

Chapter 6

Going Digital: A Beginner's Cautionary Tale

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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on an exploration into the genre of multimodal writing, examining issues of the genre's accessibility for herself and her students and its relevance to writing pedagogy. She examines, too, the need to establish a broadly accessible digital community in sites that seek to foster rich and purposeful multimodal abilities.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2006, I acted on my decision that it was time I learned more about digital writing and, in car fully packed, drove from Richmond, Virginia, to Columbus, Ohio, where I unpacked my car into the carts I had often watched students at my school use to move into their dorms and moved into a dorm room of my own for the two weeks of the summer course I'd registered for. What I recount here are my thoughts about writing during and after this digital boot camp immersion and my experiences working to implement what

I learned that summer in writing workshops the following academic year.

Thoughts on writing first: I am going to start with a premise that is fundamental to everything I think about style in writing: the best writing, regardless of genre, results when form and content are so inexorably wedded that a writer's stylistic choices, minute or grand, become a performance of meaning.

When this premise began to form, I am not sure, but the moment I articulated it I had just finished reading Wesley McNair's poem, "The Abandonment" in *The Atlantic Monthly* in the spring semester of 1989:

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*Climbing on top of him and breathing
into his mouth this way she could be showing her
desire except when she draws back
from him to make her little cries
she is turning to her young son
just coming into the room to find his father my
brother
on the bed with his eyes closed and the slightest
smile on his lips as if when they
both beat on his chest as they do now
he will come back from the dream he is enjoying
so much he cannot hear her calling his name
louder and louder and the son saying get up
get up discovering both of them discovering
for the first time that all along
he has lived in this body this thing
with shut lids dangling its arms
that have nothing to do with him and everything
they can ever know the wife listening weeping
at his chest and the mute son who will never
forget how she takes the face into her hands now
as if there were nothing in the world
but the face and breathes oh
breathes into the mouth that does not breath back.*

The poem, twenty-three lines, one sentence of 192 words, no punctuation, tells the story of McNair's sister-in-law trying to resuscitate her husband, McNair's brother, with their young son as witness. Unlike long sentences that work because the sentences have a logic as well as places for readers to breathe, McNair's single-sentence poem works because its enjambment and lack of punctuation leave a reader quickly out of breath, accomplishing both that physical reality and logic of the wife's and child's staggering, resistant, mental denial of the fact of death that lies so clearly before them. The poem leaves readers gasping in some shock, I suspect, about the narrative, but gasping also because of McNair's evoking of an authentic mix of physiological and emotional confusion. The sum of McNair's stylistic choices,

thus, perform his content, drawing readers in as can any exceptional enactment of meaning.

I use McNair to exemplify my premise because I have been thinking about form and content in what Cynthia Selfe calls "alphabetic texts" for a long time and am articulate, I hope, when I discuss how such texts do what they do with other writers or when thinking about my own writing (72). In the summer of 2006, I participated in Selfe's and Scott Lloyd DeWitt's two-week Digital Media and Composition Institute (DMAC) at Ohio State University, going there to start learning about multimedia writing (aka "going digital") with the anticipation of designing and teaching a course in multimodal composition.¹ I did not anticipate that learning to write differently would be balancing act that I was perceptually ill-prepared for. In the end, I came full circle in a way that made complete sense and in fact brought my thinking about multimodal writing into a dialogue with what I was know of writing alphabetic texts. I am a good reader and writer, processing texts on many levels, but as a writer, breaking out of the constraints of the written word forced me to think modally in ways that alphabetic texts allow, but do not necessarily compel. No reader, for example, is compelled to supply visual and auditory realities that writers might work to evoke through words any more than a reader is required to imagine touch, taste or scent. While the common convention of children's books is to tell stories through multiple modes—with images, 3-Ds, tactile elements like faux fur, with scratch and sniffs, sometimes with words that are nonsense, and sometimes with no words at all—once readers graduate to solely to the one-dimensional, linear world of alphabetic texts, they are on their own and at the mercy of their senses because "Language turns out to be a perceptual medium of sounds or signs which, by itself, can give shape to very few elements of thought. For the rest it has to refer to imagery in some other medium" (Arnheim, 2004, p. 240).

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