

## WRITING AGAINST NORMAL

### *Navigating A Corporeal Turn*

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The dominant discourse surrounding the teaching of writing focuses on texts and thoughts, words and ideas, as though these entities existed apart from the bodies of teachers, writers, audiences, communities. As a discipline, broadly speaking, we in composition and rhetoric have not acknowledged that we have a body, bodies; we cannot admit that our prevailing metaphors and tropes should be read across the body, or that our work has material, corporeal bases, effects and affects. Yet some recent attention to embodiment and to body politics in composition theory and research, and indeed the creation of a collection like this, suggests that we are beginning to recognize the corporeal entailments, foundations, and connections in the teaching of writing (see Fleckenstein, Hawhee, Couture, Lewiecki-Wilson and Wilson, McRuer). In this essay, I will build on this momentum as I argue that, in fact, ignoring the body has serious consequences. As we compose media, we must also—always—compose embodiment. I will also argue that we must be careful about which bodies we conceptualize. In this essay, I will critically investigate the ways that embodied pedagogy can be developed without invoking normative models of embodiment. And I will make some modest suggestions about ways that we can develop technologies and pedagogies for writing that not only affirm the body, but that affirm all bodies.

My theoretical background is in Disability Studies, and from this field I borrow a critical attention to bodily norms. When I use this word—norm—I refer to a complex social and cultural force. Norms can be “passive”: a name for an ideal or standard; or the unexamined and privileged subject position of the supposedly (or temporarily) able-bodied individual. Norms are also very active: normalcy is used to control bodies; our normate culture continuously re-inscribes the centrality, naturality, neutrality and unquestionability of the normate position; our culture also marks out and marginalizes those bodies and minds that do not conform. Norms circulate, have cultural ubiquity and ensure their own systemic enforcement. The normate subject is white, male, straight, upper middle class; the normal body is his, profoundly and impossibly unmarked and “able.” On the page, this subject and his body translate as error-free, straight and logical prose; as a writing process that is a portfolio of progression towards

perfection and away from all evidence of struggle and labor.

Because I feel attuned to and distrustful of these norms, in the composition classroom, I have often struggled to come up with alternative and non-normative means of engaging students in what we might call “embodied” writing, and I know I’m not alone. It may seem self-evident, but one key way to recalibrate composition to the body is to foreground the fact that dominant pedagogies disembody, and to recognize that if a body is invoked, it is through a normative filter. The ways that we police (or “coach”) student writing shapes student bodily possibilities. Another way to say this is to assert that dominant pedagogies privilege those who can most easily ignore their bodies. Disability Studies theorist Lennard Davis has written that “language usage, which is as much a physical function as any other somatic activity, has become subject to an enforcement of normalcy” (“Bodies of Difference” 100). He refers to not just writing, but also speech, and he argues that the ways we teach both are profoundly ableist: “[signs and] utterances must all be able ones produced by conformed, ideal forms of humanity” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 72). He argues, then, that writing is based in a “normative linguistic modality” that has come to impose standards that reach beyond the page to the human body: “An economy of the body [dictates] our own metaphors about language and knowledge,” these metaphors in turn “support the illusion of the ideal body” (103). As we dictate that the word must bear no trace of the non-normative body, we grant the word (and the technologies that produce it) a normative imperative. Or, as Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and James Wilson have argued, language becomes an “address interpellating the body”; linguistic conditions, in part, shape the body normatively (2). Importantly, to impose linguistic standards, we define mistakes in terms of difference and divergence that are at once about writing “wrong” but also imply the non-normalcy of the body of the writer. Davis suggests that ideals of “[bodily] normalcy and linguistic standardization (in English) begin at roughly the same time,” and he argues that this is not a coincidence (*Enforcing Normalcy* 105). In this scheme, normative language was developed consonant with the fiction of the normal body. A linguistic mistake became a bodily aberration, and not just metaphorically.

We currently see this trend played out on the page through grammar and usage rules—which Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee suggest “are the conventions of written language that allow [people] to discriminate against one another” (23). But we also see normalcy imposed multitudinously through “surface features” like page layout and sentence length. We see normalcy interpellated through nebulous ideas like “clarity,” which Trinh T. Minh Ha suggests “is a means of subjection” and “conformity to the norms of well-behaved writing” (16). “To write ‘clearly,’” she argues, we

are forced to “incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify; in other words, practice what may be called an ‘ablution of language’” (17). These metaphors all reach from the page to the body. Think, as well of the other words we use to describe good writing: it has voice, cohesion, flow, structure. Or, in opposition, it has awkwardness, modifiers are dangling, prose is constipated, turgid, convoluted. It is not fully developed. These are all metaphorical connections, in a way, asking us to recognize that how we shape writing on the page may indeed shape norms for the bodies that write these words. These metaphors, and the forms of academic discourse they produce, coincide and perhaps co-produce bodily attitudes, positions and postures. But a regime of bodily normalcy is also present, and perhaps even more insistent, in the writing process itself. As Davis argued, writing is a physical activity—as a process of somatic production, the economy of writing is always governed by the body. Despite this fact, few pedagogical approaches allow that the bodies engaged in this process should be viewed as diverse; to ignore the fact that our bodies all write differently is to superimpose a single bodily norm onto the writing process. Further, as Patricia Dunn and many others have suggested, “editing and revising is a drama about power” (126). And these power dynamics, combined with an underappreciation of the difference of the bodies engaged in writing, bodies writing processes in normative and possibly hegemonic ways—an abstract, ideal, normate body shapes the bodily possibilities for all students.

In this essay, I will trouble the writing process, and highlight those aspects that are most tangled and intercorporeal. In my own writing, and in my experience as a teacher, I have come to see the process of revision as both a site of possibility, and as a fraught, dangerous exchange. In revision we can approach a greater awareness of our connection to others through peer review and discussion, and we can come to recognize our own rhetorical choices, their connection to our environment, our bodies, their translation across relationships, cultures and interfaces. But in revision we also perform a drama of normativity, accommodating ourselves towards elusive standards, and thus towards what Davis calls “conformed, ideal [bodily] forms” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 72). As one step towards acknowledging this complexity, I have hoped to de-emphasize the common focus on error-free writing. I’ve tried to work against the assumption that writing is not a physical act. I’ve tried to recognize that, as disability studies and queer theorist Robert McRuer argues (echoing compositionists such as Lester Faigley and D. Diane Davis), “composing is defined as the production of order” yet it is “experienced as the opposite” (50). McRuer suggests that written composition is “focused on a fetishized final product” that is “straight” and that communicates mainstream competency, ability, sexuality, and culture (50). But he argues that we should in fact strive to focus on the messiness

of writing, and embodied composition, to “keep attention on disruptive, inappropriate, composing bodies—bodies that invoke a future horizon beyond straight composition” (57). I think that, in many ways, in composition, both the focus on the product and the focus on the process push students towards something clean, and straight, and cohesive. The more that students can streamline or even hide evidence of labor, the more they are rewarded. Yet student expression and learning itself can happen in the gaps, in the sidesteps and the mistakes. As George Hillocks writes, paraphrasing Derrida, we compose in polysemous chains of meaning: “every text is divided and fissured,” and thus our experience of creating and interacting with texts is messy (7). The desire to elide this messiness is the desire to ignore the body, its attachments, enablements and limitations. Peter Elbow has argued that “we think of the mind’s natural capacity for chaos and disorganization as the problem in writing...but what a relief it is to realize that this capacity for ephemeral incoherence can be harnessed for insight and growth” (288). I would suggest that the same can be said of the composing body: its unpredictability and mutability, its difficulty and diversity, can be seen as a key element of our capacity for making meaning.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF MESSY COMPOSITION

Of course, my critique of standardization and of the hegemonic possibilities of pedagogy, and my argument for a more partial, messy understanding only echoes a consistent theme emerging from vastly different schools of thought in composition and rhetoric, from the current-traditional to the expressivist movement, to various process-based approaches (from cognitivism to social constructivism), to what we might call post-process. For instance, some of the earliest research about the partiality and granularity of the composing process comes from cognitive science methodologies, which worked to invalidate views of writing that divorced the meanings found on pages of student writing from the process of making-meaning that students engaged in. For instance, in composition studies in the early 1970s, much was written about the “recursive” nature of writing. Lester Faigley later critiqued the use of this term, suggesting that it had been improperly defined and applied, yet he also acknowledged its popularity. The result was a directional-metaphorical shift. As Janet Emig wrote in “The Composing Processes of 12th Graders,” composing “does not occur as a left-to-right, solid, uninterrupted activity with an even pace” (84). This perspective was somewhat revolutionary, and held great potential for disrupting the normative view of the inviolable, rational, proportionate character of the idealized text. Of course, such cognitive approaches can be rightly critiqued for simplifying complex processes into clean and discrete models, and have done more than perhaps any other trend in composition

research to ignore and even denounce the body's involvement in the writing process. For instance, many cognitive models of the composing process ignored the role of the body as the key, ineluctable context for writing, centering the act of composition in the memory and in activities and interchanges that were posed as purely cerebral (see, for example, the Flower and Hayes model of composition). It is as though thought immediately jumps from brain to page. Yet the work of Emig, Flower and Hayes, and others did establish a sense of the loopiness of writing, as it focused attention on process, and away from product – even if it did reify the process as a sort of static and easily schematized, generalized, and thus somewhat normative transaction.

Other currents in the process movement, concurrent with the cognitivist turn, taking aim at current-traditional modes of textual analysis and criticism, suggested that writing teachers are “trained in the autopsy, we go out and are assigned to teach our students to write, to make language live” yet instead we “dissect and sometimes almost destroy” it (Murray 3). The argument was that process approaches could focus on the liveliness and unpredictability of language. This focus appeared in expressivist approaches to pedagogy, but also found application in social-constructivist theories of composition, which likewise amplified attention to the partiality of any perspective or utterance, and the prosthetic relationship between writers and readers, discourse communities, cultures, and society. In the eighties and nineties, post-process or “social turn” approaches then took aim, in particular, at the perceived naivete of expressivist teaching, arguing that no particular discourse can empower or liberate its practitioners. I would suggest that embodied perspectives on composition, following these historical trends, can be post-process approaches, because they can critique the ways that pedagogies have ignored the body (as they have ignored race, sex, sexuality, and class). Embodied composition approaches can also be expressivist in their championing of the body writing over the text written. And such approaches are also retro-process, disorienting to the process lockstep and forward focus.

My own approaches to revision, as part of a complex process, are informed by these historical movements. Thus I acknowledge that revision can be a locus of cultural and physical forces that sometimes remove writing from its situation, its context, its bodies. Revision can be strictly about correctness, or about accommodating one's views uncritically to the audience—this could be a cultural and corporeal assimilation, a cosmetic surgery on the text and its author; it can also take writing out of the moment. We can't truly describe any writing process and then try to re-apply it to another context. In revision we can set aside, rather than revisit, the evolving mixture of the many overlapping positions of the personal,

the cultural, the embodied and the technological that go into writing. Recognizing such critiques, what I've tried to create, in designing environments and movements for revision, are multiple approaches to composition and critical thinking, allowing students to recognize within the "products" of writing the interplay of their own voice with others', of their words with the means of communicating them, of the politics of each and every writerly choice they make. This movement does not have to be about the creation of an ever-more-perfect text (or body).

As John Trimbur wrote in "Take the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process," the 1980s social turn in composition was a "postprocess, post-cognitivist theory and pedagogy that represents literacy as an ideological arena, and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others' subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions" (109). I would suggest, following this trend, a corporeal turn—a theory and pedagogy that represents literacy as an ideological and embodied arena, and composing as a cultural and material activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others' subjectivities, discourses, practices, institutions, and bodies. I believe that what is needed is an expansive approach to writing as well as to textuality. If there are ways to use revision not just to create a better product, but to lay bare, to re-sense, then we could realize the ways texts connect to one another, connect us to one another, the way texts are embodied, and how such connections are never smooth but are rather tangled, strange, and result sometimes in noise and confusion, in something messy.

## WIKIS

My experimentation with a differently-embodied writing process began with writing that I asked students to do on a WIKI several years ago, when I was a graduate teaching assistant. A WIKI—like the popular Wikipedia—is a website that allows users to create content, to write into the interface and produce its message, as on a message board or forum, but a WIKI also allows any user to edit that content. A WIKI's existence is revision—once redesign ends, it becomes a website, and no longer a WIKI.

My approach was not that novel. I simply asked that "traditional" essays be written and revised on a WIKI. The students accessed a sheltered WIKI (programmed to ask for their university IDs before allowing them to read or edit on it) in a computer classroom. We moved or pasted papers onto the WIKI (or drafted them in this medium, rather than moving them from a word processor). Each student was given their own page, and we linked the pages together through a menu page from which the class could jump to any of the other essays created by classmates.

One of the most useful aspects of the Wikipedia and of the MediaWIKI design I used in my class is the “history” function. In an article on the Wikipedia, one can use the history function to see the many different versions of that article, from the time it was first defined to its most recent revision. One can choose two different versions from any point in time and compare them. Many of the changes or edits are also “claimed”—are designated by the name of the user who made them, so one can track the interactions, collaborations, and even the conflicts between the article’s writers. Using this history function, students were offered the opportunity to look backwards and sideways through their work. This somewhat fractured textuality was novel to students in that it contrasted with their previous experiences of writing as a straight process towards finality. The WIKI, which can reveal to a student a kind of flickering between ideas when we layer drafts upon one another and observe their changes, is also a deconstructive technology, calling attention to the choppiness and halting, rather than the flow of invention.

On the Wikipedia, people also end up writing together, cumulatively. And the ways that research is incorporated can be both more explicitly noted, and more immediately available thanks to hyperlinks.

The WIKI history function can be used to wafer a text, not in order to dissect it and perform an autopsy, but to deconstruct it so we might re-animate it. How students choose to re-construct or personally narrate such a wafering or stuttering of the text can become a matter for discussion. Much can be learned about the drama of revision through this discussion. Does the WIKI dynamize the writing process in useful ways, helping us see the frames and the flows of writing? Does the movement back through drafts interrupt the obsession with progression that much process pedagogy fetishizes? Or does it push us towards standardization, ideality and the marking of deviation? How does exactness, discreteness and finality contrast with partiality and interaction?

In the writing classroom, WIKIs can be used for collaborative in-class writing. A WIKI can also be used to allow students to edit their own papers, and the work of other students, online. Susan Loudermilk Garza and Tommy Hern argue that students function differently in a WIKI because it is an open environment. Closed environments, like the traditional classroom, “tend to recreate the teacher is in control of everything, I’m writing only for the teacher mentality” (n.p). They note that, “Wikis change the way knowledge circulates,” showing students that “writing is messy; writing is a socially collaborative act; and WIKI technology is a tool that enables writers to get into the mess and the social nature of writing” (n.p). Analyzing this technology, we start to see what a WIKI can do, but also what composition might always do: commenting on the convergences and

dissonances of collaborative work; interrogating interfaces and the movement between them; creating transformative recursivities; calling attention to the ways information morphs as it circulates among bodies, subjectivities and “machines”; instantiating within the body new patterns of movement/thought which might more closely resemble the fluid and fragmented processes of composition; laying out the many directional connections of composition by interrogating the history of an edited document, disturbing fraught boundaries within and between bodies, ideas and products.

It might be suggested that all online navigation is a form of invention, albeit a form of invention that troubles our need for tangible (paper-based) output. Put simply, there are more ways to create online than through the writing of code, and rolling through the web can be a creative act, even if it is often experienced as a passive act. Navigation on the WIKI invites further invention, as we receive knowledge and immediately have the option to revise it or speak back to it. Invited to reference and cite, play with space and verbally perambulate, students invent as they navigate one another’s work. Further, the WIKI is a place where, because of its “structure,” a different movement is encouraged, is indeed necessary to composition. You must move backwards and sideways, you must adapt the machine to your purposes, you must move between tools, you will (make) change(s). And because of the development of a more self-aware politics of textuality, the WIKI is also a place where students and teachers might incorporate a critical modality, interrogating the crossing and crossing-out of information in the midst of this generative process, asking us to question what is generated, how, and to what effect.

#### **THE REVISION GALLERY**

In one revision activity, I asked students to read one another’s drafts on the WIKI, and they made changes and imbedded comments. These changes and comments could be viewed by the students and then accepted or rejected. (This process is much like the Word “track changes” feature—the comparison of drafts is also much like the Word “compare documents” function.) Students also could hyperlink to research materials (for research assignments), or to other students’ work within the WIKI, and they could do all of this work synchronously or asynchronously. They could work together in a computer classroom or at home, separately, over a weekend. I also tried to get them moving around a computer classroom, doing some reading and writing together, and then also having time to navigate independently and at their own pace, so that there were many different ways for them to sense the writing and engage in the process. I also encouraged them to alternate freely between revising their own work and providing feedback or revision suggestions for others.

I then followed up a class revision session, and an assignment to work on the WIKI for homework, with an analog version of this interaction in the next class. I printed out four different draft versions of each student's writing using the history function, trying to capture the drafts when they were most busy with intertextual traffic. These texts were taped to the walls of the classroom, with each assortment of texts given its own space on the wall, and I introduced students to the environment as being like an art gallery. I encouraged them to circulate around the room and observe the artifacts. I asked students to give one another tours of their work, looking back at the decisions they made between drafts. I then asked students to—unlike in a traditional art gallery—start talking about each piece and writing back on them. Now, as students commented on one another's papers, they were paying attention to the writerly choices and negotiations that they had all made.

Now, students were literally re-positioning their bodies around these dynamic texts, looping through our shared production with an eye on the process of further revision. Taking pen or pencil or highlighter to these pages, we could challenge the idea of a chronological, straight progression forward towards a final product, as we moved backwards and evaluated choices rather than simply assuming that each revision brought us closer to closure, anything excised disconnected from what lay on the page when all was said and done.

In these ways, the WIKI is a technology that holds great potential for connecting students to one another, and each to embodiment through writing. The activities I designed were nothing revolutionary, but they were one small way to respond to more normative composition pedagogy. Obviously, there are many other questions that could be asked about my use of the WIKI—many of them critical of the limited ways I used the technology. Clearly, students need to be involved in the continued redesign and critique of this space and its tools. To begin with, this technology, like all others, needs to be assessed, re-purposed, and revised based on its accessibility and usability. But this more open revision process, I hope, places students into a different series of relationships with their work, with one another, with the process, and with this complex textuality. Moving between computers and classmates, between ideas, approaching all of these things in a reflexive way is the beginning of a looping, embodied approach to the act of writing, linked inexorably as it always is to revision—of text, embodied self and society.

#### INTERTEXTUAL EXCHANGES

The first time that I used the WIKI was in a first-year “writing about literature” course, which focused on the epistolary. Students were working on

intertextual papers, writing designed to analyze the interdependent and complementary ways in which texts stand in relation to each other. Their work was not (just) to find relationships between brother-and-sister texts, but rather to suggest ways that reading and writing texts alongside one another, in relation to one another, creates varied perspectives on an issue. There were many amalgamations of texts, and though some students had chosen similar clusters of texts to analyze, by no means were their papers written discussing all of the same texts. The papers we worked with were also structured very differently. Several students decided to write their own intertextual papers in epistolary form, incorporating the different voices of people exchanging letters as they also analyzed the ways that the different texts that they discussed spoke to one another. Other papers took on an intertextual form explicitly by incorporating poetry, fiction and elements of memoir. The hopping across genre within the papers, and the ways in which the intertextual essay assignment asked students to analyze relationships between texts seemed to fit perfectly with the structure and the goals of the WIKI environment—hopping across media and mediums, flowing between audiences, listening to different voices for guidance. One large group of students all chose to base their essays on an intertextual analysis of the poetry of Sylvia Plath her letters to her mother, Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters, and the movie Sylvia—these texts in various figurations, and often augmented with other texts of the student's choice, for instance the poetry and letters of John Berryman or quantitative research on suicide and single mothers. Another group of students examined the movie Last Letters Home, about the letters written by soldiers who passed away in the first Gulf War; excerpts from the book Jarhead, written by Anthony Swofford, a marine in Iraq, specifically sections where he writes about letters written by civilians to "Any Marine"; articles about the controversy over letters published in American newspapers from soldiers currently in Iraq that were later proven to be fabricated; and Letters From Vietnam, the classic book of letters home from that war—these texts were also variously re-arranged and augmented, for instance with lyrics from anti-war songs by the Dixie Chicks; examples of "Any Marine" letters students had written themselves in high school; personal stories about soldiers currently serving, including a funeral eulogy written by a student for a close friend, and so on. A third cluster of texts for analysis was organized around the movie About Schmidt, a movie that gains structure through its use of an epistolary exchange between an elderly American man and a fictional African "sponsored child"; advertisements for Childreach International; the short story "Dear Alexandros" by John Updike, which also is based on a letter to a "sponsored child"; and articles in the New Internationalist on the logistics and the politics of organizations which, like Childreach, allow Westerners

to sponsor foreign children—these texts augmented again with outside research and with personal experiences, in one case with a correspondence between a student and her mother, who is a Childreach sponsor, and so on. Because the whole class had read, analyzed and talked about all of these texts, we all had points of access to each of the intertextual essays that were written about the three clusters, without there being very much overlap at all in the way students wrote about them, or even those issues students focused on. In this way, the movements on the WIKI, on the walls, and in the texts weren't just about getting "help" with editing a paper, they were about greatly enriching the conversations we had about these texts, respecting and developing the huge and emotional and complex ideas they conveyed, especially when put into conversation with one another.

Here are some examples of the exchanges that happened on the WIKI. Short sections of student writing from the actual essays are in bold and in sentence case, while any of the comments we made within one another's work is in capitals. When I am commenting in caps, I sign my name. Students remain unnamed. My first example is pulled from the introduction to a paper about African aid organizations:

I know you have been up late flipping through the channels and you happen to come across one of those commercials with the sickly African kids.

**THIS IS A POWERFUL OPENING. WILL YOU DIG INTO THE ATTITUDES THIS CREATES—PITY, PERHAPS EVEN A KIND OF RACISM?** [name removed].

Here, I feel the reader used this opportunity to stop the author and question the impact of this statement. The comment seemed to ask the author: are you critiquing this representation or reproducing it? Later, in a revision, and in a different section of the essay, the author addressed this comment directly. He went through a comparison of the claims of different aid organizations, and critically read their websites in comparison to one another, focusing on this depiction of children as an appeal to emotion, but also commenting on how sponsors demanded accountability. He concluded, bluntly that:

If a program is using these innocent kids to make money it will come back to bite them in the ass in the end.

But perhaps just as importantly, when the paper was on the wall, this comment, and the author's decision not to focus too deeply on the attitudes that the images of "sickly African kids" creates, but rather on the efficacy of the sponsorship programs themselves—their ability to get the money to the children with whom the sponsors exchange letters—led to a larger discussion. Students talked about how the commercials actually tried to prove,

visually, that the programs worked, using gratuitous images of water, showing needles actually being administered (right into a child's butt), food being eaten, and so on. What were the entailments of this visual argument?

This led to a discussion of the ways our university used pictures of African-American students on its website—often students from the dorm in which the class was located, the “diversity” dorm. This discussion then led to talk about how the commercials tried to show sponsors of different races, but that students, even in a class that was predominantly African-American, and in which the parents of some students actually did sponsor children, couldn't imagine a sponsor being anything but rich and white. How did this connect to our University's use of images of diversity, in spite of the low minority population? How do institutions and organizations create their “bodies”? How did African-American students feel about being used as visual arguments?

Although the paper itself didn't fully address the loaded language of a specific image, it opened up the possibility for us all to do so in another venue. The result” a very useful mess for the class to dive into.

Next I'll look at an excerpt from a paper about Sylvia Plath:

Having faced death but survived like Sylvia did in her failed attempts, an unhealable scar has been placed upon her heart—such unimaginable despair and aloneness felt in those moments, and then to still be thrown to the wolves, to life, without much help is a crime against the soul. HOW ABOUT LOOKING TO USE ONE OF SYLVIA'S OWN METAPHORS FOR THIS? DO TRY AND CHANNEL SOME OF HER POETRY IN HERE, SO YOUR READER CAN READ HER TOO [JAY]. To keep facing life, without any treatment must have felt like drowning in misery, and who could deny the want for peace? I don't think suicide is selfish because I understand the incomprehensible pain and aloneness one must be feeling to even have those thoughts. While I don't see it as selfish, I do not support it in any way shape or form, but never will I judge someone who acts on those thoughts, never. THIS IS ALL OPINION-TRY RESEARCHING SOME OF WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND TO BE TRUE SO THAT YOUR STATEMENTS ARE MORE CREDIBLE. MAYBE YOU COULD FIND A WEBSITE THAT DEALS WITH SUICIDE AND QUOTE THEM. I THINK YOU SHOULD STILL INCLUDE SOME OF YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE AS WELL SO THAT THE READER KNOWS THAT YOU'RE NOT WRITING IGNORANTLY. [name removed].

In this exchange, I'm the person who suggested incorporating some of Sylvia's poetry into the paper, and this suggestion is obviously different from the long comment provided by a student. We're both, perhaps in a veiled way, asking the author to get more intertextual. The author did choose to do more of this second kind of “research” and actually ended up

drastically altering the paper. (Note that the author's ability to ignore my advice speaks to a disruption of traditional dynamics of authority.) What began as a very personal reflection on what Sylvia Plath may have felt in her final days, became an essay with very "credible" research into the psychology of suicide. In a way, the student may have been moving further away from the affect of the issue, and may have been led there by peers. But this paper shows something else too—it shows that the WIKI was a place where students could comment more freely on a topic that might be difficult to talk about face-to-face or in groups, with all of the benefits and drawbacks of this greater freedom. In a traditional peer workshop, there may have just been silence. As one student wrote on this author's paper:

I THINK THIS IS A GOOD PAPER. IT PROVIDES A LOT OF INSIGHT ON A TOPIC THAT NOT MANY ARE COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT [name removed].

In another paper about Sylvia Plath, also looking into her suicidal feelings, the author concluded that what Sylvia had was a "deep connection with herself." A student commented that: I AM INTERESTED IN WHETHER OR NOT YOU THINK THAT DEEP CONNECTION WITH SELF IS A GOOD THING OR NOT [name removed].

In a later revision, the author tackled this tough question:

This connection to their inner emotions could be construed as a bad thing, but without their own sacrifice, the world might never have known what profound thoughts they actually had. Their beliefs and practices led them to a different kind of immortality than what most people seek.

Again, this revision shows how some of the key, complex thinking in the paper was generated out of a dialogue between students—something we could argue is always the case, but isn't always noticeable—or traceable, as it was because of this activity, across these mediums. And again, the result when we trace this complex thinking is not a clear line toward consensus. The "reviewer" is enabled to ask a question that rends the essay open. The writer is encouraged to locate ambivalence.

Susan Stan and Terence Collins have written that students revise more on-screen, when given the opportunity. While I wasn't interested in asking if this was indeed true in my class, or asking if students commented on other's papers more, and I wasn't interested in asking any of the other quantitative questions we might ask of this WIKI work, it was clear to me that students wrote differently here. In a paper that looked at letters from Iraq, but that also spoke very emotionally of the author's experience at a friend's recent funeral, a student wrote these summative comments:

WOW I AM VERY GLAD YOU SHARED ABOUT YOUR LOSS, WHICH TOUCHED YOU PERSONALLY. THAT MUST HAVE TAKEN COURAGE ESPECIALLY SINCE THAT WAS SO RECENT. YOUR PAPER WAS EASY TO FOLLOW, AND THE ONLY REAL COMMENT I HAVE IS TO MAYBE INCLUDE ANOTHER EXAMPLE MAYBE OF THE WORDS OF ANOTHER PARENT WHO LOST THEIR SON OR DAUGHTER TO EMPHASIZE THAT PAIN AND HOW SPECIFICALLY ONCE AGAIN THAT LOSS HITS HOME. THE DEATHS OF SOLDIERS ARE NOT JUST CASUALTY NUMBERS...THEY ARE REAL PEOPLE LIKE YOU AND ME. GREAT JOB :) [name removed].

I think that the comments show that, in this case, the medium may have allowed for these students to exchange something important, for the commenting student to take care with his/her tone and to ensure (by encoding, by making rhetorical choices—perhaps even those things we'd see as “mistakes” like sentence fragments) that the message came off the way she wanted it to. What I recognize in this comment is an incredible mastery of this genre of so-called “informal” online writing, a genre that here allows the student to communicate their suggestions gently, as though the two writers are working together as an empathetic team to show how this loss hits home—a much different way to think about revision.

Finally, several days later, after—unfortunately—much of this dynamic interaction was ended, temporarily, by my need to assess their writing, I asked students to reflect on the entire process. Below are a few of the questions that I asked:

1. We compared drafts of your paper in the in-class gallery. What thoughts have you had since then about the implied space, and work, and change, in between drafts of your paper? How did you feel seeing them alongside one another? What were your feelings about the typed comments on the essay, seen after you'd revised, and about those comments written on the papers during that class session?
2. In the computer classroom, online and then in the gallery, how did you feel about the connections between you and your fellow students? Was your sense of ownership of the paper challenged? Did you feel a sense of collaboration?
3. Some students were frustrated by the format of the WIKI, others seemed to have no complaints. How did you feel about using the technology? What could be improved? How did the WIKI compare to working in Microsoft Word or another word processor? How did it compare to printing your paper out and bringing it in to class to workshop? What were the problems that arose as you tried to move

around—in Word, in the WIKI, in the gallery, between them all? What boundaries are there, what pathways? How might you have created or avoided them?

4. How do you now plan to revise your paper—or any of your work? Also, how would you revise the design of our class’s use of the WIKI, or of the WIKI itself? Are there parallels between these revisions?
5. As I ask these questions, I am particularly interested in your physical feeling for the spaces in which we worked—how did you navigate around in the WIKI, in your word processor, in the ‘gallery’—how did this affect your ability to write, to read, to think, to concentrate? Did you have a sense of your peers—where they were, what they were doing and thinking, as they read your work and wrote in your document?
6. Did moving around these spaces enable you to re-see or re-think your positions in the paper?

Many of the student responses were generic and evaluative—the WIKI was good, or it was bad, and little explanation was offered. But students also mentioned that they thought they could “see” their thought process between drafts, when they brought different versions side-by-side, and that they could understand how peer comments led directly to re-writing. One student said that she felt “more connected to her peers and freer to more honestly critique their papers” because she could “really see [her] growth and the growth prompted by peer comments” between drafts. My hope—and belief—is that this student saw growth not through the editing and perfecting of her prose, but through the critical process of introducing complexity and enriching the intertextual and intersubjective tangle. While some students felt alienated by problems with the technology, at least a few felt a connection through the WIKI, and I think this means its use was justified. But it also suggests that even an activity as seemingly structured as this one is not repeatable, must be changed and altered according to context—would it work as well, or better, had the students been writing something other than an intertextual analysis? The point, I suppose, is not to proscribe a process, but to find ways to emphasize the situatedness and partiality of communication, to draw attention to relationships and choices and the feeling for moving across ideas, genres and mediums. My suggestion is that in paying attention to these things, we develop a feeling for our embodied composition.

### OTHER BODIES

Disability Studies theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that our dominant culture encourages a gaze through which we each ignore our own body and its particularity, and focus instead on the specter of Otherness and deviance. Through this gaze, there is a “privileged state of disembodiment[...]conferred upon spectators, however fraudulent” (“From Wonder to Error” 10). I began this essay by echoing this argument, suggesting as well that by ignoring the body, we may in fact be harming bodies. As Vivian Sobchack argues, “the normative practices of our culture estrange us phenomenologically from our own bodies and the bodies of others. As a consequence our comportment becomes inhibited and restrictive rather than a capacious system and style” (204). In these ways, a composition pedagogy that ignores the body might actually limit our ability to make meaning. I would argue, then, that to understand embodiment is to actually and centrally examine the body, the body-image, the thinking of the body—not only as implied, normative inversions of a range of Other, wrong bodies and not as a default ideal. To “compose” the body is to examine the shadows and scissions that differentially constitute embodiment. Likewise, if we want to truly understand embodied writing, perhaps what we need to most closely study are not ideal, complete texts, but the messy and recursive process of composing, as we break our ideas apart through language. We need to see a polysemous writing process as that which allows for meaning to be made. I believe that, if we see the body more peculiarly, we may in fact develop the tools to critically body the world, to embody discourse, and to develop embodied rhetorics and modes of composition. David Wills suggests that writing “makes explicit the very [lack and] break that constitutes the human body” (Prosthesis 246). If we see this “brokenness” as central to our definition and embodied understanding of the self, then we should also see this as central to our understanding of the writing process.

I’ve already mentioned the ways that I believe my work on the WIKI begins to address disembodied composition. First of all, I think it is unique that the body—and body politics—were at the center of the students’ discussion of one another’s work, whether they were discussing mortality in surprisingly sensitive and philosophical ways, or whether they were discussing race and the manner in which their own bodies had been used by our institution for marketing purposes. Aside from the central importance of these topics, I also believe that the mediums and media through which we navigated shaped our interaction in important ways. I believe a particular politics and practice of embodied textuality can be facilitated by the use of technology such as the WIKI. Further, traditional class activities can

be layered onto these experiences in ways that re-animate the movement of bodies and ideas between texts. This was perhaps not a composing process that was centrally about embodiment, but it was a pedagogy directed sideways and backwards through practices that I believe are critically embodied.

In composition and rhetoric we have, for too long, held onto classical generalizations that belittle the role of the body in thought and in the act of writing. And when the body has been invoked, it has been either as an impossible ideal, or as a baseline for discrimination. One solution is to seek to re-connect mind, body, and writing, and to do so focusing not on ideals, but on the body (and the text) as meaningfully messy and incomplete. It might seem that the goal of such an embodied consciousness is counter-productive: that the teacher would reward progressively more “error”-filled work, and that the student would learn skills that would only “Other” them from the world of standard discourse. But the goal I am focused on here is not just better writing—whether this is measured through cleaner products, or through more smoothly incorporated practices. The goal of such pedagogy is a critical and reflexive thinking, the sort of thinking that perhaps writing can best allow when it is neither clean nor smooth. As we compose media and embodiment, we can refuse the forward march toward a perfectable text/body, and move instead through a recursive process via which gaps, erasures, mistakes and collaborations might be highlighted. This is the “corporeal turn” I’ve suggested. This is a critical turning-away from traditional body-meanings. This is a turn towards recognizing and enabling all bodies. Finally, this is a turn that asks you to revisit what I have argued for here, and perhaps to resist each of my conclusions, instead locating your own beginnings.