



Against Creative Writing Studies (and for Ish-ness)

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INTRODUCTION

When I talk about my work that might now be claimed by creative writing studies, I refer to it as scholarship in or writing about creative writing pedagogy and the profession. That's how I note it in my annual and promotion reviews and how I phrase it in my contributor's note. This work has counted—I've been acknowledged for this work—at a medium-sized open-enrollment state university and at small and medium-sized comprehensive private institutions. I don't use the term *creative writing studies* to refer to what I do. Despite my longstanding aspiration to explore creative writing pedagogy, creativity, and the profession, this article is a declaration against the *de rigueur* term.

Let me be clear: I oppose the term, not the scholars doing the work, nor the work these scholars are doing. I appreciate a great deal of what's going on under the guise of that term, and I recognize that my own work, particularly the edited collection *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*,¹ underpins some of the scholarship that's now being published as creative writing studies. Yet I resist the term and the concept.



To be sure, creative writing studies gets things just right; it follows the rules of the academy and fits into traditional structures. In fact, the term and concept of creative writing studies is the logical response to a perceived Goldilocks problem in which creative writing seems too hot or too soft and

1. Anna Leahy, ed. *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2005).

rhetoric-composition seems too cold or too hard. It's a top-down term of academic-ese that pleases perceived forces. In this way, creative writing studies—as a term and as a conceptual structure—addresses the perception that the work we've been doing these last couple of decades has been treated as if it's been done by unappreciated intruders in someone else's home. It claims. *We have the right label, and, therefore, our work counts.*

One of the ways to understand the traditional academic research process is via a self-sustaining circle in which research leads to a conference paper, and the response from peers at the conference and one's own expansion of ideas leads to an article. Ideally, a few articles lead to an external grant (at least occasionally, at least for some) and, especially in the humanities and social sciences, a book, which sets the individual up for further research in the area so that the cycle is self-sustaining. That's a great way to get tenure, but the dangers include that one gets trapped in a circular logic of one's own making; that a scholar always knows roughly where she is going and becomes limited, perhaps even burned out; that the audience is narrowly defined and the field remains more closed than it might be. While much of my scholarly work exploring pedagogy follows this model and while it's an important part of the mix in knowledge production, I'm interested in other possibilities, too, in drawing from the strengths of creative writing as a field to create an array of possible models for our scholarly work instead of borrowing this neatly contrived model. Especially in the wake of serious criticisms of peer review over the last decade, I'd go so far as to say that creative writing has a responsibility to add, expand, and invigorate the academic discourse rather than merely sneak into the conversation wearing the traditional scholars' outfit.

In psychology, the Goldilocks principle refers to our preference for tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult. That's one of my concerns: the term *creative writing studies* is a middling, a compromise, a reaction instead of an active re-envisioning and widening of creative writing itself. In astronomy, economics, and medicine, the Goldilocks principle refers to the desire or need for safety and stability, for the hospitable. Creative writing studies, then, can be seen as the result of a Goldilocks impulse to feast upon the academic porridge and find a cozy place to rest scholars' heads. Creative writing studies demarcates the comfort zone of the traditional academic cycle for success. Comfort—and the closed cycle—is not a worthwhile, long-term goal for the creative writer.

MIND THE GAP

While numerous scholars now use the term, the most thorough analysis of it as a concept is Dianne Donnelly's *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline*. Donnelly and I have been involved in several projects together, and we agree that, as teachers of creative writing, we're responsible for articulating what we do, how we do it, and why we do it the way we do.² To me,

2. Dianne Donnelly. *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012), 124.

it's important to create a wide-ranging understanding of what we do as teachers and as writers—to expand creative writing—and to not create sides, let alone pick sides. The term *creative writing studies*, however, points to a divide that need not exist and makes it increasingly difficult for me to carry messages back and forth across the widening the divide between the creative and the critical, though the relationship between the two concepts—creative writing and creative writing studies—remains relatively undefined. This new journal, no doubt, will solidify views of that relationship over years to come.

In a conversation essay with Stephanie Vanderslice and myself first published in *Fiction Writers Review* and included in my forthcoming book, Cathy Day writes, “These days, there’s a distinct polarization between the critical and the creative, and this discipline—creative writing pedagogy—sits in that divide. One side thinks we aren’t theoretical enough, and the other side thinks we’re too theoretical. We need to bring more writers from both sides into this space.”³ Instead of bringing more writers into this space, the term *creative writing studies* separates the critical further from the creative. I’ve kept the critical and creative intertwined in my career. Some days, I feel like the 1970s-era doll Stretch Armstrong as I try to keep hold of both parts of my work. The gap between creative writing and creative writing studies may seem a straw man to those on the studies side of the divide, but having worked to keep the bridge over it, I see it as real and widening as a result of this new terminology, rather than as a result of the work itself.

For a long time, I hoped that wouldn’t happen. I hoped those doing scholarly work would appreciate the way it helps shape—re-shape—creative writing and how that interplay between the creative and the critical makes creative writing a healthier discipline, even though or perhaps because not everyone is doing the same thing. By and large, it’s a mutually beneficial relationship. My hope emerged both from my experience incorporating critical writing into my professional work as a creative writer and from my resistance to territorialism in the academy. I’m predisposed to commingling. I know that some creative writing studies scholars are all for commingling too and perhaps don’t see the term as any big deal, though, of course, if terminology is no big deal and not meant to delineate academic territory, why introduce it?

Though I have been hired as a creative writer for every full-time academic position I’ve held, my scholarly work has been valued, too. In fact, this work likely distinguished me from peers both in hiring and in promotion. Certainly, no chair, no dean, no review committee ever indicated that I shouldn’t be doing this scholarly work in addition to my creative work nor that it wasn’t an important contribution, and I was able to demonstrate that I can withstand the rigor of peer review as well as that of editorial review. In fact, though it took several years for *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom* to find a publisher, it took longer for me to place a poetry book and required more iterations

3. Cathy Day, Anna Leahy, and Stephanie Vanderslice. “Where Are We Going Next? A Conversation about Creative Writing Pedagogy,” *Fiction Writers Review*, 10 February 2011, <http://fictionwritersreview.com/essays/where-are-we-going-next-a-conversationabout-creative-writing-pedagogy-pt-1>.

of a manuscript. To my mind, it's all challenging and it's all important; both the creative and the critical have been part and parcel of my career and of my career advancement.

Performance expectations in the academy can be rigorous, and the term *creative writing studies* seems to offer some safe haven for our critical work. The job market is terrible, and the early years in a full-time position are tough, especially for those taking risks. Creative writing studies as a structural concept makes the work we're doing seem less risky; this field—a subfield?—names a place for it. My experience in different types of institutions, however, convinces me that we have wiggle room (as do administrators who want to oust an individual for one reason or another) and that creative writers, especially those of us also writing about pedagogy and the profession, can define our careers in relatively flexible ways compared with other scholarly academics. It doesn't do us good, in the long run, to lose that flexibility by drawing boundaries with a new term that sounds more traditionally academic. In fact, this impulse to focus on whether this or that counts suggests that something might not. Besides, what if it counts but doesn't take us all where we want to go? In my experience and observation, as long as we rack up accomplishments and document them clearly (as long as *we* figure out how to count them), we can create a narrative that convinces others that those of us with blended, complex, or multi-genre careers are extraordinarily valuable to the institution.

Even the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the bastion of creative writing, has been responsive to the growth in pedagogy scholarship. In 2015, the conference proffered more panels in pedagogy than in any other category,⁴ and the 2016 conference is set to do the same. More than ten years ago, Wendy Bishop served as a Vice President on AWP's board of directors, and now I'm on the board, in large part because of my expertise in pedagogy and the profession. Creative writing is where we are doing our critical work; we're valued here.

That belonging, in no way, limits the development of this journal or the new conferences focused on pedagogy that are emerging. Last time I submitted to *Pedagogy*, a journal covering all of English studies, the editor wrote to let me know they wanted to send my article out for review but had been receiving more creative writing articles than ever. So much good work in pedagogy is now being done that they had a three-year lag between article acceptance and publication. In other words, while we need more outlets for our critical work, we're in a lively mix and making a difference in creative writing and in English. We're doing what we do, and our colleagues like it. We have the opportunity to remain interactive and to expand our critical, theoretical, craft, and creative work in the evolving field of creative writing. We're changing the landscape of creative writing in part because we're working in its midst and vibrantly so.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

4. Association of Writers and Writing Programs, 21 July 2015, www.awpwriter.org/application/public/pdf/conference/2015.

Instead, creative writing studies—as a term and as a concept—argues for a severing of the critical from the creative in our discipline. While I understand the urge to map academic territory for oneself and, with it, gain visibility and, presumably, respect, the metaphor that comes to my mind is the surgical removal of a limb. That’s a visceral response that I know many of my collaborators in this area don’t share.

Donnelly writes, “The academic goal of *creative writing studies* is to stand alongside composition studies and literary studies and any other university field of study as a separate-but-equal discipline.”⁵ *Separate*, she writes. The book repeats this goal—“its separate-but-equal position to that of literary studies and composition studies”⁶—so that there is no mistaking that a severing must occur. (I admit that “separate-but-equal” is another term that I’d rather us not use because of its historical use.) Moreover, this new discipline is no interdisciplinary offshoot, like biochemistry, which stands on its own and also in consort with parent disciplines; that model of interdiscipline-becomes-discipline appeals to me, and maybe that’s what we should be talking about.

Donnelly doesn’t mention creative writing in the proposed configuration. Instead, creative writing, because of its absence in the list of side-by-side equal disciplines, seems supplanted so that creative writing studies can take its place in the mix. Maybe that’s not the intention of Donnelly or other creative writing studies advocates, but I’m left wondering where creative writing figures into this model and why theory, research, and craft criticism cannot commingle with our creative work as it has these last few decades.

Creative writing studies, then, seems posited as the next stage in the evolution of creative writing and as if, before long, creative writing will no longer exist as a term or a concept. Creative writing, of course, will not be supplanted any time soon. For one thing, the English major has held relatively steady in raw numbers since 1970 (though lost percentage ground as the number of undergraduates has almost doubled),⁷ which is the same period during which the number of undergraduate creative writing major programs have grown from 3 in 1975 to 163 in 2012.⁸ In other words, creative writing has bolstered English departments. (And I’d argue that our literature colleagues might take note of how creative writing has expanded to include pedagogy scholarship as a way to strengthen a field.) The AWP conference now draws more than 12,000 attendees.⁹ When it comes down to it, many faculty and students are drawn to creative writing as a practice-based, aesthetics-driven discipline populated with creative people. Creative writing is incredibly agile in what is often a slow-changing academy, and that’s served this young academic discipline well and allowed it to grow quickly and more varied. It’s

5. Donnelly, 2.

6. Donnelly, 134.

7. “Table 322.10: Bachelor’s degrees conferred by post-secondary institutions.” National Center for Educational Statistics. Accessed 13 October 2015. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_322.10.asp.

8. Table: “Growth in Creative Writing Programs, 1975-2012.” Association of Writers and Writing Programs. Accessed 18 October 2015. https://www.awpwriter.org/application/public/pdf/AWP_GrowthWritingPrograms.pdf.

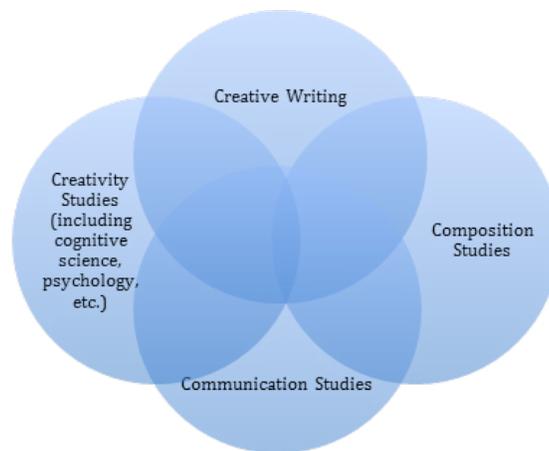
9. AWP Conference. Association of Writers and Writing Programs, 21 July 2015, www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference.

not clear how the term creative writing studies increases that agility and potential for the whole field.

Where do we belong? That's the question that's driving the rise of the term *creative writing studies* and the concept of an academic home for scholarly work in creative writing. Focusing on where we belong suggests creative writing studies might not belong. My critical work already has a home: creative writing. It's not clear to me anymore that that's where others think creative writing studies belongs.

Donnelly devotes significant time to figuring out where creative writing studies fits—and doesn't. I've talked with other scholars who are interested in this question as well. Should it be part of literary studies? Or cultural studies? Or part of writing programs as compositionists have sometimes imagined for that field? Is composition studies its real home? Donnelly asserts *No* to all of these possibilities. The book suggests a conceptual space that is none of these existing structures, even though they may be where practitioners of creative writing studies are currently housed in an institution.

Why not, then, recognize the overlaps possible in interdisciplinary work? For interdisciplinary work depends upon disciplinarity in a configuration that might look like this diagram. (The diagram is not to scale, for there exist various ways of interpreting scale in this complex relationship, and we can all probably agree that most faculty in creative writing do not do critical scholarship about pedagogy and the profession, though many write book reviews or about craft and may well consider this work scholarly within the context of the arts.) Scholarship happens in the overlaps between creative writing and other disciplines (of which I've chosen only a few as a sampling, for literature certainly belongs here too).



Surprisingly, I've not seen creative writing studies advocates suggest interdisciplinary appointments or inviting scholars from other fields into the concept of creative writing studies. Why not fashion creative writing studies out of individual scholars from many fields—creative writing, literature, composition, but also psychology, neurology, communication studies, educational studies, business, and so on—and make it a true interdisciplinary? This possibility deserves more discussion, and

10. Donnelly, 140.

I'm not hearing much.

If we are honest—and Wendy Bishop talked about need for this exchange¹⁰—creative writing studies is most akin in crucial ways to composition studies, and some of its practitioners are already in rhetoric-composition graduate programs or hold rhetoric-composition positions where that work is at least recognized and often supported. A few years after serving on AWP's board, Bishop chaired the Conference on College Composition and Communication, so, despite how uncomfortable moving between these specialties sometimes was for her, she was able to reside both in composition studies and in creative writing. While creative writing studies has drawn from composition studies and some of its practitioners are trained in composition studies, Donnelly argues against that discipline as home because “composition studies is one in which creative writers remain suspect.”¹¹ Creative writing is one in which compositionists remain suspect as well. In fact, because Bishop was perceived as fitting both, she fit neither and nowhere. The goal of our work, however, should not be to please all of the people all of the time, and Bishop kept doing her work wherever it fit—and didn't. My work doesn't fit composition studies, but avoiding being seen as suspect isn't the strongest argument to be made for not doing creative writing studies work covered by the umbrella of composition studies if that work uses similar assumptions and methodologies and has shared goals.

The more important question for creative writing studies should be retaining credibility with creative writers, who populate the field of creative writing and who don't see need for a name change. After all, creative writing is what creative writing studies purports to study and aims to change. If we remain suspect in creative writing, is that an admission that we are suspect of ourselves? How can creative writing studies affect creative writing if the scholars do not retain credibility with the creative writers? Credibility with creative writing matters because they're the people with whom many of us have a great deal in common and want to hang out, and this connection is also crucial because creative writing studies has everything to do with the teaching of creative writing, so separation or isolation undermines practical application in creative writing classrooms. Does creative writing studies wish to cut off our nose to spite our face? Or is creative writing studies best positioned as under the umbrella of creative writing, as I think the work has been positioned even without the term?

A more important and practical reason to resist alignment with rhetoric-composition, of course, is that the field has situated itself in the academy most importantly as a service discipline. As a result, there are lots of sections of composition to teach, but a report by the Modern Language Association in 2007, before the adjunct crisis had much buzz, documented that most first-year writing courses are taught by part-timers—95% of sections at doctoral institutions—and also for lower compensation than a decade earlier.¹² With the proliferation of MFA programs that offer teaching assistantships and training in teaching composition, creative writing has contributed to the glut of adjuncts; creative

11. Donnelly, 145.

12. ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing. “Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English,” Modern Language Association, 2008, 20 July 2015, www.mla.org/pdf/workforce.

writing, then, may have made the condition of composition studies worse. But the real problem composition studies faces is its missing middle; it has strong doctoral programs and ubiquitous general education coursework, but lacks the strong middle of the undergraduate major, which is a growing strength in and of creative writing. Even without joining composition studies per se, adding *studies* to creative writing connects our critical work to a model our field doesn't match. That's a mistake.

Meanwhile, communication studies, which Donnelly's book doesn't mention as a possible home, has been growing (eight times as many students as in the 1970s and 50% more majors than English, depending on where journalism is housed¹³) and undoubtedly has attracted students to its major who would likely be interested in the subject matter and methodology of rhetoric-composition. Communication studies distinguishes itself from communication—the outdated term for the discipline—in ways that creative writing studies wants to distinguish itself from creative writing. To achieve that, however, communication studies has become especially broad minded and practical and made itself relevant to an array of careers that value good communication in practice and also the theoretical understanding that allows an individual to adapt to changing circumstances. That field has become so expansive that creative writing studies might well find room there and might be welcomed because of shared scholarly sensibilities and a methodology that bridges the humanities and social sciences. But I've heard no creative writing studies advocates argue for communication studies as a model or as a new home.

Perhaps the best match in goals and methodology for creative writing studies is educational studies, which the American Educational Studies Association defines as “students, teachers, research scholars, and administrators who are interested in the foundations of education. [These individuals utilize] one or more of the liberal arts disciplines of philosophy, history, politics, sociology, anthropology, or economics as well as comparative/international and cultural studies.”¹⁴ Creative writing studies presumes, after all, the study of a slice of education and a way to use theory and research to shape the curriculum and pedagogy of a discipline. Donnelly champions “teacher training”¹⁵ in creative writing studies, and educational studies prioritizes teaching over subject matter, so it might be a good match. But educational studies focuses on K-12, and I haven't seen creative writing studies advocates considering that discipline as a model.

Too bad creativity studies was mapped decades ago by cognitive science. I've certainly drawn from that research, and more back-and-forth between cognitive scientists and creative writers could inform both disciplines. In a strange but somewhat predictable twist, creativity studies is now being actively embraced by business, and mindfulness is being touted as the route to productivity and efficiency. I wonder what poet Jane Hirshfield, whose book *Nine Gates* involves a wonderful exploration of the role of concentration in writing and literature, thinks about that application of mindfulness.¹⁶

13. “Table 322.10: Bachelor's degrees conferred by post-secondary institutions.”

14. “Overview,” American Educational Studies Association, 20 July 2015, www.educationalstudies.org/aboutus.html#1.

15. Donnelly, 16.

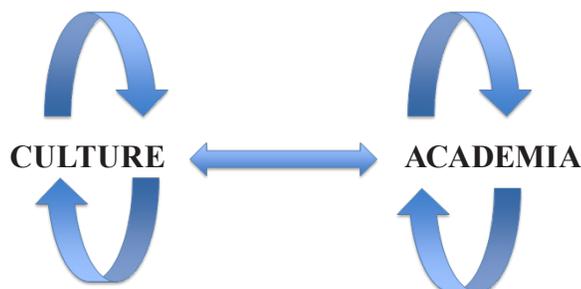
16. Jane Hirshfield. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

17. Jonah Berger. *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

Creativity studies is another successful model I don't see creative writing studies advocates considering much. Might creative writing studies someday reinvent itself as an applied field, with marketable books like Jonah Berger's *Contagious*, which applies creativity and cognitive science to marketing and branding?¹⁷ That's the sort of reshaping communication studies has done, too.

The figure below represents the often separate and self-contained realms of culture on the left and academia on the right. The separateness exists in all sorts of ways. It's also the reason that we have terms like *the ivory tower* and *town and gown*, why politicians are able to criticize the tenure system with such success, and even why scandals like the Sokol hoax in *Social Text* carried such cultural I-told-you-so weight in the mainstream. This perceived separateness leads to the popular perception that academic scholarship is unconcerned with practical matters and real life. The arrow between the two circles represents an exchange of ideas and influences. Some scientists, especially in the health sciences, now talk about translational science, a multidisciplinary approach that bridges theory and application. In that way, culture shapes the research questions for academia, and academia conducts research to address real-world problems like climate change. Science communication—sharing scientific knowledge with non-experts—is an increasing area of interest for many universities, science research teams, and federal grant recipients. Think Neil deGrasse Tyson, Janna Levin, Alan Alda, *Science Friday*. Because creative writing has not always been part and parcel with academia but is now integrated into academic institutions, structures, and processes, it has a responsibility to help bridge this gap between academia and culture as well. Academia should take advantage of this responsibility of our field, rather than push us to conform completely and stay within some inner sanctum or hamster wheel.

Creative writing, of course, is has always been translational; in fact, its role in the larger culture preceded its position in the academy by a long, long time. All disciplines create knowledge, which is a primary responsibility for the academy. Potential usefulness of that knowledge for society and culture beyond the ivory tower is part of the consideration and value in these fields. Translational work has influence beyond one's own immediate academic colleagues, as opposed to the relatively closed academic cycle of research and publication.



A new label—*creative writing studies*—seems unnecessary and possibly limiting. The label and all these structural options strike me as an attempt to pinpoint a location for what is happening. The

Venn diagram early in this essay is one way to see the label as structurally limiting, confined to set overlaps between particular disciplines, the academic cycle is differently limiting, and the diagram just above here represents a way not to be trapped by academic structures. A representation of a hub-based network might be another way to define the situation. A map with pinpoints wherever each scholar resides might be as accurate as anything and recognize that we aren't all housed in the same neighborhood—or that we are almost all in the creative writing district or the composition studies zone. The danger is that these descriptive representations become prescriptive.

Instead, maybe we need something like that vision field test, in which a button is pushed each time a light appears: there, then there, then who knows where? Ultimately, we have the Heisenberg conundrum: *Ah, there it is, but I can't tell exactly how fast it's going or what direction. Ah, we're moving along at a good clip, and I can see where we might end up along the way, but I'm not sure exactly where we are.* That's ambitious, that's exciting, that's the way it really works in the world—or the way it can, if we let it, if we don't subscribe exclusively or officially to the traditional academic modes.

All these structural options for positioning creative writing studies in an academic home also miss the point of the “good of creative writing,” which, according to Thom Vernon, is “an activity that links private imagination to the communities in which we live.”¹⁸ And teaching becomes a further fostering of that good. I pursued creative writing as a writer first and then came to pedagogy and the profession as part of that pursuit, and I've found a complex, blended career immersed in that good. I've borrowed from composition studies, educational studies, and cognitive science to do my work, and I've remained a creative writer all the while. If one pursues creative writing primarily to foster teaching (instead of the way I pursue teaching to foster creative writing in myself and my students), why not choose another subject instead? Why *creative writing* studies instead of *pedagogy* studies?

This question also points back to the potential of true interdisciplinarity—disciplines coming together to explore teaching, creativity, genre, language, and so on. The term creative writing studies isn't ambitious enough, just as none of the other existing homes are quite right in describing or prescribing what we do as scholars in creative writing. Maybe the term could invent itself more ambitiously, but we aren't there yet. That depends on individuals thinking outside the boxes, cycles, and towers.

CREATIVE WRITING, SCHOLARSHIP, AND USEFULNESS

“Studying creative writing allows students to become more astute thinkers, producers and consumers. As writers, we are constantly interrogating our thoughts and beliefs and those of our characters. We must become minor experts in quantum physics, neuroscience, credit-default swaps—you

18. Thom Vernon. “Selling It: Creative Writing and the Public Good,” *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2012), 177.

19. Vernon, 186.

20. Vernon, 187.

name it,”¹⁹ Vernon writes. This interrogation includes our teaching; many creative writers approach teaching as a creative act and think astutely about our classrooms, whether or not they produce scholarship related to that pedagogical thinking. (To be sure, some faculty aren’t thoughtful or hard-working, but that’s true in any field.) Vernon goes on to say, “creative writing offers the means to contribute our suffering, loss and triumph to the public good.”²⁰ When creative writers teach well, we guide our students—as well as ourselves—to contribute to the public good and to live their lives with greater empathy and appreciation for what is most human. Creative writing is translational; I want it to contain multitudes and mean multitudes.

In the end, after trying this porridge and that, after testing out this bed and that, Goldilocks finds a spot to rest comfortably and falls asleep. But the three bears come home and notice something amiss. When Goldilocks wakes up to see that she’s inadvertently found herself in the home of bears, she gets up and runs screaming into the forest. To my ears, *creative writing studies* sounds like Goldilocks’s screams as she runs away. She doesn’t recognize that bears who eat porridge, sleep in beds, and discuss this odd creature in their midst are very much like her. She runs away in fear from some very sophisticated bears who live in a pretty nice home that she had thought quite fit for a person like her. Creative writing studies is a leaving, and I don’t want to say good-bye.

As much as we benefit from our position in the academy, creative writing as a discipline is valuable to the academy as well. We contribute distinct habits of mind and vibrant practice-based models for understanding language, texts, and humanity. Creative writing pedagogy challenges the traditional academic model; our presence in universities benefits others who might adapt the workshop method or the portfolio-driven course, and we’ve been sharing and rethinking within our discipline as well. In *Academic Instincts*, Marjorie Garber astutely points out, “The inevitable consequence of interdisciplinarity may not be the end of the scholarly world as we know it but the acknowledgment that our knowledge is always partial, rather than total.”²¹ Each discipline rubs up against the others; it’s a give and take that allows the sum to become more than its parts. The academy is better for having creative writing in its midst. I’m better—as a writer, as a teacher, as a person—for being in the midst of creative writing.

The rise of arts-based research—research that employs tools that “adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined”²²—is testament to how very different disciplines might borrow from each other and, in particular, how traditional academic fields might use the approaches of the arts. According to arts-based researcher Patricia Leavy, *usefulness* is the “most appropriate” standard by which to judge such work.²³ What a wonderful standard to which we all in the academy might hold ourselves.

While we do make adjustments to fulfill obligations to our institutions and the academy and while we might adapt approaches from other disciplines, we shouldn’t merely conform—that cheats everyone.

21. Garber, Marjorie. *Patronizing the Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008), 79-80.

22. Patricia Leavy. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: The Guilford P, 2015), 4.

23. Leavy, 273.

To separate our teaching of creative writing from our practice of creative writing or from our study of craft—to separate the critical from the creative or to privilege the critical in a creative field—as the term *creative writing studies* suggests, dismantles the current interplay that encourages us to explore our lived lives as writers and teachers and make useful meaning from that exploration.

CONCLUSION

This past summer, when I was at a conference for directors of undergraduate research programs, I happened upon an amazing book in the university's art museum gift shop. Meant for children, *Ish*²⁴ is a story about creativity, representation, and practice so fundamentally profound that it belongs as a reference in this scholarly work about creative writing. Indeed, serendipity—making useful meaning out of happenstance—has guided my exploration of pedagogy and the profession all along.

In *Ish*, Ramon, the main character, thoroughly enjoys drawing: “Anytime. Anything. Anywhere.” He’s enthusiastic about what he does. The imaginative process enralls Ramon, which is what I want to cultivate in my students as they draft and revise poems. Then, in a moment that smacks of the bad workshop, his brother makes a remark that leads Ramon to crumple up his drawings. Jordan Rosenfeld, in her book about persistence, distinguishes criticism like the brother’s, which she defines as “personal opinion that has little or nothing to do with you,” from critique, which she defines as “a well-reasoned, astute approach designed to help you improve your work.”²⁵ Ramon’s sister, Marisol, however, adores Ramon’s drawings, un-crumple them, and hangs them on her wall. When Ramon discovers what his sister has done, he wonders why she saved his failures. After all, she can’t even tell that one is supposed to be a vase and another, a tree. Ah, she says, the vase drawing looks *vase-ish* and the tree drawing, *tree-ish*. Ramon realizes that art—and the practice in which he’d initially immersed himself—lies not in conformity or perfection, not in the label for the represented object, but in its *ish-ness*.

In my creative and critical work, as in this children’s story, sitting just right in the eyes of the critics or fitting just right into the academy has never been my highest goal. We tend to latch onto questions that point us to conformity and hold us back. These questions tend to be ones we’ve heard before and been told are important but that are questions from those who aren’t actually doing what we do; these questions, like criticism instead of critique, have little to do with us. In our field of creative writing, the most long-standing and beside-the-point of these questions is, *Can creative writing be taught?* Good responses have emerged to that question, and we’ve had several important discussions about it over the last fifty years, but I’m not sure why we kept asking it for as long as we did. The answer has always been *yes*. Likewise, some ask about our scholarship, *Is it scholarly enough? Does it count? Do we belong?* These questions produce reasonable answers. We may have some very good discussions as a result, though the answers have always been *yes*. Focusing on these questions position us—not so much to each other but to those in whose midst we write and teach—as people-pleasers not as

24. Peter Reynolds. *Ish* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2004).

25. Jordan Rosenfeld. *A Writer’s Guide to Persistence* (Blue Ash, OH: F+W Media, 2015), 138.

game-changers.

In my career, I have approached my work with the attitude that, if I am engaged, thoughtful, and do as skillful a job as I can, it will be what it is: always an approximation, always potentially valuable. While aesthetics guide our creative work, why not use Leavy's question for our scholarly work (and for our teaching): *Is it useful?* Honestly, who cares where it belongs? Not every creative writer need do critical work, but it belongs in creative writing because I'm doing it there. For someone whose position is in composition studies, it belongs there. I've made a case for it as a creative writer and made sense of it as an integral part of my professional life, even before I had a tenure-track position and then in my tenure file. I'm not sure I understood how risky that might be, but I was keenly aware of explaining my goals and accomplishments to those who might not grasp at first glance. It's reasonable and relevant to ask, *Is it thoughtful and meaningful? Does it make a difference?*

I've reached a stage in my career in which, in everything I do, I want to work *ish-ly*. Working this way is challenging, rewarding, and holistic, and it allows those of us doing work in creative writing pedagogy and the profession to make our mark on the academy as much as the academy makes its mark on us. I want others to be able to work *ish-ly* too, now and in the future, for it allows us to risk imperfection and innovation, to resist and to play, to work within constraints and outside the box or cycle, and to connect our writing and teaching lives in ways that acknowledge that we are thriving and in flux. The better term and concept for the critical arm of our work, then, is *creative writing-ish*.

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