



Composition, Creative Writing, and the Digital Humanities

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Review of

Koehler, Adam. *Composition, Creative Writing, and the Digital Humanities*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine shared some thoughts about the job market for English doctoral candidates. “Nobody knows what ‘digital humanities’ means, but if you mention that phrase during an interview you’ll land a job,” she said with a laugh. As an English doctoral student focusing on creative writing and composition studies, I was in a similar position: I had no more than a vague understanding of the digital humanities. What academic areas did it include? What did its scholars study, and what potential did the field hold for English department students, graduates, and professors?

My lack of knowledge stems partially from an ambivalent relationship with technology. I’m a writer, and as Adam Koehler points out, we can be slow to change. I also have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter with whom I spend my non-work time, leaving little room for keeping up with the ever-evolving digital landscape. Koehler’s *Composition, Creative Writing, and the Digital Humanities* provides a satisfying introduction for those new to the digital humanities, while also revealing how the boundaries between composition and creative writing studies stand to become more productively porous as technology influences both fields.

Tim Mayers’ foreword introduces a central premise of the book—that writing is itself a malleable technology, though most people tend not to view it that way. Koehler positions the book as a look at how the “digital turn” is effectively transforming writing inside and outside of the university, and how this turn has already begun and will continue to change writing, research methods, curriculum, and more in English departments. Relying on scholars who have bridged composition and creative writing such as Mayers, Douglas Hesse, and Wendy Bishop, as well as innovative digital writers like Jeff Rice and Kenneth Goldsmith, Koehler traces the rise of “creative composing” (6), arguing that the relationship between print and digital should be seen not as adversarial but as an interdependent ecology.

To work toward an ecological understanding of what often gets termed a divide, Koehler begins by examining how composition and creative writing have each dealt with the digital turn, then goes on to outline the emerging field of digital creative writing studies and the writer's role in the digital composing landscape. The final chapters of the book are concerned with how previous understandings of some basics of writing, such as genre and process, as well as language itself are being transformed by our digital world.

Composition and rhetoric has arguably demonstrated more theoretical interest in the digital than has creative writing. Interests in multimodality—including weaving together the visual, aural and textual—have been important to what Koehler terms critical-creative composition (26). Koehler advocates for the broader term writing studies, which would mean a joining of composition studies and creative writing that to date has not occurred; he also sees potential for academic creative writers to find research interests regarding multimodality. All of this, Koehler acknowledges, would require significant reorienting of English departments and writing pedagogy, including a reconsideration of what constitutes “literary” writing, what kinds of texts are deemed worthy of study, and how scholars and students should approach that study.

Koehler's book hints at some of the current tensions in the creative writing field, including the limitations of the workshop as a pedagogical method, especially for writers of color and women; the literary/publishing world's attitudes about race; and what Martha Dooley, in her 2011 *Writer's Chronicle* piece, calls “novel anxiety”—a growing unease around the strict genre boundaries to which literary writing has traditionally adhered. In a 2017 *New York Times* Book Review piece, Viet Than Nguyen, the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *The Refugees*, called the workshop “a model of pedagogy that is also an object lesson in how power propagates and conceals itself” (Nguyen) and claimed, as Junot Díaz and others have, that the failure of most workshops to address matters of politics and identity leads to hostility towards writers of color, and also to lackluster writing. Nguyen's solution is to teach writing not as “isolated craft,” but in concert with philosophy, cultural studies and related fields. Koehler's book seems to pick up on a similar concern about workshops, but in his view, workshops can be stultified and stultifying not only because of the issues Nguyen raises, but also because many writers and instructors haven't harnessed the potential of the digital world to enliven literature and restructure the study of writing.

Koehler does mention several fiction writers who have embraced the digital world, and this section of the book is effective in pointing out some possibilities inherent in writing across media. Koehler cites Jennifer Egan's Twitter stories and her novel *A Visit From the Goon Squad* as examples of fiction that makes use of the digital. He discusses Kenneth Goldsmith's work and teaching, while also acknowledging his notoriety for instances such as his appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy report. Particularly relevant for Koehler is Goldsmith's course called *Uncreative Writing* that grew out of his book of the same title, in which students are encouraged to borrow from the massive amounts of information in existence to create art, relieving them of the burden of originality.

Koehler addresses other experiments in digital pedagogy, including Robert Coover's hypertext course, which he taught to his "notoriously conservative" (52) writing students, who, though initially reticent, came to enjoy the freedom of writing outside of genre boundaries. Koehler cites Paul Miller's *Rhythm Science* and Miller's insistence that even critics of digital creative writing should understand multimodality's potential for generating new art forms.

Engaging in and teaching digital creative-composition means revising understandings of craft as well as creating new discipline-specific methodologies for research (124). Tim Mayers' perspective on craft as not merely the tools that are used to create art but the multiple forces behind the creation of a text situates Koehler's definition of digital craft-criticism as an investigation of the sociocultural concerns surrounding online art. Jeff Rice's ka-knowledge and the notion of digital writing as the "digital rhetorical practice of assemblage" (89) was helpful for me in envisioning how both compositionists and creative writers could develop research related to writing in digital realms. Koehler rightly points out that while new media embraces innovation, universities and publishers may remain wedded to traditional genres. College curricula can be reconstructed to better reflect the world students inhabit, and courses can focus not on the interpretation and production of texts, but on the production of knowledge. Koehler names two paths forward: creative writing practice and pedagogy can either be *informed* or *transformed* by new media (128). A few qualities of this new writing practice would be nonlinearity, genre blurring, appropriation, and intertextuality, each of which is already gaining momentum in print realms, outside of (or maybe in tandem with) digital composing.

In order for digital creative writing to make progress as a discipline, it must first reckon with its prominent internal naysayers. Koehler contrasts enthused theorists with writers such as Charles Baxter, whose craft criticism in *Burning Down the House* demonstrates wariness about technology and its usefulness to creative writers. Baxter claims that there is no place for inner stillness needed to write in our information-soaked age. Both Baxter and Jonathan Franzen's objections to technology prompt Koehler to argue that writers who eschew the digital are damaging the future of creative writing by narrowing rather than widening the possibilities of digital art to become a transformative mode.

Koehler's book raised important points about what it means for writers to write in voices not their own, and particularly in digital spaces (85), but more could have been done to explore individual writers' forays into the digital, which would have bolstered Koehler's argument for the transformative potential of digital creative writing. Writers like Margaret Atwood, who has debuted novels on Wattpad; Patricia Lockwood, known as the poet laureate of Twitter; and Claudia Rankine, whose 2014 *Citizen* has already become required reading in many English departments, have each published identity-exploring pieces in online venues.

Similarly, more discussion of contemporary debates or innovations around technology and creative writing in the university, perhaps using as evidence AWP articles or conference presentations, could have bolstered Koehler's argument about the future of creative writing as an academic field. How might

instructors of introductory creative writing (who are often contingent laborers) develop digital humanities-inflected curriculum? How can we encourage students to become invested in digital composing projects? I was particularly intrigued by Koehler's discussion of the workshop model, and would have liked more specifics about what a digital creative writing course might look like in terms of pedagogy.

In asserting that creative writing, by engaging in the digital world, can position itself to become a field interested in production of knowledge, Koehler rightly points out the slow-to-change nature of both the publishing industry and academia. This is the greatest obstacle to his vision for the digital humanities. His book successfully continues the conversation about how composition and creative writing studies intersect with the digital world and how each field stands to be transformed by these intersections.