Digitizing Craft: Creative Writing Studies and New Media: A Proposal

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In January 2009, College English devoted a special issue to the status of creative writing in the twenty-first century. In the introduction to that special issue, guest editors Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice address the crossroads at which creative writing finds itself through posing the following central questions: What is Creative Writing as it enters the twenty-first century? What new facets of this discipline are emerging? What new questions need to be raised in order to keep the discipline engaged, productive, and respected well into this new millennium? (214)

The issue expands on the problems and possibilities that creative writing faces in the twenty-first century through essays that grapple with a wide range of concerns. Mary Ann Cain’s “To Be Lived” examines and advocates for creative writing’s resistance to institutional hegemonic forces. Patrick Bizzaro’s “Writers Wanted” urges the merging of expressivism and social epistemic rhetoric. And Tim Mayers’s “One Simple Word” calls on scholars and teachers of creative writing to recognize an emerging field of creative writing studies in order to better theorize and understand the effects of creative writing’s academic institutionalization on the imaginative texts produced there. Since that issue, several of these concerns have been explored through edited collections such as Dianne Donnelly’s Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?—which examines the workshop method through not just pedagogical, but institutional, historical, and ontological concerns—and in book-length arguments such as Paul Dawson’s Creative Writing and the New Humanities, in which he examines “what form a literary intellectual might take in the age of postmodernity [. . .] and what role Creative Writing can play in the formation of literary intellectuals” (5). And while all this work admirably approaches some of the urgent pedagogical,
methodological, and institutional concerns developing in creative writing, one set of concerns (as my title suggests) remains largely unaddressed: the ways in which creative writing, or creative writing studies, engages with, understands, responds to, and thrives in an age of digital writing.

I want to define and examine a digital arm of creative writing studies. Defining creative writing studies in the words of Katharine Haake as “scholarly work that seeks to move us beyond our preoccupation with the writer or the text to the role of creative writing as an academic discipline inside a profession that includes, but is not limited to, the production and teaching of imaginative writing” (qtd. in “One Simple Word” 218), Mayers urges scholars to explore the “problems and internal contradictions” (218) that present themselves through the introduction of the word studies to creative writing so as to form a complex theoretical and pedagogical discourse regarding the rich opportunities available when we deepen and explore the various ways creative writing has been imagined. And in the twenty-first century, obviously, poetry, short stories, and creative nonfiction live—are written and read—across our digital technologies. But in what ways have their digital environments begun to affect them? What can creative writing studies help us understand about those effects? And most important: how does writing “creatively” in digital spaces alter the act of composing “creatively” and help teachers, writers, and scholars of creative writing (and composition studies) better theorize our current methods and practices? By working toward an answer to the last question, this essay establishes a beginning—a framework—to help creative writing studies begin to examine what emerges when, following Mayers’s lead, we add “one simple word”: digital creative writing studies.

Creative Writing Scholarship and “Craft Criticism”

As many scholars working at the intersection of composition studies and new media have argued, the methodological complexity that emerges when examining the act of composing with new media provides scholars with the chance to reevaluate fundamental assumptions attendant to established methods. And in an era of blurred generic boundaries, multimedia storytelling, and open-source culture, creative writing scholars stand poised to consider the role that technology—and the creative writer’s playful engagement with technology—has occupied in the evolution of its practices. To get there from here, however, I will begin by contextualizing and addressing the ways in which Mayers’s argument for creative writing studies comes from a history of creative writing scholarship that he recruits and redirects toward a practice he calls “craft criticism.” Following this contextualization, I will then extend craft criticism through some of what composition studies, literary studies, and new media studies have explored regarding the ways digital environments help us reimagine imaginative texts and the composing process. I hope to come out on the other end with a way of
imagining what it means to work with a digital craft criticism and, ultimately, what
digital craft criticism means for creative writing studies and English studies at large.

I use Mayers’s pioneering book (Re)Writing Craft as a touchstone for research
on creative writing not only because of the useful understanding of the institutional
context he builds around that field, but also because of the larger context he builds
around institutions—he is, after all, interested in how the ideological and material
contexts of the production of imaginative texts affect the process and products of
creative production. (And what is a consideration of the digital environments in
which creative writing takes place if not a consideration of ideological and material
context?) In his first chapter, Mayers characterizes what he calls the “institutional
conventional wisdom” of creative writing: that creative writing is taught by poets and
fiction writers who largely refuse to theorize the cultural, political, and economic
ways in which “creative” work operates. According to the “institutional conventional
wisdom,” creative writing has largely rejected the academic work of college and uni-
versity curriculums in order to foster an understanding of the process of composition
as “something so individual, intrinsic, even “mysterious,” [that] it cannot really be
analyzed or explained in any significant way” (16). According to Mayers, even the
Association of Writing Programs (AWP)—creative writing’s major professional
organization—reinforces this conventional wisdom. D. W. Fenza, AWP’s former
executive director, argued in the Writer’s Chronicle, AWP’s official journal, that “the
goal of creative writing is to [help students] become, first and foremost, accomplished
writers who make significant contributions to contemporary literature. All the other
goals, like becoming an academic professional, are ancillary to that artistic goal” (qtd.
in Mayers 19). In the hierarchy Fenza establishes, Mayers points out, placing aca-
demic pursuits as they may pertain to creative writing works only to isolate creative
writing, not only from literary or composition studies, but also from the work of the
college or university at large. In this way, creative writing becomes reduced to craft,
understood merely as the manipulation of the surface features of a text.

Mayers’s argument in (Re)Writing Craft (and his call to action in “One Simple
Word”) works toward framing an understanding of craft as not only the manipulation
of the surface features of a text, but also, more importantly, the process of generat-
ing a text—enabled by the ideological, material, cultural, and political forces that
surround it—that grapples with meaning in a critical and symbolic way. He calls this
craft criticism and defines it as “an attempt to situate the writing of poetry and fiction,
and the teaching of poetry and fiction writing, within institutional, political, social,
and economic contexts. As such, many of the concerns of craft critics may be called
rhetorical” (Re)Writing Craft 34). By recruiting a rhetorical analytical method from
composition and rhetoric, Mayers analyzes the ways in which criticism regarding the
craft of creative writing has been imagined in the professional journals and organi-
zations that surround the field of creative writing. In short, Mayers works toward
framing craft criticism as a form of criticism that foregrounds textual production while backgrounding textual interpretation. While literary criticism uses methods of interpretation to examine the ways imaginative literature operates, craft criticism uses methods of production to examine the ways imaginative literature operates—and how it can help its authors and audience members engage critically with the cultural environment that surrounds them.

Complicating a tradition of creative writing scholarship devoted to the way in which craft is imagined in the foundational work of scholars such as Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (that is, as a set of—often pedagogically situated—skills for poets and writers of fiction and creative nonfiction to master), Mayers’s argument builds off the work of scholars such as Haake and Bizzaro. Haake’s book *What Our Speech Disrupts* intervenes at the site of craft in order to theorize the ways in which craft not only mobilizes resistance to hegemonic forces (for example, through learning and employing craft, writers learn how to speak back to power) but also intervenes at the site of where craft intersects with institutional, cultural, and political forces (for example, the highly masculinized ways in which “the writer” is often imagined in those contexts). Bizzaro’s argument in another essay written for *College English*, “Research and Reflection in English Studies,” makes a case for academically employed creative writers to acknowledge the crucial role their institutions have played not only in what they do, but in who they are. Mayers’s take on creative writing studies comes from this line of creative writing scholarship and, as such, is devoted to the deep examination of the forces that circulate through the act of writing creatively in the academy.

This kind of engaged theorizing about creative production, Mayers argues, tends to position craft criticism according to four basic categories: process, genre, authorship, and institutionality. Craft critics investigating questions about *process* engage with concerns regarding whether a writer can determine in advance what a particular piece of writing will look like, sound like, or mean. Questions of *genre* deal with definitions and borders (what is poetry?), and questions of *authorship* explore the debate surrounding the intrinsic originality and talents of the writer. Questions of *institutionality* “focus on how the teaching of writing (and reading) is institutionalized within creative writing programs at colleges and universities,” exploring how creative writing practices have been shaped by their presence in the academy. (Re) *Writing Craft 47*.

Each of these four categories, of course, engages with the digital in some fashion. *Process*: can a writer determine what a piece of writing will look like as it develops across digital technologies? What happens when poems intersect with songs, video, and image while integrating reader response? *Genre*: are blogs creative nonfiction? *Authorship*: how have notions of “originality” changed in an open-source culture? *Institutionality*: how can scholars in creative writing help parse out and understand
the shifting dynamics of print and electronic reading/writing practices as they are presently evolving in the academy at the undergraduate workshop level as well as the PhD and teacher training level? Each of these four criteria directs scholars in creative writing studies toward examinations of the ways in which craft criticism can deepen our understanding of the surface features of a text as well as—when applied to their digital contexts—examinations of the ways in which contextual and technological developments can—and often do—change the process and products of creative production.

I want to organize this digital arm of creative writing studies according to these four categories. When we take into account the ways in which digital technologies have reshaped genres, contexts, and even authors of imaginative texts, I argue, we begin to see the ways in which creative writing can deepen an understanding of how the act of composing is shaped by digital technologies in the twenty-first century, as well as the broader implications for creative writing’s companion fields in English studies: composition and rhetoric and literary studies.

**Hypertext and Its Descendants: Digital Processes**

The implications of digital technologies and ideologies on the act of composing, of course, are nothing new to composition and rhetoric. Even the role of imaginative texts in this thread of scholarship isn’t exactly new. In 1998, *Kairos* published a special issue on hypertext fiction and poetry, grappling with a range of pedagogical and theoretical concerns presented through the electronic threading of multiple narratives and themes in short stories, novels, and poetry made possible by hypertext. The issue grappled with the concerns of the time: the pedagogical advantages of using the Web to construct e-zines for creative writing classes; the interruption of linearity in the recursive nature of hypertext; and, to a smaller degree, hypertext’s visualization of short stories and poems on the development of ways of seeing alongside ways of reading. The concerns laid out in that issue, however, present a beginning and an end for imagining how creative writing might engage the digital. “Hypertext” gave way to “New Media” in only a few years, and the evolving methods that emerged in English studies turned largely (and rightly so) toward the multimodality afforded by more developed technologies. Hypertext, within the span of five years, was more or less left behind while English studies moved on to consider, broadly speaking, the ways the literary artifact and the act of composition have been challenged, changed, and charged by new media. We saw the emergence of 2.0 technologies (re)shaping the scene of English studies.

In *Hypertext 3.0*, George Landow characterizes the developments since hypertext:
Some [...] digital applications, genres, and media [...] do not take the specific form of hypertext. Some of these, such as Weblogs, show an important relation to hypermedia, but others, like computer games, have only a few points of convergence with it. Still others of increasing economic, educational, and cultural importance, such as animated text, text presented in PDF format, and streaming sound and video, go in very different directions, often producing effects that fundamentally differ from hypermedia. (xiii)

As I will discuss toward the end of this section, those differences amount to the critical elements at stake in framing a digital understanding of creative writing studies, but here it is important to illustrate the difference between Landow’s understanding of hypertext (a text that connects internally and externally to parallel or contrasting texts) and what I’m referring to as digital or new media (platforms that enable a multimodality that serve to open up a text to a variety of media). In *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Jeff Rice characterizes this in rhetorical terms:

I recognize that rhetoric and rhetorical invention emerge out of a number of influences: art, film, literature, music, record covers, cultural studies, imagery, technology, and, of course, writing. Our challenge is to foreground that acknowledgement, not resist it because of its unfamiliarity or because it doesn’t fit what we assume writing should entail. (10)

Likewise, imaginative invention emerges from (at least) the same set of influences, and creative writing’s challenge, as I see it, is similar: to foreground these influences on our understanding of craft, particularly as all those influences Rice has just described exist in our often trafficked digital writing spaces.

Scholarship in literary studies and composition and rhetoric has since followed the development of hypertext into new media to exciting places, inviting us, as N. Katherine Hayles does, to consider the “medial ecology” in which reading and writing take place daily in the twenty-first century, pointing out that “computer screens [are] being arranged to look like television screens, television screens with multiple windows made to look like computer screens, print books mimicking computers, computers being imaged to look like books” (5). The complex ecology in which Hayles plunges her argument in *Writing Machines* asks a fundamental question that has helped propel a new direction for literary study: how does the materiality of the digital age affect the literary artifact? As Rice generates rhetorical tropes made possible only by virtue of their digital roots in *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Hayles helps generate an understanding of literary study that takes into account the (per)mutations made possible in an age of electronic writing.

Scholarship in creative writing didn’t pick up on these interests as enthusiastically as these two threads of English studies did. However, poets and writers of fiction and creative nonfiction did. While most MFA programs continued to provide workshop-based pedagogical methods and print-based praxes and practices, the Web saw a rush of creativity in the form of online literary journals, blogs, and multimedia projects.
And while Kairos developed its Inventio section, which is devoted to “the decisions, contexts, and contributions that have constituted a particular webtext [. . . .]” and in which “[a]uthors include, alongside or integrated with their finished webtexts, materials that help them articulate how and why their work came into being” (which is arguably a proto-digital-craft-criticism), creative writers experimented with how digital technologies redefine the boundaries we draw around fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. How a text changes across emergent technologies is now, as a result, something we can look back on and examine in terms established through the process category of digital craft criticism.

To see this development, it helps to notice how print adapted to a readership that became equipped with a technological way of reading fostered by immersion in the Internet and Web 2.0 culture. As Hayles discusses in Writing Machines, Mark Danielewski’s 2000 novel House of Leaves infamously borrows a visual template from digital writing in not only the formatting of that novel—the text visually reframes different genres (primarily fiction and journalism) in its treatment of “The Navidson Record” (the text’s central account of the physically impossible house that the novel’s central characters, the Navidson family, document in their home footage)—but also, every time the word House appears in the text, it is in blue as if a link in a hypertext story. The novel is framed twice: it has a forward by Johnny Truant, who discovers a text about a family that bought a house and became consumed by its physical properties written by a recently deceased author named Zampanò. The novel is immersive in a narrative fashion—Truant supplies the reader with Zampanò’s original text outfitted with Truant’s own footnotes and explanations—and readers are asked to occupy a worlding effect that allows the story of the Navidson family to refract through multiple layers that present as much of a multimedia environment as print can make possible. The novel is ultimately about the broken-up film footage (a visual medium) of the house, written up by Zampanò (in various notes, texts, interviews, and newspaper clippings) and commented on by Johnny Truant, who discovered Zampanò’s notes and unfinished narrative following his death. A full-length companion album, released by the musician Poe, provides an aural dimension to the novel as well. Titled Haunted, Poe’s album loosely references the novel and, likewise, the novel references the album and lyrics found in particular songs.

What’s interesting for our purposes is the way we see Danielewski’s novel engage with other media. As Hayles points out, the novel is brought to its medium’s limit. Kodwo Eshun, in More Brilliant Than the Sun, argues that the digital practices in hip-hop and electronic music have developed to the point of amplified integration, contributing to the birth of a new audio paradigm that integrates sound, vision, and bodies. In this paradigm, traditional categories break down—songs can become fiction and fiction can become songs—and a large part of Eshun’s project is capturing the movement and kinetics of aesthetic practice in the twenty-first century. As he puts it,
You are not censors but sensors, not aesthetes but kinaesthetes. You are sensationalists. You are the newest mutants incubated in womb-speakers. Your mother, your first sound. The bedroom, the party, the dancefloor, the rave: these are the labs where 21st C nervous systems assemble themselves, the matrices of the Futurrhythmachinic Discontinuum. The future is a much better guide to the present than the past. (001)

By breaking down the language into a kind of cyberpoetics, Eshun’s manifesto points us toward the interaction of texts across multiple media platforms—an integration of story as it becomes intensified and experienced through sound, images, and text. When put next to a born-digital, multimedia, interactive, episodic digital novel like *Inanimate Alice*, Danielewski’s and Eshun’s work show us the ways in which imaginative narrative has begun to develop across emergent technologies. The role of the visual and aural, integral to the narrative of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and the argument of Eshun’s manifesto, are also part of the fundamental composition of *Inanimate Alice*, which is designed (a word I use here deliberately) for long-term literacy development across years of reading. *Inanimate Alice*, in the words of its creators, novelist Kate Pullinger and digital artist Chris Joseph, is a “transmedia project, designed at the outset as a story that unfolds over time and on multiple platforms.” A hybrid of fixed storytelling and embedded game playing, *Inanimate Alice* is about a young woman named Alice and her imaginary friend Brad, an avatar she and the reader use in the coming-of-age story that *Inanimate Alice* becomes: in the digital novel, Alice eventually fulfills her calling as a video game designer. Through a network of aural, visual, and language texts, readers work alongside, sometimes as, Alice as she grows up. Landow calls this sort of storytelling a “read-write system,” arguing along post-structuralist lines that “open” systems like hypertext and, I would add here, digital writing (as opposed to the “closed” systems of print technologies) “offer students […] a laboratory with which to test [post-structuralism’s] ideas” (2). *Inanimate Alice* is just such a laboratory, not just inviting readers to imagine themselves as both reader and writer set afloat in Roland Barthes’s “galaxy of signifiers,” but now requiring them to be.

To consider our question regarding process (can a writer determine in advance what a particular piece of writing will look like, sound like, or mean?) in a digital environment, then, is to consider the relationship a writer’s imaginative text establishes with its reader and the role new media play in the development of that relationship. In the case of digital imaginative texts, no longer is reading exclusively an act of interpretation. It requires, in a literal and material fashion, participation as well. To determine the narrative is simple enough (even in *Inanimate Alice* there is a kind of determinative linearity in effect), but how a writer crafts that narrative will require the skillful deployment of particular technologies that provide sensory immersion. Digital environments provide immersive multimodality and worlding features that are dependent on an affective ambient world of integrated sound, image,
and text, each of which require integrated as well as independent theorization. Because digital imaginative texts require participation, they require an understanding of how craft synthesizes texts and readers. Brian Massumi, in Parables for the Virtual, calls this “actualizing” the digital. If imaginative writers wish to sandwich their readers into their texts by integrating into those texts readers’ sensory participation (as interactive digital storytelling allows), then one consideration the process category of digital creative writing studies brings to light is the need to develop a sustained theoretical approach toward the sensory and interpretive immersion that craft becomes. Although the figure of reader-as-writer is hardly new to scholarship, the recruitment of technologies that materially require the reader to occupy or construct that duality is. Creative writing studies in the twenty-first century can use the digital environment in which this duality takes places as a way of asking imaginative writers to begin examining and imagining writing beyond the sensation provided by lines of language on the page and examining how participation with a variety of sensations may provide new ways of understanding craft as a synthesis of readers’ affect and participation in an unfolding narrative.

**Genre(s) Growing**

Ander Monson’s 2010 book Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir helps us begin to see, more specifically, what the genre category of craft criticism looks like as it matures in the digital age. “This is a book,” he writes on the first page. “It is fixed in time, in space, in print, an artifact.” But his “brain, of course, is flux, motion, synapses, connecting and reconnecting and thinking exploding everywhere” (1). So he has employed footnote-like “daggers,” which, he explains, “lead to things that exceed the capacity of footnotes. Some of them have video. Some images. Some evolving text” (2). The daggers take you to Monson’s website. The subtitle of the book urges readers not to read it as a memoir, but (as we see develop in the book) rather as an interrogation of the “I” the memoirist recruits, which, of course, requires Monson to write some autobiography and allow the alchemy of digital and print technologies to challenge that autobiography. The result is a kind of imaginative text that we can quite easily call creative nonfiction, but one that grapples in a sophisticated way with the possibilities afforded a poet, novelist, or essayist (Monson is all three) who engages with generic conventions in a digital environment. Heir to the hypertext, Vanishing Point picks up on how memoir can recruit digital tools to redefine “craft” and to change a memoir into—for lack of a word that has yet to emerge from the ether—“not a memoir.” Vanishing Point is “not a memoir,” after all, because the tools Monson employs—print as well as video, image, and sound—often veer his book away from him, allowing a sort of flexibility with the memoir form that disperses the “self” he interrogates as a way of keeping the book in perpetual motion, sometimes getting
away from himself (there are strange histories that leak out of the book and into the Web—toothpaste, for one) and sometimes returning to himself (as he does when he describes his childhood or his experience with jury duty).

More specifically, *Vanishing Point* includes an essay titled “Solipsism.” This essay was originally written not just on, but for, Monson’s own website. As a result the essay, of course, grew, accumulating footnotes and other “paraphernalia,” and one of the later additions to the essay describes the “life” of the essay after it was published on Monson’s website:

So the best thing about this essay—and the website containing it that functions as its own venue for publication, which has both good and bad qualities—is that after being composed and published here (*strand one*), it was picked up by this great newish magazine *The Pinch*, being a cool magazine, formerly *River City*, out of University of Memphis. They did a great print version of it (*strand two*) with some serious design elements that make for a very interesting and provocative read. I find out today (04.16.08) that it will be reprinted in *The Best American Essays 2008*, being *strand three* of the same essay. Or perhaps *strand* is wrong. Maybe it is *strain*, like something viral and expanding. All of this brings up a number of interesting questions: one is how the design elements of the piece will be translated to the BAE format, and how much say I will get in the process. If design means, and in this essay (particularly in the version printed in *The Pinch*) it certainly does, then modifying the design means meaning changes. So I would hope that I will get to tinker. (*Vanishing Point: A Book and a Website*)

So an “un”-memoir about “the self” in twenty-first-century American culture becomes not only an example of how one can write about the self in the digital age, but also a commentary on the institutional ways (in this case, the institution is the *Best American* series) in which conforming genre to print-based conventions of that genre alters the meaning of the piece. But, of course, Monson’s book is just that: a book. Recalling Rice’s acknowledgment that invention emerges from a variety of influences—print and digital technologies being two influences now afforded creative writers—it’s important to note that *Vanishing Point* asks us to (perhaps paradoxically) reimagine narrative structure beyond the exclusively print-based understanding of that word, and *that print will always be one force available to the creative writer*. In this way, we will always be able to identify genres as they emerge and reconfigure across developing technologies, however a digital understanding of the genre prong of craft criticism allows us a point of entry regarding the quality and nature of the interactions of those technologies on the conventions of the texts they produce. In Monson’s case we see the ideological baggage of a print-based understanding of “essay” exert itself on the fact that he was not, in the end, allowed to tinker. And the result was an essay included in an edition of *Best American Essays* that ends up going without an integral part of what that essay is about: its capacity to solipsistically grow and reference itself.

We see similar print-based ideological baggage associated to short stories that
appear on Twitter. When Rick Moody published “Some Contemporary Characters” through the online literary magazine *Electric Literature’s* twitter platform, he told *Future Perfect Publishing* that “it felt more like writing haiku”; and in Jennifer Egan’s recently tweeted short story “Black Box” (published through the *New Yorker*’s Twitter platform), readers saw a character from her print novel *A Visit From the Goon Squad* return in serialized “mental dispatches” sent from a secret mission that the protagonist, essentially, tweets about (“Rick Moody’s Novel Experiment”). The 140-character limit shapes the narrator’s dispatches into small lessons she learns while on that secret mission (to seduce and attempt to kill a violent political leader), turning what Egan called a story into a serialized series of observations of a fictional narrative. One of the reader’s responses to Egan’s story, posted to the *New Yorker*’s website, came from a mildly disgruntled fan: “I’m sorry to inform Ms. Egan that she is writing a narrative poem. I know that sounds very feisty, Venus and Adonis-ish, but I’m convinced that Twitter and short attention spans will be the saving of poetry as a living form” (Egan). In Moody’s and Egan’s cases, writers and readers recruited other genres to help understand the modifications of the genre that surfaced through the interaction of stories and the platform those stories were published through. As Marshal McLuhan argued in *Understanding Media*, any cool medium is going to require the participation of its audience to fully express the potential of that medium—and as we use the vocabulary of (and ideological baggage associated with) print-based understandings of genre to understand how they blur and evolve in digital spaces—the *genre* category of a digital craft criticism points us toward how generic conventions are resisted (as they are in *Vanishing Point*) or mutated (as they are in the “live” stories of the tweeted work of Moody and Egan). In short, identifying and investigating the ways digitized craft invites the technology to play a role in the contour of the work helps scholars of creative writing studies develop sophisticated understandings of the ways genres blur and mature through electronic writing practices.

**Authors, Avatars, and Identity: Managing Authorship and Ownership in a Digital Age**

Perhaps the most developed category of digital creative writing studies examines notions of originality and authorship as they are complicated by electronic writing practices. Jonathan Lethem’s 2007 essay “The Ecstasy of Influence” (anthologized, as a matter of fact, in the same *Best American Essays* volume as Monson’s “Solipsism”) addresses the historical lineage of appropriation in the arts, arguing that “art is sourced [and] apprentices graze in the field of culture,” ultimately mounting a Bakhtinian position about the ways in which intertextuality in the arts has always been a rich resource, a lifeblood, in fact, for any writer or artist looking to engage
and substantively develop the culture around her. In the addendum following the essay, Lethem reveals the sources he “plagiarized” in the writing of his essay—the overwhelming majority of the essay is a collage of other writers’ and artists’ work. Lethem plagiarizes a complex argument regarding one particular method used often in digital writing practices: appropriation. Digital writing practices, he points out, simply acknowledge it by requiring its use. “Digital sampling is an art method like any other,” he claims, “neutral in itself.” In *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Rice brings this practice into the precincts of composition studies, addressing the “borrowing” logic present during but absent from composition studies’ lynchpin year of 1963: “appropriation [. . .] allows [us] to consider what the pedagogical implications of this moment might be for composition studies—how we appropriate and apply appropriations rhetorically to make meaning in technology-rich environments” (51).

Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing* shows us what this means for creative writing, and refers to appropriation practices as “pushing language around” in digital spaces, arguing that these practices—which he also historicizes in a lineage that includes Walter Benjamin, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, William Burroughs, and Andy Warhol—are capable of emotionally moving audiences and should, therefore, find a sophisticated home in the teaching of imaginative writing. Such a home in the field of creative writing—which he says is “stuck” on perpetuating an incorrect notion of the “original” artist—has been difficult to find because, he argues, creative writing has been reluctant to follow the strides made in other arts and aesthetic theory, particularly music and painting, where appropriation is a commonly used practice. He explains:

Perhaps one reason writing is stuck might be the way creative writing is taught. In regard to the many sophisticated ideas concerning media, identity, and sampling developed over the past century, books about how to be a creative writer have completely missed the boat, relying on cliché notions of what it means to be “creative.” These books are peppered with advice, like “A creative writer is an explorer, a ground-breaker. Creative writing allows you to chart your own course and boldly go where no one has gone before.” Or, ignoring giants like de Certeau, Cage, and Warhol, they suggest that “creative writing is liberation from the constraints of everyday life.” (7)

Resisting these clichés, Goldsmith argues, requires invigorating creative writing by addressing the ways that digital writing practices—which include, for Goldsmith, not only appropriation (although that’s a large part of Goldsmith’s argument), but also code writing, collage writing, and performance art—are descendents of the literary avant-garde. Advocating a context-is-the-new-content approach to the understanding of creative writing, Goldsmith proposes what he calls *uncreative writing*: “while traditional notions of writing are primarily focused on ‘originality’ and ‘creativity,’ the digital environment fosters new skill sets that include ‘manipulation’ and ‘management’ of the heaps of already existent and ever-increasing language” (15).
Uncreative writing develops conceptual, pedagogical, and practical understandings of how to “manipulate” and “manage” the heaps of language in those environments in imaginative ways.

Invited to the White House to read his work in April 2012, Goldsmith read from a poem titled “Traffic,” a collage of traffic reports from Manhattan. When recontextualized for a White House audience, the poem—not one line of which Goldsmith “wrote”—achieved a poetic accomplishment by not only presenting “gridlock” to an often-argued “gridlocked” audience, but more important, by illustrating the cadences, images, and materiality of everyday language in an elevated context. By “pushing around” traffic reports from the radio to the page to an audience at the White House, Goldsmith’s ready-made poetry draws from an aesthetic set in motion by Duchamp, de Certeau, Cage, and Warhol, and, as such, is designed to upset conventional models and expectations of what we consider “creative” or “poetry” to be. In this way, much of Goldsmith’s argument in Uncreative Writing works toward establishing conceptual models of what it means to write imaginatively in the digital age, exemplified perhaps most effectively in the course he teaches (also called Uncreative Writing) at the University of Pennsylvania, in which “students are penalized for showing any shred of originality and creativity. Instead, they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering, and stealing” (8).

At stake in Lethem’s and Goldsmith’s arguments are, obviously, notions of what originality means in an open-source culture. It’s easy to see the ways in which they champion a kind of originality that recruits culture in order to reimagine it. And while these are themselves important issues at stake in how we frame and present notions of “originality” to imaginative writers in creative writing classrooms—and should be followed up on in creative writing scholarship devoted to the author category of digital craft criticism—they also help develop notions of authorship that begin to emerge as they do for Hayles and Monson, both of whom use ciphers themselves in their own work as a way of working through the compounding and refracting of what authorship means in digital spaces. In other words, digital writing practices are not only shifting our understandings of plagiarism and originality, they are also helping scholars and creative writers address how authority can be reimagined. Instead of examining creative authorship at the extremes of a spectrum with the individual genius on one end and the death of the author on the other, the authorship category of digital craft criticism asks creative writing scholars to imagine the multiplication of the author, an author who can appear in her own webtext, video, embedded image, animation, or print text wearing a variety of masks and playing a variety of roles, all of which work toward a choreographed effect that her imaginative text aims to achieve.

David Shields’s book Reality Hunger argues that these concerns go so far as to redefine an audience’s relationship with reality. Citing popular culture’s dismay at
both James Frey and J. T. Leroy’s controversial deceptions regarding who they were as opposed to who their audience thought they were, Shields points out that our culture missed an opportunity to address the issues at stake in the issues backgrounding their public lies like, for example, the role their publishers played in asking, even if not directly, to lie in the way that each did—as well as the ways in which a popular culture simultaneously enthralled and repulsed by “reality television” hungers for public figures to believe in and reject, roles that both Frey and Leroy ultimately played out. Shields advocates for the same kind of appropriation and conceptual recontextualization of writing that Lethem and Goldsmith champion (in fact, his entire book is plagiarized as well—a collage of over 500 clips of other writers’ and artists’ work), but links his project to a larger cultural argument regarding how those concerns reject and recruit deception, citing the industrialization of creative work through the publishing and academic industries as the main force behind policing categories such as fiction and nonfiction and the ways those categories ask authors to occupy different kinds of ethos. When digital writing practices ask (and often require) authors to experiment with the different kinds of author/ity that emerge when hybridizing and modifying genres, then an attendant ethos also needs to emerge. As such, the authorship category of digital craft criticism begins the project of (re)imagining the ethos imaginative writers occupy when appropriating, employing, or modifying language, ready-made texts, and/or particular genres.

**Institutionality**

While Shields considers the shape and regulation of cultural assumptions regarding originality, authority, and ethos, another major concern regarding the ways digital technologies have reshaped creative production, of course, has been in academia’s adaptation to electronic reading and writing practices. Collapsing the divide between readers and writers, social media and other digital technologies ask the publishing industry as well as creative writing MFA and PhD programs to consider how institutional practices adapt. Imagining craft as it intersects with institutions and the effects those institutions have on creative production, as a result, will increasingly require examining the ways in which fluid communication between writers and readers and cheaper, easier, and more effective distribution methods—all effects of digital technologies—have modified the practices of those institutions. Put simply: how are colleges and universities adapting their undergraduate, MFA, and PhD programs to these developments? Creative writing, as it works out a more sophisticated understanding of the role digital technologies have played in these developments, must grapple at least with how academic institutions are learning to progress in light of the influence of digital technologies.

Some academic institutions are already beginning to position pedagogical
concerns to address the opportunities that digital technologies provide. Courses like the University of Massachusetts–Amherst’s Experimental Writing Workshop, in which students enroll at the 200 level for a course “designed on the premise that writing can be playful and play can be both creative and productive,” provides a loose framework for a rotating set of courses to address a variety of “experimental” concerns, one of which is called Digital Storytelling (The Writing Program). George Mason University’s Digital Creative Writing course is a “combined workshop and studio course in technological and aesthetic issues of reading and writing hypermedia texts with emphasis on poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, mixed genre, drama, or performance” (English Department). As creative writing begins to consider its status in the twenty-first century, those who take creative writing seriously must begin to consider how our institutional practices—ranging from the undergraduate workshop to teacher training—frame an understanding of and scholarship regarding how our craft and practices as teachers and writers demands new theorization in light of digital technologies.

In Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline, Donnelly examines the history of the workshop method and addresses technology in terms of the “digital natives” we teach in our creative writing classrooms:

How are creative writing educators to connect with students who are preoccupied with a virtual rather than a physical world, students who are more likely to skip university lectures and less likely to go to the library and check out a book? Are our writing students among the average college graduates who have “spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours of watching TV),” as Marc Prensky (2001) claims in “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants?” We do know that our students are among the majority who want technology at the ready. “The more portable the better,” Carlson (2005) notes. After all, he suggests, “they are able to juggle a conversation on Instant Messenger, a Web-surfing session, and an iTunes playlist while reading Twelfth Night for homework.” Are creative writing teachers ready to embrace and prepare for changes that suit these Googlers—to construct workshops online, create videos and modules, craft lectures on podcasts, which can then be downloaded to students’ iPods, becoming portable, rewindable, even pauseable? Should they be? (92)

As Goldsmith’s course Uncreative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania illustrates, by beginning to try such a connection through the deep theorization and scholarly treatment of the practices we develop in light of digital technologies, creative writing can begin to imagine not only workshops that employ digital technologies (I would, to answer Donnelly’s question, emphatically say yes, we should be embracing the “changes that suit these Googlers” but in a cautious and thoroughly theorized way) but also course work that addresses these concerns in PhD programs that provide candidates with the opportunity to engage in the production of knowledge, and creative texts that employ the digital as well as the teacher training we conduct.
(or don’t) in those programs. As Ritter argues in “Professional Writers/Writing Professionals,” the conditions surrounding pedagogical theory and practice as they are employed and investigated through graduate study in creative writing has needed attention for some time. “Universities must stop looking at their popular and financially profitable graduate programs in creative writing,” she concludes, through the lenses of university public relations officials, graduate recruitment materials, and rare success stories belonging to famous writers who need never teach again. Graduate programs must not continue to allow creative writing to be the riderless horse in the larger field of English studies. (227)

Investigations into the institutionality of a digital craft criticism is a way into imagining what is at stake in our digital considerations and conceptions of craft as they are inflected through their (re)production in workshops and teacher training. To build off Goldsmith’s course: to provide undergraduate creative writers with course work through which to investigate and practice creative writing as appropriation (or any other digital writing practice) requires that we incorporate into our teacher training in creative writing how and why we position students in these contexts in the first place.

Craft and Contours: English Studies and Digital Craft Criticism

In his book Literary Art in Digital Performance, editor Francisco Ricardo investigates how literature changes when digital technology is used for aesthetic reasons and not just distribution. In his introduction, he argues that while human expressive force remains vibrant, electronic media have made it possible to create work that spans traditional distinctions at key junctures, to include the aesthetic and the poetic; the entirely participatory and the entirely receptive; the act of narrative creation and that of real-time production. (2)

Although Ricardo’s book works toward a literary criticism devoted to examining “the cinematic element in video games, poems in projective installations, dramatic reenactments played out in simulated online worlds [and] the audible immersive [that is] explorable in open physical space,” the interests in his book certainly line up with how creative texts (and, I would urge, creative writing) begin to illustrate a distinction that emerges in a culture that employs electronic media: namely, the difference between “the entirely participatory and the entirely receptive” (Ricardo 5). An emerging digital understanding of craft criticism unpacks precisely what creative writing studies would be able to examine at a moment in our scholarship when we seem situated somewhere in the middle. Digital understandings of craft will develop alongside—in many cases out of—print forms and perhaps begin to contribute to larger discussions regarding craft and authorship in an age of “participatory” aesthet-
ics, including the ways in which creative writing may begin, eventually, the project of unhinging genre, process and practices, and even authors from their print-based conventions.

Particularly important to imagining craft as a digital immersion and not just a textual surface is the possibility for recruiting (and advocating for further) research devoted to understanding the sensual and affective ways knowledge circulates through the act of reading, viewing, listening, and reacting to imaginative texts. As research in composition studies emerges regarding the ways in which sound, image, and speech complicate the rhetorical and composing situation, creative writing studies needs to begin the important work of thoroughly attending to the particular opportunities afforded imaginative writers who work at the intersection of storytelling and new media. Digital craft criticism imagines what choices made at the material level contribute not only to the interpretation of the text that requires reading, watching and listening, but, more important, the limits and horizons that particular material conditions in digital environments make possible for imaginative texts.

In his 2009 article in *College English*, “One Simple Word,” Mayers observes that creative writing studies “may harbor the roots of an institutional compromise in which the union between composition and literature does not involve one side winning and the other side losing, but rather both enterprises being transformed [by creative writing studies] so that they can meet on heretofore unimagined ground” (227). Because those roots are spreading into digital ground, it only makes sense that such a union be able to adequately attend to the ways in which the ideological, material, and institutional forces at work on the act of imaginative composition in digital spaces provide one particular way to reinforce that union.

To build a kind of criticism that foregrounds textual production as it engages with digital environments requires the attention to and complication of print-based ways of understanding imaginative texts as well as the development of how the digital environs of an imaginative text affect the process of constructing that text. Not only do we begin to see the sort of union that Mayers forecasts in “One Simple Word” begin to emerge when we consider the effects of digital technologies on conceptions of craft, but we can also begin to address a range of research directions—bigger than craft—that require further examination across such an “unimagined ground”: the effects of digital research methods on writing novels, short stories, poems, and creative nonfiction; the evolving relationship between video games and narrative structure; the relationship between rhetorical ethics and citizenship as they are imagined and critiqued across “democratizing” stages such as online literary journals and in cultural studies scholarship; not to mention the sustained analysis of the cultural, economic, and material ways in which the publishing industry grapples with the digital age, to name only a few. In this way, creative writing studies stands ready to better understand and assess the ways in which a creative writer’s work is enabled and limited by her
capacity to engage with the opportunities afforded her, whether in print or digital tradition, or both, asking her to compose through and speak back to traditions both literary and rhetorical as they are preserved and always reimagined.

Notes

1. For a historical treatment of the rise of creative writing as a field in academia, see also D. G. Myers’s *The Elephants Teach*.

2. Although most of the examples I will use in this argument focus on narrative and/or fiction, there are other examples in poetry that require further analysis on behalf of scholars working in creative writing studies. As a scholar focusing primarily on fiction and narrative, I am more familiar with these examples and have chosen to use them here.

3. Donnelly’s introduction in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* mentions some of the work being done in the digital writing workshops at University of Massachusetts–Amherst, Texas A&M University, and George Mason University; however, Donnelly’s collection was published in 2010 and illustrates how technology is still only beginning to enter into our considerations of creative writing studies.

4. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* also includes a chapter written in PowerPoint, demonstrating a fluidity on Egan’s part regarding the variety of platforms across which story can develop.

5. This practice is also becoming more popular in composition studies. Rebecca Moore Howard’s *patchwriting*, which she defines as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes”(233), examines the borders we use to define plagiarism in the teaching of writing, and the ways we can explore those borders in order to help students identify not only the sound practice of intertextuality, but also the critical intervention imperative to great writing.

6. For more on this, see Lethem’s “Promiscuous Materials Project” on his website. The project is devoted to fair-trade use of intellectual property, providing writers and artists with materials meant to be appropriated and reused.

7. See also John D’Agata and Jim Fingal’s 2012 work *The Lifespan of a Fact*.

Works Cited


