

Beyond ‘Digital’:

What Women’s Activism Reveals about Material Multimodal Composition Pedagogy

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In 1990, the Dignity Memorial Vietnam Wall¹ set up one of its first exhibits among the beaches, lighthouses, and seafood eateries of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. No one could have imagined that it would inspire a small group of its women viewers to create a commemorative event of their own, one which would remain active even today, 26 years later. One of these women, a survivor of domestic violence and rape, took the initiative to question, “Where is *our* wall? Where is *our* memorial?... Where is the wall that commemorates the 51,000 women killed in the *war against women?*” (Hipple, 2000, p. 168). At that time, the Maryland Men’s Anti-Rape Resources Center (MARS) released information which estimated that “[d]uring the 16 years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a war that claimed the lives of 58,000 men in Southeast Asia, more than 51,000 women were murdered in this country by their husbands, male friends, dates, and casual male acquaintances” (p. 168).

The group of women moved by the Vietnam memorial and this startling statistic then created the Clothesline

Project (CP), what they thought of as an “in-your-face educational and healing tool” (“History of the Clothesline Project,” para. 2). The CP, now an international event, invites survivors (and those remembering victims) of violence against women, primarily sexual in nature, to decorate tee shirts about their experiences. These tee shirts then get hung on a clothesline in a public space, such as university campuses and other community settings (Fig. 1). The spread of the Project to 41 states and 5 countries indicates the continued and pervasive problem of violence against women, as well as organized resistance to that violence. For the past 25 years, many colleges and community organizations have turned to the CP to provide temporary catharsis to survivors of sexual assault and to raise public awareness of the issue.

As a feminist scholar and member of Kent State University’s CP planning committee, I set out to understand 1) written and visual literacy as it mediates women’s experiences of gender violence and, 2) ways in which textual and

¹ A travelling replica of the original Vietnam Wall.



Figure 1: Multiple decorated tees hang from a clothesline. Source: Clothesline Project

visual artifacts help activists make sense of the construction and revision of cultural narratives. My study, through rhetorical and semiotic analysis, involves questioning how written and visual literacy function in relation to understandings of female embodiment and violence against women. The New London Group (2014) suggests any “semiotic activity” as one that involves design (available designs, designing, and the redesigned) (p. 194). In their view, discourse both reproduces and changes social conventions; design decisions and products are always historically interwoven with other texts. Likewise, CP participants’ design decisions suggest that the seemingly ubiquitous discourse of digital composition influences understandings and use of composing practices in other modes. More specifically, the CP shows that alphabetic text presides, rhetorically, over opportunities for multimodal art in ways that are contrary to expectation.

Gunther Kress (2003) asserts that a shift in visual culture requires a move from literacy theories of linguistics to those of semiotics. He argues that semiotic change occurs when the change in mode echoes “the values, structures and meanings of the social and cultural world of the meaning-maker and of the socio-cultural group in which they are” (p. 40). The semiotic analysis in my study suggests that the change in people’s preferred mode of communication may be from organic multimodal composing to digital multimodal composing. In other words, generally speaking, engaging with the arts at one time involved more interaction with tangible, rather than digital, materials (i.e. scrapbooking, architectural designing, and drawing). Engaging with tangible materials may be less common today.

Of course, all representations are limited in their ability to reflect experiences (Kress, 2003). But while

Kress argues that images have supplanted the use of text in communication, my study shows participants relying on text. Therefore, cultural trends related to mode, in some cases, may pertain more to divides between digital and non-digital multimodal composing, rather than to divides between textual and visual composing.

Moreover, Janis Jefferies (2001) refers to the combination of linguistics and image as “scriptovisual” (p. 191) and observes how language and art take their status as subversive only in relation to the dominant. In other words, activists must use the language of the dominant discourse even as they critique it; after all, social critique by those in oppressed positions almost always involves elements of disguise (p. 82). The issue becomes not whether art depicts the truth but how art came to be, what it conveys, and who gets implicated in it (Coogan, 2010, p.161). Explorations of visual rhetoric draw attention to the CP as a rich site for questioning materials used in feminist activism and what those materials suggest about dominant culture (Wysocki, 2005); the live audience of an event which includes previously constructed materials by anonymous creators (Hocks and Balsamo, 2003); and the “active” relationships formed among narrative images (Kress and VanLeeuwen, 2006) on CP tee shirts.

James Clifford (1992) describes the tee shirt as “that blank sheet, mystic writing pad, so close to the body” (p. 114). Teachers use tee shirts as a writing pad in the form of “T-shirt literacy”; that

is, teachers have allowed students to consider rhetorical context to design a tee shirt that addresses a community issue (Odell and Katz, 2009). Moreover, similar to the CP, some teachers have asked students to research social issues and create persuasive tee shirts pertaining to their chosen cause (Shankar-Brown, 2014, p. 366). The rationale for such projects is that graphic tee shirts are useful in the teaching of multiliteracies. Rajni Shankar-Brown, for example, discusses her favorite tee shirt, decorated with the *Schoolhouse Rock* logo; the shirt, as a conversation piece, engages people in the literacies of viewing, speaking, and listening (2014, 366). Moreover, “[t]he words textile and text both derive from the Latin *texere*, which means ‘to weave,’ either through cloth or story” (Hipple, 2000, 164). This weaving together of stories through cloth is evidenced across the tee shirts displayed and collected in the CP.

To engage in a systematic examination of the way written and visual communication rhetorically represent survivors’ narratives (or parts of them), I turned to an analysis of a CP shirt collection at a large, public university (Kent State). This CP collection consisted of 74 tee shirts that yielded 897 data points, which explore patterns in linguistic and illustrated content, and how women use the content to position themselves in relation to their experiences of violence. This exploration also informs multimodal composition pedagogy by further addressing Jody Shipka’s (2011) concern about the ways in which multimodality has been overly conceptualized as “new

(meaning digital)” media and how such a narrow view of multimodality could constrain students’ composition practices (pp. 7-8). Despite pushes toward multimodal and more visual-laden composing in education (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003; DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill, 2005; Takayoshi and Selfe, 2007), only one participant in my study communicated without the use of words. This is in stark contrast to Kress’s (2003) notion that words have been subsumed by visual communications. Therefore, I end the article with a discussion of what student activist compositions suggest about students’ understanding of multimodality.

Methods

I took photographs of each tee shirt (front and back, when relevant), assigning each tee shirt a unique number and organizing them into one digital image collection. I examined the collection as a whole, using rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2009) and/or semiotic analysis (Silverman, 2011). For the rhetorical analysis, I used Foss’s Fantasy-Theme Criticism to identify characters, actions, and settings. Fantasy-Theme “is designed to provide insights into the shared worldview of groups” (2009, p. 97). Here, “‘fantasy’ is the creative and imaginative interpretation of events and a fantasy theme is the means through which the interpretation is accomplished in communication” (Foss, 2009, pp. 97-98). Therefore, tracking patterns in the interpretations of acts of sexual violence

(fantasy) and the ways in which CP participants communicate these interpretations (theme) guides the understanding of the personal and public appeals of the shirts as they engage ethos, pathos, and logos. More specifically, my interest in using data to understand divides between the personal and the public meant that I needed to form a connection between personal disclosure of characters, actions, and settings related to a CP participants’ experiences and the rhetorical appeals used to engage the public (viewers of the CP). Logos, ethos, and pathos, though not discussed specifically in the results and analysis, facilitated a finite breakdown of the data, which could then be pieced together to identify larger patterns *in* and significant contributions *to* understandings of feminist activism.

The rhetorical analysis, then, looks at personal and public appeals of messages as they relate to cultural narratives. The semiotic analysis addresses how visuals acquire meaning as elements related in a system, especially a social system. I was looking for patterns in the visuals content rather than features (such as placement); as such, traditional notions of semiotics served my purpose of finding the frequency of use of text and image, and the relationships between text and visuals. Thus, extensive development of a scheme was not necessary.

I use David Silverman’s (2011) notion of semiotic analysis, which involves examining signifiers and signified concepts, the autonomous nature of images, the arbitrary/unmotivated nature

of images, and the relationships between images and concepts.² Such an analysis enables me to determine how images acquire their meaning in the context of other images, words, and the CP. In this project, then, the semiotic analysis looks at how images and their parts converge and diverge to construct evidence of particular rhetorical approaches within social narratives. In other words, examination of the relationship between signifier and signified shows patterns in participants' conceptualizations of images' symbolic meaning. These patterns implicate cultural narratives such as those related to gender communication (i.e. the frequent use of hearts). Cultural narratives are also implicated in the idea of images gaining their meaning from their placement in a system, rather than from an inherent connection. The semiotic analysis established patterns in visual content within social structures and systems related to violence and activist responses. Furthermore, these two methods enabled me to draw conclusions

about the relationship between text and images and to offer implications of such relationships for the field of rhetoric and composition.

Results and Discussion

WHAT STUDENT ACTIVIST COMPOSITIONS SUGGEST ABOUT STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF MULTIMODALITY

With this data, I argue that women's activist messages align with patriarchal narratives, even as their activist messages attempt to counter narratives about women's identity.³ This argument is supported by the finding that participants' visual messages rely on socially constructed representations of concepts rather than on original representations of experiences.

I also argue that activists employ textual and visual messages but rely on text to make meaning. This argument is supported by the finding that visuals' content show that participants tend to use

² Semiotic analysis includes responding to the following criteria: 1) "Signs bring together an image or word (the 'signifier') and a concept (the 'signified')." 2) "Signs are not autonomous entities—they derive their meaning only from the place within a sign system. What constitutes a linguistic sign is only its difference from other signs (so the colour red is only something which is not green, blue, orange, etc.)" 3) "The linguistic sign is *arbitrary* or unmotivated. This, Saussure says, means that the sign 'has no natural connection with the signified.'" 4) "Signs can be put together through two main paths. First, there are possibilities of combining signs... Saussure calls these patterns of combinations *syntagmatic relations*. Second, there are contrastive

properties... Here the choice of one term necessarily excludes the other. Saussure calls these mutually exclusive relations *paradigmatic oppositions* (Silverman, 2011, p. 330).

³ CP participants receive no instructions for the composing of their shirts other than that they cannot use perpetrators' names if perpetrators were not found guilty by a court of law. From a legal standpoint, disclosure without an official guilty verdict can be considered slander. All other design decisions are determined by CP participants at their own discretion. Moreover, this argument does not discount the agency of participants. One of the findings, which falls outside of the scope of this article, explores in great detail how participants express agency in their messages.

Visual Categories	Examples	Frequency
Depictions of Bodies/Body Parts	Stick figures or drawings of people, handprints, happy and sad faces, mouth/lips, “female” symbol (circle with ‘+’)	19
Depictions of Awareness to Social Causes	Teal ribbons, purple ribbons, blue ribbons, TBTN logo, peace sign	16
Depictions of Emotion	Hearts and tears	15
Depictions of Religion/Spirituality	Angel wings, candle, cross, demons	5
Depictions of Natural Elements	Flowers, stars, ladybug	4
Depictions of Location	“Downtown” buildings, home, and outline of a state, arrow	3
Depictions of Social Guidelines	“Anti” symbol (circle w/ diagonal line through it)	2
Depictions of Food	Banana	1

Table 1: Semiotics Analysis results.

textual and visual components in their work, but that these components do not function rhetorically in relation to one another. (By “rhetorically,” I mean that text and images do not support one another in messages’ attempt to persuade or influence CP audiences.)

ACTIVISTS’ VISUAL MESSAGES RELY ON SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED REPRESENTATIONS OF CONCEPTS
 Of 74 tee shirts, 48, or 65% of the collection, include visual components in their messages. These visual components

exclude detailed representations of experience and instead rely on “bumper sticker” notions of activist communication. Table 1 provides a categorization of the types of visual representations found in the CP.

Table 1 shows, then, that CP activists tend to gravitate toward common, socially constructed representations of concepts such as happiness, love, awareness, peace, religion, liberation or healing, and faith. Only 2 shirts (24 and 69) depict scenes from activists’ experiences with assault (Fig. 2); both of these representations fall into the category of Bodies/Body Parts.



Figure 2: Shirts 24 and 69

These two shirts, then, rely on participants' imagination to design their shirts, to envision moments or scenes from their attack, to determine which moments to illustrate on their shirts, and to determine *how* to portray those moments. These shirts may show evidence of preconceived notions about elements such as the symbolism of color, but nothing routinely suggests their meaning based on prior social understandings of their elements. In other words, the images in Figure 2 would likely receive different interpretations, as opposed to an image of a heart, which would likely be described as representing love. Examples of shirts that rely on socially constructed representations can be seen in Figure 3. That participants' visual messages rely on socially constructed representations of concepts all suggest the presence of dominant narratives that influence individual composers' design decisions.⁴ In addition, participants' invocations of the body suggest ways of

4 Dominant narratives, or patriarchal narratives, are those that perpetuate the oppression of women and other marginalized groups.

5 Arguments exist for CP participants' influence on one another in regards to participation (i.e.



Figure 3: Shirts 3 and 1

thinking about activism and action as separate from literate practices. Repeatedly, given the opportunity to say anything, and in any way, CP participants “play it safe.” They avoid profanity. For the most part, they avoid graphic textual and pictorial representations of their assault. And they rely on images such as androgynous figures, hearts, awareness ribbons, and flowers and ladybugs. This evidence suggests that women have internalized culturally normative narratives about what it means to “speak out,” either as survivors of assault, activists, or women in general. This evidence is made stronger by the fact that shirt-making sessions are held in private, often with one or a few people attending a single session—and with the shirts being collected over a number of years. In other words, the possibility for groupthink decreases under these circumstances.⁵ Therefore, we are left to look to a larger influence than what the women may have on one another.

validating one another and showing the issue of gender violence as more than anomaly). But evidence does not suggest that CP participants influence one another's design decisions.

ACTIVISTS' TEXTUAL AND VISUAL MESSAGES DO NOT FUNCTION IN RELATION TO ONE ANOTHER

Data suggest that activists see importance in both textual and visual representations. Seventy-three of 74 tee shirts (99%) present some sort of written message, whereas 48 of 74 tee shirts (65%) use some sort of visual (even if it is just the use of a heart to “dot” a linguistic “i”). As mentioned earlier, despite pushes toward multimodal and more visual-laden composing in education (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003; DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill, 2005; Takayoshi and Selfe, 2007), only 1 participant communicated without the use of words. This one participant, moreover, relied on the awareness ribbon and confetti-looking dots, visuals that already offer some standardization of form and meaning.

Of 48 shirts with visual representations, only 8 of them (16% of shirts with visuals) have visuals that render the text no longer sensible or at least less powerful if the visual is removed from the shirt. In this case, the meaning of the activist's message relies on visual composition. For example, shirt 2 presents a rebus; the statement, “One in two women will be in a violent relationship,” uses symbols to represent “women” and “relationship.” Shirt 19 has the words, “MOMMY Please don't make me go over daddys [sic] anymore. Please! I ♥ you”; this message appears on a child's shirt, used visually to create a more powerful impact for an audience. Shirt 39 is covered by a chaotic presentation of what appear to be random words; viewers

can't make sense of any of their combinations. Here, the meaning of the shirt relies less on what the words are and more on the presentation of the words in this chaotic manner, which may represent the fragmentation of identity or sense of confusion after an assault. Though symbiotic to an extent, with these shirts, activists place emphasis on the visual element to convey meaning.

Moreover, 23 shirts (48% of shirts with visuals) have visuals that would no longer make sense if the text were removed from the shirts. Though these shirts contain visuals, they rely on text to convey their meaning. Removing the text from shirt 3, for instance, would leave us with a shirt with drawings of a heart and a banana. Shirt 22 presents the Take Back the Night (TBTN) logo, along with the phrase “Take Back the Night.” Without the words, viewers would be presented with a picture of a half moon and some stars contained in a circle. While people familiar with the issue of sexual assault or TBTN might recognize the symbol, the general population most likely would not; in addition, even if a viewer did not understand the meaning of “take back the night,” the text lends itself to a quick internet search far easier than the image itself. To reach a vast audience, then, the shirt relies on the text. Shirt 60 has a purple ribbon with the words, “Stand up [&] speak out against sexual violence.” Similar to the teal ribbon, the purple ribbon might symbolize numerous social causes. It is only through the words on the shirt that we connect the purple ribbon to the issue of assault. Though symbiotic to



Figure 4: Shirts 33, 15, and 72.

an extent, with these shirts, activists place emphasis on the textual element to convey meaning.

Overall, then, with only 1 of the 74 shirts eliminating the use of words altogether, and 23 shirts creating a relationship between text and image that depends on the text to make sense (versus 8 shirts that have a relationship between text and image so that if image is removed, the text no longer makes sense), activists seem to rely on text more than on visuals to communicate their ideas. While 65% of tee shirts incorporate a visual element, 48% of these have visuals that depend on text to make any sense, and only 16% use visuals that are necessary to maintain the meaning of text.

Finally, 16 shirts (33%) have neither words nor visuals that make sense without the context of the larger CP. Messages on these shirts include general statements such as “Speak Out Fight Brave” (shirt 15); “I will take back my strength” (shirt 33); and “Not all scars are external” (shirt 72) (Figure 4). These shirts also suggest the

influence of cultural narratives on such designs.

Activists’ reliance on socially constructed representations of concepts suggests that even in communicating against normative narratives regarding what women should say and how they should say it, activists adapt patriarchal narratives into their messages. Again, activists tend to rely on pre-conceived notions of their representations (happy faces, sad faces, hearts, and awareness ribbons), representations already deemed appropriate by the general public. While these symbols may be easy to draw, especially for novice designers, skill level does not explain the inclusion of these symbols. Hearts, for example, are not inherently or instinctively associated with the issue of sexual assault, and many of the shirts make no direct linguistic reference to the hearts. It is not necessarily easier to dot an “i” with a heart than it is to dot an “i” with a dot. It is not necessarily easier to include a heart or a happy face than it is to forgo the visual component altogether.

Therefore, no evidence directly explains why activists made the choice to include them; hearts could, however, represent emotional healing or a sense of victory. Lives become shattered by sexual assault; experiencing happiness, security, and a sense of wholeness—a reconfiguring of identity—requires engagement in cognitive and affective processes, which the hearts may represent. The hearts, similarly, may represent a sense of victory, a statement that, though survivors have reason to not trust others or to isolate themselves, they choose to interact with others in ways that make themselves vulnerable, and to believe that positive experiences will come from this effort. Hearts may suggest conflicting emotions toward intimate partners or friends who committed acts of violence against them; acts of violence do not necessarily sever emotional ties to some perpetrators. The use of hearts also suggests something about the ways in which women are conditioned to communicate, however. To what extent do the hearts really represent activists' experiences and to what extent were they used because they were an appropriate option among other "feminine" symbols and "feminine" messages?

As for the awareness ribbons, they provide another example of communication that considers what might be appropriate for a public audience. Awareness ribbons are used in activist communication for many causes; a single color represents dozens of medical and social issues. In other words, national and local organizations and individual activists

rely on the same symbol for their own causes, thereby making it an acceptable option for survivors of sexual assault. Because viewers are familiar with the symbolism of ribbons, they serve as a reliable and quick "go to" for people looking to broach a subject. In the case of the CP, activists can rely on the context of the CP, and the way that shirts work together, to construct an understanding of the issue, to bring attention to sexual assault or other forms of gender violence. Creating scenes from experiences, linguistically or visually, makes great demands on the CP participants and the viewers; in such cases, activists must revisit their experiences and try to find a way to put those experiences into words and images. This can be difficult, given that traumas are often referred to as indescribable or unspeakable. Participants might figure that viewers who are not survivors will not be able to "understand" the experience, regardless of the detail used. Personal disclosure also puts weight on the viewer; the viewer may be disturbed by such disclosure, given the nature of the trauma and/or the fact that the viewer feels helpless in confronting such an event. With these factors in mind, awareness ribbons address issues in impersonal, appropriate ways for public consumption.

Finally, that activists rely on text to communicate, even when images are included, challenges society's current emphasis on multimodal and digital communication. Perhaps participants recognize the immediacy that can come with images; images can be quickly

recognized in passing and draw a viewer's attention to text, or communicate messages in and of themselves. Tee shirts do suggest that participants look to images to communicate (whether that be because they find images easier to work with, to be a better rhetorical strategy for gaining viewers' attention, or to align with an increased focus on visual communication within the university and global setting). But, almost all shirts used text, and more than half of them used both text and images. Data suggest, however, that participants did not have a developing or developed understanding of how the two modes could be used together to communicate more effectively.

Conclusion: Multimodal Composition Pedagogy

These findings raise questions about the importance of visual communication in our society as it pertains to audiences and communicators, or the receiver versus the sender. Such questions counter Kress's (2003) notion that visual communication has supplanted linguistic communication. Though technology has allowed people to engage in more visual communication, technology may fail to motivate people to create visual forms of communication. For example, Tumblr offers the option to upload video and pictures (though K. Shannon Howard's 2012 findings show a reliance on text to make meaning). Pinterest invites users to choose among photographs to "pin" on their own boards. Facebook allows one to quickly choose a

"sticker" that conveys one's emotions. Instagram allows people to "create" to the extent that users can alter photographs and video. But these tools do not engage users in what I conceptualize as "organic" creating—the kind which the CP allows. The CP invites people to use materials (shirts, paint, markers) to think of and carry out creating a representation, as opposed to choosing from a menu of pre-constructed representations. Participants do not provide evidence that they know what to do with this opportunity. Calling this finding into question implicates not only activist communication but also pedagogical practices related to these issues.

With a desire to expand my own students' understanding of multimodality, in addition to explorations of digital multimodality, I incorporate into my freshmen-level composition course a unit on material multimodality. Using the research explored in my study of the CP, I have students in my freshman-level composition course read articles such as Cornwell's "T-Shirts As Wearable Diary: An Examination of Artifact Consumption and Garnering Related to Life Events," Cockrell's "Where T-Shirt Culture Meets the Black Protest Tradition," Hipple's "Clothing their Resistance in Hegemonic Dress: The Clothesline Project's Response to Violence Against Women," and Shankar-Brown's "Wearing Language: Celebrating Multiliteracies through Graphic Tees." I have students write an argumentative essay about social justice issues of their choosing and then design

tee shirts that address that particular issue, tee shirts which can be displayed like the CP.

My work with activist art is one of the few spaces in which I find in-depth discussions about multimodality outside of the concept of “new media.” Even recent releases such as Jason Palmeri’s *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* focus on digital writing.

While I understand the focus on digital writing in contemporary culture, as Patricia Suzanne Sullivan points out in *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*:

As with previous arguments about experimental writing and mixed genres, more contemporary arguments suggest that only (or especially) through the use of new technologies and media, students may be allowed to express their unique individualities, articulate marginal or underrepresented social realities, and/or critique the limits of dominant sociopolitical discourses and the institutions that perpetuate these discourses (p. 16).

Similar to Sullivan’s argument about aesthetic theory, Knight argues:

A useful conception of the aesthetic has promise for deepening our understanding and our teaching of multimodal composing practices. Such a conception would push against fixed and limiting definitions in order to accommodate a more inclusive view of multimodal composition practices and speak to a range of potentially audience-based

experiences including issues of beauty and pleasure, taste and appreciation, form and content, style and delivery, art and craft, process and product, emotions and affect. This more accommodating notion positions the aesthetic, not as something set apart as a special order, but as a mode of everyday human experience.

Accordingly, the act of *reclaiming* aesthetic experience delivers three primary affordances in the context of composition and new media studies (n.p.).

Finally, Shipka, in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, also argues for an understanding of multimodality that includes “writing on shirts, purses, and shoes, repurposing games, staging live performances, producing complex multipart rhetorical events, or asking students to account for the choices they make while designing linear, thesis-driven, print-based texts” and which allows students more and different ways to “write, read, and perhaps most importantly, respond to a much wider variety of communicative technologies - both new and not so new” (p. 9). Shipka further notes that a focus on digital representation assumes an inability or lack of desire on students’ part to communicate their ideas outside of digital spaces.

The CP seems to foster “writing [as] a way of learning, a way of looking for allies who are looking for us, a way of winning recognition and resources vital to changing minds and changing social relations” (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 25). If students are

to have a rich understanding of how writing and multimodal composition achieve such rhetorical goals, they need to have not only the broad understanding and redefining of “composition” that new media has argued for, but also a broader understanding of “multimedia” and its function in relation to audience and purpose. Explorations of aesthetics and material multimodal rhetoric begin to address these pedagogical goals.

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