

From Digital Storytelling To Multimodal Criticism

The Marrow of African American Literature

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The use of digital storytelling has grown out of what may be characterized as a need to insert the unauthorized narrative into the dominant discourse. The basis of the intervention has been to give voice to the voiceless or the barely heard of our social milieu. In this respect, it has been akin to a primer, the introduction to the ongoing experience of learning to read and write – communicate intelligently. In the context of our college experience, we need to move our students from the primer stage to a more self-conscious, critical and authoritative stage.

A more developed skills set in reading entails the simultaneous ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the words on the page, in order to extract meaning and evaluate the text. A similar process is needed in multimodal reception. Indeed, if we extend the comparison between reading and multimodal reception, we realize that at the college level we must call for a more sophisticated critical acumen. In the reception and appreciation of multimodal narratives, we are dealing with multiple narrative strands which are interdependent and whose effect is a cumulative aggregate. Although most people have internalized an ability to engage with these multiple narrative strands, they are often as conscious of this ability as they are of breathing. Technology has afforded us a unique avenue to become more aware and critical of this ability and thus optimize our reception and critique of multimodal narratives.

The student, based on her subject-position, her knowledge of the content and her critical skills will draft a script/narrative voice-over. This script will summarize her central argument, in other words this becomes the backbone or foundational layer of the multimodal project. Over this foundation the superstructure is erected layer-by-layer, for instance a visual layer, either still photographs or moving image clips, even continuous footage. To these are added audio elements and then signs/posters/typed or written quotes etc. One can imagine these layers interacting not dialectically, but polylectically, to produce a multimodal narrative pastiche or concert in which the various layers or elements comment on, and are subject to comment, and thus modification by the other elements of the narrative's deep and complex structures.

The final product of the student's efforts will be measured in terms of the quality of each layer, their composite effect(s) on the audience and her ability to manipulate the technical tools in order to effectively communicate her argument in all its nuanced complexity. Assessment of the multimodal product, like the assessment of the traditionally written essay focuses on content, quality of argument and presentation. Like the assessment of the traditional essay, presentation alone is not the hallmark of a good essay or an excellent multimodal narrative.

Vincent Odamtten.

Primary Texts:

The Classic Slave Narratives, edited by Henry Louis Gates
Running A Thousand Miles, by William Craft
Clotel; Or The President's Daughter, by William Wells Brown
Our Nig; Or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, by Harriet E. Wilson
Blake; Or the Huts of America, by Martin Delany
The Garies and Their Friends, Frank J. Webb
Iola Leroy; Or Shadows Uplifted, by Frances E. Harper
Imperium In Imperio, Sutton Griggs
The Marrow of Tradition, Charles W. Chesnutt
Ways In: Approaches to Reading and Writing about Literature, by Muller & Williams.

This world is not my home
This world is not my home
This world is a howling wilderness
This world is not my home
 -- Traditional slave song/lament

I like you and your book, ingenious Hone!
 In whose capacious all-embracing leaves
 The very marrow of tradition's shown;
 And all that history, much fiction weaves.
 -- Charles Lamb: *To the Editor of the Every-Day Book*

Class Discussions:

- Out of Africa or the Heart of Darkness? *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* and questions of narrative construction, theme and ideology.
- *History of Mary Prince & Louis Asa-Asa*. Questions about an amanuensis, voice-overs, and other editorial interventions.
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* discussions about considerations of voice, **pov**, audience and outcome. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*....
- *Running A Thousand Miles* – Pushing boundaries, creating new spaces, editing and the Crafts
- *Clotel* – An Interregnum and the limitations of *History*. Is it fact or fiction? And why it matters and to whom.
- Fictional biography or biographical fiction? Exploring *Our Nig*...
- *Blake, Or the Huts of America* a case for alternate histories: imagining utopia, or hallucinating nightmare? What has context got to do with it?
- Subject position, point of view and audience response: *The Garies and their Friends* and *Iola Leroy*.
- The exploding frames of the framework tale, a glass onion or down a rabbit hole? How do we read/view *Imperium In Imperio*? And why?
- *The Marrow of Tradition*: what is the role of the creative artist? How and what does *this* text/narrative mean? How does the critic or audience respond – then and now?