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The collection of essays in *Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment)* represents a unique equation for understanding multi-layered composition that dominates writing today. Drawing from the growing necessity to recognize materiality and multimodality in the field of Composition Studies, Wysocki and Arola have honed in on an equally-relevant concept of self: embodiment in writing. This notion of embodiment can be rather abstract—calling to mind the psychological and metaphysical influences in writing—and also quite concrete—understanding the physicality of the writing process.

If one were to create a concept map or word cloud from this book, what might surface are terms such as Otherness, connectivity, re-orientation, recalibration, re-authoring of self, navigation. Underlying each of these words is the question of how intimately tied the body (sometimes as self, other times as physical entity) is to the composing and revising process. The contributors universally challenge us to question traditional assumptions of being, identity, sexuality, functionality, and, in return, offer us a variety of ways we can instruct our students toward this new perspective.

The book is divided into two parts almost as closely linked as the body and mind. Part 1 focuses on the medium through which information is delivered and how that chosen medium impacts the effectiveness of the message. There is particular attention paid to embodiment in the medium and how that influences the development—and reflection—of an individual’s identity.

The collection opens with an essay by Anne Wysocki (“Drawn Together: Possibilities for Bodies in Words and Pictures”), which discusses the marriage of opposites in relation to composing a whole entity. She culls together bits of comic book history (as visual rhetoric) and the theory of opposing forces as outlined by Pythagoras and W.J.T. Mitchell to help readers understand the often competing elements of word and image. Wysocki lays the groundwork for a discussion of what constitutes “high” literature and embodiment in the digitally-rich world we write in today.

Paul Walker further develops the idea of embodiment as he discusses reflection in citizen writing, through a discussion of mass observation journals and blogs. These personal narrative structures are embodiments of the daily lives of people who, like our students, are not self-identified or socially-ranked professional writers.

Few who’ve taught a class of first-year composition would deny that through writing, our students are consistently composing themselves. This is an idea shared by Matthew S.S. Johnson, who draws parallels between the
first-year experience and the practice of constructing avatars in the gaming world. Through game-related role-play (embodiment of avatars), students move beyond what is familiar, explore possibilities beyond the surface, and make conscious decisions that will help shape their identity. These are the very same goals we have for students in many of our traditional class assignments.

Ultimately, the questions posed by David Parry (“How Billie Jean King Became the Center of the Universe”) and Jason Farman (“Internet Cartography”) involve determining how users mediate the Internet, how the Internet embodies the users’ roles as information explorers. Both authors see the Internet as a vast space that can be explored purposefully or aimlessly, either for mindless entertainment or Enlightenment-worthy acquisition of knowledge. Just as it’s difficult to read a digitally-networked document such as Wikipedia in a linear fashion, it’s also difficult to see how Internet maps can benefit users. Both authors discuss the concept of connectivity as a roadmap for maximizing the potential of the Internet.

We can also teach our students to embody writing through recognition of the physicality of the writing process, as Jay Dolmage discusses in “Writing Against Normal.” He notes the language of flawed writing as synonymous with the physically-disabled (“awkward,” “not fully developed,” “dangling” [112]) and shares ways for us to reteach the process of revision as a dominantly physical act (moving, cutting, trimming, looping text). Through the ideas of increased embodiment in the process of writing, he encourages students and teachers alike to reconsider our approach to composing altogether.

As a bridge to the discussion of objects, materiality and mediating of self through writing, the first chapter of Part 2 presents the writer in a new role, as craftsman. Kristen Prins explains that the product—that is, the text and ideas—in the world of multimodal composition is crafted using a vast array of tools and technologies (159).

The next several chapters discuss the role the human body, and the resulting sense of individual identity, plays in the composing of self in the textual and digital world. Through a scripted essay (“Bodies of Text”), which is a performance of sorts, Aaron Raz Link demonstrates how we are embodied in what we write, our physical bodies sometimes exposed and sometimes sheltered by our words. Similarly, well-known Queer Theory scholars, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, discuss the role of multimodal writing in helping to shape and introduce body, sexuality and gender identity to the world. The authors imply an intersection of sex and text, even highlighting a techno-sensual navigation experience (212).

Co-editor Kristin Arola (“It’s My Revolution”) uses Native American powwow regalia as a metaphor for social networking-related digital identities. She notes that regalia, much more than a costume, is an “embodied, visible act that […] represents one’s history, one’s community, and one’s self within that particular moment” (218). This is much like MySpace and Facebook profiles, which she examines to better understand how group identity can sometimes be situated within a particular medium.
The work of the feminist group “Guerilla Girls,” which Karen Springsteen explores, also challenges assumptions of a group traditionally objectified and tied to their bodies and physical appearance. She sees online composing as a means to “create new embodied identities” (230), and both Arola and Springsteen welcome opportunities for re-identification and re-presentation of self in the digital world. In fact, one grand takeaway from this collection is that we can all benefit from the opportunities to re-mediate ourselves and our ideas through what we compose for new media.

While each essay in this collection addresses the influence these topics have on the way we teach, the collection is not pedagogically dense. To balance theory with practice for the compositionists who teach first-year college writers, the editors have included at the end of each part four or five classroom activities. These suggested activities invite students to reflect on how they are influenced and shaped by media, and to re-examine their perceptions of media, as well as their place in it (indeed, their experience with embodiment).

Wysocki concludes “Draw Together” by asking how we, as leaders in our classrooms, might work discussions of dichotomies into our class activities in order to encourage our students to consider the role of materiality, mediation and embodiment in their own creations. Perhaps another question prompted by the essays in Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment) as a whole is how we can embrace the power of digital identity and use it to our benefit.

When reflecting on how far we have come in the area of digital composition and how much has changed in our field, we might consider Vannevar Bush’s 1945 piece, “As We May Think.” In it, the American engineer and innovator, whose ideas greatly influenced Ted Nelson’s work on hypertext and hypermedia, wrote in very forward-thinking fashion about many impending technological and scientific changes as he saw them likely to happen. He encouraged his readers to embrace these changes, to be grateful for them, arguing that the “lasting benefit has been man’s use of science and of the new instruments [...and has…] increased his control of his material environment” (1). Today, Bush might argue that technology allows the writer to harness the power of materiality in composition, rather than being slave to one-dimensional writing.

On the subject of writing technology, in particular, Bush said that in order for a writer to effectively adapt to the changing composing technology, “All he needs to do is to take advantage of existing mechanisms and to alter his language” (3). As we go forth into a more multimodal world of reading and writing, it is necessary that we work to both understand this new lexicon and add to it. Perhaps even more importantly, in a case effectively made in the Wysocki and Arola text, we must incorporate multimodality into our English composition curriculum.

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Works Cited