarily constrained our ability to engage students in composing compelling visual arguments—arguing powerfully that “our students have a much richer imagination for what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address” (12).

While George’s history of multimodal pedagogy focused primarily on the visual, Cynthia Selfe’s article, “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning,” recovers the history of aural forms of composing in the field. In her work, Selfe tells a complex historical narrative that emphasizes how rhetorical instruction in US colleges focused primarily on speaking until the later nineteenth century when rhetorical oratory courses were replaced with first year “composition” courses that focused nearly exclusively on alphabetic writing instruction. As Selfe reviews the history of twentieth-century writing instruction, she notes that considerations of

aurality have largely been limited to theorizing “voice” as a metaphor for alphabetic writing, to engaging audio texts as objects of analysis, or to employing audio recording as a method for providing feedback on student writing. Like George, Selfe concludes that compositionists have too narrow a vision of the role of multimodality in the writing class and she points to contemporary students’ experiments with digital audio production as inspiration for how we as a field might expand our purview to value multiple modalities of communication.

Writing in a moment when “multimodality” was still a relatively new term in the field, Selfe and George’s histories understandably focused on critiquing the often limited ways that past writing scholars and teachers had engaged non-alphabetic forms of composing—laying the groundwork for arguments that positioned the “multimodal turn” as a novel approach unique to the contemporary moment. Yet, in seeking to establish the innovativeness of multimodality as a theoretical construct, early advocates of the multimodal turn (George; Selfe; Yancey) tended to reinforce the common assumption that the interrelated fields of English and Writing Studies have traditionally been focused on alphabetic writing—an assumption that has led many to question whether writing scholars have the disciplinary expertise needed to engage students in composing robustly multimodal texts.

Countering this tendency to position multimodal composing as a new, largely digital phenomenon within the field, Shipka’s *Toward a Composition Made Whole* grounds contemporary multimodal pedagogy in relation to the “communications approach” to writing instruction that flourished briefly in the 1940s and 1950s in the early days of the *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. Drawing on primary sources as well as the work of other composition historians (George and Trimbur; Heyda), Shipka articulates how the “communications approach” (integrating instruction in writing, speaking, and multimedia) offers an alternative path that we might build upon to develop “a discipline dedicated to examining the communicative process as a dynamic whole” by engaging the “complex relationship between writing and other modes of representation” (28). In recovering the history of multimodal communication pedagogy before the digital era, Shipka seeks to remind scholars that the multimodal and the digital are *not* synonymous—that limiting students to composing multimodal texts only with digital tools risks “missing or undervaluing the meaning-making and learning potentials . . . of still other representation systems and technologies” (11).

Although Shipka usefully recovers the 1940s multimodal communications approach to teaching writing, she positions the 1960s and 1970s process era in Writing Studies as a moment in which the field problematically re-narrowed its emphasis to alphabetic writing. In contrast, my own *Remixing Composition* looks to this period to recover ways in which multimodality has always already been a central foundation of writing research, theory, and pedagogy. Offering a revisionist reading of canonical and lesser-known theorists of process-based and rhetorical approaches to writing instruction, I demonstrate that composition scholars have long studied and taught writing as an embodied, multimodal process that shares affinities with visual and performing arts. Challenging the notion that multimodal composing must necessarily represent a departure from traditional writing instruction, I draw on the archive of process-era composition scholarship to demonstrate how multimodal composing activities can enhance students’ invention and revision of more traditional alphabetic texts. At the same time, I also recover the more radical work of composition scholars in this period who employed “new media” (Super 8 cameras, Xerox machines, tape recorders) to challenge the field’s tendency to privilege linear alphabetic text over other forms of knowledge making. Finally, I articulate and practice a remix methodology of historiography that resists rigid periodization and categorization in favor of creative sampling and juxtaposition of past and present pedagogies and technologies—arguing that a remix methodology can better enable us to draw useful pedagogical inspiration from our disciplinary past.

While *Remixing Composition* emphasizes productive ways that contemporary digital writing teachers can build on past multimodal pedagogies in the field, Kelly Ritter's *Reframing the Subject* sounds an important cautionary note about how our field's multimodal past continues to influence the present. In her work, Ritter recovers how 1940s and 1950s writing teachers employed instructional films in service of current-traditional pedagogies that reinforced classist, sexist hierarchies. Ritter carefully articulates the complex network of governmental and corporate power that enabled the rise of the current-traditional instructional film, and then she powerfully demonstrates how a similar nexus of power is encouraging many contemporary designers of massively open online courses (MOOCs) to employ digital video in similarly problematic ways. Ultimately, Ritter's work compellingly reveals how historical scholarship can help us develop a critical perspective on contemporary multimodal pedagogies.

Thus far, most histories of multimodal pedagogy have tended to rely on case study methodologies that emphasize close reading of a relatively limited number of texts in a relatively narrow period of time. Although such case study methodologies can reveal important critical insights, they can also make it difficult to grasp how multimodal pedagogies have evolved over time. To counter this limitation, Ben McCorkle and I have recently published a brief "distant reading" (Moretti) of nearly 800 articles about multimodal and "new media" pedagogies in 100 years of *English Journal*, the longest running pedagogy journal in the field. Complicating Ritter's narrative about the conservative uses of instructional film in the post-Second World War period, our study points to the 1930s as a radically innovative period in which numerous English instructors sought to engage students in *producing* both films and radio broadcasts (sometimes using professional tools, sometimes using makeshift approximations). Our quantitative coding and data visualization demonstrates that multimodal production pedagogies tend to flourish when media are new and then wane when media become more established; for example, the initial burst of interest in student film and radio production in the 1930s ultimately declined in the post-Second World War period as teachers increasingly positioned radio programs and films solely as texts to be analyzed; yet, interest in student film production picked up again somewhat in the late 1960s and early 1970s when more inexpensive consumer cameras, such as the Super 8, came on the scene. In this way, we suggest that moments when media are new present opportunities for multimodal pedagogical innovation, but we must carefully guard against a disciplinary tendency to revert to conservative models of textual analysis once a medium becomes more established.

In addition to coding trends in media production pedagogies, we also track the evolution of ideological assumptions about multimodal pedagogy over time. On the one hand, we note that the argument that multimodal media are "engaging for students" because they "expand audiences beyond the teacher" is both ubiquitous and persistent across the twentieth century—a finding that can urge us all to be more humble when we make these kinds of claims about contemporary multimodal pedagogies (McCorkle and Palmeri 20). At the same time, we note a persistent commonplace that multimodal activities are most valuable for enhancing the teaching of traditional alphabetic reading and writing—a commonplace that has tended to constrain our imagination about how new media might radically transform our pedagogical practices.²

When we zoom out on the history of multimodal pedagogy before the computer era, we can understand that the discipline of English (from which Writing Studies arises, at least in part) has a long history of engaging students in both producing and analyzing multimodal texts—a history that we can draw upon as we design pedagogies in response to contemporary digital writing technologies. At the same time, the discipline of English also has a long history of constraining new media by seeking to use them to reinforce traditional and often oppressive pedagogical practices—a history that we must remain vigilant to avoid replicating.

Multimodal Composing Histories Beyond the Classroom

Although histories of multimodal writing instruction in formal educational settings can be useful for helping us rethink contemporary pedagogical practices, we must remember that formal schooling (as Ritter compellingly argues) is often a deeply conservative enterprise. If we seek to develop multimodal writing pedagogies that disrupt dominant power relations, it's necessary that we look beyond the classroom and beyond our mostly alphabetic archives to find inspiration for pedagogical practices that challenge "business as usual" in the university. To this end, numerous digital writing scholars have turned to exploring how diverse multimodal art traditions and cultural practices can offer theoretical perspectives on writing pedagogies that disrupt many of the ideological assumptions of traditional academic writing instruction.

In *English Composition as a Happening*, Geoffery Sirc works to excavate the implicit theories of composition and writing in the work of canonical avant-garde and punk artists associated (directly or implicitly) with the happenings movement, including Kaprow, Duchamp, Pollock, and the Sex Pistols. Sirc draws on the avant-garde tradition to foreground not the finished product on the page, but rather the embodied process of "composition—as a record of tracings, of gestures, of a body moving through life" (111). Sirc's work demonstrates how the history of avant-garde art and punk music can inspire teachers to design pedagogies that engage students in composing with diverse materials (visual, alphabetic, audio, gestural) to create experimental texts that radically challenge academic genre conventions. While Sirc's work powerfully emphasizes the role of the body in multimodal composing, he focuses his attention almost wholly on the embodied processes of white, male artists. On the one hand, Sirc's work is radical in its challenge to the privileging of "coherent" print texts in the field, yet it is also deeply conservative in its reification of white male "genius."

Extending Sirc's work recovering avant-garde writing pedagogies, Jeff Rice's *Rhetoric of Cool* offers an alternative genealogy of the field of composition studies that seeks to "reimagine ourselves and our field entirely" (157), asking how the field would look different if it had paid more attention to various "cool" forms of art practice proliferating in the year 1963. Challenging the ways in which the 1963 revival of rhetorical approaches to writing pedagogy focused narrowly on linear, persuasive argument in print forms, Rice recovers the work of a range of experimental artists, writers, and theorists including Burroughs, Baraka, Anger, and McLuhan (among others). From this archive, Rice develops a vision of digital multimodal writing pedagogy that emphasizes nonlinear juxtaposition of found materials—the cut-up, the montage, the collage, the remix. Ultimately, Rice draws on avant-garde traditions to argue that students should be challenged to compose associative multimodal texts that resist closure—texts that seek less to persuade and more to invite audience participation in the meaning-making process. Although Rice usefully moves beyond the Eurocentric art canon to engage meaningfully with the work of Amiri Baraka, he still problematically enacts a "great man" school of historiography that situates Baraka's work almost exclusively in relation to other canonical white male artists and theorists.

In contrast, Carmen Kynard's *Vernacular Insurrections* offers a vision of multimodal writing pedagogy grounded in the collective work of the Black Arts Movement in which Baraka played a key (but also limited) role. Looking at the activist artistic practice of visual artists, writers, and performers associated with the Black Arts Movement (or BAM), Kynard articulates how BAM offered a vision of multimodal pedagogy that "redefined art to be functional and relevant to the lives of black people" (123). While Kynard discusses some prominent BAM artists and writers, she focuses less on individual stars in the movement and more on the collective activist work members did to challenge racist art institutions and establish alternative art spaces (122). Here we see a vision of avant-garde writing pedagogy that engages students not in pursuing an individual

aesthetic vision, but instead in working collectively to compose multimodal texts that challenge racist power structures.

Importantly, Kynard also recovers how the art practice of the Black Arts Movement influenced the work of Geneva Smitherman and other members of CCCC Black Caucus who were instrumental in advocating for the organization's 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution. Kynard demonstrates powerfully that

Smitherman's work unfolded how BAM could propel new writing and composing possibilities not just for artists and activists, but for students in English classrooms, thus launching an attack on the field's prior definition of what counted as writing and who counted as writers. (123)

Although Smitherman's work is most known for transforming how we engage with linguistic diversity in the writing classroom, it's important to note that she also powerfully critiqued the limitations of alphabetic ways of knowing and argued in favor of a critical multimodal pedagogy that integrated speaking, writing, and visual composing (Palmeri 72–9). In many ways, Kynard's work offers an important corrective to my own discussion of Smitherman in *Remixing Composition* in which I problematically positioned her work in conversation mostly with other well-known white scholars—failing to account for the ways in which Smitherman's multimodal pedagogy must necessarily also be historicized in relation to the collective resistance and art practice of Black people both within and beyond the academy.

Further demonstrating the importance of situating multimodal writing pedagogies within particular cultural, historical, and ideological contexts, Adam Banks's *Digital Griots* offers an important challenge to the tendency of many white scholars (myself included) to deploy "remix" and "sampling" as a theoretical lens for understanding multimodal composing histories and practices without engaging or acknowledging how the idea of remix arises in many ways from African American hip-hop and storytelling traditions. For Banks, to speak of remix without engaging the historical work of African American DJs is to position one's scholarship in "the long line of those who have 'taken our blues and gone' as Langston Hughes would call it" (13). In contrast, Banks' work historicizes contemporary practices of digital remix in relation to a long history of sampling in African American culture among DJs, mixtape makers, storytellers, and preachers who used diverse technological tools to repurpose existing materials to move audiences and challenge racist structures. In insisting on historicizing how contemporary theories of remix arise out of historic and ongoing African American rhetorical practices, Banks ultimately works to "build theories, pedagogies, and practices of multimedia writing that honor the traditions and thus the people who are still too often not present in our classrooms, on our faculties, in our scholarship" (14). By theorizing digital pedagogy through a recovery of African American traditions of technological storytelling, Banks outlines a multimodal pedagogy of community engagement that moves beyond the university classroom to engage diverse community members in composing multimodal texts that both build upon and extend their own cultural traditions of meaning making.

In another powerful argument for the value of centering the voices of the marginalized in conversations about multimodal writing pedagogy, Damian Baca's *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migration, and the Territories of Writing* reclaims pre-colonial Aztec codices as a powerful multimodal inscription system whose influence persists in contemporary Mestiz@ cultural production. Drawing on the work of Anzaldúa and Mignolo (among others), Baca demonstrates that the imposition of alphabetic literacy in the Americas constituted an act of colonial violence and he argues for a re-imagining of histories of composition and writing that starts with indigenous

pictograph rather than the alphabetic letter—a vision that refuses to position alphabetic literacy as privileged over other forms of knowledge-making and that also radically challenges the notion that multimodal writing practices are “new.” In this way, Baca’s work argues that our teaching of multimodal composing risks reinforcing settler colonialist hierarchies unless we center the histories and ongoing composing practices of indigenous composers who have long resisted disembodied, alphabetic-centric hierarchies of knowledge.

Further demonstrating the relevance of indigenous traditions of making for contemporary digital pedagogy, Angela Haas has articulated how the historic and ongoing tradition of American Indian wampum belts can be recognized as an alternative genealogy of hypermedia composing—a genealogy that challenges white, patriarchal narratives of the development of multimedia hypertext. In her work, Haas importantly critiques the conflation of the digital with the computer, arguing that “‘digital’ refers to our fingers, our digits, one of the primary ways (along with our ears and eyes) through which we make sense of the world and with which we write into the world. All writing is digital” (84). By centering digital writing scholarship on embodied cultural practices of making rather than on particular computer-based tools, Haas’s work calls on digital writing teachers to resist reinforcing technological progress narratives and instead engage students in diverse forms of associative, multimodal composing grounded within particular cultural traditions.

Haas’ evocation of the digital as referring to the work of the human hand solidifies one of the key insights that runs across all the histories I review here: we can gain a more capacious and inclusive understanding of digital writing pedagogy if we center our attention on the embodied act of composing with diverse materials rather than on dominant narratives of computer technologies. While it can be transformative to highlight embodied processes of composing in our work, we must also be careful not to position the embodied act of making as a kind of individualist artistic genius—always remembering that “what any body is and is able to do . . . cannot be disentangled from the media we use or from the times and cultures in and technologies with which we consume and produce texts” (Wysocki 8). When we come to recognize multimodal composing as both deeply embodied and culturally situated, we can work to resist narrow, digital-centric visions of multimodal pedagogy in favor of a broader, historicized view that enables students and teachers to bring all their diverse culturally situated, semiotic resources to the table.

Digital, Multimodal Methods of Historiography

Despite calling for embodied, multimodal re-imaginings of how we theorize and teach writing, the scholarship I’ve discussed so far largely takes conventional print form in which alphabetic text is privileged over other forms of meaning making. In recent years, however, digital writing historians have sought to compose scholarship that enacts the very kinds of embodied multimodal composing that they advocate. For example, while Alexander and Rhodes’s recent book, *On Multimodality*, takes print form, it prominently features numerous digital image collages that enact their vision of a “*historicized and poeticized* understanding of new media” (69) that can open up our conceptions of the kinds of multimodal texts writing scholars and teachers might compose. Challenging the common tendency to ask students to remediate traditional print genres with new media tools, Alexander and Rhodes recover the work of Guy Debord and the Situationist movement as a possible inspiration for a more disruptive praxis of multimodal writing pedagogy. Offering a queer reimagining of the situationist practice of *detournement*, Alexander and Rhodes demonstrate how teachers and students can tactically manipulate photos in ways that disrupt normative visions of gender and sexuality—importantly “showing not telling” (Ball)

about queer multimodal disruption by presenting a variety of manipulated images that demonstrate the embodied queer “excess” of their own collaborative writing partnership.

In Rhodes and Alexander’s recent born-digital book, *Techne: Queer Meditations on the Writing Self*, they more fully demonstrate what a multimodal queer practice of historiography might look like. Placing the collaborative queer art practice of Jean Cocteau in dialogue with Sara Ahmed’s articulation of queer phenomenology, Rhodes and Alexander argue that Cocteau’s work offers a vision that can enable “our composing, our multimodal poeticizing, to be disruptive, even to disorient—perhaps, in a word, to *queer*.” Importantly, Rhodes and Alexander don’t just call for a queer practice of *disorientation*, but they radically enact *disorientation* in a robustly multimodal webtext that blends words, images, and sounds in associative, nonlinear ways—offering complex, multilayered stories of their own queer life histories that resist simplistic models of identity and narrative closure.

In another example of historical scholarship that not only analyzes but also enacts avant-garde art practice, Susan Delagrangé’s interactive webtext, “*Wunderkammer*, Cornell, and the Visual Canon of Arrangement,” presents a multimodal argument for a digital pedagogy that emphasizes composing as a deeply embodied process of juxtaposing and rearranging found materials. Not only does Delagrangé draw theoretical inspiration from sixteenth *wunderkammer* and twentieth century assemblage art, she presents her historical argument as a digital “cabinet of wonders” in which images and words are juxtaposed in complex and ambiguous ways that open up diverse interpretations. Furthermore, Delagrangé followed up her initial work with a reflective webtext, “When Revision is Redesign,” in which she details the complex, iterative process of composing historical scholarship that enacts imagistic juxtaposition as a method of knowledge making. Pointing to the limitations of composing multimodal histories in alphabetic print media, Delagrangé suggests that we might best understand how avant-garde art traditions can inform digital pedagogy if we ourselves work to compose born-digital historical scholarship that challenges alphabetic print conventions.

Further showing how digital multimodal composing can help us re-see histories of writing, a recent born-digital collection, *Reconstructing the Archive*, features a variety of digital video engagements with archival writing practices. Jody Shipka’s video chapter, “On Estate Sales, Archives, and the Matter of Making Things,” offers a complexly layered reimagining of a series of mid-century scrapbooks composed by an everyday woman otherwise forgotten by official history. Shipka’s video highlights her own embodied process of engaging with the multimodal scrapbook archive, and makes an important call for multimodal writing historians to move past official archives to explore everyday archives of multimodal composing found in unlikely places (such as estate sales). Shipka’s video also documents a collective project in which she invites diverse scholars to create multimodal reconstructions or reimaginings of texts found in her scrapbook archive. Challenging the common tendency of historians to attempt to stabilize the meaning of archives by writing about them in solo-authored alphabetic text, Shipka repositions the archive as a site for collaborative multimodal art practice—suggesting that historical scholars might best understand multimodal archives if we compose our own diverse multimodal texts in response to them.

In another contribution to *Reconstructing the Archives*, Trisha Campbell creates a video remix of the life and work of Josephine Miles—a compositionist and poetry scholar who developed a deeply embodied, materialist vision of both composition pedagogy and quantitative textual analysis. Refusing the position of a distant, “objective” historian, Miles performs a creative monologue based on her archival research into Miles’ life and work—carefully layering archival images over her own embodied performance. In this way, Campbell seeks to highlight the

“resonant entanglement between . . . [her] voice and Miles’s voice, between the digital and the body.” Not only does Campbell make a powerful argument for the value of reclaiming Miles’s deeply embodied approach to composition and textual research, but she also demonstrates how historians can employ digital video to better highlight the ways in which their own embodied experiences influence how they locate and make sense of archival materials. In this way, Campbell shows the potential of born-digital, multimodal scholarship to radically challenge common assumptions about historiographical methods.

In addition to re-seeing history through creative multimodal art practice, we also should work to make greater use of digital methods of textual analysis—text mining, topic modeling, digital mapping—that can enable us to visualize trends in larger historical archives over time (McCorkle and Palmeri; Miller; Moretti; Mueller). By quantitatively coding large historical data sets (with a mix of human and machine reading), we can potentially add more complexity to our understanding of multimodal pedagogical histories. While distant reading may enable us to ask new questions of larger swathes of archival data, we must remember too that it—like all ways of knowing—is deeply embodied and culturally situated. Large digitized archives tend to privilege the knowledge of the powerful; furthermore, any quantitative coding scheme or machine reading technology that scholars develop will be deeply influenced by their own embodied experiences. The point of embracing digital, multimodal methods of historiography is most certainly not to arrive at a definitive history, but rather to open up more complex, multivalent and (perhaps even) contradictory stories we might tell about our multimodal writing pedagogies past and present.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

In this chapter, I’ve demonstrated that historical scholarship about multimodality has played an invaluable role in helping the field of digital writing and rhetoric develop more capacious, inclusive visions of digital writing pedagogy; yet, I’ve also suggested that historical scholarship can lead us to be wary of how multimodality can be employed for conservative, repressive ends. In many ways, to study the history of multimodal writing pedagogies is to revisit a litany of calls for radical disruption in academy that have gone largely unheeded. I suggest one reason this has been the case is that much scholarship in English and Writing Studies has continued to be governed by alphabetic, print conventions. The fact that I’m writing this chapter about multimodality in a traditional print volume is a case in point. Yet, when I review the born-digital multimodal work of scholars such as Rhodes, Alexander, Shipka, Delagrange, and Campbell (and others) that radically foregrounds embodied forms of knowledge-making, when I find myself working on a collaborative historical book project that simply cannot be contained in alphabetic print, when I see more and more scholarly venues opening up where such robustly multimodal work can be published, I’m given hope that *this time* the “multimodal turn” might really have the momentum to resist those ever-present, conservative disciplinary forces that have for too long constrained our work.

Notes

1. For a useful discussion and visual timeline of how multimodal, multilingual, translingual, and transmodal pedagogical approaches intersect in the field, see Horner, Selfe, and Lockridge.
2. At this point, McCorkle and I have only published a brief snapshot of our findings in *English Journal*; we are currently at work on numerous multimodal webtexts and a born-digital book that more fully represent the complexities of our archive.

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