

*Review: composing(media) =
composing(embodiment): bodies,
technologies, writing, the teaching of
writing*

Julie Platt

Arola, Kristin L, and Anne Frances Wysocki, eds. *composing(media) = composing(embodiment): bodies, technologies, writing, the teaching of writing*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2012. Print.

Early in the introduction to Kristin L. Arola and Anne Frances Wysocki's new edited collection, Wysocki echoes Merleau-Ponty and states that "without our bodies—our sensing abilities—we do not have a world; we have the world we do because we have our particular senses and experiences" (3). As I think about this statement by Wysocki, I wonder about the body that I experience, and how easily I take it for granted; how easily my body's thousands of minute workings pass beneath my consciousness. And yet, the freezing cold air of the room I am seated in chills my skin and sinks into my limbs; I am distracted from my writing by an awareness of my body as it engages with the most primal of interfaces—the air around me. Wysocki's introduction asserts that our writing, like our bodies, "modifies our sense of engagement; it shifts how we feel what is around us or how we sense those with whom we communicate" (4), leading to a realization that the tools we use (writing, media, et cetera) are as much central to our embodiment as our bodies themselves. Arola and Wysocki argue that bodies both mediate and are mediated, thus positing two "assumption sets" that serve to structure the collection. The first set of assumptions, "Media = Embodiment," suggests that "we come to be always embedded—embodied—in mediation" (4). The second set of assumptions, "Mediating

Bodies ^ Mediated Bodies,” discusses a number of related tensions, including the tensions between mind and body, word and image, active and passive, expressive and socially conscious.

The book is divided into two major sections according to the sets of assumptions that Wysocki posits in the introduction. “Media = Embodiment” groups essays that interrogate how media encourage or discourage “possibilities” for bodies and embodiment. The first essay in this section, Wysocki’s “Drawn Together: Possibilities for Bodies in Words and Pictures,” considers—through comics and graphic novels—what kinds of identities can be created when one is not limited to alphabetic text. Wysocki, examining the tension between words and images in Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home*, states “if the words and pictures suggest opposing possibilities [. . .] it is not to show conflict but rather to make visible certain identities that can only be lived across the clean boundaries that separate the dichotomies” (38). Paul Walker’s “Pausing to Reflect: Mass Observation, Blogs, and Composing Everyday Life,” uses as its framework the “mass observation” experiment in 1930s England in which “ordinary, hardworking folk” (46) were asked to keep diaries of their everyday lives. Walker compares writing these diaries to the practice of writing blogs, highlighting how both practices, through the evocation of perceived audiences for their so-called “ordinary” reflection, result in writers composing themselves and others. In “Authoring Avatars: Gaming, Reading, and Writing Identities,” Matthew S. S. Johnson speaks to themes of identity formation as he illuminates the similarities between how embodiment and positionality operate at two sites: avatar creation instruction in role-playing video game manuals, and essay composition instruction in first-year writing textbooks. In “How Billie Jean King Became the Center of the Universe,” David Parry casts Wikipedia as both a static, librocentric reflection of Enlightenment values and a dynamic living organism requiring constant care, thus reflecting the thematic tensions illuminated by Wysocki.

Continuing in the first section, Jason Farman’s “Information Cartography: Visualizations of Internet Spatiality and Information Flows” traces the various ways that networked spaces are and have been mapped, pointing to their shortcomings in relationship to the ways that users navigate cyberspace. Farman notes that “internet cartography can address these problems through visualizing information not as raw

data but as a lived social space experienced in a situated and embodied way” (85). Recognizing and valuing lived experience is of importance in Jen Almjeld and Kristine Blair’s “Multimodal Methods for Multimodal Literacies: Establishing a Technofeminist Research Identity,” as the authors situate feminist methodological practices in Almjeld’s dissertation work, in which she told her own story in order to complicate notions of researcher identity. To conclude this section, Jay Dolmage’s “Writing Against Normal: Navigating a Corporeal Turn,” explores the physical and metaphorical ways that so-called “norms” “coincide and perhaps coproduce bodily attitudes, positions, and postures” (112). Dolmage looks to revision as a site where the possibility for growth and connection to others is heightened but where there is an increased risk of normalizing both bodies and writing. Dolmage walks the reader through the experience of several kinds of media-facilitated revision activities, noting affordances and risks. He seeks “to reconnect mind, body, and writing” by seeing “the body (and the text) as meaningfully messy and incomplete” (Dolmage 125).

The second section of *composing(media) = composing(embodiment)*, “Mediating Bodies ^ Mediated Bodies,” collects essays that examine “productive relations” between texts and bodies that lead to new relationships and new possibilities for creation. The second section opens with “Crafting New Approaches to Composition,” an essay by Kristin Prins, who engages relational understandings of writing while proposing that we consider “craft” as opposed to “design” as a way of conceptualizing writing. Prins argues that “craft” allows us to interrogate ethical and embodied approaches to composition and offers, at the end of the chapter, numerous classroom activities aimed at positioning writing as craft. Aaron Raz Link’s “Bodies of Text” invites and challenges the reader to examine their own subject position in relationship to text and to other bodies, engaging the reader in a dramatic performance which questions the possibilities offered by academic writing: “Here in the text we are safe and bodiless, here we can have a discourse on sex and color and size and other properties of bodies. But we are talking about bodies in a zone that has excluded them, and the actual appearance of bodies in such a discourse can feel like a gauche and terrifying invasion from another country” (168). In “Whose Body?: Looking Critically at New Interface Designs,” Ben McCorkle engages the theme of the

contact zone, looking to how innovations in haptic interfaces urge us to reconsider the conversation of access, warning that “when we forget our integumental bodies, conditions are prime for a reiteration of technology as a transparent, neutral tool” (186). “Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation,” a piece by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, looks to ways of refiguring queerness through such diverse, multi-mediated vectors as online queer texts and the films of Jean Cocteau. As such, “Queerness” arranges its narratives in tension and in play, in various nonlinear configurations on the page.

The second section continues with Arola’s “It’s My Revolution: Learning to See the Mixedblood,” which engages themes of materiality and representation of bodies in networked spaces. In this essay, Arola argues that “seeing” the mixedblood body is a complex and potentially fraught practice. She highlights the embodied nature of Native American powwow regalia, and analyzes the MySpace profiles of three mixedbloods, showing how their fashioning of these heavily-templated spaces creates ways to see their identities. This section concludes with two essays that triangulate activism, media, and embodiment: Karen Springsteen’s “Visible Guerillas,” which examines the visual rhetorical work of the activist group the Guerilla Girls, and Kristie Fleckenstein’s “Affording New Media: Individuation, Imagination, and the Hope of Change,” which introduces and explores the work of activist and artist Coco Fusco and her one-act performance *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* (IDW) as an inspiration for new media assignments that begin to foster social change. Springsteen argues that the Guerilla Girls trouble the subject-object dichotomy prevalent in white supremacist, masculinist art with visual rhetorical moves that challenge viewers with humor, among other approaches. Fleckenstein cites legal scholar Drucilla Cornell’s essential components for individuation—the preservation of bodily integrity, access to symbol systems, and the protection of imaginative space—as the tenants according to which transformative compositions may be created.

Each section of *composing(media) = composing(embodiment)* concludes with a subsection of pedagogical activities designed for a wide variety of writing teachers. For example, the first subsection includes activities such as developing a visual literacy narrative, wherein students use words and images to tell their stories of literate activity and mapping students’ digital connectivity, in which students log their digital technology usage

and weave that usage into a map they design. The second subsection offers such activities as evaluating and designing social interfaces, where students rhetorically analyze the design of social networking sites and exploring visual activism, where students discuss the public effects of visual rhetoric. Each activity has clearly outlined objectives and a list of considerations for implementation, offering suggestions for managing and modifying the lesson. These rich, well-designed activities explicitly correspond with the themes and arguments of the chapters and are an extremely valuable resource for writing instructors seeking ways to implement the ideas discussed in the book. The inclusion of these activities marks this book as a kind of hybrid text, engaging both critical and pedagogical concerns. As a writing teacher myself, texts like these help me to frame my pedagogical responses to theories advanced in the texts and provide ideas for developing my own writing activities.

At the beginning of one of these pedagogical sections, Arola and Wysocki state: “We experience relations between embodiment and media as we breathe, walk, talk, look, listen, sigh, read, write, and view. We feel our embodiment continually” (127). *composing(media) = composing(embodiment)* is a collection that invites us to consider the ways that our embodiment is made both explicit and implicit and how our worlds, outer and inner, are mediated. The essays and exercises in this text ask us to consider how we are positioned—and how we position others—in the tensions that comprise the ways we mediate our bodies and the world.

About the Author

Julie Platt’s critical work and book reviews have appeared in *Computers and Composition*, *Computers and Composition Online*, and *Kairos*, and her poems and essays have appeared in numerous national journals. She is the Creative Editor of *Technoculture: An Online Journal of Technology in Society*.