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Beyond Lores:
Linking Writers' Self-Reports to Autoethnography

In their 2017 article, “Research in Creative Writing: Theory into Practice,” Christine Bailey and Patrick Bizarro report on a study the findings of which were presented in the form of a novel. “Using this method,” they explain, “we studied creative writing aesthetically as creative writing . . .” (77). Their research question for the study was: “Is there a method of research uniquely suited to conducting research in academic creative writing” (79)? While the primary focus of the article remains to be the authors’ intent to develop a research method for creative writing away from composition studies because, they argue, research methods borrowed from composition have “not advanced the cause of creative writings’ existence in English studies as an independent subject” (79), this effort to develop “appropriate aesthetic research methods that collect data and report those data in a manner consistent with the values of the creative writing community” (79) aptly reflects the field’s lack of established research methods and a continued search for the ones that adequately serve our disciplinary needs.

Unlike in most other disciplines in the university, creative writing instruction is still largely informed by lore-based craft writing done by the practitioners of writing, writers themselves. “Lore,” according to Stephen M. North, who popularized the concept in *Composition Studies* in the 1980s, is “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught” (22). This knowledge is not methodologically developed and is not “‘scientifically’ rigorous either” (North 23). In creative writing, lores have been understood mostly as writers’ self-reports. Wendy Bishop describes writer’s self-reports as “professional writers’ stories,

anecdotes, aphorisms, and other forms of self-report” (16). Such reports are neither methodologically studied findings, nor are they mere whims of the author, though sometimes the latter may be the case because such reports are individual perceptions put forward without a systematic inquiry. Yet lore, as North says, is not without logic. According to North, “It is driven, first, by a pragmatic logic: It is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing” (23). Though North’s focus here is writing in Composition, it can be equally true of Creative Writing. In this article, I discuss the role autoethnography can play in substantiating craft talks, which can often take the form of creative nonfiction, and authors’ self-reports in Creating Writing.

Apprenticeship and Lore

The field of Creative Writing was established on the apprenticeship model, which facilitated the entry of the practitioners of writing to the university to impart knowledge to students based on their experiences. This practitioner knowledge is an individual’s perception of what worked for them and the anticipation that it will work for other practitioners as well. Creative Writing is rich with such practitioner knowledge, which often takes the form of craft writing, and giving craft talks is a widespread practice when guest authors are invited for reading. These craft talks are expected to impart wisdom acquired through practice, rather than research as it is understood in other disciplines.

“Kill your darlings”—the much repeated motto attributed to various writers from Oscar Wilde to William Faulkner, and in fact, John Crowley argues that it was Arthur Quiller-Couch who was the “true originator of the phrase” (Crowley)—for instance has remained a standard advice for decades, and authors take pride in repeating the advice or being able to repeat the advice not matter now it worked (or did not) for them, and hardly any theoretical basis has been provided for the rule. In his *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* Stephen King repeats the same advice: “Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings” (222). But what exactly is the basis for this? He does

not feel the need to substantiate it except that it worked for him in some way, and even that process can hardly be explained in such simple terms. You need to love your writing. If you do not really love your sentences, your imagery, how would you keep investing your time and energy in it? Matt Bell writes, “In general, if you’re not excited about what you’re writing, consider writing something else” (21). Aren’t “darlings” the parts that truly excite and inspire us? Bell here is talking about drafts, but what remains when we kill darlings? How do we decide which ones are darlings and which ones are not? One writer replied to a question on Twitter recently, “What is the worst writing advice anyone has ever given you,” saying, “That if you take pleasure in what you’re doing, it’s bad and doing it wrong” (Jen). Some form of theoretical substantiation would make such claims worthwhile and practical and the basis of my argument here.

In their 2007 book, Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice point out how those essays, mostly “stories—literally lores,” “sidestep scholarship” (xiv), although they see value in them and emphasize the importance of taking them seriously. While they agree that the “existing scholarship ignores the lore of creative writing pedagogy, considering it to be only small, uncomplicated utterances,” they add that “in fact it is a powerful, complicated discourse, one whose power we will harness only by giving it our full critical response” (xvii). This position is in line with Bishop’s suggestion to link (“join”) “writers’ insights” to Composition research and theory “to further clarify what it means to be a writer and have a writing process” (18). Bishop says, there is “a wealth of unsubstantiated yet intuitively accurate knowledge” (17) in those self-reports and lores.

Changes are taking place for the better regarding scholarly engagement in Creative Writing. The work being done through organizations like Creative Writing Studies Organization, with its annual conference and the publication of a peer-reviewed journal for the promotion of scholarship in the field, is a good example. In this context, many creative writing scholars have looked to Composition Studies for guidance and taken methods and methodologies from them to study creative writing. Bailey and Bizarro’s

concern aside, this trend in the field of Creative Writing has helped explore various possibilities for the development of theories and practices in the field. One good example of this is the anthology titled *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alexandria Peary and Tom C. Hunley. The anthology features essays and articles that are informed by rhetorical and composition theories and cover a wide range of topics, including creative writing and process pedagogy, writing center theory and creative writing, literary citizenship, and creative literacy pedagogy. Tom C. Hunley and Sandra Giles argue in their article that “grounding our pedagogy in both Greco-Roman rhetoric and the work of more recent rhetoricians would provide for our students a framework for deeper, richer training and understanding of the tools, the messages and methods and media, of their chosen art” (8). While this approach has provided the field of Creative Writing with some much-needed tools, it has also raised questions about their intrinsic value given the differing epistemologies of the two fields.

From John Gardner to Ray Bradbury to Edith Wharton to Robert Olen Butler to Stephen King to, very recently, Matt Bell—all have wise advice for writers, especially the writers of fiction, texts which can often be applied to nonfiction and poetry. Some craft books are more rigorous in terms of drawing from existing conversations and available literature, while the others are based more on individual experiences. But at the core of the advice is this: this particular strategy worked for me, and so it may work for you as well. Matt Bell’s take as found in his recently published book *Refuse to Be Done* reflects the overall epistemological root of the standard craft essays and books:

The novel-writing process described in this book is a version of my own, and therefore it necessarily proceeds from my personal preferences regarding craft, audience, and story.... All this is only to say that while I believe much of what I suggest will work for many different kinds of fiction writers, it’s more than okay if certain tactics or techniques don’t work for you.... So, if some of the forthcoming advice doesn’t feel like it applies to your

novel, go ahead and discard what doesn't help or, better yet, subvert it: there's much to be gained by actively opposing a craft lesson as there is in following it. (5-6)

As a writer, a teacher of writing, and a creative writing researcher, I find this advice both heartening and disheartening. It is heartening because this is not prescriptive and so gives me ample flexibility; I can determine for myself what helps me and what does not. But it is also disheartening because while the advice may be promising, it may not apply to me, as the author warns. There is no guarantee that the wise words of a proven talent will help me in my writing. And how do I know whether the advice will work for me or not? Am I supposed to try it first and find out my own answer? This to me does not feel like a much better strategy, whatever it is going to be, than learning through the trial-and-error strategy. Would some elements of scholarly research, which is expected to produce generalizable knowledge, make the advice more applicable and help me determine in advance if it would apply to me? I believe so. Here we are discussing writing, not science, but even then, even in the context of writing advice, especially in the context of Creative Writing as a university discipline, we have come to a point where we want to move beyond the “lores” that we have repeated again and again.

We have had more research tools available today than we had in the past, more opportunities to interact with other disciplines in the university, but pedagogical research into creative writing classrooms remains thin and under theorized. As Bishop points out, “In the creative writing classroom, the experts are the textbooks and the teacher,” and that is one reason self-reports are still valued even without much theoretical substantiation. When experts (meaning the writers themselves) are the textbook and the teacher, it makes perfect sense to employ methodologies that help teachers of creative writing “to ask themselves to what extent the texts they employ and their own writing ‘rules’ are culture-, genre-, and context-based” (Bishop 19). This is where I see an opportunity to substantiate self-reports and craft pieces through an autoethnographic approach to writing research.

Autoethnography as Research Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines the characteristics of ethnography and autobiography, of which both elements are present in creative writing lore.. “Autoethnographers,” Steven Pace explains, “reflexively explore their personal experiences and their interactions with others as a way of achieving wider cultural, political or social understanding” (2). An offshoot of ethnography, autoethnography centers on the researcher’s experience and self-reflexivity, and as a form of ethnographic research, autoethnography aims to substantiate the lived experiences of the practitioner through a number of methods that may range from self-reflection and fictionalization to more analytical examination of the practices based on the practitioner’s interaction with external actors. In recent years, researchers have shown that this method can be used as a valid form of research in creative arts. Through the article “On Learning, Teaching and the Pursuit of Creative Writing in Singapore and Hong Kong,” Eddie Tay and Eva Leung have shown how authors can draw from their experiences of teaching creative writing to further understand the process and inform their future practices. In the article they exemplify that “the authors’ experience of learning and teaching in the creative writing classroom is a prism through which we explore issues pertaining to the pursuit of creative writing in the two Asian societies [Singapore and Hong Kong]” (103). Similarly, in “Writing the Self into Research: Using Grounded Theory Analytic Strategies in Autoethnography” Steven Pace demonstrates how creative artists and writers have been using autoethnography and how grounded theory can contribute to making the research more analytical.

Currently there are two major strands of autoethnography in practice: evocative autoethnography and analytical autoethnography. Autoethnography first made it into a valid research method in the form of evocative autoethnography as championed by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner. Ellis, in her keynote address, titled “*Heartful Autoethnography*,” to a qualitative methods conference in 1999, makes an elaborate case for an ethnography that includes the heart as well as art. “Autoethnography? What’s that?” asks the author’s student in the case study she presents in the address (671), and Ellis replies, “Well, I start

with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story" (671). Autoethnography helps one to codify their experiences in a systematic way.

In autoethnographic writing, Ellis and Bochner argue that "distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition" (in Ellis 673), and autoethnographic texts can take a "variety of forms," including short stories, poetry, novel, personal essays and "social science prose" (673). In this case, autoethnographic texts can be more "emotive" than critical. This form of autoethnography has been criticized for the shortfall of traditional goal of research—generalizability and abstraction. Ellis agrees that generalizability is a concern in a way, but then argues, "Our lives are particular, but they are also typical and generalizable since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions. A story's generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they ask if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (674).

Leon Anderson has critiqued emotive autoethnography for "the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry" (374). In its place he proposes what he calls "analytic autoethnography" for the practice of this methodology more scientifically. While Anderson applauds the "energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of these scholars [emotive autoethnographic] for articulating a theoretical paradigm for the form of autoethnography that they promote and for producing and encouraging texts (and performances) that exemplify ethnography within this paradigm" (374), he argues that over the years "the term *autoethnography* has become almost exclusively identified with those advocating the descriptive literary approach of evocative autoethnography" (376-7), and so he aims to "clarify an approach to autoethnography that is consistent with traditional symbolic interactionist epistemological assumptions and goals rather than rejecting them" (378). For the practice of this research method more

scientifically, he proposes five key features of autoethnography: 1. Complete member researcher (CMR) status, 2. analytic reflexivity, 3. narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4. dialogue with informants beyond the self, and 5. commitment to theoretical analysis (378).

More recently, autoethnography has begun to embrace both emotive and analytic features at the same time. In the introduction to their 2015 book *Autoethnography*, Adams, Jones, and Ellis write, "Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience" (1). Here they synthesize existing explanations of both emotive and analytic autoethnography and agree on a few features of autoethnographic research, which include the researcher's "personal experiences," the researcher's "relationships with others," "deep and careful reflection" or "reflexivity," people's stories of struggle to make meaning, "intellectual and methodological rigor" balanced with "emotion, and creativity," and "social justice" (1-2).

Adams, Jones, and Ellis argue that autoethnography addresses the problems of the "limits of *scientific* knowledge" in social sciences (22). Stacy Holman Jones shares her story in the book: "Autoethnography provided me—and can provide you— method for exploring, understanding, and writing from, through, and with personal experiences in relation to and in the context of the experiences of others. In autoethnography 'proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return'" (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 23). But "connecting the personal (insider) experience, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts, and conventions" is always a core ideal of autoethnography (25).

Autoethnography for Creative Writing Researchers

I would like use the five key features of analytic autoethnography to show how author's self-reports reports and craft pieces can be made more "researched," and so generalizable, to the extent any qualitative, auto/ethnographic research can be, so that 1) such reports can rise above the status of mere lores because

they will have a methodological apparatus to prove it otherwise, and 2) readers of such reports and craft pieces can tell more or less before they practice them if they are likely to work for them.

Complete member researcher (CMR) status is the first element that Anderson attaches to analytic autoethnography. Unlike ethnographic research, autoethnographic research requires the researcher to be a complete member of the group they are researching. Such status may be acquired by birth, by choice, or by being thrown into it by circumstances. But in any case, explains Anderson, “group membership precedes the decision to conduct research on the group” (379). One is not born into a group of writers to become a writer. But one chooses or becomes a writer by circumstances. When the writer decides to do research on writing, it naturally gives them the CMR status. It implies that one cannot be an autoethnographic researcher first and a writer later. Adams, Jones, and Ellis explain this element as “personal experience.” This type of research is not done by observing others, like in ethnographic research. This is auto—. Hence, writers’ self-reports and craft pieces follow the authors’ identity as a writer, and so this first condition for such work toward becoming autoethnographic research is met by default in author’s self-reports.

As an autoethnographic researcher, however, a writer, Anderson suggests (after Alder and Alder), need to “record events and conversations” as documentation (380). Mere memories may not always help them achieve the methodological rigor expected of research work. The writers who document their work can better study their own processes and substantiate them better with theories. Emily D. Chase’s essay “Notes from a Journey Toward ‘Warping Time’” on how she wrote “Warping Time with Montaigne” is a good example of a writer documenting their writing process and crafting a craft essay. In the essay, Chase shares her notes from her freewriting for the essay to how she “jotted down notes ... for herself,” where she explored the connection between “the elements and process of threading a loom and the elements and process of writing an essay” (371). She also uses her journal entries not only on Montaigne and Rodriguez, whose essay “Late Victorians” she interprets in the essay, but also on the progress on the essay itself. The

point she establishes is that writing an essay is a form of discovery. She says, “It was a journey of discovery: first of myself and my knowledge, then of different forms of writing available for my use, and finally of the power of freedom, innovation, and inspiration” (375). With the help of clear documentation, she successfully shows her readers how the process worked for her and in what circumstances. This may tell us that the writers who have the habit of documenting their writing processes will be in a better position to write craft essays and develop them into autoethnographic research pieces.

The second element that Anderson discusses is “analytic reflexivity” (382). Reflexivity is part of any ethnographic research; especially in the later phase of ethnographic research it has been highlighted that the researcher needs to be self-reflective of their position and their relationship with their research subjects. When it comes to autoethnography, self-reflection becomes even more important because this is a process of making knowledge by studying oneself, making knowledge from the “auto,” and when the bias of the self can be so prevalent and dominating that if not approached carefully, the entire process can be no more than one’s self-projection and they can lose all credibility. As Anderson puts it, “As a CMR (as contrast to a more detached participant observer), one has more of a stake in the beliefs, values and actions of other setting members” (383). As such, continues Anderson, “Indeed, the autoethnographic interrogation of self and other may transform the researcher’s own beliefs, actions, and sense of self” (383). The researcher needs to constantly question their relationship with their subject, the issue at hand, and be aware how their positionality may affect their knowledge of the subject.

A writer making a statement about an aspect of writing, let’s say revision, can confidently talk about what worked for them. But at the same time, the same author may have a different process the next time they revise a new novel. John Gardner famously says, “When one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends up in pedantic rigidity and atrophy of intuition” (3). While we celebrate this aesthetic flexibility, we also want some sort of clarity about what can be done and

what cannot, otherwise the advice will hardly help anyone in practical terms. Self-reflexivity, or what Adam, Jones, and Ellis call “deep and careful reflection” (1), encourages and allows the author researcher to go beyond simply what worked for them and analyze circumstances that led to that success (or failure) of a particular practice, like the idea of writing and rewriting a novel in three drafts, as Matt Bell shares in *Refuse to Be Done*.

Anderson highlights “mutual informativity” as “one of the most appealing features of autoethnographic work” (383). Self-reflexivity is an act that demands questioning of one’s practices in relation to not only their own value and belief systems but also similar practices by others in the field. When it comes to “the zone” that Robert Olen Butler discusses, for instance, in *From Where You Dream*, he uses Graham Greene’s claim that all “novelists are bad novelists” and recommends writing from the unconscious (23). He further recommends writing every day “though it’s still always daunting and difficult and scary” (24). He says that when you take a break “you’ll be grumpy and out of sorts and things will be uncomfortable, but after a day you can go back in” (24). He shares his experience of stopping to write for eight weeks and being unable to get back to the zone to write anything. He says it took him “eight weeks of daily torture to write another sentence—because I had stopped writing every day” (26). Maybe he is being a bit hyperbolic here, but the point is his experience of being stuck when the train had stopped. He says reflectively, “I thought I was going to have to buy a little motor and stick it on my chair to jiggle it. Maybe buy a choo-choo sound for my record player. But of course, the real problem was the broken link to my unconscious caused by putting the work aside for a time” (26).

Anderson says that an autoethnographer should not only “engage in reflexive social analysis and self-analysis” but also “be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text” (26). Analytical or deep reflection in autoethnography is an opportunity to challenge ourselves as the experiencer of our own writing process and our insights learned from experiences. Did it really work the way I think it did? What evidence leads me to this conclusion? Analytic reflection helps us maintain a distance between our

experiencing self and the researcher self that is trying to make knowledge out of our experience.

Sometimes it may require us to challenge our assumptions about what worked in our own cases. Looking around and comparing and contrasting our experiences with others' can be hugely helpful, something we can probably see missing in Butler and much of craft writing.

“Narrative visibility of the researcher’s self” is another major element Anderson discusses as part of analytic autoethnography. By definition, autoethnography is a study of the self for the purpose of making knowledge. As discussed under CMR, the researcher is a member of the group they are researching. That itself does not, however, sufficiently help explain the researcher’s position and stakes in the work. That is why autoethnography requires that the researcher explain their emotional and any other stakes and involvements in the research. “The researcher’s own feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered vital data for understanding the social world being observed,” explains Anderson (384). Researcher’s self-awareness in relation to their research subjects’ responses and the need to acknowledge this fact is not new to ethnography. But autoethnography requires the researcher to make their presence part of the data, and that needs to be visible in the narrative. Anderson states that autoethnographers “should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds” (384).

A writer as a researcher studying their processes and techniques can be more effective when they clarify their emotional involvement in the process. This in-depth narrative of the author’s involvement makes it clear to the reader under what circumstances, under what emotional, ideological, and other duress did it work for the author and what the readers can expect to learn from it. In “On Writing ‘Zion’” Maureen Stanton explains the process of authoring her essay “Zion” thus:

After the fogginess of grief started to lift I began to remember interesting details of the experience, interactions and events I couldn’t seem to recall when I was engulfed by

emotions. The lifting of the veil of grief brought a flurry of raw material forward and I jotted notes everywhere, often waking up at night to write down a sentence that would later trigger a whole episode.... I get very excited about an idea and become preoccupied with it. My mind is constantly tugged back to that subject whenever it is not engaged (usually when I am trying to sleep, but I will always sacrifice sleep for inspiration, even when it means arriving at work the next day a bit exhausted. (410)

Similarly, in “Unwrapping Surprises in the Personal Essay,” Abigail Moore Allerding writes:

What I discovered in my own essay was that there was more lurking beneath the surface than even I first realized. As a result, I searched deeper, discovering something about myself even I didn’t want to admit. What I was forced to face were some of the ugliest qualities about myself, particularly the selfishness with which I handle the topic of finding home with my husband. (358)

In both these cases, the authors have a certain level of narrative visibility maybe because they are sharing the process of writing their memoir and personal essays. But this level of author visibility of any craft writer helps them to “reveal themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds” (Anderson 384). This reveals the authors’ intimate, emotional engagement with their subject, leading to some knowledge that they did not know they were arriving at. The craft essays and self-reports that either recount the process without emotional engagement or try to be objective as if it were a process anyone would be able to replicate risk the chances of sounding dishonest or prescriptive, or at best mere pedantic without really teaching much of worth, as this practice “devolves into self-absorption” (Anderson 385), or “author-saturated texts,” in the words of Clifford Geertz (qtd. in Anderson 385). Anderson says, “The self-narrative of analytic autoethnography is used, in part, to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social processes...” (385).

The fourth element of analytic autoethnography that Anderson discusses is “dialogue with informants beyond the self.” Anderson develops this feature of autoethnography as a method to avoid “the potential for self-absorption” (385). Like any ethnographic work, autoethnography warrants “relational activity” (Anderson 386). In fact, dialogue with others becomes even more important in autoethnography because this research method places the researcher at the center. When this is the case, the work has the potential to become too parochial and too easily questionable. Evocative autoethnography may sound questionable a lot of times on this ground. “Unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well,” explains Anderson (386). This, I believe, is one major element a lot of craft writing is missing.

Self-reports and craft books may have all the four elements discussed above—CMR, critical self-reflection, narrative visibility of the author researcher, and dialogue with other writers—but if they are not theoretically sound, they have caveats for questioning of their generalizability. “Commitment of theoretical analysis” is the last elements Anderson discusses as part of analytical autoethnography, pushing it one step ahead of evocative autoethnography. He writes, “The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience, to provide an “insider’s perspective,” or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader” (386-7). This is what evocative autoethnography would normally end up doing. And in this sense, a lot of self-reports and crafts writing may end up being evocative autoethnography if a theoretical rigor is not made a part of it. Anderson adds that the traditional use of empirical data and their analysis cannot achieve the rigor we may achieve from analytic autoethnography (387). He argues that analytic autoethnography goes beyond being descriptive by using theoretical analysis of the phenomenon. Adams, Jones, and Ellis also agree about the need for “intellectual and methodological rigor” and they add that it must be balanced with “emotion, and creativity” (2).

Anderson makes a distinction between creative nonfiction and analytic ethnography on the basis that creative non-fiction, like evocative autoethnography, only captures “‘what is going on’ in an individual life or social environment” (387). He explains, “The definite feature of analytic autoethnography is this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization” (388). In a lot of cases where craft writing ends up in the form of creative nonfiction, it is worth reflecting how those craft essays could be substantiated with theories in some way.

Whenever craft essays and talks are theoretically substantiated, they become more generalizable and trustworthy. When Butler talks about “dreamspace” he refers to “the psychology of creation” (24). To explain how he “wrote every word of my first four published novels on my lap” as he “commuted from my home in Long Island to a job as editor-in-chief of a business newspaper in Manhattan” he refers to the idea of “*functional fixedness*.” He explains, “That is, if you have a certain place and certain objects that you associate only with a certain task, eventually the associational values build up in such a way that when you go to that place and engage those objects, you are instantly completely focused on that task” (25). Gardner uses numerous literary theories, movements, and insights from literary studies to substantiate his advice. Discussing “aesthetic interest,” the need to be “interesting” in fiction writing, for instance, he explains how Edgar Allan Poe rejected the Aristotelian theory of “*energeia*” and freed “Kafka to write: ‘One day Gregor Samsa awoke to discover that he had been changed into a large cockroach.’ Who knows how and why? Who cares?” (47). His advice: aspire to achieve “aesthetic interest” thinking “in new ways” and “broadening the fictional experience” (48). This is not to mean that Butler and Gardner always have such theoretical substantiation but to show that when it happens craft talks become more grounded, and generalization is possible.

In a recent post on *Story Club*, George Saunders shared about his method of teaching at his university, expecting his students in the “club” to do the same as his university students. He writes:

I like to start my class at Syracuse by asking my students to mentally open a set of parentheses, and precede the first one with the phrase, “According to George,” And, for the rest of the semester, I ask them to believe, or try to believe, or at least conditionally accept, my approach (my theories, my silly drawings on the board, my strained metaphors that don’t quite hold together under closer examination). This gives me permission to be as persuasive and passionate as I can, as I try to convey my sense of how (*for me*) this writing thing works.

Their part in this (your part in this) is to try to stay *open* - to temporarily accept my view, try it on, see what sticks. If something that I say makes sense or causes a positive reverberation or a little confidence-burst: perfect. (Saunders)

Who would not be excited to learn fiction writing from George Saunders? But at the same time, a reasonable person would be curious about the basis for his pedagogy. What theory guides this practice? Traditionally creative writers have been sharing their insights and teaching writing as writers, and students have been accepting their mentorship as apprentices simply because creative writing pedagogy did not exist. This in fact is the very basis for the prevalence of lores. In a situation where a teacher proposes this kind of lore, theoretical substantiation and historical contextualization would strengthen the autobiographic nature of the pedagogy.

Anderson cautions that analytic autoethnography is not meant to produce “undebatable conclusions,” following Ellis and Bochner’s argument (388). Autoethnographic study, as a form of ethnography, is a systematic documentation of individual stories that will not be fully generalizable like studies in hard sciences but will show the depth and breadth of human experiences in such a way that they can be enlightening, and readers can understand the circumstances that produce results that the autoethnographer shares as their conclusion.

Conclusions

By promoting autoethnographic codification of craft writing, I do not mean to diminish the value of writers' self-reports as they exist. As already established, the wisdom and insights they harbor cannot be denied, and who would not want to hear from expert writers just any story they have to tell? They are valuable in their own right. Furthermore, not every writer is, or has to become, a creative writing researcher. But to those who are research oriented, and in fact in the context of the university teaching of creative writing, or the fact that Creative Writing is a university discipline, there is a wonderful opportunity for us to go beyond unsubstantiated craft talks and self-reports and document our experiences and insights through autoethnography.

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