Review Essay

New Histories and Theories of Writing with/through Technologies: A Review Essay

Are We There Yet? Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education–Twenty Years Later, by Jennifer Marlow and James P. Purdy. Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2021.

Video Scholarship and Screen Composing, by Daniel Anderson. University of Michigan Press, 2021.

100 Years of New Media Pedagogy, by Jason Palmeri and Ben McCorkle. University of Michigan Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Gavin P. Johnson, Texas A&M University-Commerce, and G. Edzordzi Agbozo, University of North Carolina Wilmington

When the Covid-19 pandemic sent us into lockdown in early spring 2020, many teachers, especially writing teachers, were rightfully concerned about the amount of labor demanded to remediate their teaching for online delivery. Within a few weeks after going into lockdown, there were tons of "how-to" sites with tools designed to help us provide a pseudo-physical learning experience for students; however, continued anxieties spilled out onto social media sites, teaching blogs, and virtual faculty meetings. Notably, some of the anxiety stemmed from perceived lack of adequate knowledge about new media technologies and their incorporation into writing pedagogy. As scholars who study writing technologies and their pedagogical implications, we found this concern puzzling. A backward glance at the history of writing, rhetoric, and composition studies suggests that teacher-scholars—especially those who place themselves within the (sub)fields of computers and writing and/or digital rhetoric—have been using technology to teach, critique, and remediate the writing process for more than one hundred years.

The three open-access publications, *Are We There Yet?: Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education–Twenty Years Later*, *100 Years of New Media Pedagogy*, and *Video Scholarship and Screen Composing*, are timely reminders of our engagement with technologies in writing theory, practice, and pedagogy. While these born-digital books certainly are not focused on the nuts and bolts of teaching writing online, they offer important insights on the histories, theories, and methods of teaching with technology that could not be more timely for teachers today. Experiencing these three projects together

offers readers the opportunity to zoom in and out of important conversations about the nature and histories of writing in a technology-mediated classroom. While we do recognize (and discuss) some gaps in these projects, we are encouraged by the trajectory these books—made through born-digital and open access publishing—put us on as teachers and scholars invested in writing with/through technologies.

Overviews

In *Are We There Yet?: Computers and the Teaching of Writing—Twenty Years Later,* Jennifer Marlow and James P. Purdy take on the monumental task of making sense of the histories, motives, and future directions of computers and writing. Focusing on both technological changes and the people who work(ed) in the field between 1995 and 2015, this e-book, as the authors describe it, picks up the historiographical work of Gail E. Hawisher, Paul LeBlanc, Charles Moran, and Cynthia L. Selfe's *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994: A History*. Published in 1996, Hawisher et al.'s book tracked the birth of the (sub)field from 1979-1994, and, more than anything, crystallized a discourse around word processing technologies and their introduction and influence on the teaching of writing. Marlow and Purdy, however, have a different task. As they point out, their archive begins in "the year of the Internet" and addresses an explosion of technologies in the writing classroom, which necessitates a capacious understanding of "computers" and writing. They primarily study publications in *Computers and Composition, Computers and Composition Online,* and *Kairos* as well as Computers and Writing Conference programs and books (including monographs and edited collections in print and online). In addition to their proper archive of journals, conferences, and books, Marlow and Purdy include interviews with scholars from across the histories of computers and writing, including Gail Hawisher, Cindy Selfe, Charles Moran, Paul LeBlanc, Laura Gonzales, Kristin Arola, Jason Palmeri, Steve Krause, Cheryl Ball, and more.

With their archive in place, Marlow and Purdy offer research questions primarily concerned with the contours of the (sub)field over two decades of publications: What is writing, and how do we (who study computers and writing) define the term?(Chapter 1); What do we mean by and how do we define computer in computers and writing? In what ways have the technologies we used and studied changed? (Chapter 2); What do we learn about computers and writing by employing machine reading of twenty-one years (1995–2015) of conference programs from the (sub)field's primary conference, Computers and Writing? (Chapter 3); In what ways do we define the (sub)field and its relationship to another technology-focused field, the digital humanities (DH)?

(Chapter 4); To what extent has computers and writing achieved its goals? Are we "there" yet? That is, to what extent has computers and writing cohered and been recognized as its own autonomous (sub)field? (Chapter 5). From these inquiries, Marlow and Purdy paint the (sub)field in broad strokes, which makes this text very valuable for new scholars in graduate seminars.

Stretching decades before "the year of the Internet," Jason Palmeri and Ben McCorkle's joint effort, *100 Years of New Media Pedagogy,* argues that instructors have always used various multimedia technologies in the English studies classroom. In some ways, this point is not new to readers of Palmeri and McCorkle's previous historiographic scholarship (see *Rhetorical Delivery as Technological Discourse* and *Remixing Composition*). Here, in contrast to their earlier work, McCorkle and Palmeri draw our focus to the ebb and flow of new media pedagogies across a century of scholarship. Interestingly, Palmeri and McCorkle build their corpus not from journals dedicated to new media work but rather the broader *English Journal.* Using a corpus of 776 articles over 100 years (1912-2012), Palmeri and McCorkle's argument suggests that new media pedagogies in English classrooms did not emerge fully-formed but rather evolved over time and with technologies. The later chapters of the book, for example, focus on how different new media technologies inform mode-based pedagogies: audio pedagogies (Chapter 4), visual pedagogies (Chapters 5 and 6), and multimodal/digital pedagogies (Chapter 7).

Evidence from the later chapters historicize new media technology experiments in K-12 to college-level English studies pedagogy to provide models for teacher-scholars; however, perhaps the larger contribution of the born-digital book is the "methodological play" employed throughout. Chapter 2 of the book, "Methodological Play," offers a robust explanation of the benefits of embracing multiple methodologies and modes of delivery when approaching the tangled histories of writing, technology, and pedagogy. Performing methodological play in Chapters 3-8, Palmeri and McCorkle emphasize the possibilities available to teacher-scholars who take digital/DH methods such as distant reading, thin description, media archeology, data visualization, and multimodal performance seriously in the study, practice, and teaching of writing. This project, we believe, would be a particularly beneficial model for those wanting to produce born-digital scholarship.

Unlike the previous titles, Daniel Anderson's collection does not seek to map a history of writing with/through technologies but rather focuses on a particular mode of digital scholarship—video and screen composing—to argue for an expansive view of writing. *Video Scholarship and Screen Composing* pushes the multimodal nature of born-digital books through a deep exploration of the theory and practice. Anderson focuses on the "layered, emergent, and multimodal" nature of contemporary inventions of writing and extends

our understanding of composition to "performance, immersion, affect, and ambiguity" (Introduction). Each chapter in the collection begins with a short screen composition, which Anderson then elaborates on through written prose and detailed audio-visual descriptive texts. Anderson's videos are performances that create a text from which he can theorize. He maps four themes for the projects, and each theme has three video compositions:

- Affirming: Blessing Critique, Refiguring Citation, Waves
- Speculating: Screenshots, Truing, Sediment
- Theorizing: Bridges Sing, I'm a Map, Trainsplaining
- Teaching: Watch the Bubble, Casting Learning, So Much Depends

This is not the order the videos and their respective discussions are presented. Anderson, it seems, wants viewers to wander through and appreciate the overlapping nature of his argument's theme. But, at its core, this collection argues that video composing opens space for different kinds of reading and scholarly inquiry through the affective layering of media assets. This collection, we believe, would be particularly beneficial for scholars interested in the affordances and constraints of video and screen composing as well as those persuaded by theories and practices attentive to the philosophical inquiries allowed by technology.

Overlaps

We appreciate the unique foci of each project but find unique value in the overlapping conversations that emerged from our simultaneous engagement with Marlow and Purdy, Palmeri and McCorkle, and Anderson. Perhaps the most prominent concern across these three born-digital books is the nature of writing and/as technology. In Chapter 1, *Are We There Yet?* explicitly revisits the old question "what is writing?" and, through interviews with scholars, capitalizes on the blurriness of writing and composing. The consensus on this question—similarly stated in *100 Years*—is that writing is much broader than alpha-numerical inscriptions and includes all the available means of technologically mediated communication exhibited in everyday life. *Video Scholarship* makes this same declaration in its opening: "Writing now includes images, sounds, and words in networked spaces. The scholarship here responds to this moment. The response does not try to directly translate writing from print to video. Instead, it takes up intellectual concerns through experiments in screen-based composing" (Introduction). However, the authors make clear that even if the (sub)field largely accepts the multimodal nature of writing and composing, this question—what is writing?—remains an ongoing epistemological inquiry for many scholars, teachers, and practitioners.

Because it is enmeshed in actual acts of communication and changes with the evolving nature of cultures, writing is not detached with cultural artifacts such as technology. Palmeri and McCorkle suggest that multimodality has always been part of the English writing culture and pedagogy. They provided an example of audio-visual aids and typewriters in the classrooms to highlight how varied levels of technological engagement shaped the history of writing(Introduction). Anderson demonstrates this apotheosis of multimodality through his use of "multimodal performance" as a mode of argumentation throughout his book. For Marlow and Purdy, these intricate relations between writing and technologies also continue to complicate ideas about "authorship, textual ownership, and audience" (Chapter 1, "Conclusion"). For instance, the electronic and digital influences on writing resulted in MOOs, OWLs, webtext, hypertext, computer programming (HTML), multimodality, and social media. Thus, technological escalations blur the lines between writing—alphanumeric scribbling—and composing—enmeshed in multimodality—but this distinction is not holistic when we look at the constant changes within online networks.

A second overlap in these projects is an interest and investment in DH methodologies. Marlow and Purdy as well as Palmeri and McCorkle approach their respective histories by engaging in methodologies commonly attributed to DH. These include distant reading and thin description of large corpuses of published materials. Through these methodologies, the authors are able to generate data visualizations that offer insight into the conversations being had across generations of scholars. McCorkle and Palmeri lean into DH's methodological uses offering insight into the historical narrative of new media pedagogies while also modeling how computers and writing scholars can work with DH when producing scholarship. In *Are We There Yet?*, Marlow and Purdy go beyond using DH methodologies and query how DH and computers and writing scholars have seemingly talked passed each other. In chapter 4, they argue that a continued tension between process and product (a tension well-known to compositionists housed in literature departments) has positioned DH as the "savior of the humanities" while funding agencies, administrators, and colleagues seemingly are unaware or uninterested in computers and writing's contributions. In one of Marlow and Purdy's interview clips, Cheryl Ball identifies this tension more precisely as one where the central focus of the (sub) fields do not line up ("Two Histories"). Ball, and by extension Marlow and Purdy, maintain that computers and writing's central concern is pedagogical whereas DH is "research-based." They conclude this chapter by suggesting that this divide feels disingenuous, especially with the rise of "digital rhetoric," which offers a bridge between the computers and writing and DH camps.

A unique bonus of reading *Are We There Yet?* and *100 Years* side-by-side is witnessing the evolution of Palmeri's thinking on DH methods in computers and writing scholarship. Palmeri, circa 2014, is featured in *Are We There Yet?* discussing his own concerns about DH scholars not recognizing the works of scholars brought up in the computers and writing tradition. While he suggests that both (sub)fields learn about the other's respective histories, Palmeri seems suspicious of the use of DH in computers and writing scholarship. But this opinion had obviously shifted by the time Palmeri and McCorkle began work on their *100 Years* project.

All three of these born-digital books take advantage of affordances unavailable to print-based projects. Marlow and Purdy, in our opinion, have the most straightforward approach to media integration. As noted, *Are We There Yet?* brings video interviews and data visualizations into the book to support an otherwise prose-based argument. However, McCorkle and Palmeri as well as Anderson take on "multimodal performance" as a mode of argumentation. By using "multimodal performance" to drive the argument of their respective projects, Palmeri and McCorkle as well as Anderson follow Cheryl Ball's early calls for teacher-scholars to take full advantage of the affordances and constraints of composing technologies in their scholarship ("Show, Not Tell"). Common across these projects is the use of layered video media that creates an immersive space for the audience to experience the argument. However, these projects approach multimodal performance in very different ways. Namely, Palmeri and McCorkle frame their multimodal performance as playful composing but go further and recognize the risk of playful scholarship:

> In the context of born-digital multimodal scholarship, the fear of not being taken seriously often propels digital scholars to continue to make webtexts that are weighed down by leaden academic prose or (even worse) to make monotone video voiceovers that sound like a conference paper being read aloud. Far too often, scholars worry that if our digital, multimodal work departs from the staid tone of academic prose, it will not be taken seriously by our colleagues' (Chapter 2, "Methodological Play," para. 5).

In contrast, we see Anderson's multimodal performance in *Video Scholarship* as extremely serious in tone and delivery. The composed videos are atmospheric, layered, and media-rich. Anderson's theorizing with the videos does not take on the same playful tone as McCorkle and Palmeri opting, instead, for a digital *happening* in line with the work of Geoff Sirc and Greg Ulmer. Comparing McCorkle and Palmeri and Anderson's respective approaches is

instructive insofar as readers can see and think through the rhetorical work each of these texts is accomplishing through its style and delivery.

Gaps

While these authors have done absolutely astonishing work with these born-digital books, in our discussions, we identified certain gaps in their arguments (as well as larger disciplinary conversations). For example, we see an uneven critical engagement with issues of identity and cultural composing practices. According to these texts, throughout its history computers and writing has leaned towards critical democratic sensibilities and deployed theoretical tools such as feminist critique in its approach and engagement with technologies. Marlow and Purdy go as far as to write, "The (sub)field's commitment to equity and diversity as well as to egalitarian and liberatory pedagogical approaches is directly related to it being a feminist (sub)field" (Introduction, "The Stakes"). These critical sensibilities have become part of the history and practice that formed a new window through which conference papers and publications have complicated how technologies aid writing and composing. We can see this work in action, for example, in Palmeri and McCorkle's heavy use of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's "strategic contemplation" in *100 Years*.

With this in mind, we expected more intentional engagement with issues of race, sexuality, disability, nationality, and other cultural categories. Marlow and Purdy's distant readings of Computers and Writing Conference programs (chapter 3) clearly demonstrates a growing discussion of "Identity" (the category which houses the key terms: *cultural, disabilities, feminist, gender, identity, queer, race* and *racial*) and their conclusion suggests that "calls for diversity, inclusion, and equity will magnify" (Conclusion, "New Directions"); however, they simply present this information to the reader without deeper discussion on why such topics would be categorized "new directions" for the (sub)field. Additionally, the limited focus on digital pedagogies beyond the US context is concerning. This segment of the scholarship was collapsed in a brief discussion of the "International and Second Language Writers" (Chapter 2). A reality of our contemporary world is that English is an international language with diverse varieties in use across differently mediated contexts. Technologies are also boosting the use of these Englishes both in the traditional classroom and in digital writing pedagogies. While this conversation is, we admit, still developing in computers and writing scholarship, a major omission in their survey of the literature, for example, is the influential born-digital book *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times* published in 2012 by Patrick W. Berry, Gail E. Hawisher, and Cynthia L. Selfe. Palmeri and McCorkle's examination of *English Journal* does call attention to a range of problematic trends in new media pedagogies.

From using dehumanizing language when discussing a student's abilities to the constant (re)centering of canonical literature, Palmeri and McCorkle ask, through a listicle-style section of their concluding chapter, "Can you really believe they said that?" And yes, we can believe it. We wonder, however, if this approach to calling out dangerous pedagogical practices is enough? The playful tone, something we really appreciate throughout the project, sends mixed messages to the reader and, seemingly, downplays the systemic problems embedded in new-media pedagogies throughout the last century.

Anderson's collection offers no apparent engagement with issues of identity and culture. This is particularly concerning to us because it continues a way of studying and theorizing the digital that is not grounded in specific embodied experiences and, thus, the screen composer, as well as the video's viewer, is oriented alongside neutral technologies that offer self-expression against an unstated normative writing. It feels very neo-expressionist to us. Discussions of ethics and citations, for example, remain at the level of personal choice and experimentation. Anderson's own citational politics reinforce this point by not citing scholars—especially scholars of color—who have offered insight on the digital composing process as a cultural and culturing process (see Haas; Banks; Arola). Many techniques and technologies of digital composing have their roots in specific non-dominant epistemologies, and the interactions between contemporary multimedia writing and those cultural rhetorical forms are also part of the history and theory of the (sub)field. By this assertion, we mean that engaging long-ignored cultural rhetorical practicies is critical to the historical accounts, theoretical endeavors, and pedagogical practices. This is an issue of epistemic justice.

Conclusions

These three born-digital books offer important perspectives on the histories, theories, and pedagogies of writing with/through technologies. For us, the intentional multimodality and interactive texture of each text demonstrates the rhetorical power of deeply researched, media-rich scholarship. We are also excited that these texts embrace an increasingly important feature of this kind of born-digital scholarship by making space—through open-access publication—for precarious professionals in our field such as low-income graduate students and non-tenure track professors to participate in and shape important conversations. Finally, amidst the shifting educational terrain, these works remind us that technologies have always been part of the study, teaching, and practice of writing, and encourage a kind of collaborative innovation that enriches not only our learning but also our lives beyond the academy. As we move forward, we must continue expanding our work to respond to the flexibility of transnational digital writing as well as recognize the histories left

out of our journals, books, conferences, and curriculum. We know that no single scholarly project—or even three projects engaged simultaneously—can exhaust all aspects of the complexities of writing with/through technologies, and, therefore, we hope these books become motivations for pluralizing our histories and classroom practices beyond dominant discursive spheres.

Commerce, Texas; Wilmington, North Carolina

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