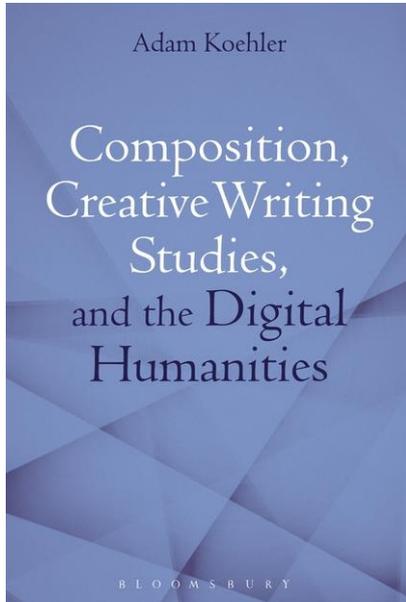




## Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities

Adam Koehler

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Review by Valentina Romanzi\*

With his book *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities*, Adam Koehler sets himself a challenging goal: exploring the often contrasting yet somewhat overlapping fields of Composition and Creative Writing studies in order to find common ground on which to start developing a new discipline, that he names “Critical-Creative Composition” (29). Koehler argues from the very beginning that this moment in history might be the most fruitful for such an endeavour thanks to the rise of the Digital Humanities, a field that notoriously disrupts age-old disciplinary boundaries and borders.

He identifies several general concepts to explain how the Digital Humanities can be the engine that sets in motion the merging of Composition Studies and Creative Writing Studies. The first one is the concept of technology, which recurs in most of the chapters and is one of the keystones of Koehler’s argument.

From the very beginning of the book, he takes his time to stress how “we need to recognize that we can no longer simply educate students to become technology users -and consumers- without also helping them learn how to become critical thinkers about technology and the social issues surrounding its use” (Selfe 2009 quoted in Koehler 35). Technology must be understood not only as a tool that enhances our production of creative (or not so creative) writing, but as a medium that mediates the way we interpret and express our experience of the world. It is even more pressing for scholars to understand and embrace the fact that “writers have always been mingling with a variety of mediums in the production of traditional print texts” (74), and that writing itself is a technology and as such it influences our way of seeing, interpreting, and exposing the world (105-107).

Technology, argues Koehler, is and has ever been at the core of creativity, enhancing it and pushing it forward. In the age of the Digital Humanities, it has become widely evident that technology is not only a means to convey creative writing, but itself a performer in the creative act. Koehler uses the hypertext as a

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fitting example: the conservative genres, conventions, and tropes so commonly explored during creative writing workshops stop working when they are applied to a hypertext. The students, “confronted with hyperspace, [...] have no choice: all the comforting structures have been erased. It’s improvise or go home” (Coover 1994 quoted in Koehler 52).

Koehler investigates deeply what creativity might come to mean in the age of the Digital Humanities, given that the old conventions do not seem to suffice anymore. If creativity has a long history of being “unconventional’ or ‘chaotic’ or ‘messy’ [...], experimental, shapeless, and/or dangerous” (25), there is now the tendency to investigate options that, to borrow Kenneth Goldsmith’s powerful title, we could define “Uncreative Writing” (61). Koehler underlines how several authors have highlighted the possibility, or even the appropriateness, of rethinking creativity in terms of “manipulation’ and ‘management’ of the heaps of already existent and ever-increasing language” (Goldsmith 2011 quoted in Koehler 61). Whereas for centuries plagiarism has been considered a practice to be frowned upon, in the new digital era the general opinion on borrowing, tweaking, copying, and appropriating someone else’s words has shifted radically. Creativity, today, deals with the creation of new works, ideas, words, just as much as with the composition of *collages*, codes, and performances. Creativity is not only generative anymore, but transformative as well.

However, the admission of such works into the category of creative writing has endangered the traditional notion of authorship. Koehler dedicates long pages to the question of who the author is and what (or whose) voice he uses in the digitally-embedded era.

In the section titled “Electronic ethos” Koehler elaborates on Goldsmith’s notion of “post-identity literature,” which he defines as literature in the postmodern era, where “postmodern identity politics [...] call into question the stable modern self for the sake of a heteroglossic and ‘slippery’ self that works through digital spaces” (Koehler 80). Goldsmith’s words deserve to be quoted fully because of their strong and direct summary of what Koehler expands upon:

If my identity is really up for grabs and changeable by the minute - as I believe it is - it’s important that my writing [reflects] this state of evershifting identity and subjectivity. That can mean adopting voices that aren’t “mine,” opinions that aren’t “mine,” political positions that aren’t “mine,” words that aren’t “mine” because, in the end, I don’t think I can possibly define what’s mine and what isn’t (Goldsmith 2011 quoted in Koehler 80)

Koehler also quotes another author, Paul Miller, who embraces a similar vision of authorship in the digital era. In his work *Rhythm Science* he illustrates the act of borrowing someone else’s words as an act of mixing, a “‘generative’ [possibility] ‘for new languages of creativity’” (Koehler 2017, 88). Goldsmith does not go as far as to state that the act of appropriation is generative, but rather uncreative; Miller, instead, embraces it fully as a way to widen the way to create.

Creativity in the digital era does not only disrupt the traditional concept of authorship with new notions of mixing and appropriating but questions the thoroughly-crafted system of genres on which literature has stood for centuries as well. Koehler is constantly aware of the workshop as a prime site of creative production, one which exploits genres to create assignments. With a touch of nostalgia, he reflects on the fact that genres are inherent moulds of the creative act, technologies themselves, ones that have become so embedded in our way to perceive the world that we do not notice them anymore (105). Since writing itself is the technology through which we describe the world, it is peculiarly difficult to face a reality that does not fit into its self-imposed categories anymore. Quoting Jonathan Franzen, he confesses

“As an artist, you want to be able to move liberally and sympathetically among various classes and culture - just like Shakespeare did - *while secretly hoping that everyone who’s not an artist will stay fixed in place*” (Franzen 2013, 159). [...] As our culture increasingly embraces emerging technologies and the shady promises they make, our writers face and increasingly heightened challenge: to say something within and about the shifting plate tectonics of that culture *as they shift*. (Koehler 101)

In such a complex and stimulating environment, Koehler takes into account is the concept of multimodality as a force that will allow the merging of genre and a new modality of creativity in itself.



Koehler's analysis of the subject matter is indeed deep and well structured and offers fascinating suggestions as to where the two fields might be heading toward. However, perhaps inevitably, Koehler decided not to catch the bright opportunity of, for once, merging theory and practice and chose to follow the genre and conventions of academic writing proper, relegating his suggestions to the purely theoretical realm. I realize I am actually doing the same here, reviewing his book in the most traditional of ways. Unfortunately, the academia is one of the most conservative and traditional institutions. I still believe it would be beneficial to scholars and students alike if a book on Creative writing actually practiced what it preached, not only explaining, but exemplifying at the same time.

Perhaps the time is not yet ripe; I do believe it is near.

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