

Codifying the Creative Self: Conflicts of Theory and Content in Creative Writing

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Abstract—This paper explores the embattled territory of academic creative writing—and most focally, the use of critical theory in the teaching and structuring of creative practice. It places creative writing in contemporary social, cultural, and otherwise anthropological contexts, and evaluates conventional creative writing pedagogies based on how well they serve the updated needs of increasingly diverse student congregations. With continued emphasis on student-centered learning, this paper compares theoretical to practical applications of discipline-specific knowledge, examining and critiquing theory in terms of its relevance, accessibility, and whether or not it is both actionable and beneficial in the creative writing classroom.

Index Terms—creative writing, literary theory, content, pedagogy, workshop, teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

As the craft of creative writing gains in social recognition, it is becoming evident that many who study, practice and teach creative writing in academic settings sustain a certain low-grade disappointment over the academy's lack of commitment to the craft, which it demonstrates routinely in its hesitancy to treat creative writing as a formal discipline. In this era of highly specialized education, it is a source of frustration to modern-day students—as well as to a growing subset of creative writing teachers—that creative writing has been virtually disallowed to claim itself as specialty, and abandon, finally, its ill-fitting role as the lesser stepchild of literary theory, presented to developing writers as a potentially engaging but ultimately incidental part of a more legitimate course of study.

Indeed, much has been published in support of this grievance, and a particular amount of attention has been paid to the injustice of creative writing's longstanding subordination to other, more quantifiable subjects. Yet, more often than not, these analyses only circle the depth of creative writing's conflict with theory, despite that this particular embattlement is the driving force behind many a prominent argument for the reformation of academic creative writing. As creative writing demonstrates that it will continue to grow, as a study and practice simultaneously shaped by and rebellious of literary theory, perhaps it would enrich the conversation to identify and investigate some of the exact points of disharmony between these two areas of interest. This dialogue might be initiated by a question of paramount importance to the debate: Is literary theory helping writers produce better literature?

II. IMPACT OF LITERARY THEORY ON EXPRESSIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CREATIVE WRITING

Famed literary feminist Barbara Christian (1988) has pronounced theory largely unhelpful to the practicing writer, citing as her rationale the occupation of theory by an association of intellectually sanctimonious critics who “are no longer concerned with literature but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and conceived of herself or himself as the center” (p. 67). Overarching, Christian's critical work in African-American and women's literatures reflects a certain skepticism regarding the legitimacy of academic discourse—and a particular suspicion of discourse that looks inward for confirmation, appearing to preclude or discourage cross-cultural conference. If we are sympathetic to her argument, we may apply this skepticism to academia's highly discursive systems of classification, exemplified in its elaborate construction of the formal “discipline,” a designation that, as I have mentioned, is often withheld from creative writing—but never from literary theory.

In “The Race for Theory,” Christian (1988) explicated the racial and ethnic fallout of these systems—how presiding literary theory has allowed such a marginalizing term as “minority discourse” to become a field standard, despite that the descriptor is “untrue to the literatures being produced by our writers, for many of our literatures (certainly Afro-American literature) are central, not minor” (p. 69-70). Here, Christian has observed what is perhaps the most pivotal problem in allowing a select demographic of “critics” to set and control the discourse by which creative writing is taught, discussed, and evaluated: it may result in imposed classifications that improperly limit the scope of minority writers' work.

While Christian's work opens up an important space in which to discuss the disenfranchisement of cultural identity in creative writing—and the ways in which literary theory may enable it—her indictment of literary theory on grounds of cultural divisiveness has been met with resistance. In “Literary Theory in the Creative Writing Workshop,” John Parras (2005) appeared to subvert Christian's argument that theory begets an oppression of identity, offering that identity-related concepts such as “ethnic mixture, family role, [and] social class” may actually be regarded as “theoretical issues

and contexts underlying the production and reception of writing” (p. 158-159). He framed theory and identity as symbiotic, rather than antithetical, and argued the benefits of using theory in guided discussion to help creative writers “break the boundaries of the self” (p. 158).

This notion of the “self”—its role in creative writing, and the subjectivity it acquires in the application of literary theory—will reappear throughout this essay. Christian and Parras have provided a useful framework for the discussion. While both have commented on the self—on authorial identity in creative process—it is easy to see where their assessments might collide; the former regards identity as self-evident, and theory as a compromise, while the latter regards identity as malleable, and theory as a means to elevate it to new heights. The most practical of such analyses likely fall somewhere between; after all, as Francois Camoin (1994) observed, creative writing, though it may resist what theory is forced upon it, is not itself without theory: “We have our own stock of critical terms, familiar and nonthreatening. Round and flat characters. Point of view. Narrative persona. Flashbacks. Showing versus telling” (p. 3). These terms function similarly to literary theory in that they are applied to a text in pursuit of deeper understanding. The difference lies in the accessibility of the discourse.

While an additional few of the binaries populating these arguments will necessarily be addressed throughout the remainder of this essay, it is not the primary intention of this essay to referee the theory/no-theory debate. This analysis seeks to dispute neither the existence of theory in creative writing, nor the potential of its usefulness in the teaching of creative writing. It is concerned, rather, with what Christian (1988) has referred to as “academic hegemony, and possibility of its inappropriateness to the energetic emerging literatures of the world today” (p. 69). In the context of this position, the following discussion will elucidate the ways in which specific applications of theory to creative writing have failed, and are as a result actively alienating a generation of promising writers.

III. THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF CREATIVE WRITING

To start, creative writing’s trajectory in the university and in the greater public sphere might be examined more thoroughly—for a shift in the epistemological tides which govern student and professional curiosities suggests that however marginalized creative writing appears as an academic discipline, it *is* gaining in public recognition. In its annual report, the Association for Writers and Writing Programs cited its 2013 conference in Boston as the “best-attended and most diverse and dynamic gathering in our history,” with an attendance of “11,600 writers, teachers, students, editors, and publishers” (p. 6). This is hardly an unanticipated development. In *The Future for Creative Writing*, Graeme Harper (2014) outlined the ways in which globalization is shaping creative writing’s expansion, and predicted that as the world continues to become a more integrated place, creative writing will serve as a catalyst for critical discussions of “cultural difference” (p. 49).

Response to such projections has been mixed. Michelene Wandor (2008) characterized the ongoing conversation about the “new” creative writing in terms of its most notable constituents, which include 1) members of the academic or intellectual elite, arguing for a return to more systemic analyses of literary production, and 2) members of community-based movements, favoring the development of the individual author over that of any applied course of study (p. 62). While established critics work as they always have to articulate—or disarticulate—creative writing, to forecast its movement socially and throughout academia, the momentum of the craft is shifting to the incoming generation of student writers. Ostensibly, the timing is right for a change of hands; as civic engagement makes a comeback on college campuses, students are increasingly interested in courses of study that provide them with constructive outlets for social and cultural commentary—a cause to which creative writing is particularly suited. This trend is a brilliant addendum to a recent history in which creative writing remained largely out of focus, for as Harper has noted, Twentieth Century academia was organized rather exclusively around “professional specializations,” a cataloging of academic disciplines which appears to have held creative writing in a kind of marginalized suspension, and from which the craft now advances with vitality and promise (p. 6).

It is worth noting, however, that the recent accord between creative writing and social movement is not itself a new development, but is a natural (if traditionally neglected) element of a craft that has always prioritized an awareness both of the human condition and the social climate of the era. The practice of translating thoughts to writing is unmistakably collective, absorbing the features of its environments, contracting and expanding around points of interest or concern. As Patrick Bizarro (2005) noted in “Research and Reflection in English Studies: The Special Case of Creative Writing,” creative writers “understand the value of history” and are able to engage their sources “not only through the lenses of our own critical eyes but also through the thickening fog of current events and experiences” (p. 302). This remains true beyond the parameters of the write-to-publish model often presented to creative writers at the university; poetry carved into the walls of holding cells at the Angel Island Immigration Station, for example, attests to the more fundamental intersection of creative writing and human experience, as well as to creative writing’s critical function in the documentation of history (Lai, Lim, & Yung, 1980/2014). With multitudes of such applications existing in both historical and present times, creative writing may accurately be characterized as an essentially anthropological craft, investigative in nature, and it may be concluded that pursuits in creative writing are borne by an organic desire for knowing and expressing, rather than as a result of any prescriptive theory.

At this point in the discussion, one might recall Christian’s (1988) “academic hegemony,” and consider its consequences to the quality of creative writing outlined above. Christian’s particular concern was that the instatement of lit-

erary theory in the processes of producing and analyzing creative writing has led to the inappropriate co-optation of a craft whose purposes are much broader than as dictated by the critical discourse. She laid a special emphasis on the adverse possibilities of forcing this critical discourse on the work of minority writers:

The pervasiveness of this academic hegemony is an issue continually spoken about—but usually in hidden groups, lest we, who are disturbed by it, appear ignorant to the reigning academic elite. Among the folk who speak in muted tones are people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard, and for whom literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better. (p. 69)

Christian's early reframing of writing and literature as tools for exploring the human experience and communicating across populations coheres remarkably well to modern objectives (e.g. engaging multiple audiences), and also provides us with an initial criterion by which to evaluate the successfulness of all current applications of literary theory to creative writing.

And indeed, there has been a certain departure—very much in the vein of Christian's argument—from those conventions of theory which may have stymied the outward growth of creative writing. What once was an exclusive "discourse amongst critics" is blossoming into an interdisciplinary conversation; this is evident in that creative writing has not remained limited only to those practitioners who would identify in any traditional sense as either "creative writers" or "literary theorists." In modern post-secondary (and professional) environments, creative writing attracts from a variety of previously disengaged areas of study. Harper (2014) has observed what may be interpreted as the ascension of creative writing to more interdisciplinary status:

Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers historians, social workers, nurses, computer scientists... and special-ists in education, to name a few, have all found some reason, advantage, or sense of possibility in engaging with creative writing in an academic setting. (p. 50)

Tom Moran's (2008) "Strong Words – The Creative Writing of Engineers," provides additional testament to this trend. After interviewing a dozen engineers-turned-authors, Moran even found that some of them "saw the creative writing as simply an extension of their workplace writing or technical writing" (p. 10). That students and professionals with limited backgrounds in literary theory are investigating creative writing in this way, rediscovering it in its most essential capacity as a means to human expression, is significant and encouraging of widespread change at the university level. In particular, it indicates that creative writing is emerging from its literary strictures as a more widely applicable craft, no longer married so exclusively to the study of theory. It is imperative, in turn, that English departments respond to this change.

IV. MODES OF RESISTANCE TO CREATIVE WRITING AS SOCIAL CRAFT

Yet, even as the social climate of the university favors a change, the academy has shown little interest in formally restructuring creative writing curricula and pedagogy. There is, in any given institution, a number of reasons that creative writing might be excluded from curricular reformations: departmental politics, financial restrictions, and poor administration, to name a few. The most universal of these reasons, however, may simply be that creative writing teachers are uncertain of how to recalibrate their methods without compromising the structure and integrity of the craft—and without risking additional scrutiny and criticisms from their departments.

If this is an impasse, it is a rather understandable one. Many of today's creative writing teachers received their initial training in the university trenches, as instructors of "basic writing"—a discipline very much defined by its controversies, and by the theories, methods and techniques developed in response to those controversies. Such teachers are commonly prepped by their predecessors and superiors to do battle against the unstructured masses, to organize the disorganized and teach between the defensible lines set up for them. In my own orientation to university teaching, my colleagues and I were handed a prefabricated syllabus and a composition textbook authored by our direct supervisor, and told that if we "stuck to the plan," it would enable the university to protect us in the case of disgruntled students—and to shield us, as well, from the broader problem of public scrutiny over college illiteracy rates.

To imply that the above experience is representative of the teacher training behind all basic writing programs would be in error. It is, however, reasonable to suggest such training precedents as an explanation for why creative writing teachers, although having diverged from the somewhat restrictive channels of first-year composition, continue to lean so heavily on established procedures. In "Professional Writers/Writing Professionals: Revamping Teacher Training in Creative Writing Ph. D. Programs," Kelly Ritter (2001) suggested that universities are encouraging in their teaching assistants the misplaced belief that basic and creative writing share an ethos, and that those pedagogies and theories which served the composition classroom will serve the creative writing classroom equally well (p. 214). These ideas have had a lasting influence on the way that creative writing is perceived and taught in academic settings. For any antipathy writer-teachers may harbor toward literary theory—its inaccessibility and its distortion of creative practice—the truth is that it has long provided them with a roadmap to the instruction of writing. It has provided them with the terms they use to explicate and the standards by which they evaluate the work set before them. Literary theory, though it is often out of sync with the needs of emerging creative writers, has provided creative writing *teachers*, otherwise regarded the "exotica of English departments," with a more articulable kind of pedagogy, and with a means to translate the unconventional

interest/skill of creative writing into something that can be marketed to the higher education workplace (Camoin, 1994, p. 3).

Although this may appear counterintuitive, the convention that creative writing teachers are educators *as well as* writers does, in a way, obligate them to approach the aforementioned “writing-as-human-experience” movement from a pedagogical and not merely a “writerly” perspective. In doing so, additional points of concern—some of them originating outside the academic spectrum—are identified. As self-help media popularizes the creative process as a path to self-discovery and consolation, there is a mounting concern amongst teachers that the lines between personal and public writing—between private journaling, and the kind of writing that a student produces in an academic setting—are becoming blurred. In *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: the Authority Project*, Nancy Kuhl (2005) claimed that recent recharacterizations of creative writing as a kind of “therapy” have proven especially problematic in the classroom, resulting in a “commodification of the artistic process [which] undermines the reality of that process,” making it difficult to engage certain students who are now so “heavily invested the popular mythologies dealing with writing and creativity” that they have lost sight of what it means to produce quality literary work (p. 4).

This is an entirely legitimate complaint. Discarding the basic principles of craft in favor of unfettered self-expression is not a sustainable option in academic settings. Most creative writing teachers agree that guided discussion of literary form is beneficial to students in that it asks them to engage with the material on a deeper level—to consider “good writing” not as a self-evident outcome, but as the result of a process that involves many stages of trial and error. In this, students acquire a basic frame of reference for narrative essentials such as diction, and the interplay between sound and meaning (Leahy, 2005, p. 14). Knowledge of these and other devices is prescriptive, and will ultimately help students exercise more creative control over their work.

Additionally, form offers teachers a reliable baseline for discussion of student work. In the creative writing workshop, where every manuscript is an uncharted territory, form is a safe, controlled course of inquiry. This is especially helpful when dealing with writing of a more confessional nature; focusing on the *mechanics* of a highly sentimental or opinionated piece helps keep the workshop objective and on track, while simultaneously orienting students to the nuts and bolts of a working literary form. It also helps ensure that the disposition of the writing is held as separate from that of the writer, thereby avoiding a situation in which the workshop begins to criticize the writer instead of the writer’s work. With this critical distinction in mind, students are more apt to remain focused on the tasks at hand, which are to participate in close, informed analyses of the text, and to make the kinds of pointed suggestions that will truly aid the author in revision.

In theory, literary form—its study and its associated pedagogies—provides teachers with everything needed to conduct productive, technically correct creative writing workshops. And given creative writing’s ongoing lack of stature and/or security in most English departments, teachers might not be *inclined* to step too far outside those lines; after all, a form-driven, topically neutral approach to student writing is often substantially easier to execute than any content-driven approach. Indeed, one of my own graduate professors use to make a point of intercepting all content-related queries with a quick, “When we talk about content, the questions become enormous. Form gives us something we can actually discuss.”

However, despite its myriad attractions, teachers must keep in mind that form is not, in itself, an end; it is something to employ, analyze and discuss in the service of larger objectives. Consider Lynn Domina’s (1994) comment on the balance of form and content in the workshop space:

Yes, sonnets and sestinas are made of lines made of words, and will be more or less successful in part because of the sound or syntax of the particular phrases, and craft is comparatively easy to discuss. But a more fundamental influence on a student’s or any writer’s success, I think, is permission to address one’s personal obsessions. (p. 27)

What happens, then, to an author’s investment in the workshop process when his or her personal obsessions are pushed out of the workshop space so that it might be repopulated by the more universal language of form? Or, a broader question might be: What happens to the integrity of the workshop itself, to the quality of its suggestions, when peer reviewers are encouraged to comment on the form of a piece without ever being asked to consider what the piece is trying to achieve in its use of form—i.e. the *content* of the piece? Domina aptly suggested that

In each case, it is the student’s person which has been dismissed and/or censored, and the content of any subsequent writing will be virtually irrelevant, since the student has been judged a priori incapable of portraying truth. (p. 27)

This, a universally undesirable outcome.

While this line of questioning does not suggest that teachers remedy this issue by dismissing the edict of silent observation that is placed upon the author at the beginning of the workshop session, it does suggest that teachers reexamine the ways in which the conference is organized and executed. To safeguard against an ultimately unproductive dismissal of the author, the workshop must ask and attempt to answer such questions as, What is this piece of writing about? and What is it attempting to do? *before* turning to a discussion of how form can help the piece achieve its (identified) goals. In short, without discarding form, and the ways in which a piece of writing meets or falls short of formal expectations, the workshop must reframe form as a tool for enhancing content.

Parras (2008) is among those who have criticized this approach. Channeling prominent poststructuralist arguments which diminish the role of the author in the creation of a text, Parras has questioned whether creative writing teachers are already paying *too much* recognition to students’ authorship: “Workshops ... function on assumptions such as that

all poems are ruled by authorial intention, that the author is the undisputed origin and master of her work, and that, indeed, there exists an entity which we can without difficulty agree to call an author” (p. 160). While Parras cites influential theorists Foucault and Barthes in support of his position, it is not difficult to see the alienating quality in this line of thought, which operates (at least ostensibly) outside the realms of practical application. I mean here to imply that such a theory, while deserving of its place in philosophical debate, simply does not land in the very practice-oriented context of the creative writing workshop. For the sake of encouraging in their students a continued investment in the ideas that compel them to write, teachers cannot responsibly advocate that those same students renounce authorship of their work to the extent that it is *no longer their own*, and is rendered thusly the communal property of the workshop. While it may be an eventual reality of the published author that his or her finished product is consumed and reconstituted by the reader, the workshop is a *pre-publication* conference to aid in the ongoing process of *revision*—and forcing the author out of his or her own work in the middle of that process does not suit any reasonable objective.

V. CONCLUDING DISCUSSIONS

In the course of defending theory in creative writing, Parras (2008) may also have summarized its most challenging paradox. Consider the following of his concerns, which reveals theory as a source of conflict in the workshop practicum:

Turning to the author at the end of the workshop session. . . unambiguously reinstates the writer to a position of ultimate authority; the danger is that the entire workshop session will be viewed in retrospect as nothing other than having taken stabs in the dark, having merely guessed at the writer’s intentions. The message is that, despite the professor’s lesson in the theoretical death of the author, in real life it is still the author who counts. (p. 164)

This all-but-nonexistent relationship between workshop and author reflects the more fundamental estrangement of theory from practice. It also alerts us to the practical consequences of that estrangement; after all, one might wonder at the effectiveness (and sustainability) of a workshop that is undone merely by reinstating the author as a participant in the conversation.

These considerations beg a parting question: What—and whom—do teachers of creative writing ultimately serve in striving to replace the “real-life” advent of the author with the “theoretical death of the author”? Pursuit of an answer might well reveal that these efforts are better spent finding ways to *invite* students into the writing process, and that teachers might benefit their students substantially to reconsider those applications of theory which emphasize form to the exclusion of content and voice. Perhaps in future discussions of theory the question of how it can be used to illuminate students’ thoughts, opinions, and inspirations will take a more central role. Perhaps educators and administrators in positions to help harmonize theory and practice might initiate these conversations, and reveal that it is possible, without compromising the academic integrity of the creative writing discipline, to move away from what Jay Parini (1994) has called “a baroque and technocratic language cut off from a wider sense of audience,” and begin to recognize in subsequent generations of creative writing students the ability not only to acquire discourse, but to *create* it (p. 129).

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