

Research in Creative Writing: Theory into Practice

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Since the publication of Wendy Bishop's Released into Language (1990), the disciplinary boundaries of composition and creative writing have been in question. More recently, as Douglas Hesse's "The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies" (2010) suggests, creative writing has been assumed to exist as a subdiscipline of composition despite efforts during the past decade to develop a new discipline, Creative Writing Studies. The research reported on and analyzed here argues for creative writing's disciplinary status by using Toulmin's (1972) definition of disciplinarity as a basis for claiming writers' aesthetic documents as data and reporting those data in an aesthetic form. In our study, 57 students in first-year composition were asked to write a creative piece concerning how they came to the present place in their lives. Students produced 57 artifacts, including 55 poems, one script, and one visual narrative. These data were subsequently represented in fiction—that is, we used a novel to present our findings in an effort to assert the differences between the ways findings might be rendered in composition as opposed to creative writing. This paper examines what each subject area views as evidence and how that evidence might be most profitably analyzed and discussed in an aesthetic document. We suggest that the process of writing the novel is a method, a mode of analysis, with the novel itself as the articulation of the researchers' analysis of the original data. Using this method, we studied creative writing aesthetically as creative writing and offer a justification for doing so.

We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examinations.

—Foucault, 2010, p. 22

A range of research methodologies with different epistemological and ontological positions can and should be utilized in research. The over-reliance on one sort of research method runs the danger of not fully understanding the nature of the phenomenon.

—Hanauer, 2010, p. 139

In a recent essay on agency and resistances among Native American students, Timothy J. San Pedro (2015) made four points that clarify the correspondences we believe exist between resistance to establishing institutional disciplinarity in universities and the oppression of individual students. First, San Pedro (2015) reminded us that we must consider “hierarchies of power,” a concept that applies equally to the plight of individuals in classrooms and to disciplines in institutions insofar as both are affected by “the ways dominant knowledges . . . denounce, rebuke, and/or silence [alternative] . . . identities, experiences, and knowledges” (p. 137). With regard to institutional identities, Bizzaro (2004) noted that one characteristic of an emerging discipline in English studies is its effort to contextualize itself by demonstrating its similarity to other subject areas already in the field, and therefore higher in the hierarchy of power. Contextualization, then, is a response to an existing hierarchy among disciplines and subjects of study. It is an acknowledgement of whose knowledge counts and whose way of making knowledge matters. Indeed, scholars are correct when they argue that, in making change in institutions, “hierarchies of power need to be considered” (San Pedro, 2015, p. 135). San Pedro led us to ask a question that is crucial to the study we report in this essay: What battles ensue when scholars refuse to succumb to dominant cultural or disciplinary perspectives?

Second, when San Pedro (2015) empowered us to see the necessity of examining teaching practices and the texts used in school, we were also able to see the necessity of adding research methodologies to San Pedro’s list, especially as existing knowledges “attempt to sustain imperialistic legacies of schooling” (p. 135). Third, we must acknowledge “imperial legacies that continue to be taught in schools,” including what constitutes data or evidence in the construction of knowledge. And, finally, we must acknowledge the necessity and relevance of “other knowledges” (San Pedro, 2015, p. 136). An anecdote from Wendy Bishop (2003) eloquently demonstrates San Pedro’s points about how the oppression of students connects to the way disciplines of power in English studies (and elsewhere in most universities) retain their power.

Bishop (2003) recounted her department’s concern over who “owns” creative nonfiction. A graduate student in composition and rhetoric “wanted to add literary nonfiction . . . as a minor area of his degree study” in a department that “grants the English PhD with an emphasis in literature, composition and rhetoric, or creative writing” (p. 259). At the time, there were no designated courses in creative nonfiction at her university. Bishop was unprepared for the vehement response by the graduate committee to the candidate’s request. She thus documented composition’s intrusion into territory simultaneously inhabited by creative writing and literature:

Equally suspicious seemed to be this candidate’s motives: what were those of us in composition *really* up to in proposing such a minor area in the first place? Wasn’t nonfiction the studio domain of creative writers or the scholarly domain of literary critics and, no matter what, certainly somehow distinct from the profession of composition? (Bishop, 2003, p. 260)

San Pedro's study and Bishop's anecdote set up the motivating concern of this essay: Is there a method of research uniquely suited to conducting research in academic creative writing? Tensions such as the one Bishop describes still exist. And the problems in English studies are not limited to the intrusions of an emerging composition studies. Silent struggle has also characterized the evolution of creative writing studies in contemporary English departments. What Bishop calls *genre-fear* is a virtual displacement caused by the collision of ideas. Just as two bodies cannot occupy the same space without collision, the concept of *genre-fear* is based upon the belief that two disciplines cannot simultaneously occupy the same genre. Experiences such as Bishop's support the view subsequently espoused in *College Composition and Communication*: creative writing should be studied to determine its place in composition studies (Hesse, 2010).

More recently, Hoppenthaler (2016) in an entry on the Creative Writing Pedagogy listserv worked around *genre-fear* on behalf of other creative writers by expressing to them his interest "in hearing ways in which you've reworked the traditional composition course to accommodate your own specific writing skills and interests while still accomplishing the expected course outcomes." The sides of the issue seem clear: either creative writing is being absorbed into composition studies, as suggested by both Bishop's anecdote and the placement of creative writing in composition studies by Hesse (2010) and the editors of *CCC*, or creative writing and composition are separate disciplines with ever-increasing points of contact, as Hoppenthaler (2016) suggested.

A major cause of this tension is creative writing's failure to differentiate its epistemological differences—what Toulmin (1972) described as *ideals*—from composition's. These differences would be most convincingly demonstrated in the development of research methods, such as the one espoused here, that acknowledge that what creative writing values as data or evidence (that is, what would most convincingly persuade creative writers to reenvision their pedagogies) differs from what is valued in composition. Currently, as we argue below, research methods most often used to study creative writing generate data more useful in the study of composition than in the study of creative writing. Intentionally or not, research has focused on the way composition has intruded upon creative writing studies. This approach has not advanced the cause of creative writing's existence in English studies as an independent subject. In fact, we believe that this lack of research in creative writing studies has contributed to a growing sense that creative writing is being usurped by composition, as we argue below by theorizing disciplinarity and then by applying the principles of that theory in our search for data and evidence that are suitably aesthetic in their emphases. We argue that, by studying student poems in a first-year composition course and rendering those data in a novel, we are employing an appropriate aesthetic response to the aesthetic nature of the original data. We believe that, for the academic field we call creative writing to survive as an independent subject area, scholars in this field need to work harder to define what makes creative writing a discipline, and they should do that by developing appropriate aesthetic research methods that collect data and report those data in a manner consistent with the values of the creative writing community.

Theorizing Disciplinarity

As a starting point in arguing for creative writing's disciplinary status, we approach the idea of a discipline as Toulmin (1972) and later Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) did, as subject areas with two essential features: (1) acknowledgement of what a community values as evidence and (2) development of methods for collecting that evidence to make new knowledge appropriate to the interests of that community. In Toulmin's (1972) words, a discipline exists "where men's [sic] shared commitment to a sufficiently agreed set of ideals leads to the development of an isolable and self-defining repertory of procedures" (p. 359). This definition has given scholars and researchers who study disciplinarity, such as Thaiss and Zawacki, a space in which to work as they attempt to better understand writing studies as an interdisciplinary project.

The limitations of studies proclaiming that they are conducting research into creative writing may be traced to Bishop's (1990) *Released into Language*. To solve problems related to disciplinarity—that is, to understand in any practical way the "ready-made synthesis" the profession was already making of composition and creative writing in 1990—Bishop chose to describe her work generally as an investigation of writers and writing studies, defining writers as "people who write" and writing studies as "the study of writers writing" (p. 1). This broad and inclusive strategy worked well as a starting point for the evolution of creative writing studies. But by grouping all "people who write"—forcing a synthesis that does not distinguish one kind of writing from another, one genre from another, even one writer from another—this approach continues to create difficulties, exemplified most visibly in the divergent views of creative writing that Hesse (2010) used to distinguish the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC): "The distinctions between these meetings and their sponsoring organizations are tellingly metonymic of contrasts between academic creative writing and composition studies" (p. 32). These contrasting views are products of epistemological and ontological differences between composition and creative writing: simply put, what one values as the basis for making knowledge differs from what the other values.

Bishop (2003) acknowledged these difficulties even as she developed the strategy that caused them by approaching all writing as though it could be studied similarly. The absence of clarity concerning disciplinarity, as exemplified in the anecdote above, has resulted in the use of research methods in creative writing that are better suited to the study of composition. Academic creative writing thus far has no "shared commitment" to "a sufficiently agreed [upon] set of ideals," to use the language of Toulmin (1972, p. 359). As a result, creative writing as an academic subject has not yet developed "an isolable and self-defining repertory of procedures" (Toulmin, 1972, p. 359) for studying itself *as* creative writing, making this essay or one like it inevitable.

Instead, research studies have generally adapted methods of empirical research popular in composition studies to the purposes of studying creative writing. For example, research has been done in an effort to see how creative writing may as-

sist applied linguists in teaching writing to language learners (Hanauer, 2010), or as a means of reporting new knowledge in fields outside English departments (Prendergast, 2009). Clearly, empirical research methods are not widely used by creative writers to study creative writing. Nonetheless, arts-based research (Alexander, 2003), certain variations on “thick description” (Leavy, 2013), and Cultural and New Historicist readings of literature (Greenblatt, 2001) seem to reflect a variety of efforts to make creative writing useful to disciplines in the university: ESL, sociology, communication, and literature among them.

The lure of creative writing, especially the writing of fiction and poetry, outside English departments is demonstrable. Thus, to say that research and creative writing are incompatible, as some creative writers might, belies the evidence. We believe creative writers’ interest in studying themselves, and what they do, has not been acknowledged widely by published creative writers. But poets and novelists write about scientific discoveries (Barks, 2008; Chappell, 1991), and professionals write poems about their experiences (Belli & Coulehan, 2006). Craft interviews have historically served as sources of writers’ self-reports (Packard, 1987). Nonetheless, little attention has been paid to research in creative writing at the most influential gatherings of composition scholars, leading Hesse (2010) to conclude, given the evidence available, that creative writing as a discipline “is largely disinterested in (and occasionally contemptuous of) systematic research on writing and writers, especially empirical studies, trusting instead an author’s own accounts, in memoir, essay, or interview, as far more valuable than anything in the guise of ‘scholarly article’” (p. 32).

In the absence of empirical research projects conducted by creative writers focused on creative writing pedagogy, researchers trained in composition have taken up the task. But, by doing so, they have given rise to the same lingering question: Should the methods compositionists use to study composition serve to guide teachers of creative writing courses in decisions they might make regarding how to teach creative writing? If so, what will be the lasting effect of that work on creative writing as a discipline, if it is indeed a discipline? One must wonder, to use Bishop’s (2003) words again, “what were those of us in composition *really* up to?” (p. 260). What will become of creative writing?

We have at least two groups vying for control of knowledge in creative writing studies, characterized, as Hesse suggested, by the different emphases of the two organizations most supportive of creative writing in America, AWP and CCCC. Intentionally or not, AWP seems to long for a time before Master of Fine Arts programs. CCCC tends to accept papers to its conference based on the belief, forwarded in the Hesse essay, that creative writing should find its place in composition studies (Bizzaro, 2011).

Another way of expressing this view, to use Toulmin’s (1972) conception of a discipline, is to argue that composition studies is a discipline with “a sufficiently agreed set of ideals” (p. 359) that are self-defining, but that faculty working in creative writing studies have not yet reached such an agreement. From this perspective, the task ahead for proponents of creative writing studies is to debate what creative writing seeks to accomplish in the university and to examine “those groupings that

we normally accept before any examinations” (Foucault, 2010, p. 22). We must ask what constitutes knowledge in creative writing because the values exposed by doing so will inevitably clarify ways academic creative writing differs from composition and help teachers of academic creative writing agree upon a “set of ideals.” As textbooks and descriptive studies of creative writing pedagogy have insisted by their emphases, scholars in the field of creative writing build their theories and pedagogies from “an author’s own accounts, in memoir, essay, or interview” (Hesse, 2010, p. 32), accounts otherwise known as *writers’ self-reports*. As a result, teachers of creative writing make decisions about what and how to teach in the creative writing classroom on the basis of what Bishop (1990) termed “expressive” research (p. 23), the reports of writers writing. By contrast, composition studies is a field with “a sufficiently agreed set of ideals” (Toulmin, 1972, p. 359). One might argue that this “agreement” has long meant that knowledge-making should be a product of empirical research, thereby sustaining, in San Pedro’s (2015) language, “imperialistic legacies of schooling” (p. 135) when that method of research is employed in the study of creative writing.

The research we describe (Bailey, 2014) demonstrates both creative writing’s current influence on what might get done in a composition classroom and how data might be reported in an aesthetic approach that uses the students’ creative efforts in the researchers’ artistic process. Questions that motivate our research are as follows:

1. What language choices do students in a first-year composition class make when engaged in a writing task typical of those used in creative writing?
2. How might those data be represented in a creative genre, and how does that representation compare to a report of the same data in traditional form?
3. In making a piece of fiction based upon the writing done in first-year composition, how does the author, a published novelist, decide how to make new characters that are based upon the data found in the more traditional format?

This aesthetic inquiry allows us to use a novel as a method for analyzing and discussing data. Thus, we offer an aesthetic expression in response to an aesthetic experience, asserting values central to creative writing as a discipline and promoting a method of inquiry that is fundamentally aesthetic. By doing so, we avoid the confusion that results when aesthetic material is used as data but reported in a way—a list, for instance—that attempts to isolate the experiences described, as often happens in reporting qualitative and quantitative data in composition studies.

Using Artistic Processes in Conducting Research

This research project began with the study of creative narratives written by students in the first-year composition (FYC) classroom. Many descriptive and rhetorical

studies of the impact of creative writing on the activities teachers might use in the composition classroom advocate for such an effort but have been rhetorical, descriptive, or anecdotal (Berg & May, 2015; Ritter & Vanderslice, 2007). With the support of an abundance of studies advocating for the use of creative writing activities in the composition classroom, our task required that we investigate how data might be represented in a creative genre and how that representation compares to a report of the same data in traditional form. We assert the belief that reporting findings in a creative form allows us to break out of the confines of composition methodology and study creative writing as and through creative writing.

As a postexpressivist endeavor, this study challenges thinking about research methods that have only recently employed aesthetic artifacts as data (Hanauer, 2010). We believe one benefit of using an aesthetic record in response to findings that themselves are aesthetic is that it helps creative writing justify its status as a discipline in English departments. Further, by closely examining aesthetic expressions (poems) and how they translate into a second form (the novel), we are able to evaluate the original poems in a constructive way, one that upholds what “counts” as research in creative writing studies.

As a result, we set out to investigate what San Pedro (2015) called “other knowledges,” knowledge specifically associated with disciplinary values and status. Creative writing, as a discipline that values alternative forms of data representation, reflects this value in what it considers evidence and how it reports and discusses that evidence. The rationale for using aesthetic forms of data, then, is to consider how creative language can aid in researchers’ and teachers’ understandings of student experiences and identities. For notions of identity and self in narratives, including how second-language learners negotiate identities in academic and/or social contexts, we looked to scholarship on writing and identity (Giampapa, 2004; Ivanič, 1997; Pavlenko, 2007). We focused on the “many selves” brought to the act of writing, drawing heavily from Ivanič’s (1997) work. She posited: “One or more . . . identities may be foregrounded at different times; they are sometimes contradictory, sometimes interrelated: people’s diverse identities constitute the richness and the dilemmas of their sense of self” (Ivanič, 1997, p. 11). In turn, our study looked at the self from a postmodernist view, as a nonstable/multiple entity. Consequently, we focused on the many selves of writer identity because it made sense to do so when we analyzed student identity narratives. However, we acknowledge that there are many ways to deconstruct, position, and envision identity.

What’s more, when data are recast as a young adult novel—an alternative rhetoric, if you will, an unconventional form of data representation—the sharing of a culture can provide “productive ambiguity”; when material is evocative, it invites complexity (Eisner, 1997, p. 8). Some researchers use alternative forms to capture the experience of the participant and to “engage the reader both intellectually and evocatively” (Piercy et al., 2005, p. 365). Ultimately, alternative forms of data representation allow the creative writer-compositionist to explore genre as a means of knowledge-making while crossing boundaries and, thereby, underscoring disciplinary status for creative writing. Alternative forms are especially

conducive to the perception of data and the interpretation of them, both of which are products of the imagination and, therefore, accrue certain benefits in making knowledge (Berthoff, 1984).

Additionally, the decision to recast the data specifically in a YA novel, rather than in a poem or other genre, derived from many considerations, one of which was personal preference. Bailey chose fiction because of her academic background and writerly interests. With an MFA in fiction and a published YA novel, she decided to represent the data in novel form because it seemed the natural fit for her as a writer, a variation on “thick description.” The crafting of characters and setting, along with the invention of a detailed plot, seemed challenging yet inviting to a researcher who also identifies as a novelist and teacher of creative writing.

Data Sources

The data, student narratives in creative forms as well as demographic surveys, were derived from nine sections of FYC classes spanning spring 2013 and fall 2013. FYC courses were primarily chosen for two reasons: (1) writing was a *required* component, making the assignment easy to integrate into the course design, and (2) as part of the university’s general core, FYC offers a broad sampling of entering first-year students.

All faculty in the English department, both full-time and adjunct, who were teaching FYC courses were invited to participate in the study. All professors who agreed to participate in spring 2013 taught a second-semester FYC course primarily focused on writing about literature. This course typically explores fiction, poetry, and drama, and requires three to four academic essays. In the following semester, fall 2013, one additional professor agreed to participate in the study. His course differed from the others in that it was not focused on writing for literature; further, it was an international/English as a second language (INT/ESL) designated section. All students within the participating FYC classes were asked to contribute to the study.

The process of gathering data included two phases. In the first, participating professors were provided an explanation of the creative assignment with a sampling of creative narratives, as well as copies of three handouts: a creative narrative assignment, a student demographic survey, and a participant consent form. The consent form indicated that the information obtained in the study could be published in academic journals or presented in an alternative form of data representation such as a novel, poem, or short story, and that identities would be confidential. The professors distributed the handouts to students during the course of the semester. All students were asked to complete the creative narrative assignment for a class participation grade; however, participation in the study was voluntary. All students were asked to write about an experience and present it in a creative piece such as a poem, screenplay, or graphic novel. The prompt for the creative piece was: *How did you come to this place in your life? Tell me your story.*

In the second phase, professors collected all of the creative narratives from the students and separated those marked “participant” from those marked “nonparticipant.” The professors made copies of participant narratives only and stapled the copies to both the demographic survey and the signed consent form. Next,

all of the writing samples were returned to the students. The data were then submitted to the researchers. The pieces were not anonymous; however, instructors could easily have blacked out names and separated signed consent forms from anonymous creative narratives.

Lesson plans were not provided, nor were there any classroom visits by the researchers. Since all of the professors in the spring 2013 semester taught the writing for literature course, the creative narrative assignment was designed to fit with poetry and drama segments, noting that in addition to writing about literature, students could model the form and write their own prose or poetry. A variation of the assignment sheet was provided for the INT/ESL section. Finally, professors had complete freedom to introduce and/or teach the creative narrative at their own discretion. All six of the professors chose to give a participation grade for the completed assignment.

Data Analysis

Once the creative writing pieces were collected—57 artifacts in all, including 55 poems, 1 script, and 1 visual narrative—the data were analyzed and coded. Two separate coding sessions took place apart from the original analysis to create a rich, layered repository of perspectives for comparative analysis. One session consisted of a team of three composition instructors outside of the home institution who offered a broad analysis; the other session included one undergraduate English major/research assistant from the institution.

The creative narratives were coded in two ways to determine how students present the self within creative texts. First, reviewers examined the submitted creative texts for an understanding of individual experiences and identities/personas. Reviewers considered global influences (cultural, historical, or social influences) as well as local or micro-level concerns (language choice and place/time of the narrative) and made notes on the texts, such as *child of abuse or divorce; spiritually lost; battling an eating disorder*. Powell (2000) argued that students come to understand their selves through a “critical consciousness”—a platform to consider the complexities of many forces. Elspeth Probyn’s explanation of self, as noted in Powell’s work, is as follows: “The self has to be positioned in relation to the absence and presence of the concepts of truth, confession, experience, immanence, private and public, individual and universal, and of course, masculine and feminine as well as sex, sexuality and gender, women and men” (p. 44). By negotiating these forces, students construct a self that enables them to voice their responses to the world through their writing.

Another way of viewing the “writerly” self is Ivanič’s (1997) autobiographical self: “The identity which people bring with them to any act of writing” (p. 24). Of the autobiographical self, she wrote, “The term also captures the idea that it is not only the events in people’s lives, but also their way of representing these experiences to themselves which constitutes their current way of being” (Ivanič, 1997, p. 24). Ivanič’s concept was further explored by Hanauer (2010), who stated that the autobiographical self “consists of the life-history, memories, events, ways of representing and being in the world. The autobiographic self is not considered

a fixed, essentialist entity, but rather a developing, changing entity responsive to context” (p. 58). These complex and layered notions of identity and self informed our inquiry into how students’ rich experiences and histories, as presented in creative narratives, could serve as cultural data.

Next, reviewers coded the identity narratives for metaphors and images. This enabled us to see that many of the constructions of self were presented as metaphors and images. Key to our analysis and coding of metaphor was Seitz’s (1999) *Motives for Metaphor* and his discussion of Davidson’s “literalist” perspective: “According to Davidson, theories that seek to explain the unique power of metaphor are looking in the wrong direction when they turn toward its supposedly hidden meanings” (p. 97). What matters more, according to Davidson, is the “interaction between the metaphor and those toward whom it is directed” (Seitz, 1999, p. 97). Thus, in our data analysis, we looked to the use of metaphor in student works as messages carrying meanings. As Seitz (1999) wrote, “What is imaginative about metaphor is not its generation of new meanings but its creative employment of standard meanings in order to stimulate further thought about the subject” (p. 97)—in this case, the students within their places.

As reviewers read through the student narratives, underlining or highlighting metaphors and other key phrases, they made brief notes about possible meanings. They were asked to consider what was revealed about the students’ identities. Next, reviewers were asked to develop preliminary descriptors or tags for the metaphors found, such as “speakers taking on various pursuits for finding happiness” and “masked insecurity”—meanings reviewers pulled from metaphors in student poems. These tags were then keyed into a spreadsheet for a later comparative analysis.

For assistance in coding, we looked to Alexander’s (2011) study on student literacy narratives, in which she examined the ways students use “multiple stories to communicate their experiences” (p. 614). In our own study, we looked to singular narratives to collaboratively tell a story of a community, but still followed her coding process. Alexander grouped her data into eight coding categories, such as *Success*, *Hero*, *Child Prodigy*, and *Victim*, all informed by scholarship on the narrative by Paterson (2001), Fox (1997), and Carpenter and Falbo (2006), among others. The coding schema for our study followed Alexander’s structure, though it ultimately yielded different descriptors.

After our coding sessions, the narratives were organized by themes/threads. Once loose categories were decided upon, a second analysis ensued, in which a comparison of all of the descriptors was made. Next, descriptors were finalized, and poems were narrowed into six groups by their common threads. Some shifting occurred due to overlap, as many of the poems shared common threads.

The Demographic Survey

To begin developing characters for the novel, we analyzed student-participants through demographic surveys. The results of the survey offered a way to configure characterizations with attention to gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation,

relationship status, and high school setting (urban or rural, homeschool or public/private) aside from, and in addition to, the information garnered from field notes and the creative data. The survey yielded the following results.

In addition to faculty-participants, 57 students participated in the study; of those, 42 were female and 15 were male, ranging in age from 17 to 21, with the exception of one male student who was 34. Further, 53 students claimed English as their primary language, with others noting Korean (1 student), Portuguese (1 student), and Chinese (2 students) as primary. The demographic survey revealed that student-participants came from the following settings: 24 from rural locations, 9 from urban areas, and 23 from suburban areas. One student did not respond to this question.

Two other factors surveyed were previous schooling type and religious affiliation. Of all participants, 33 students went to public schools, 8 went to private schools, and 3 were homeschooled. The remaining students claimed combined schooling experiences, such as some public or private with homeschooling (11 students) or attending both public and private schools (2 students). The survey revealed that students claimed the following religious affiliations: 23 Christian (denomination not specified), 27 Baptist, 2 Catholic, 1 Presbyterian, 2 Methodist, and 2 Agnostic. The demographic survey also considered marital status (52 single, 2 engaged, 1 married, and 2 who did not respond), as well as whether respondents were first-generation college students (13 responded yes).

Common threads found within the narratives, as well as results from the demographic survey, enabled us to identify six groups, presented here as a standard analysis in a list to contrast with the rendering made in Bailey's piece of fiction (excerpted below):

- Descriptor 1: Poems with personas reflecting a solid identity in religion; outgoing and part of many communities; sometimes judgmental.
- Descriptor 2: Poems revealing speakers who were spiritually lost; "black sheep"; rebellious in nature; lovesick/love-focused; unfocused on studies.
- Descriptor 3: Poems with "conflicted" personas; uncertain of identity, desiring change, and/or struggling with past and future; child of divorce/abuse.
- Descriptor 4: Poems with personas/speakers who were reclusive, introverted, and/or homesick; strong family ties; strong attachment to place; identities based on team sports (team is family).
- Descriptor 5: Poems with themes of redemption or reformation and with personas new to religion, forging new identities, seeking rebirth, and/or seeking to belong.
- Descriptor 6: Poems with personas who had lived in multiple cultures; with international parents; taking on various pursuits for finding happiness within new places/cultures; masking insecurity; vulnerable; religious.

From Coding to Characterizations: Notes toward Findings as Process

The next challenge was to establish how to translate the poems' themes from the six groupings into six characters and place them within an established setting where they would honor the original data, which might more consistently reflect how data could be used in investigating creative writing. One major consideration at this stage was moving from a standard analysis of student writing (i.e., mining for words and phrases that reveal student identity) to synthesizing the data into characters. We had to consider what was being compromised or lost and what was being gained from individual writings. While we understood the risks, we were also determined to honor and sustain the original aesthetic expressions in our own creative piece. We considered the novel as an opportunity to further understand the data, a method that offered freedom in aesthetic expression while still presenting data.

Many scholars have used aesthetic expressions in the development of research methods, including Faulkner (2009), who studied poetry as a way of reporting research, and Hanauer (2010), who demonstrated the use of poetry *as* research, much as Prendergast (2009) argued for Rukeyser's (1938) poem "The Book of the Dead" as ethnography. Leavy (2013) argued that the blurring of fiction and nonfiction makes fiction-based research a viable option and demonstrated how such a project might be designed. Ellis (2009) wrote personal stories that show the power, value, and authenticity of autoethnographic research. Her *The Ethnographic I* (2004) is subtitled, appropriately enough, *A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* and models the use of storytelling in autoethnographic inquiry.

In our own ethnographic inquiry, the process of storytelling began with writing character sketches to determine which data set became which character. Novelists often piece together characters from several sources—from different people they know—to create authentic and "whole" perspectives. Characters come alive from this piecing together, and writers often discover through writing character sketches what their story is "about." In the sketches within this study, Bailey sought to preserve individual traits from the student narratives, but the overarching similarities within the groups were used as the foundation for each character.

In creating six independent characters based on the characteristics of multiple students, we considered whether instructors could still understand students as individuals. We argue that, yes, individual identities are still visible through the composites. For example, we see the novel as somewhat like survey results addressing the question: *Who are the individuals sitting in my first-year composition classroom?* The data from the survey offered individual glimpses into student makeup, but the final report, like the novel, offered composite views of those students. The composites were linked by students' similarities. As previously noted, those glimpses of student selves offered important cultural information, the kind of knowledge that teachers might find useful in the classroom. Finally, the research conducted in this study was not that far removed from traditional research methods—we collected data and reported on those data; however, we chose a different form in which to present our findings, the novel, which is more attuned to aesthetic writ-

ing. The process of writing that novel (i.e., developing the characters, setting, and plot) was simply an aesthetic mode of data analysis. The following section aims to explicate part of that process.

Reporting Data: Content and Process Approaches

A major objective of the study was to explore personas within student poems to build fictional characters that “embodied” or “articulated” aspects of those original expressions. As Bailey analyzed the data in developing characters for her novel, she returned to one narrative in particular, “Belonging,” because of its persona shaped by stark imagery, conflict, and the theme of the student’s identity search. Ultimately, this poem initiated the development of the main character, Liz Walker (Descriptor 5) for those very reasons. While the protagonist of Bailey’s novel was influenced by ten poems from the data set, “Belonging” was pivotal in informing the character type because of the speaker’s overt battle with an eating disorder. The underlying issues associated with anorexia—the notion of control that accompanies the disorder—proved key to the characterization of Liz.

The speaker in “Belonging” says, “Out of place, belonging to another world / and a different space. The feeling that pervades / when you hate your own skin fighting a battle useless to win” (Lines 1–3). She continues, “The promises he makes are silky and sweet / making you obsessed with the foods you cannot eat” (Lines 9–10). While Bailey did not want to build a character based on one poem (nor did she want it to be a story about a teen battling an eating disorder), she did want to draw upon the element of control, which is often the underpinning of eating disorders. The poem “Belonging,” like others within the category of Descriptor 5, offers a troubled figure coping in a new situation.

Additional poems in the “Liz” data set presented speakers divulging details about troubled pasts; existing in uncomfortable new situations in which they felt out of place; searching and longing for peace and/or identity; and, in some cases, experiencing a rebirth and gaining control of a new life. Bailey used these themes to further develop Liz’s character as one who is uncertain about attending a Christian university and, consequently, questioning religion. Further, some of the titles alone revealed themes of redemption and rebirth: “Free at Last and Free Indeed,” “The Shift,” “Find the Courage,” and “Under the Water I Go.” All of these poems informed Liz’s character. At the beginning of the novel, readers find Liz “drowning,” gasping for breath and for life. By the end, she emerges and catches her breath. She finally gains control of a newly forged life. The intent of the drowning scene, and also of the title *Girl Under Water*, was to represent a baptism of sorts, though not in the literal sense.

To further illustrate how characters developed from the data, we offer an example of how Descriptor 1 informed/became “Emmy” in the novel. The character of Emmy derived from 13 poems coded as “religious” or as having a principal connection to the student-speaker’s identity in relation to a deity. While many of the 57 poems mentioned a deity, the poems that informed the character of “Emmy” were chiefly focused on the speaker claiming her sole identity as religious. Some of the descriptions from those who coded the data included the following tags:

“reassurance of worth found in religion,” “changed person because of faith,” and “redeemed.” Many of the selected poems illustrated a speaker solid in her convictions; however, some poems were tagged as “judgmental.” This additional feature gained a degree of prominence as Emmy began to emerge, as evidenced in the novel excerpt to follow.

The use of imagery in the poem “Life is a Liquid Flowing Fast” helped in the crafting of Emmy. For example, the poem’s emphasis on colors, as in “Life is a liquid flowing fast / Run with both *blues* and *red*” (Lines 1–2, emphasis ours), cast someone as running cold and hot, perhaps in convictions and in relationships. This image translated to Emmy’s behavior toward Liz, as one minute Emmy was cold to Liz and the next she was warm. Also, in the line, “Let the *crystal show* play on and on” (Line 19, emphasis ours), the words *crystal* and *show* represent Emmy’s often-transparent nature. Other lines cast the speaker as fearful of “dark, imperfect souls / Hungry never fed” (Lines 9–10); impressionable, as in “painful lessons never stop” (Line 11); and vulnerable, as in “I am held by tape and thread” (Line 18). All of these characteristics are evident in Emmy; and, while this poem proved useful in building Emmy’s character, other narratives in the group did so as well.

In creating these “composite” characters, we did lose some measure of the individuality present in the original narratives; however, such a loss of individuality is likely in any kind of research that constructs categories from a mass of original/raw data. But what is gained through this particular process is a freedom to employ a method of aesthetic data analysis that is an appropriate aesthetic response to creative texts. The following excerpt (Bailey, 2015) illustrates such a response to creative texts via the “composite” characters of Liz and Emmy.

Chapter One

Being submerged was, at first, thrillingly beautiful. The water lapped over my bare skin, sending a barrage of chill bumps across my arms, stomach, and down the nape of my neck. I drifted and dreamed about life as a mermaid—as someone or something guarded from the dirt and filth under the feet of mortals. I felt alive as I kicked my feet like fins against the current and prayed for a torrential downpour to carry me off farther into the stormy night.

From a distance, I heard a muffled voice calling me and pulling me back to reality. I opened my eyes under water, fighting the sting from the salt, or maybe it was the soap. My lungs grew tight, and my pulse drummed inside my ears as my dreams of mermaids and underwater castles started to drift away. *Just a few more minutes—hold on. Count to five to ten to ninety-seven. Almost there . . . a few more beats.* But it didn’t matter. The outside voice grew louder, nagging me to the shore. I lifted my head out of the water, just barely, and gasped for air.

The voice and the pounding against the bathroom door became clearer as my ears popped and drained. “Quit hogging the bathroom,” my roommate yelled.

My breathing echoed in the tiny bathroom I shared with my two roommates, and I searched for words, any words to make her go away. Finally, I whispered, “Leave me alone.”

“Come on already,” Emmy whined as if she had heard me over the loud whirring of the ventilating fan.

I pushed my toes against the foot of the tub and sat upright. Almost immediately, the drafty air settled over my bare shoulders, and I shivered as streams of water fled down my back. I spotted a pinkish-white towel on the back of the door and stepped out onto the cold tile floor to grab it. The towel wasn’t mine, but I took it anyway and sobbed into the frayed terrycloth. The soured fabric bit back with its pungent odor.

“Hello?” Emmy yelled from the other side of the door. I stepped back as another round of pounding ensued from her tiny fist.

“*All right!* Give me a second.” I wrapped the rank towel around my head and steadied myself on the edge of the sink. I scanned the small space for another towel and saw my other roommate’s blue robe hanging from a silver hook. I slipped it on and avoided the mirror—avoided looking at the girl with sunken cheeks. I ran my fingers down my face to the visible bones in my chest.

At first I had lost nine pounds in one month, seven the next, then it slowed to three pounds a month until I hit “an unhealthy 102 pounds for a 5’10” young woman.” Dr. Carnessi was not happy with me on my last visit to Cumberland Hills. He wanted to check me in again, but I begged Mom not to listen to him. I promised her I’d eat and stay on my meds. Part of the problem *was* my meds. They made me forget things, like food. It wasn’t an intentional starvation—the speculated anorexia; I forgot to eat most of the time, or I slept through meals.

“Liz? Did you hear me?” Emmy yelled.

I exhaled slowly and counted to three.

“Seriously. Come on!” she said.

I turned away from the mirror and flung open the door. “Fine. *Je-sus!*”

“I hope you *did* talk to Jesus in there,” she said.

“What?” It took me a second to register. “Whatever.”

She started to move past me and stopped. “Hey, that’s not your robe.”

“And it’s not your business.” I slinked off to my room and locked the door behind me. I had laundry to do anyway, so it wasn’t like Drea would even know. It bugged me how Emmy was up in everyone’s life all the time. No one ever asked her opinion, but she was always there handing out advice and condescending remarks with a sugar coating.

I sat down on my bed and unraveled the towel from my head, letting loose strands of wet, wavy hair. In a few minutes, Emmy would be out of the apartment, and I’d have the place to myself. Friday nights in my dorm were usually quiet with Miss Social Director and Drea both gone. Drea lived an hour from home and hadn’t transitioned to college life yet. But then again, neither had I. And Emmy stayed on campus—just not in our dorm.

I reached for my laptop and scrolled through some online movies to stream. I landed on a documentary about starving supermodels in Poland and clicked “watch now.” On my bedside table rested a small bag of candy, unopened, and I ripped the bag with my teeth. I chewed on a few gummy bears as Nadia spoke in broken English about missing her family back home. About twenty minutes into the film, Emmy called out from the other side of my locked door, “I’m done if you need the bathroom.”

I popped a yellow bear into my mouth and thought about going back. “Okay, thanks,” I managed back. I wiggled down into my bed and repositioned my laptop on my stomach, right between my hipbones. I stiffened at Emmy’s singsong reply of “Okay then.”

A few minutes later, I heard the front door slam shut and the lock click. *Finally*. I fought against the weight of my lids, but the warmth of my bed won me over. The last thing I remembered was watching Nadia stare out a plane window that was dotted with pellets of rain. The weather in the film matched the soft downfall against my own window, creating the perfect surround-sound effect. Nadia hummed a sweet, child-like tune into the blue-gray sky, and then the screen went dark.

Explaining Data: The Novel as Cultural Evidence

Responding to students’ creative writing with creative writing, as illustrated in the above novel excerpt, allowed Bailey to synthesize and adapt the student data into a larger work, one that captures and even honors the original works. We argue that the writer’s process of writing the novel is an interpretive method and that the novel itself is the report on the original data. Further, with the novel, we wanted to explore how creative writing serves as *cultural* data. The novel, a metanarrative derived from multiple narratives, provides a story of a community of people—evidence of particular places and times—much as ethnography does. What we did in our study is typical of work done by ethnographers and is not as outlandish as it might first seem. For years, ethnographers have studied and written about individual peoples and cultures, often giving readers fragments of data that can “stand for the social world” (Atkinson, 1990, p. 83). Atkinson (1990) stated, “The reader can thus encounter persons, events and the like which are proffered as representative of the given culture” (p. 83). Our study, with fragments of textual evidence and observations of setting and a community, “stands for” cultural themes or social types within a studied environment. It is not a whole representation, nor is it a concrete, objective, conclusive text; it is a semiotic exposition of persons, belief systems, and the interplay of those elements within a place.

Our metanarrative leans upon the actual writing of accounts, in which *interpretations* become the data (Gobo, 2008). Gobo (2008) suggested, “The researcher thus constructs fictitious cultures through narrative” (p. 62). This ideology does not come without critique; some see the recasting of an experience as self-reflexive and a dead end, or as a “convenient alternative” to more stringent forms of analysis (Gobo, 2008, p. 63). However, as evidenced in our study, postmodern ethnography can be a means of gaining knowledge about *the other* as well as *the self*. It becomes not just a way of understanding cultures, but also a way for ethnographers to “gain a fuller understanding of themselves, by uncovering their prejudices, ideology, and tacit knowledge” (Gobo, 2008, p. 62).

Also key to our aesthetic narrative is Bishop’s (1999) realization that “things as they really are” do not exist, at least in terms of fixed and factual concepts within ethnographically reported communities. From a postmodern view, the “warmer” voice of subjective, interpretive, creative narrative, compared with science’s “cooler” voice, lacks rigor and does not align itself with objective, factual realities (Bishop, 1999, p. 151). But Bishop requires the ethnographer, the researcher, to take re-

sponsibility for the space between these worlds, to negotiate and understand the role of ethnographer as storyteller versus a researcher influenced or informed by a positivist position. She noted how “writing up” the data or narrative includes “creating believable, interesting, and authoritative authorial identity” (Bishop, 1999, p. 151)—a key to our own research study. In addition to Atkinson’s, Gobo’s, and Bishop’s discussions of ethnography, other important texts such as *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 2010) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer, 1999) have also provided significant contributions to notions of representation in research. Both of these now “classic” texts did much to instill the idea that ethnographic research is ultimately a means of interpretive writing.

As noted previously, data representation of the original poems in a novel was key to our study in that we hoped to illustrate how this kind of inquiry is appropriate to creative writing research. However, the study also provided evidence of students’ success as creative writers themselves. Through language choices, emotions, and inner states revealed, students crafted creative narratives, evidencing time, place, and experience. Those responses are found throughout the novel. The students’ stories exist within the subsequent creative work, reappearing in the author’s reimagined space.

Conclusion

We set out to explore and argue what counts as evidence in creative writing. We believe evidence in creative writing has historically grown from writers’ self-reports to reports in aesthetic forms, and the validity of those reports has historically been found in aesthetic statements. As a result, we have argued that reports of data in aesthetic forms—that is, aesthetic renderings of/responses to findings—are a legitimate mode of research, especially in creative writing. The current alternative to asserting the independence of creative writing as an academic subject by reporting research that employs aesthetic forms is to employ methods of research better suited to composition studies and, frankly, to abdicate responsibility for securing creative writing’s disciplinary status in English departments. In the process of reaching this conclusion, we discovered an approach especially well suited to research in creative writing as it might be done by creative writers. By using an alternative form of data representation instead of conventional findings and discussion, the adaptations and interpretations offered count as data. We see that the evidence lies in both student narratives as well as in the author’s aesthetic response to the students’ creative works. And we conclude that evidence in composition is not evidence in creative writing because findings must be spoken in a language which creative writers value; the research method reflects a “sufficiently agreed set of ideals” and leads “to the development of an isolable and self-defining repertory of procedures” (Toulmin, 1972, p. 359).

Aesthetic inquiry is at the heart of our efforts here. Thus, we forward the view that as published creative writers, ourselves—a novelist and a poet—we have a unique perspective on making texts that are, themselves, aesthetic objects, and reflect an agreed-upon set of ideals among creative writers who are unlikely

to have been trained in empirical research methods in MFA and PhD programs in creative writing. Leavy (2009) asserted that “there are two primary avenues for addressing the question of aesthetics in arts-based research: the theoretical and the methodological” (p. 17). We opened this essay by addressing the theoretical: if creative writing is a discipline apart from composition studies, it is so, as Toulmin (1972) suggested, because it construes data or evidence in a manner consistent with its values, privileging the aesthetic object as data. We use two sets of aesthetic data here: poems by students and the report of what we found in those poems in another aesthetic form, a short novel. Here the theoretical and methodological merge, as other scholars have indicated they might.

Leggo (2005), for one, pushed us to further interrogate this theory of disciplinarity and connect it to our research methods: What does this method accomplish that other methods don't? We have presented two sets of findings, one a traditional representation that shrinks the experience we report upon to a list of findings, and the other a piece of fiction that not only recreates the experience but, in a sense that creative writers understand, becomes the researcher's experience. Rather than shrinking, reducing, and inevitably misrepresenting the data, the aesthetic object (the novel) contextualizes it in a way that resonates with the aesthetic impulse of creative writing, the discipline, and creative writing, the school subject. By writing poems that represent their cultural awarenesses, students create aesthetic objects that serve as data (Hanauer, 2010). Those data (student poems) are the phenomena under investigation by the researchers. But the fiction that results from this study constitutes the “articulation” of the author's analysis of those data. Both sets of aesthetic objects are evocative, engage readers' imaginations, and resonate with the world we share not only with our students but also with our colleagues in creative writing. When the data reappear, as they do here in a piece of fiction, the imaginations of readers are stimulated, a longstanding ideal in the approaches creative writers take to engaging in experience. So the effort demonstrated in this essay also allows us to record the findings of a published novelist as she makes characters for a piece of fiction, building a theory for instruction that privileges transparency in inventing characters.

By making this case, we are also repeating our belief that creative writing is a self-contained discipline with its own values, as reflected in what serves as evidence and how that evidence is rendered. Further study is needed to examine how aesthetic pieces contribute to research in creative writing studies. Harper (2008) argued for new considerations of creative writing research as more interest develops and more students pursue creative writing doctoral research degrees. By studying creative writing in the composition classroom and presenting the findings in a creative form, we can learn more about how creative writing can be beneficial to the student-writer, teacher, and researcher. Specifically, future researchers should be studying the value of aesthetic responses to aesthetic texts. One might research how an instructor's aesthetic response to students' aesthetic writings might influence students' subsequent writings. In other words, how are an instructor's aesthetic responses a form of good teaching? Another possibility is to look into the com-

patibility of aesthetic responses and institutional contexts (such as composition programs) that favor more traditional instructor responses. Finally, a researcher might conduct a more theoretical exploration of how recent scholarship in/about “the aesthetic” might inform instructors’ rationale for and their forms of aesthetic responses to their students’ writings.

Eventually, we would like to think—especially as more creative writers see the need to engage in research in academic creative writing *as creative writing*—that the quality of poems and stories that report data will become of some importance in determining what gets published in our best journals (Leavy, 2013). When this concern for quality of representation occurs—that is, when the “literariness” of data reports is a consideration in the presentation of research—composition and creative writing will have fulfilled the promise of an equitable relationship in writing studies.

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Initial submission: May 21, 2015

Final revision submitted: December 19, 2016

Accepted: January 23, 2017