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In Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy, Jason Palmeri both reconstructs and remixes the historical role multimodality has played in the teaching of composition. Whereas much contemporary scholarship on the subject of non-alphabetic composition, whether digital or not, expresses both excitement for the capacity of these forms to revolutionize the field and fear that they introduce elements into our classrooms that fall outside our realm of expertise, Palmeri highlights the fact that multimodality has been a constant thread in our teaching for the last several decades and that we are the most qualified to teach multimodal composition in the structure of the academy. His extensively sourced historical “remix” highlights points throughout recent movements in Composition Studies where multimodality has played a significant role, and uses them to argue that multimodality is not only a natural part of the teaching of composition, but that to exclude it from our curriculum also excludes the voices of students (and cultures) falling outside of the dominant model of alphabetic literacy.

Palmeri divides the book into two parts, each consisting of two chapters. Each chapter is subsequently divided into several “tracks” and “refrains,” thus maintaining the structural metaphor of the “remix.” Part 1, entitled “Composition has Always Already Been Multimodal,” associates multimodality with specific movements from the last four decades of Composition Studies. Palmeri makes it clear that multimodality does not rest on a specific theoretical model, as he charts its relevance to schools of thought ranging from current traditionalism to critical pedagogy. Both chapters in part 1 make the argument that compositionists both have a history of engagement with multimodality and have the expertise to teach it.

The first chapter of part 1 reconsiders the early process movement, which Palmeri defines as ranging from 1971 to 1984. His goal is to highlight that some of the core goals of the process movement rely upon multimodal thinking. He begins with two fundamental questions around which the chapter is framed: one, “[a]re there similarities in the creative composing process of writers, visual artists, designers, and performing artists?” and two, “[w]hat role do nonverbal modes of thinking play in the invention and revision of alphabetic texts?” (25). Palmeri presents three tracks in response to these questions. The first and second tracks explore the relationship between the alphabetic writing process and the composing process in the allied arts, based on the work of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and John Hayes. He notes that, despite the fact that the writing process is multimodal at its core, teachers of composition receive little training in non-alphabetic ways
of approaching it (27). This gap ignores students whose creative process is naturally multimodal. Palmeri extends this argument throughout tracks two and three. He asserts provocatively in track two that multimodality can be both a method and a product: the “ultimate goal” of this being the “rhetorical choice about which modalities are best” given the context (38). The claim culminates with Palmeri’s call for “composing” across the curriculum programs that do not place value in print alone, but encourage and promote true multimodal literacy.

Chapter 2 further explores the presence of multimodal thinking in historical pedagogy. Here Palmeri pays special attention to the metaphorical and literal exploration of “voice” in expressivist, rhetorical, and critical pedagogy. By beginning the first track with the work of Peter Elbow, he distinguished metaphorical “voice” in student writing and their actual auditory voice. Words, he argues, are “both sounds and alphabetic signs,” and thus are themselves multimodal (55). The division between sounds and signs is entirely artificial, originating with the disciplinary divorce of English studies and speech in 1914 (52). Building on the foundation of auditory words, subsequent tracks in the chapter explore the connections between composition and acting, dialogue, and dialect. Each track points specifically to the ways these modalities provide a path for student access beyond written words. The chapter concludes with a call for a new literacy that values more than just print, and reminds readers that only traditionally privileged knowledge is best expressed through words on the page alone. (84).

While part 1 engages primarily with theoretical models and broad trends in the field of composition, part 2, entitled “All Media Were Once New,” or “The Technologies Composition Forgot”” takes a practical turn to explore specific instances of multimodal practice in the historical composition classroom. Palmeri parallels specific examples with the delineation expressed in part 1 between scholars and teachers who viewed multimodality as a means to augment traditional alphabetic literacy, and those who saw it as an opportunity for new forms of expression. Additionally, part 2 demonstrates a continuity between the cautionary forecasts compositionists made in past decades about the effect of multimedia on the field with claims appearing today about digital media. In highlighting the “limitations and contradictions” of that historical alarmism, Palmeri frees the contemporary multimodal turn from the same arguments (18).

Chapter 3 surveys the multimodal trends that occurred in Composition Studies between 1967 and 1974. This period, Palmeri suggests, parallels the conversations we have today about the role of different modalities in our teaching. He takes some issue with Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 assertion that the current shift towards digital literacy is unique. The late 1960s and early 1970s, like today, saw composition scholarship focused both on the analysis of multimodal texts and their production. It also saw a minority of scholars disputing the privileging of academic print, and calling for multimodal, mixed-media forms of expression, and the teaching of such (88).
Palmeri emphasizes that the digital compositions we ask of our students today are just a remix of what we asked them to do in the past, and that students have always preferred multimodal composition to essayistic composition (98). Though for the most part the chapter serves as a historical survey of specific instances of multimodal composition in the early 1970s, the conclusion makes two important points that stand out as particularly important. One, as we develop new digital media and multimodal composition curricula for our students in the 21st century, we would do well to consider the “successes, failures, and contradictions” of the past (108); and two, simply adding a multimodal component or layer to a curriculum that is rooted in fundamentally ineffective pedagogy cannot “reinscribe” that pedagogy (109).

In the final chapter, Palmeri continues his practical recovery of instances of multimodal thinking in the history of composition pedagogy, this time focusing on the integration of visual media with print between 1971 and 1984. This chapter has a much narrower focus, and explores specifically the kind of multimodal composition that utilizes images and video. In exploring the careful balance between the teaching of composition and the teaching of production, Palmeri reveals that not only is it possible for composition teachers to develop a rich, multimodal pedagogy involving photography and video, but that teachers did it twenty years before contemporary digital tools that made the production process much simpler. The chapter concludes with a call similar to the preceding three; that expanding the teaching of composition to include the critical adaptation of different modalities ensures that our students will be able to communicate robustly in a diverse and multicultural world (148).

The epilogue highlights three goals that Palmeri believes should frame future conversations about multimodality. First, he advocates that we continue to use multimodal tools to enhance traditional alphabetic composition. He suggests that the incorporation of multimodality into this process can make writing more relevant in an increasingly non-alphabetic age. Secondly, Palmeri calls upon teachers of composition to reclaim multimodal composing, and to apply to it the same theories of process and rhetoric that we value for print. Finally, the third goal broadly predicts that opening the field to multimodal composition can not only make it more relevant, but can provide a way in for diverse cultural perspectives, and break down the limited cultural range of the print hegemony.

This book adds an important perspective to the ongoing disciplinary conversations about multimodality, and the role of non-alphabetic composition in our classrooms. Palmeri makes it clear that we are overlooking several decades worth of experience and knowledge about multimodality when we say that the challenges and opportunities posed by digital media to be completely new. In fact, digital technologies represent only the latest in a series of tools that arose to facilitate multimodal composition. In highlighting the myriad ways multimodality has enhanced and augmented the teaching of composition in the past, Palmeri makes a compelling argument.
that compositionists are not only well suited, but the most well qualified in the academy to teach non-alphabetic literacy, whether it is in support of traditional writing, parallel to it, or entirely independent.

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