The 2014 CCCC included almost fifty sessions that contained the words *multimodal*, *multimodal*, or *multimedia* in their titles or abstracts. More anecdotally, conversations with fellow attendees revealed that many sessions—even those dealing with such ancient concepts as the canons or the appeals—touched on the idea that rhetors are now operating within a new communication environment, one that values, even demands, crossing traditional boundaries between media and modes of discourse. Similarly, a glance through the rhetoric and composition listings in recent Modern Language Association Job Lists turns up a significant number of schools looking for digital humanists, multimodal composition theorists, and other experts in “twenty-first-century composition.”

This is not to say that the fields of rhetoric and composition or English studies are wholly comfortable with expanding conceptions of traditional writing and composition. A thread on the TechRhet mailing list in March and April 2014 included a lively discussion about whether the integration of multiple modalities into composition studies was really a “given” in light of opposition from administrators and other scholars. It is clear that many schools have not moved past the situation described by James Purdy and Joyce Walker in 2010: “discussions have tended to

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*College English*, Volume 77, Number 2, November 2014

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focus primarily on establishing digital work as equivalent to print publications [. . .] instead of considering how digital scholarship might transform knowledge-making practices” (178). Anxiety about works that blur the boundaries dividing alphabetic text from these “new” nonlinear, born-digital texts remains a force in our field.

The three works reviewed here contribute powerfully to the scholarly conversation about the changing face of composition by illustrating how the narrative of newness associated with multimodal and experimental work hides a long saga of negotiation between the traditional and the new in the field of composition. These texts give the field affordances similar to those provided by recently published histories by David Fleming (From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957–1974) and Steve Lamos (Interests and Opportunities: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post–Civil Rights Era). In re-seeing our past work with both alphabetic and multimodal texts, we disrupt the all-too-prevalent narrative that our current engagement with technology and new forms of writing has no precedent. In critically reexamining our “set” history, we can return focus to crucial evidence that was glossed over by older narratives, unearth tantalizing theoretical dead ends, and make connections between past experimentation and current work. Although these texts’ scope and focus differ significantly, compositionists interested in engaging with a broader, more nuanced understanding of the field’s engagement with composition that goes beyond traditional alphabetic writing will benefit from reading these three books together, as they provide a means of fostering conversation about how composition’s legacy of experimentation can enhance our future.

**Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy**

Of the three texts under review here, Jason Palmeri’s will likely be the most accessible to compositionists less versed in the discussions about nontraditional composition. Beginning from a particularly thorny question—what specialized disciplinary knowledge can compositionists bring to multimodal composition?—Palmeri makes the case that “multimodality is a key part of the common disciplinary heritage that we all share [as compositionists]” (14). His argument, presented in what he calls an “associative remix” (16; original italics), is a history of composition scholars’ sometimes overlooked engagement with nontraditional, technology-mediated composition in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. He powerfully argues that the field of composition should both acknowledge its multimodal history and commit to a “capacious vision of multimodal pedagogy” (160) that can foster critical engagements with dominant narratives outside traditional alphabetic literacy.

Following a brief introduction that sets out his remix history approach, Palmeri divides his investigation into two parts: “Composition Has Always Already Been
Part 2 of Palmeri’s book opens with a chapter that draws connections between discussions of the current communications environment as a unique moment and similar claims made about an earlier “electronic moment” (the late 1960s and early 1970s) when compositionists struggled to adapt to the new media of film, television, and photocopiers (87–88). Beginning with Corbett’s ambivalent response to emerging communication technologies, Palmeri explores how composition theorists’ early

Multimodal” and “All Media Were Once New,’ or The Technologies Composition Forgot.” Each part is divided into two chapters, which are further divided into “tracks” and “refrains.” The refrains, in which Palmeri suggests strategies for connecting earlier theories to multimodal assignments, are particularly intriguing, as they allow the author to explore how older theories can be remixed for contemporary assignments.

Chapter 1, “Creative Translations: Reimagining the Process Movement (1971–84),” is a consideration of how early process theorists Janet Emig, Linda Flower and John Hayes, and Ann Berthoff positioned multimodal work as part of the writing process. Specifically, Palmeri examines how these scholars highlighted the connections between the composing processes of writers, performing artists, and visual artists; as well as how they explored the role of nonverbal modes in the creation of alphabetic texts. In the first two of the chapter’s four tracks, Palmeri describes how Emig and Flower and Hayes conceived of composition as inherently interdisciplinary and multimodal, even though the goal remained the production of alphabetic texts. In the third track, building on Berthoff’s claim that visual thinking is analogous to the creation of written texts, Palmeri suggests that writing across the curriculum could be reimagined as composing across the curriculum. The goal would be to build on these early interdisciplinary theories as a means of helping students recognize that choosing a modality is a vital task of communication (37–38).

Chapter 2, “Composing Voices: Writing Pedagogy as Auditory Art (1965–87),” shifts from a broad examination of multimodalities to a specific modality: the aural. Because of the institutional split between English and speech departments, the auditory dimensions of communication tend to be deemphasized in composition pedagogies, even though Palmeri argues that “the teaching of writing must necessarily be an auditory art” (52). He complicates Cynthia Selfe’s 2009 survey of aurality in writing instruction (“The Movement of Air, The Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing”) by returning to Peter Elbow’s theories of voice and how words, as “both sounds and alphabetic signs,” represent an understanding of writing as a concomitantly auditory act (Palmeri 55). Following a discussion of Edward Corbett’s work with classical rhetoric, Palmeri explores the role of dialogue in critical pedagogy and Geneva Smitherman’s work with dialect as a means of drawing on semiotic resources (75). Palmeri concludes with a call for compositionists to explore pedagogies of multimodality as a means of valuing the diversity of knowledges and literacies of our students (84).
work with collage, montage, and assemblage can serve as inventive heuristics for developing and modifying contemporary digital pedagogies (88). Yet, as he notes in track 2 and the reprise, there is a danger of assuming that multimodal composition is inherently progressive (109)—a claim Patricia Suzanne Sullivan also unpacks (see next section). Using examples of well-intentioned, but flawed pedagogical experiments from the early 1970s, Palmeri demonstrates how assignments that engage uncritically with new media can reinforce the traditional valuing of alphabetic text.

In Chapter 4, “Zooming Out: Notes toward a History of ‘Cameras-and-Writing’ (1971–84),” Palmeri again narrows his focus from a broad consideration of multimodality to a specific technology; in this case, the use of film and video cameras in composition classrooms. He contests Diana George’s position that compositionists did not engage substantially with visual composing, arguing instead that the development of affordable cameras and the integration of visual media into the classroom during the 1970s and 1980s encouraged compositionists to rethink pedagogies and theories of composing (141). Palmeri reveals that the work of composition researchers of this period shows a deep engagement with visual composing and at least some exploration of the commonalities between alphabetic and visual composition strategies.

In each chapter, and again in the epilogue, Palmeri makes a strong case that compositionists should move away from the idea that the current societal moment represents a wholly new or unique engagement with technology. Instead, he argues, the field should recognize its multimodal past, should continue to explore how alphabetic literacy can be developed via an engagement with multimodal composition, and should recognize, value, and encourage multimodal work as a means of societal change.

**Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies**

Early in her examination of the relationships between the field of composition and aesthetics (primarily avant-garde aesthetics), Sullivan explicitly states that her goal is not to offer a history of experimental writing in the twentieth and twenty-first century (19). Instead, her focus on the emergence of composition as an institutionalized discipline is a means of centering her argument on a particularly important period in which writing instruction participated in a larger set of the dialectics also animating theories of art and aesthetics (10). Although her goal is not a formal history, Sullivan’s work participates, like Palmeri’s, in a project of re-seeing the disciplinary past of composition. However, her use of “experimental” as a descriptor rather than the more technology-linked “multimodal” marks a different approach to the topic of nontraditional composition. Technology is not a key term, nor are the material outcomes of experimentation (the assignments or resulting student texts), the specific
form of experimentation, or even the value of teaching experimental writing at all (2). Instead, Sullivan examines how unacknowledged theories of aesthetics undergird composition pedagogies, and demonstrates how scholars can use aesthetic theories as a means of critically interrogating the dialectics shaping the field of composition. The result is, as she notes, “as much an investigation of conventional composition as it is an investigation of unconventional composition” (3).

This divide between conventional and unconventional is one of many dialectics Sullivan explores in the text. She frames her discussion in terms of seven dissoi logos, contrasting terms dividing conventional and experimental composition. She identifies these dialectics—which include such thorny elements as social/individual authorship, constraint/freedom, and school/real world—as vital to most arguments for experimental writing in composition, which pursue various goals but which tend to share a common dissatisfaction with “traditional” discourses (4–5). Sullivan argues that the terms associated with experimental composition represent a “space we fill with our dreams and desires for composition to be ‘otherwise’ than what it is or has been” (5). This space, created by aesthetics, is the realm in which advocates of experimental writing position their experimentation.

Sullivan’s claims depend on a deft interweaving of theories of both composition and avant-garde aesthetics. Although Ben McCorkle, whose text I discuss next, erects a complex argumentative framework in his first chapter, Sullivan opts to build her argument more slowly to stress the openness of her interpretive model and the fluidity of the dialectic pairs that shape experimental writing. Following an introduction establishing the value of investigating composition pedagogy via an aesthetic lens, Chapter 1, “Experimental Expressivism: Autonomy and Alienation,” shifts focus to a specific family of pedagogies: expressivism. Specifically, Sullivan considers how arguments for experimental writing in the 1980s and 1990s were bolstered by the highly individualistic expressivist pedagogies of the 1960s and 1970s (18). She identifies Winston Weathers’s An Alternate Style: Options in Composition as a key text for understanding the legacy of expressivism in experimental writing pedagogies. This text, like many other works of the period, relies on a romantic aesthetic in which writers are positioned as autonomous individuals and “personal expression remains unquestioned, ahistorical, and asocial” (23, 27). Sullivan also identifies a parallel thread, in Weathers’s work as well as in more modern histories such as Geoffrey Sirc’s Composition as a Happening, to position experimental writing as a panacea for the problem of students alienated from the labor of conventional composition. Rather than simply reject these claims, Sullivan draws on the work of Peter Bürger, Nicos Hadjinicolaou, and other theorists to demonstrate how theories of the avant-garde can be used to explore tension between the individual and the social in both art and writing.

While Sullivan’s first chapter focuses on pedagogies that envision the author
as an autonomous individual, Chapter 2, “Experimental Writing and the Politics of Academic Discourse: Composition’s Institutions,” examines theories that position experimental writing as a means of intervening in social and institutional structures. Once again, Sullivan uses theories of art—in this case, debates about the role of the political in the avant-garde—as a means of uncovering how aesthetic assumptions shape the discourse of experimental writing as resistance or political intervention. Via a close reading of Derek Owens’s Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition) Sullivan focuses on moments where “a progressive politics for innovative forms seems to come at any expense,” regardless of the social realities and goals of students (53). She connects this assumed progressiveness with similar narratives in avant-garde art theory, illustrating how the freedom afforded by nontraditional assignments can also work against larger social changes (59). Her questioning of these assumptions is important in light of Sirc’s and Gregory Ulmer’s use of avant-garde aesthetics as a base from which to critique the institution of composition (in particular, David Bartholomae and Ways of Reading). Sullivan reads the avant-garde more critically than do Sirc and Ulmer, arguing that positioning experimentation as both inherently resistant to tradition and to institutionalization is incorrect. Instead, she advocates for an approach that acknowledges that alternative discourses are “disarmed” when they are brought into the academy. This act of institutional disarming can then serve as an avenue for critical investigation by students and faculty (74).

Chapter 3, “The Crisis of Judgment in Composition: Evaluating Experimental Student Writing,” engages with a topic that is, based on audience comments following conference presentations on multimodal composition, high on the list of many instructors: the evaluation of nontraditional work. Sullivan positions experimental writing as a response to anxiety about the value of academic writing, as well as a means of fostering a crisis of judgment (76). Yet, as she argues, simply sidestepping the question of evaluation (which she differentiates from assessment) or shoehorning experimental works into existing systems of judgment are not sustainable approaches: “If unconventional student writing is going to successfully disrupt the status quo of composition, then it must be allowed to disrupt our evaluations of, as well as our pedagogies for, student writing” (88). Instructors should consider the contingent nature of judgment described by Min-Zhan Lu in “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” and make manifest the contact zone of students’ writing; this can open up the possibility for experimental writing to productively “disturb their pedagogies and unsettle their judgments” (95–96).

In the introduction, Sullivan describes Chapter 4, “Collage: Pedagogies, Aesthetics, and Reading Students’ Texts,” as a means of making material the broad issues of the intersections of experimental writing, pedagogies, and aesthetics (15). Following a brief history in which she calls for the use of collage in composition courses into conversation with Dadaism and postmodern theories of the collage,
Sullivan describes three collages produced by students in her first-year composition course. The collages, inspired by Susan Griffin’s “Our Secret,” required students to reconsider their composition strategies, but also required that Sullivan reconsider her evaluation strategies to avoid the unproductive assumptions discussed in Chapter 3. Her account of the process of reading and judging these collages offers a rich portrait of an instructor working with texts that “crack [. . .] open my pedagogy” (146) and requires the type of questioning, revising, and rethinking too often glossed over by advocates for experimental writing.

The fairly brief final chapter, “Postscript: Toward a Multimodal Composition,” explicitly connects experimental writing with multimodal composition, illustrating how many of the arguments for technologically mediated composition exhibit the dialectical tensions identified earlier in arguments for experimental writing. Using three popular texts on multimodal composition—Selfe’s *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, Jeff Rice’s *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*, and Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc’s *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*—as exemplars, Sullivan argues that the current discourse about multimodal composition continues to elide important questions about such topics as autonomy, individualism, the social, the avant-garde, and aesthetics. Sullivan leaves the reader with pointed, complex questions about the assumptions underlying composition’s pedagogies, as well as a call to collaborate with students on strategies for moving beyond traditional aesthetics, rhetorics, and practices of composing (158–59). Although her concluding questions are compelling, I do feel that this chapter suffers for its brevity and for the implicit division between multimodal composition and experimental composition as a broader phenomenon. Given that, as she argues, promoters of multimodal composition are drawing on many of the same assumptions as experimental compositionists, there may not be much difference between the two. Placing multimodal composition into its own chapter seems to reinforce the problematic narrative of the uniqueness of the present moment that both Palmeri and McCorkle discuss. This is not to critique Sullivan’s subtle and well-researched argument as a whole; though I would have appreciated a more blended approach, her survey of experimental writing remains vital and compelling work.

**Rhetorical Delivery as Technological Discourse: A Cross-Historical Study**

Palmeri’s history of multimodality is tightly focused on a key period in rhetoric and composition. Sullivan also works primarily with texts and theories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In contrast, McCorkle takes a broad view of history in his fascinating reconsideration of what he terms “the moving parts of the
rhetorical process” (the canon of delivery) and its role as a means by which emergent communication technologies become naturalized (1, 5). McCorkle argues that the current recasting of delivery as medium (rather than embodied speech act) in the works of Kathleen Welch, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and others does not adequately acknowledge how theories of delivery have always shaped the design and form of nonverbal texts (4). His survey of key moments of communication change—ranging from ancient Greece to the current day—illustrates how theories of delivery contribute to the process of remediation described by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. As a technological discourse, McCorkle argues, delivery is the avenue through which emergent technologies—in conversation with older media—come to be accepted and naturalized (13). Like Palmeri’s text, *Rhetorical Delivery* makes a strong case that the current media and communications environment is not as unique as it is often portrayed.

Early in the text, McCorkle notes that his approach in this text is broad rather than deep, a strategy similar to Franco Moretti’s “distant reading” and Steven Johnson’s *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (McCorkle, 8–9). Rather than close readings of particular moments, McCorkle teases out connections, patterns, and themes associated with his thesis. At times I did find myself wishing for more specifics or sustained attention to an intriguing example, but this broad approach succeeds as a means of illustrating the operation of delivery-as-remediation and its role in shaping material elements of texts through the millennia.

Chapter 1, “Reading Rhetorical Delivery as Technological Remediation: A Rationale,” provides, as its title suggests, the theoretical underpinnings of McCorkle’s work with the historical case studies appearing in later chapters. In this intricately argued chapter, he connects Martin Heidegger’s relational view of technology, one in which technology is cultural and supported by associated discourses (15–16), to more recent networked theories of epistemology in the works of Bruno Latour and Kevin Kelly. This move supports McCorkle’s claim that rhetoric is not just a *techne*, but a technology with multiple effects on the world (19). In so doing, he illustrates how rhetoric serves to validate new technologies by remediation (20). As the discursive means by which societies engage with new technology, rhetorical theories of delivery foster the refashioning of old media by new media. Via an extensive review of recent work on delivery, McCorkle illustrates how current reconsiderations of delivery fail to take account of delivery’s remediation function and thus gloss over the role rhetoric has played in naturalizing new technologies (36).

Building on the fairly dense first chapter, Chapter 2, “Alphabetic Literacy and the Transformation from Speakerly to Writerly Rhetorics,” examines how the development of rhetoric as a discipline in fourth-century BCE Greece served both to remediate the new technology of writing and to reduce the importance of embodied delivery. McCorkle claims that the emerging discipline of rhetoric blended attributes
of writing and speaking, an act of remediation that enabled writing to become naturalized (49). Rhetoric was not simply a passive means by which writing entered culture; it actually enabled the acceptance of the new medium. At the same time, emerging rhetorical theories began to downplay delivery as a means of shifting attention from the performative aspect of rhetoric to the written words (58). McCorkle illustrates this shift with brief discussions of three important means by which rhetoric was naturalized by associating it with the “more culturally situated discursive medium of embodied speaking” (42): the Isocratic sentence, Plato’s exploration of dialectic and rhetoric in his dialogues, and Aristotle’s abstracted and disembodied audience.

In Chapter 3, “Pressing Matter: The Birth of Print, the Decline of Delivery,” McCorkle shifts his attention to the late medieval and early modern eras, a time in which delivery again served to remediate a new technology. This chapter focuses closely on the interplay between hypermediacy and immediacy, the twin elements of Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation. Hypermediacy, the exaggeration of a mediated form, is exemplified by the adoption in printed texts of elements of illustrated manuscripts; immediacy, making the mediated form invisible to readers, is demonstrated by the less ornate aesthetic of other texts (70). In this exchange, McCorkle argues, printed texts and manuscripts became naturalized as “neutral containers” of information. This was accompanied, in the fifteenth century, by a decline in focus on delivery due to a shift in attention from the embodied elements of communication to a conception of language as an abstract, unmediated phenomenon (71). Unlike the first historical case study, where textual elements were mapped onto oral delivery, the operation of remediation depended on the essential absence of delivery (outside of preaching) in rhetorical theories (83). While letter writing and poetry maintained what McCorkle calls “a hidden or invisible theory of delivery,” the influence of Peter Ramus and other rhetoricians who downplayed the importance of delivery meant that it was all but excised from pedagogical consideration (85). This move, as McCorkle notes, facilitated the acceptance of the printed page and blurred the distinction between handwritten and printed forms of writing (88).

Chapter 4, a version of which was previously published in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, focuses on the nineteenth century and the development of a broad culture of print. Although McCorkle acknowledges the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying increase in literacy rates on the naturalization of print as delivery, he focuses his analysis on the less obvious role played by the New Rhetoric and elocutionary movements. In contrast to common scholarly understanding of the belleuristic and elocutionary movements as antagonists, McCorkle positions them as collaborators in naturalizing the print medium (92). This period, during which the printed page was established as a “heavily regularized, uniform, mechanical product,” also saw the development of a belief that rhetoric transcended medium (101–2). At the same time, McCorkle notes, the elocutionary movement was driven by printed
texts, a means of remediating print through its association with “more natural” speech (105). More subtly, the elocutionary movement’s prizing of mechanical standardization of delivery operated as a means of naturalizing the uniformity and predictable fixity of print (108). I found this last point to be fascinating, and I hope McCorkle develops this line of inquiry further in future works.

In the second half of this chapter, McCorkle complicates his discussion of the elocutionary movement by examining how it worked in tandem with the belletristic tradition of the New Rhetoric. The elocutionary movement, with its printed texts focusing on making delivery formal and predictable, reinscribed “print-like attributes” onto speech, but the belletristic tradition remediated print via the handwritten word and the conflation of media (109). Although delivery was not stressed in the belletristic tradition, McCorkle makes a strong case that standardizing handwriting and introducing paragraphing remediated print by inscribing rules of text production onto the act of composition. The result is a situation where, as McCorkle notes, “we have forgotten that the interface, the design of the page, does in fact have a hand in conveying meaning, constructing truths, reinforcing ideology” (120).

In many ways, the case study that makes up Chapter 5, “Delivery Disappeared in the Age of Electronic Media,” represents the flowering of the communication environment (and rhetorical understanding) McCorkle describes in the previous chapter. In this chapter, which focuses on the first half of the twentieth century and the electronic media that came to the fore during this period, McCorkle examines the seemingly paradoxical disappearance of delivery in a communication environment dependent on aural and video reproduction. He argues that, rather than paradox, we should read delivery’s effacement as an example of immediacy and a coherent strategy of naturalization (123). A number of factors, including the academic fragmenting of the study of rhetoric into different departments, as well as the spectacle (hypermediacy) of new technologies, contributed to a waning of interest in elocution (and delivery in general). Such a move resulted in an environment where new media developed largely outside considerations of rhetoric, which remained focused on the individual rhetor rather than the operation of larger, less accessible communication technologies (133).

McCorkle’s next case study, in Chapter 6, “Reviving Delivery, Remediating Hypertext,” shifts the discussion into the current cultural and technological moment. In this chapter, he examines not only the communication environment in which current scholars operate, but also the scholarly conversation about the redefinition of delivery discussed in Chapter 1. McCorkle argues that the current reconception of delivery is itself an act of remediation, an example of how delivery alters new forms to resemble already naturalized media (142). Unlike the case studies presented earlier in the book, where remediation took place via theories of delivery that were largely implicit, the contemporary scholarly conversation explicitly links delivery
with paratextual elements of texts (143). This serves to forge material links between the performing rhetorical body and texts, as well as to conflate all modes of discourse (153). At the same time, the remediation function of hypermediacy appears in the claims—also discussed by Palmeri—that technology makes the current communication moment unique (154). The result is a “disembodied” canon of delivery that reflects larger epistemological understandings of subjectivity (160).

In the final chapter, “Afterword: Rhetorical Delivery on the Technological Horizon,” McCorkle both recapitulates his argument and makes the case that rhetoricians are uniquely positioned to consider how technologies change (163). He argues that scholars of rhetoric have an obligation to be sensitive to interfaces and the “powerful lulling effect to forget that the technology exists as technology (164; original italics). In an era when direct haptic control—via touch screens and voice-recognition tools—is altering our interactions with technological tools, critical users should critically interrogate how these tools naturalize certain forms of interaction. Scholars should investigate the underlying rhetorical factors of communication as a means of “interrupt[ing] our society’s compulsion to render its tools invisible” (171).

McCorkle’s book rewards close reading. Because of its theoretical breadth, the first chapter can, at times, feel a bit meandering. This is likely an unavoidable element of his approach, which draws on Hayden White’s methodology of poststructuralist history (36). This is not to say that the argument is unclear; rather it is to note that the initial chapter risks overwhelming the reader with possible threads of inquiry. As McCorkle states, the book is positioned as a first step, one upon which he plans to build in future works (9). Similarly, his tendency to revisit theories discussed in the introduction may feel repetitious to those familiar with the theorists, but it helps limit misunderstandings and opens his argument to more readers. These minor complaints aside, McCorkle’s work represents an exciting new lens through which to view the intersections between rhetoric and technology.

Taken together, these three works illustrate the vital importance of historicizing claims of the “new” and “different” in composition, as well as the need to take a more critical, questioning stance toward both familiar and novel pedagogies. There is no doubt the current communications environment affords very different opportunities for experimentation with new forms of writing and media, yet scholars interested in exploring new ways forward should not ignore that the field of composition has a long history of just this type of experimentation.

Work Cited