

A Different Kind of Wholeness: Disability Dis-closure and Ruptured Rhetorics of Multimodal Collaboration and Revision in *The Ride Together*



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Abstract: In this article, I explore normative assumptions regarding multimodality from the perspective of disability studies, and focus particularly on how coherence and wholeness work in disciplinary conversations and professional statements. I offer a reading of the hybrid graphic-written text *The Ride Together* as a way to resist these normative impulses and to explore a different kind of wholeness at work in the interaction between text and image. I argue for appreciating the rhetorical strategy of dis-closure, which I define as occurring when disability frustrates the normative expectations of multimodal, compositional, and narrative closure in productive and generative ways. I analyze multimodal collaboration and revision in *The Ride Together*, arguing that insights from comics studies, together with an appreciation of dis-closure, present alternatives to the limiting disciplinary focus on coherence and wholeness.

Multimodality, particularly the combination of word with image, is typically celebrated as a way of optimizing meaning, cohering information, and generally enriching the composing environment. Describing the experience of reading a sign with pictorial and word elements, literacy theorist Gunther Kress writes that multimodality is “simple, really,” and explains that each element contributes its own semiotic work to make a harmonious whole—“Writing *names* and image *shows*, while colour *frames* and *highlights*, each to maximum effect and benefit” (1). Furthermore, each of these elements having “its distinct potentials for meaning” functions to form a whole and typifies for Kress “the argument for taking ‘multimodality’ as the normal state of human communication” (1).

What does it mean to assume that the elements forming coherence in multimodality are “normal”? Kress’s use of “normal” invites considerations from the perspective of disability. Disability studies theorists such as Lennard Davis have interrogated the concept of normalcy, asking crucial questions about assumptions underlying what is presupposed as normal, showing it to be a socio-cultural construct of a specific time and place rather than a naturalized state. Applying these interrogations to the frequent deployment of multimodality in composition studies, it’s useful to re-think the assumption that multimodality is a “normal” state of human communication and that multimodality typically results in enhanced communication and optimized meaning for all users.

In “Multimodality in Motion,” a collaborative webtext, several composition theorists have begun this effort, noting that “multimodality as it is commonly used implies an ableist understanding of the human composer” (Yergeau et al.) Discussing multimodality and new media, Sean Zdenek notes a similar problem: “Too often, our excitement about new media [...] leaves intact a set of normative assumptions about students’ bodies, minds, and abilities.” Although there is potential in multimedia for all users, impulses such as these can lead to an unexamined tendency in composition studies to celebrate multimodality without acknowledging its potential complications for disabled users. One way in which this tendency functions is by attaching multimodality’s value to coherence.

Several key theorists laud coherence and wholeness as the main benefit or component of multimodality. Kathleen Yancey argues that coherence can be a defining characteristic of multimodal and digital texts, writing that “coherence in digital compositions seems to be a function of a pattern that is created through the relationships between and among context, screen, image, the visual, the aural, the verbal, and with repetition and multiplicity as the common features” (95). Similarly, Jody Shipka, in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, argues for an understanding of multimodality beyond digital texts that supports a “more comprehensive theory of composing” and that treats the

“composing process as a dynamic, multimodal whole” (132). Although these arguments for coherence and wholeness do not set out to exclude considerations of disability and accessibility, they risk being taken up uncritically in ways that can perpetuate normative expectations about the composing experience, particularly in contexts in which disabled and nondisabled composers collaborate.

Specifically, the emphasis on coherence and wholeness and the celebration of completeness and clarity that is expected and accepted in multimodal composing environments can be inhospitable to disability experience. The experience of disability in physical, cultural, and social spaces designed for nondisabled bodies is often not simple, clear, or complete but instead is productively and generatively fragmented, messy and confusing, particularly when disabled and nondisabled composers attempt to collaborate. Without a way of understanding multimodality as not hinging on a normative drive for coherence and wholeness, disabled rhetors’ contributions in rhetorical situations risk being devalued or ignored altogether, particularly in the classroom. Indeed, considerations of disability and accessibility have yet to be taken up comprehensively in multimodal composition studies and already risk further marginalization, or, as Yergeau et al. suggest in “Multimodality in Motion”, tend to be relegated to the realm of after-the-fact, “retrofitted” fixes. Recent scholarship such as *On Multimodality* (Alexander and Rhodes), *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook* (Lutkewitte) and *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* (Bowen and Whithaus) do not explicitly or comprehensively consider the possibilities that disability may occasion for multimodal studies.

This trend is in keeping with a tendency in foundational texts of multimodality to presume nondisabled users, a tendency that includes pedagogical approaches. The New London Group’s concept of multiliteracies, for example, advocates for a pedagogy of multimodal learning and expression, but does not “address learning differences from the perspective of disability” (Dolmage, “Disability Studies Pedagogy”). As Molly J. Scanlon notes, collaboration is an under-studied element of multimodality. In the context of disability, this absence is even more pronounced. For writing teachers in particular, there is a dearth of theory and practice regarding how to attend to the intersection of disability, multimodality and collaboration in the classroom.

The assumptions of coherence and wholeness underlying theories of multimodality can also be found in larger disciplinary conversations in composition, particularly in professional statements, which exert influence in the classroom and shape institutional norms by recommending guidelines, outcomes and frameworks for pedagogy. The [Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition \(Council\)](#), the [Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies](#) (National) and the [Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing](#) (Council), each, to a certain extent, assumes a relatively normative student and teacher, and lack specific attention to disability, accessibility or non-neurotypical perspectives, particularly in multimodal situations. In each statement, for example, the term “students” is deployed universally, without any defining characteristics, a rhetorical choice that assumes a norm.

In this essay, I explore and then intervene in this trend by drawing attention to comics, a growing area of interest in composition studies, disability studies and narrative medicine. As Dale Jacobs (*Graphic*), Jason Helms, Elizabeth Losh, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, and Zander Cannon, and the contributors to a recent special issue of *Composition Studies* (Jacobs, “Comics”) have shown, comics, functioning as multimodal literacies, can augment and intervene in composition and multimodality. Comics are also emerging as a particularly rich genre for the study of disability in a range of cultural and literary contexts (Foss, Gray and Whalen). Comics such as *Stitches* (Small), *el Deafo* (Bell), *Epileptic* (B.) and *The Ride Together* (Karasik and Karasik), the latter on which I will focus in this essay, demonstrate the productive possibilities of exploring disability in a multimodal medium. As I explore, theories of comics that emphasize rupture and fragmentation in multimodal texts are particularly useful for questioning the assumed value of coherence and wholeness in our disciplinary conversations and professional statements about multimodality. Indeed, as Jacobs and Dolmage assert in their study of disability and comics, it’s necessary to explore the “difficult articulations” of how “both self and trauma/disability are constructed in the multimodal textual space of a comics memoir” (69). Disability often functions in comics in difficult, unclear, and messy ways, in which meaning confronts a void or resists coherence. Since comics’ difficult articulations of disability resist wholeness and coherence, they are worth exploring for their radical potential for shaking up normative assumptions of multimodality.

To illustrate how our current disciplinary frameworks and pedagogical conversations frequently assume a normative composer, and to suggest alternatives to assumptions of normativity, I explore how multimodality functions—particularly in collaboration and revision—in the hybrid memoir *The Ride Together: A Brother and Sister’s Memoir of Autism in the Family*, composed in alternating written and graphic chapters by Judy and Paul Karasik. This memoir operates in the difficult articulation of trauma, turning specifically on the question of abuse. In this context, multimodal collaboration and revision generate rupture and fragmentation rather than coherence and wholeness, posing counterexamples to the coherence and normalcy assumed in current disciplinary conversations, frameworks, statements and guidelines. In these situations, multimodality depicts meaning becoming diminished, fragmented and even absent rather than made whole and coherent. When the Karasiks learn, for example, that Brook Farm, the

residential program where their autistic brother David has been living for years, is under investigation for widespread physical and sexual abuse, they experience a crisis of meaning that plays out in multimodal format. David does not disclose whether he has experienced any violence or abuse, a non-disclosure that both Judy and Paul struggle with intensely in their written and graphic accounts.

The Ride Together contains a series of meta-compositional moments in which the Karasiks make their processes of collaboration and revision legible and visible. Rather than editing out the ruptures and discontinuities in their multimodal composition in favor of wholeness and coherence, the Karasiks emphasize their difficulties, a decision supported by alternative theories of comics that emphasize the potential of rupture and fragmentation for producing meaning. These scenes of rupture are prompted by the rhetorical strategy of dis-closure, which I define as occurring when disability frustrates the normative expectations of multimodal, compositional and narrative closure in productive and generative ways. David practices dis-closure when he decides not to disclose the abuse at Brook Farm; the family must deal with the implications of this non-disclosure not only for how they understand David, but also for how this dis-closure ruptures their neurotypical multimodal composition practices. These implications ask crucial questions about the ways in which multimodal expressions are expected to function along lines of wholeness and coherence in our theories, pedagogies and disciplinary conversations. Exploring these implications can encourage a way of understanding the “difficult articulations” of disability and multimodality as important and productive, without the normative expectations of closure, clarity, completeness, or full understanding.

As a complexly intersectional text, *The Ride Together* offers readers a rich interplay of identifications to explore, including race and gender, which I focus on elsewhere (“Crip Mammy”). While these intersections clearly affect the multimodal composing environment, in this essay I focus my exploration on neurotypical and non-neurotypical approaches to collaboration and revision to place them within a disciplinary conversation in need of change. Ideally, recognizing these complex collaborations can lead to changes in pedagogical practice, making room for collaborations from both disabled and nondisabled composers and a more accessible space for multimodal composition. By changing disciplinary conversations to better reflect disability concerns, pedagogical practices can change to better support diverse composers.

Dis-Closure and Delimiting Multimodal Collaboration

Multimodal Collaboration: Harmonious and Neurotypical

As Gabriel Sealy-Morris has explored, the WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Writing (Council) and the NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies (National) can both be applied to the study of comics and comics in the classroom. This application can be extended to the study of disability, revealing how normative assumptions undergird parts of these position statements. NCTE’s Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies, for example, asserts that “integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond illustration or decoration” (National). Judy and Paul’s written and graphic descriptions of their brother and his autism initially conform to this expectation of enhancement and harmonious integration. In an early chapter, Judy describes asking her mother about David’s autism. Joan answers, “You know the way you look at something, Judy, and it’s just there? Or the way you hear something and it’s just a sound (35)? She continues, “What David sees or hears breaks into a lot of little pieces before it gets to him. So he needs to put it all back together. [...] The parts of his brain are the same—it’s the way they’re connected that’s different ... Things arrive splintered.”

This verbal description reinforces a graphic representation that Paul provides in a preceding chapter, which details a scene in which Joan, carrying a snack on a tray, asks David a question as he watches television. In this scene, images conform to neurotypical perception and experience. Shapes and proportions render a realistic depiction of a mother asking her son a question; representations of sensory modes such as the sound of a voice or the smell of food do not seem out of the ordinary (14). Directly following this panel, in Paul’s representation of David’s experience, the sounds, smells, touches and sights of the same scene are scrambled and splintered. Joan’s question becomes a giant, disembodied hand tapping David on the back, while oversized pieces of food populate a floating plate and a three dimensional figure pops out of the television (15). These panels, taken together, in conjunction with Judy’s conversation with her mother, present a scene of collaboration in which modes of writing and comics support and enhance each other to represent David’s experience as different from his siblings’. This collaboration is in keeping with both the rules for “good” multimodality and, by some accounts, the standards for “good” comics, each mode enhancing the other beyond simple illustration. Comics theorist Scott McCloud explains that “in comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading” (156). McCloud draws athletic, able-bodied figure skaters to represent this harmonious collaborative relationship, the male skater holding up the female skater easily.

Judy and Paul's harmonious collaboration also initially reflects elements of the "Process" Outcomes in the WPA's statement regarding First Year Composition (Council). As their coordinated written and visual depictions of David show, Judy and Paul "experience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes" and "adapt composing processes for a variety of technologies and modalities" in their work together. Their collaboration is initially fairly seamless, as they are each able to adapt their strengths in different representational modes to best support the other. In short, they model an idealized and harmonious multimodal collaboration, both in agreement regarding how to describe and represent David's autism for their readers and collaborating well in multiple modes.

This picture of harmonious collaboration between Judy and Paul typifies assumptions that are embedded in pedagogical conversations regarding how multimodal collaboration works: it acknowledges the different skills and abilities that composers bring to collaborative multimodal composition without fully engaging with the more critical challenges disability brings to the composing scene, particularly in the classroom. The NCTE's Position Statement, for example, features collaboration as a prominent feature of multimodality, situating this collaboration primarily according to different skill levels: "Because of the complexity of multimodal projects and the different levels of skill and sensitivity each individual brings to their execution, such projects often demand high levels of collaboration and teamwork" (National). Similarly, Anne-Marie Pederson and Carolyn Skinner present the benefits and challenges of collaboration on multimodal projects in relation to the different skill levels students bring to projects. It is a benefit, for example, that students can "draw on shared knowledge" of different modes or technologies, but it can also be a challenge if students "choose to work only on parts of a project" because of "different levels of familiarity" or "personal preferences" regarding modes or technologies (44).

This attention to different levels of skill, sensitivity, familiarity, personal preference or previous knowledge is not explicitly placed in terms of ability or disability, or the more challenging questions that disability poses to the collaboration process. While these guidelines consider differing skill levels, they do not go far enough in imagining the radical challenge and productive change that disabled students invite. To a certain extent, Judy and Paul's initial experience of multimodal collaboration reflects this current approach to collaboration—one relatively untroubled by the radical questions that disability asks. Their collaboration goes well initially because each, as a neurotypical composer, is able to work with the mode most comfortable to him or her, supported by a composing environment that values normative discourses. Their collaboration appears whole and coherent in this neurotypical context.

If multimodal theorists and practitioners took more seriously the questions that disability occasions for collaboration, existing conversation about collaboration in multimodal environments would face deeper challenges. Most pressing, multimodal theorists and teachers would have to account for the more comprehensive changes to multimodal collaboration that disability occasions in classrooms. As Brenda Brueggemann has shown in the composition classroom, "disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, and sensory" (321). Disabled students bring different strengths and needs to multimodal composition environments. For example, while not all blind students work the same way, it is productive to recognize that a blind student will bring disability insight to the multimodal classroom. A deaf or physically disabled student might, in turn, bring different insights. These differences ask deeper questions about the multimodal composing environment than does the general emphasis on skill level, familiarity and preference currently circulating in disciplinary and pedagogical conversations.

Defining Dis-closure: Resisting Norms in Multimodal Collaboration

Dis-closure—the process by which disability frustrates normative expectations of multimodal, compositional and narrative closure—has the potential to interrupt tendencies in multimodality favoring harmony, clarity and coherence. Dis-closure can also revise the concept of closure in comics as popularized by McCloud. This revision, together with alternative comics theories, demonstrates one way to invite a different kind of wholeness in multimodal composition.

As McCloud explains, one of the most important interactions between text, artist, and audience in comics is the process of closure, which is the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). With comics, closure names how readers make mental leaps between panels, closing the gap between what is shown and what can be known. Ideally, "closure allows us to connect" separate moments between graphic panels and to "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67) between panels of images and/or words. McCloud describes closure in graphic and written expression in relation to the everyday acts of closure that we supposedly all make naturally. He explains, "In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience ... In recognizing and relating to other people, we all depend heavily on our learned ability of closure" (63). What remains unquestioned here, however, are normative assumptions about past experience and learned abilities. McCloud's understanding of closure assumes a neurotypical and normative perspective and experience.

This emphasis on normative closure in comics resonates with the emphasis on harmony, wholeness, coherence and completeness in multimodal composition studies. Similar to the expectation in multimodal theories that different

modes of word and image make meaning insofar as they coalesce to form an effective whole, closure for McCloud means that readers draw particular mental connections, “naturally” see a bigger picture and appreciate part in relation to whole. In multimodality, Kress’ designation of multimodality as the “normal” state of communication, as words and images work together in harmony, reinforces McCloud’s universalist account of comics reading. Unquestioned in both of these conversations is the possibility that this emphasis on closure, wholeness and coherence is a normative, neurotypical and potentially ableist expectation.

Dis-closure functions differently, interrupting the expectation of wholeness and coherence. Dis-closure occurs when disability frustrates normative closure, generating new and productive ways of thinking about coherence and different approaches to wholeness in multimodality. David practices dis-closure when he refuses to reveal information about Brook Farm, frustrating any closure on the question of his abuse and causing Judy and Paul to revise their multimodal composition processes in unexpected ways. Tracking the struggles and adjustments that Judy and Paul experience, especially their attempt to include David in the memoir’s revision, suggests implications for our current disciplinary conversations, position statements and pedagogies featuring multimodality.

David’s rhetorical strategy of dis-closure has the potential to more radically ask questions of normative multimodal composition processes and to suggest alternatives for more diverse composers. In addition to his non-disclosure regarding potential abuse, David practices dis-closure at the end of the memoir when Judy and Paul attempt to include him in the revision of their memoir. In a final chapter that combines contributions from both siblings, Paul depicts a meta-compositional scene in which he and Judy try to involve David in drafting and editing the memoir, but David does not seem to want to participate. When they ask him if he has any final words about the memoir or something to add, he says, “Now that’s enough of that” and strolls off to perform one of his favorite *Superman* scripts (199).

From a neurotypical perspective, David does not seem to achieve much rhetorical success here. For example, he does not appear to attend to the major outcomes recommended by the WPA’s statement (Council). His demurral does not showcase his Rhetorical Knowledge, or his “ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act on that analysis in comprehending and creating texts.” He does not seem to demonstrate Critical Thinking, Reading and Composing by illustrating his “ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts.” It is telling that these first two WPA outcomes feature the word “ability” in their definitions and, in the case of Rhetorical Knowledge, the potential “to act.” These outcomes risk excluding disabled composers and collaborations between mixed-ability rhetors and leave little room for disability, disabled rhetors, or collaborations between composers of diverse abilities.

However, as I explore below, from a non-neurotypical perspective, it’s possible to understand David’s demurral and *Superman* performance differently, as a potential site of collaboration. By including their scene of attempted collaboration, Paul and Judy invite readers to ask questions about David’s potential as a collaborator. In thinking along with *The Ride Together*, it becomes possible to tackle crucial questions: how can we understand a response such as David’s *Superman* as a practice of multimodal collaboration, and how can we support an approach such as this in the classroom?

Ruptured Rhetorics of Multimodal Closure and Revision

Paul and Judy’s transition from harmonious to strained collaboration illustrates the challenges and opportunities that disability poses to multimodality. The challenges that Judy and Paul experience, prompted by David’s dis-closure, can suggest new ways to make collaborative composition processes more inclusive. I illustrate these possibilities with scenes demonstrating Judy and Paul’s challenges with multimodal composition, showing ways of re-emphasizing elements of our disciplinary guidelines to invite diverse rhetors. A disability-focused approach to these elements, combined with theories from comics that emphasize rupture and fragmentation, rather than closure, coherence and wholeness, can revise our disciplinary conversations to be more inclusive of diverse rhetors and supportive of non-neurotypical students in classroom multimodal composing environments.

Judy’s Ruptured Written Rhetoric

Judy learns of David’s potential abuse via an act of reading, but quickly launches into a multimodal revision, with which she struggles to achieve closure. While living in Italy for a few months, Judy receives an email message from her older brother Michael notifying her of the abuse that she records verbatim for her readers:

Things are not good at Brook Farm.

...

Brook Farm is losing its license to operate, rampant reported cases of abuse both physical & sexual. We were first contacted last Friday and have since learned that Brook Farm is in deep trouble. Many people are being taken back to Maryland for replacement within the next 48 hours. David will be taken care of by a very highly placed person (who is in constant touch with us). While he is home this weekend, he will be shown new places in Montgomery County to live. The situation is under control.
180-181

Judy repeats Michael's words again directly after this verbatim reproduction, reiterating for herself and her audience the most troubling part: "Rampant reported cases of abuse both physical & sexual" (181). It's noteworthy that Judy, a book editor and accomplished writer, leans on her brother Michael's terse email to reveal the abuse to readers and then repeats it. As the WPA Outcomes indicate, the writing process is "collaborative" and "social," but Judy's engagement here is less than productive, as she opts for recitation rather than collaboration. Perhaps as a way to engage different modes, she also depends on Paul's typical mode—visual depiction—using highly visual imagery in order to convey her emotions in fragments. Her writing style mimics what are likely the rapid-fire images she sees in her head after reading: "David's rib. David's head nodding because of his medication the day of the Open House. His bad back. A finger that had also been broken" (181).

By revising her writing and blending visual and written modes, Judy can be understood as attempting to follow the rules of "good" composition and "effective" multimodal composing; however, she does not experience much success. Under its third objective, "Processes," the WPA outcome statement describes how "writers use multiple strategies, or composing processes, to conceptualize, develop and finalize projects," noting that these processes are "seldom linear" and often "flexible" (Council). The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing also advocates "developing flexible writing processes," noting too that these processes are "not linear" and often mean "incorporat[ing] evidence and ideas from written, visual, graphic, verbal, and other kinds of texts" (Council). As both professional statements indicate, writing and its stages can be non-linear and recursive, but Judy's experience seems more frustrating than generative. Judy's use of the visual mode here is fractured and fragmented, rather than cohesive and whole. She attempts a meta-compositional revision, filling in the fragmented images with more highly visual imagined scenes: "I imagined David being hit, thrown down. I didn't like thinking about sexual abuse. I imagined someone yelling at my brother" (181). Judy then develops this revision, adding details such as words and movement to the visualization: "I imagined David frightened. He calls out in his words that we understand but other people don't. My tall elegant awkward brother, crying as he falls ... David confused and hurt and scared and falling down. Being hit" (181). As she depends more on visual imagery, Judy's written expression falters, becoming sentence fragments. Still revising, she then attempts to get more specific in her mind's eye, but bumps up against David's dis-closure and can only ask unanswerable questions: "Then something happened with enough force to break a rib. Was he hit with a fist or with a cane? Or was he kicked?" (181). Unsure, she draws her reverie to a frustrated, partial close by relating that there was no one to help David and no one to tell about the abuse and concludes simply: "I left my brother alone" (181).

David's dis-closure leads Judy to experiment more with visual imagery and multiple modes that are meant to fill a gap, but she ends up with repetition, fragments, questions and incoherence. The NCTE Statement on Multimodal Literacies focuses on the "ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color and animation," among other things, but Judy's process is labored and difficult. It's hard to rationalize her visual imagery as "enhanc[ing] or transform[ing]" the meaning of the scene she is representing (National) as she flounders to figure out what exactly happened. Repeated attempts at revision do not lead to any more wholeness or clarity regarding the situation or how she represents it. Judy's non-linear attempt at describing and then revising her account, shifting between stages in the writing process, is not particularly conclusive. In short, David's dis-closure means that Judy cannot achieve closure or multimodal coherence regarding the situation at Brook Farm. Judy's attempt to convey her message with writing that is flexible, non-linear and multimodal—all elements of "good" composition in our disciplinary statements and conversations—ultimately fails her.

Yet Judy's turn to the visual mode to describe the potential abuse, even in its incompleteness, makes sense from a multimodal perspective if taken in consideration with theories of comics that welcome fragmentation and ruptures. As Judy reads about the abuse in her brother's email, she seems to take on the role of a reader of comics, using multimodal and specifically visual strategies to imagine what might have happened. Because of David's dis-closure, Judy cannot know exactly what happened and has to try to fill in gaps herself—not unlike a reader of comics attempting to make closure. As comic theorist Hilary Chute writes, "a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning" (452). Unlike McCloud's definition of closure, closure in this sense is not always harmonious or coherent, but instead can be disruptive and disconnected between written and visual modes. This disruption is productive. As Jason Helms writes, the different modes of comics "break down the barriers that text is often thought to erect: image and text, visual and

verbal, author and reader, content and form.” Judy’s oscillation between written and visual modes, as well as her repeated revisions, demonstrate her attempt to break barriers in her search for meaning.

Paul’s Ruptured Visual Rhetoric

Like Judy, Paul struggles intensely to understand the abuse at Brook Farm in the wake of David’s dis-closure; this struggle is reflected in his difficulties composing a graphic chapter. In Paul’s meta-compositional chapter called “Memory Believes,” a character named Gorilla Watson is depicted drawing a black wavy line through the chapter title while saying that the chapter is “under repairs” because “it stinks” (155). Gorilla Watson is described by Judy as someone “who had been a character on the *Superman* television show and whom David had transformed, over the years, into a general but potent threat lurking outside the family tent” (148). To a certain extent, Paul’s use of Gorilla Watson—David’s creation—makes David graphically present. However, this presence creates discordance in the text. In the abbreviated chapter, Gorilla Watson admonishes Paul for trying to tell a story about the family, all grown up, at the beach, swimming happily in their own style and in different directions, a metaphor for independence and trust (156). This scene is not pictured and is only related through written description, a sign that Paul cannot reconcile verbal description with the graphic images. Multimodality in a traditional sense fails as Paul is unable to use words and images to support each other; closure is impossible between image and word or between panels.

Significantly, Paul decides to include this “scrapped” chapter, rather than smooth over his compositional difficulties by editing it out, a rhetorical decision that is supported by approaches to comics that favor disjunction as producing its own meaning. Charles Hatfield, who characterizes comics as an “art of tensions,” (32) allows space for disjunctive moments such as Paul’s scrapped chapter in comics. For Hatfield, “the fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable” (xii-xiv). This chapter is particularly unstable, with its word-image disconnection, as it works productively to convey the crisis in meaning for Paul that follows David’s dis-closure, resisting normative aims in comics and multimodality. For Paul, David’s dis-closure prevents traditional comics closure, in which the space between panels functions to solidify meaning and connection between words and images.

Paul’s half-finished chapter violates the standards for successful multimodal composition in that it ends abruptly, lacks coherence, and does not present wholeness or a harmonious relationship between words and images. The chapter resists current disciplinary conversations and statements which generally tout “the ease with which we can combine words [and] images” (National) or the productive “interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements” (Council). Instead, this chapter relishes in the “difficult articulation” of David’s dis-closure, aligning itself more with theories in comics which welcome disconnection, particularly between panels. As Barbara Postema writes of the space in between panels: gutters do not necessarily cohere; the “gap between fragmented moments” may not be an explicit “filling in blanks” but often supports “retroactive signification” instead (49, 50).

Something akin to a retroactive signification branches into the following chapter, as Paul, like Judy, tries to rely on a process-centered approach by attempting to revise the previous chapter’s story. As with Judy, this re-telling does not conform to disciplinary expectations about how effective revision should function because David’s dis-closure prevents coherence. In this second attempt Paul tells the story of the family via the story of *Superman*. He portrays David as a loyal fan of *Superman*, reaching through the television screen to become part of the show and throwing Gorilla Watson in jail, while the rest of the family loses interest (159-160). The panels attempt to take on David’s point of view, described by Paul. The chapter changes tone visually when Paul writes, “Then one day David was sent to Brook Farm,” and includes a dark panel with only the word “click” to suggest the slamming of prison doors (160). In the final full-page panel of the chapter, David is drawn in a chair, facing away from the viewer, with Gorilla Watson hovering ominously behind him. They are both behind bars, with David’s profile visible as Gorilla Watson turns his face around to readers, saying, “David’s the best roommate a fella could want” (162). Like Judy, Paul does not know what happened to David. He struggles to try to represent the situation, opting to convey the threat of violence that likely always surrounds David, by using Gorilla Watson, David’s own creation, to relay this. Whereas Paul represents the violence he believes David experienced in this particularly haunting image, Judy eventually gives up pursuing what may always be an unanswerable question. She attempts to make an incomplete closure: “Why David was beaten, which I believe to be true, we will never know. We will never know the circumstances. It doesn’t really matter; David was hurt” (185).

Dis-closure and Non-normative Revision

It is typically a given in composition theory and pedagogy that revision makes writing better, more coherent and cohesive, but when Judy and Paul turn to multimodal revision as they attempt to understand the abuse at Brook

Farm, each experiences frustration and only partial closure, an experience that leads them to what I consider a different kind of wholeness, one which features disability and dis-closure at its core. Rather than Judy's writing becoming clearer, more cohesive and orderly, it becomes repetitive, fragmented and confused. Paul includes an incomplete, half-abandoned chapter. Rather than understanding these multimodal efforts as poor writing or "bad comics," comics scholarship teaches us to view Judy and Paul's careful recording of disjuncture in their composition process as resisting norms and producing meaning. This resistance supports pedagogical approaches to multimodality based on a different kind of wholeness and coherence.

In their attempted revisions, Judy and Paul practice a multimodal version of what queer disability theorist Robert McRuer calls decomposition, which is an approach to composing that resists assumptions that writing or bodies should function a certain way. Positing that composition as it's often understood is a process that "reduces difference" and is "connected to order," McRuer asks, "Can composition theory work against the simplistic formulation of that which is proper, orderly, and harmonious?" (48). Decomposition is explicitly connected to disability, resisting the "compulsory able-bodiedness" that expects all bodies to be normal, nondisabled, coherent bodies that produce normalized, orderly and coherent compositions. In the classroom, decomposition favors agitation over order and attempts to "resist the impulse to focus on finished products" (49). Paul's decision to include his "scrapped" chapter—the one Gorilla Wilson draws a line through—is an effective example of composition that resists normative wholeness and coherence.

In this way, Judy and Paul's ruptured rhetorics of collaboration and revision also represent what Dolmage calls a "messy" and "partial" approach to composition, which resists the normative assumption that everyone writes in "error free, straight, and logical prose" via a "writing process that is a portfolio of progression towards perfection and away from all evidence of struggle and labor" ("Writing," 113; 110-111). This approach, together with decomposition, can challenge WPA Outcomes focused on "Knowledge of Conventions" including "correctness." In the classroom, writing teachers might ask themselves critical questions, such as: how can we reimagine writing and multimodal conventions not based on "perceptions of correctness and appropriateness"? This re-imagination can be productive, especially if considered in relation to broader readings of the "flexible" and "non-linear" processes of the WPA Outcomes (Council). How flexible and non-linear might our accepted writing and multimodal strategies have to be to accommodate David's dis-closure? Judy and Paul's telling of the abuse at Brook Farm can never be a finished product primarily because David's choice not to disclose any abuse—itself perhaps a non-normative collaborative act—frustrates any normative possibility of coherence or closure. Most productively, Judy and Paul's struggle to complete their multimodal composition—not edited out but reproduced on the page in word and image—shows how it's possible to question accepted truths about multimodality and inspire pedagogical change.

A Different Kind of Wholeness: Pedagogical Directions

Dis-closure has the potential to significantly change pedagogy, making multimodal classrooms more accessible spaces. The NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies addresses accessibility broadly by invoking the digital divide, quoting the BETHA group: "we must call on our institutions to provide the necessary support and infrastructural, cultural, and technological adjustments, including access to technology for people with diverse abilities and needs" (National). As writing teachers, we can use this statement to imagine more radical change. In addition to access to technology, people of diverse abilities also need access to classroom practices of multimodal composition, including collaboration and revision. Judy and Paul's seemingly unsuccessful attempt to involve David in their collaboration at their memoir's end demonstrates how rhetorical situations of multimodal composition, including collaboration and revision, remain normative and neurotypical if they do not imaginatively invite alternative participation. This scene, however, also suggests ways of amplifying attention to access in position statements and disciplinary conversations to better accommodate contributions of diverse rhetors.

To more fully accommodate neurodiverse students, writing teachers may need to adjust their definitions of what counts as collaboration and reimagine their approaches to process-oriented practices. When Judy and Paul ask David to contribute to a draft of their memoir, they are attempting to use a process-oriented approach, expecting David to neurotypically practice the social and collaborative aspects of writing and the non-linear recursivity that accompanies revision. David, however, may have a different, more radically imaginative approach to collaborative and social aspects of writing that does not align easily with his siblings' approach.

A neurodiverse approach to collaboration and revision means rethinking what qualifies as collaboration and revision. When Judy reflects on dropping David off at Brook Farm's associated facility after a short road trip a few years before the abuse surfaces, she notes her feelings of discomfort, situating this perspective in terms of revision: "I felt strange, leaving David behind, even though he was in good hands, even though my duty, my boring duty, was done and it was time for me to get into the car and go. Something felt unfinished, like a piece of uneven writing you put into a

drawer. Because you can't figure it out, you move on to something else. You'll have to come back to it later" (153). Several times throughout the memoir, both Judy and Paul take this "revised" approach to David. Similar to Postema's "retroactive signification," they don't understand him or his situation at the time, but in hindsight, understand his words and his actions better. The significance of this lesson is perhaps shown most clearly in the final chapter's aforementioned meta-compositional scene when Judy and Paul invite David to collaborate on their draft and revision of the memoir. They draw attention to their process of revision and collaboration rather than edit it out, relating that "there's more stuff about us getting older" in this iteration and tell David, "we thought maybe you'd have a good idea of what to say at the end" (196, 199).

The siblings can be understood, here, as attempting to practice what are generally thought of in existing disciplinary conversations as good strategies for collaboration and revision. They can be understood, for example, as attempting to develop and enact the "flexible writing processes" described in documents such as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (Council) and WPA Outcomes (Council). By trying to include David, they are attempting to "use feedback to revise texts to make them appropriate" for their context and "work with others in various stages of writing" (Council, "Framework"). David, however, as mentioned, demurs at their request for participation, saying "Now that's enough of that" and in the last panel of the memoir, is pictured as striding away to perform one of his *Superman* shows. While it's possible to interpret this as David being dismissive of siblings' efforts or unwilling to collaborate, it's also possible to take David's actions and words as an invitation for a different, more imaginative interpretation.

David is collaborating and revising the composition of his siblings' memoir in his chosen way—it may not be a normative or neurotypical approach, but it's performative and filled with potential. David's performances of his *Superman* shows are thoroughly multimodal endeavors—filled with action, visuals, sound, words and movement. In this scene, he is drawn as a large figure, confidently striding ahead and smiling, occupying almost an entire panel-less page, the edges of which bleed out into a facing blank page, suggesting expansiveness and possibility (200). Paul appears in a small panel off to the side, looking up at David, his head breaking the frame slightly. The rupture suggests Paul is changing his perspective on David, looking at him differently in the memoir's final image.

This alternative reading of non-normative collaboration invites a resetting of accepted truths in current collaborative writing theories. David's *Superman* show might be understood more radically as a neurodiverse approach to process-centered strategy such as that described in the WPA Outcomes (Council), the NCTE Position Statement (National) or the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (Council). The *Superman* show David performs might be understood as a particularly "non-linear" and "flexible" way to collaborate with and revise the *Superman* story that Paul told in his own revised chapter, inserting his own take on how to keep the character alive. David may not be executing collaboration and revision in a typical way—he is not isolating that chapter, marking it up with a red pen or discussing with Paul a different approach. But he is giving "productive feedback" and "adapt[ing] composing processes for a variety of [...] modalities" in his performance (Council, "Outcomes"). From a non-neurotypical perspective, he is "us[ing] composing processes and tools" such as the performance of *Superman* "as a means to discover and reconsider ideas" such as those presented in Paul's revised chapter (Council, "Outcomes").

Via his performance, it's possible to understand him as "easily combin[ing] and mov[ing] between drama, art, text, music, speech, sound, [and] physical movement" (National). He is certainly "incorporat[ing] evidence and ideas from written, visual, graphic, verbal and other kinds of texts" with *Superman* (Council, "Framework"). David's launching of his *Superman* show is a rhetorical strategy based on action, emotion and invention. He is embodying "productive feedback" by enacting an alternative, more imaginative approach to multimodal composition. His performance invites others to think of him differently. David's collaboration and revision is not traditional or typical, but can be understood as successfully attentive to crucial areas of pedagogy, including the emphasis on flexible strategies, process-oriented approaches, critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge.

Rhetorical strategies such as dis-closure not only reveal how multimodal composing processes are assumed to be normative and neurotypical, but also point toward alternatives. Ideally, recognizing the value of non-normative rhetorical strategies such as dis-closure could inspire multimodal composition teachers to break free from normative expectations revolving around wholeness, coherence and closure in the classroom. For example, what might a collaborative peer review session for a multimodal project look like if a rhetorical strategy like dis-closure were valued? How might teachers re-value revision if the revised material remained in a multimodal project rather than being edited out? Can teachers attempt to re-read what appears as unwillingness to collaborate (in a normative way) in a multimodal project as a neurodiverse contribution in and of itself? While I don't suggest imagining a student exactly like David in the multimodal classroom, it might be productive to think through how a non-normative strategy such as dis-closure might make the multimodal composition classroom a more accessible space for neurodiverse students. Teachers, for example, may need to stretch the "flexible" and "non-linear" approaches evoked in broader disciplinary conversations in more imaginative ways. The normative "social aspects" of collaborative writing may also

need reassessment.

For writing teachers, recognizing rhetorical strategies such as dis-closure means opening up to alternative ways that all students can collaborate and revise in the multimodal composition classroom. As Melanie Yergeau demonstrates, in writing as well as in diagrams, the identities and discourses of “autistics” and “neurotypicals” are not necessarily separate. Nondisabled, neurodiverse and temporarily able-bodied students are also poised to benefit from changes to pedagogy occasioned by disability. Most significantly, all students can benefit from an approach to multimodality untethered from assumptions of wholeness and coherence. Although multimodality has been positioned as a composition practice that favors coherence, wholeness, clarity and order, the practices of multimodal composition can invite and support generative messiness, fragments, ruptures and disorder, particularly in contexts of collaboration and revision. Similarly, although comics are often valued according to a standard regarding how well words and images connect and engage readers in producing closure, different possibilities exist, some of which take disconnection as a given in multimodality. Dis-closure is an alternative possibility specific to the imaginative radical potential of disability, demonstrating how non-normative collaboration and revision is not only possible but rhetorically effective and successful.

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