



# Bad Grades, Making Bank, and Hating Piano: The Divergent Trajectories of Two Creative Writers' Semiotic Becomings

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## ABSTRACT

*This article challenges lore-based conceptions of creative writers' becomings by showing how creative writers establish their literate and disciplinary identities not only through modes of learning characterized by curricular-based advancement in their field, but also through complex social and material negotiations with communities, institutions, and engagements outside of the disciplinary domain of creative writing. Drawing primarily from case study interview data, this article argues for a theoretical and empirical approach to studying creative writers' "semiotic becomings" in order to further inform creative writing studies research, creative writing pedagogy, and the disciplinary benefits of validating creative writers' extra-literate and extra-disciplinary experiences.*

## INTRODUCTION

Popular narratives of creative writers' development have long forwarded an unevidenced view of how these writers progress as practitioners and construct their writerly identities. These narratives have often been marred by lore-based conceptions of who creative writers *essentially* are, how creative writing is learned, and the methods by which writers produce literary works. I use "lore" in this case to refer to the largely unchallenged "practical writing 'traditions' poured...from the full vessel of the writer-teacher-mentor into the empty vessel of the student-disciple" (Andrews 247). However, it also references a "romantic process" of development that mythologizes instead of historicizes the construction of writerly identity (see Ritter & Vanderslice).<sup>1</sup> Such misconceived processes often ask us to "hold narrowly individualist and humanist views of creativity as a product of purely human genius and personal talent" (Pope 144) that do not and have *never* tracked with writing studies scholarship on professional and disciplinary development (see *Prior Writing/*

1 N.b. Lore-based pedagogies are not *inherently* ineffective. The issue lies in their large basis of unexamined beliefs about disciplinary knowledge and teaching. Not only do they run the risk of being ineffective for these reasons, but they also risk reinforcing problematic and ahistorical writing standards, as well as subjectifying student experience.

*Disciplinary*, “How Do Moments”); Roozen & Erickson; Woodard).

These lore-based conceptions of creative writing and creative writers have hindered our recognition of the sociocultural dimensions of literate activity that account, historically and materially, for writer’s “semiotic becomings”<sup>2</sup> (Prior, “How Do Moments”). Unfortunately, views that eschew these dimensions continue to persist even despite recent scholarship in creative writing studies that has sought to identify the contextual dimensions of writers’ development (Ryden & Sposato), offer new perspectives on creative agency (Piller), highlight problematic and patriarchally-derived myths around such social relations as and benefits derived from mentorship (Surkan & McGill), and more broadly challenge lore-based pedagogies (Ritter & Vanderslice). As a result, the widely accepted narratives of creative writers’ becomings<sup>3</sup> still often consist of the artist’s early fascination with their future medium, unrelenting practice and tutelage, and the production of artifacts that adhere to stylistic conventions of a particular form or medium that solidifies the artist’s status as a member of the associated community. Because these prototypical artists can create artifacts inspired by thoughts outside of the conventional, then, they may also be viewed as contented outsiders and individualistically great (see Pope).

As I describe below, however, the stories of creative writers’ disciplinary development often demonstrate the ways writers veer from these more direct and commonly *assumed* lanes of tutelage, practice, mentorship, and professionalization. Creative writers who were part of a qualitative case study I designed reported that the formation of their professional, creative writerly identities seemed to rarely, if ever, conform to these more “common” narratives of artists’ development. In place of a linear, step-by-step progression to their disciplinary and professional identities as creative writers, participants frequently articulated the ways their processes of development encompassed larger groupings of interactions with and activities in several, often disparate, and not always beneficial, communities. Additionally, they reported on the importance of extra-literate and extra-disciplinary activities (those not related to creative writing, sponsored or underwritten by educational institutions or otherwise) to their literate and disciplinary development. This article, then, aims to contribute to the discussions by the above-mentioned scholars by also highlighting the importance of these “extra-” sites and contexts in our understanding of creative writerly development.

Using data gathered from semi-structured interviews with two study participants, Hasanthika Sirisena and Ashley Farmer, I examine how creative writers understand the circuitous pathways of

2 A dialogic model of literate identity formation that suggests development happens across domains of learning (not all of which are school based) that inform one another, instead of in discrete contexts. More on this term below.

3 See *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* by Dianne Donnelly for numerous specious depictions of creative writers and creative writing mentorships that abound in popular culture, and particularly in popular film.

writerly identity formation, as well as how extra-literate and extra-disciplinary activities contribute to this formation. Both Hasanthika and Ashley describe numerous experiences outside of the disciplinary context of creative writing—relating to their education, extracurricular activities, familial relations, jobs, identity markers, and others—that, through processes of recontextualization and reframing further detailed below, contributed to their perceptions of themselves as creative writers. These descriptions reveal the deeply dialogic, interconnected, and intertextual role these “extra-” activities have played in the processes of writerly identity formation. Beyond a discussion of these activities’ descriptions, I also examine how Hasanthika and Ashley have “taken up”<sup>4</sup> and renegotiated what they have learned or came to understand from these activities and applied to these processes.

A key factor of Hasanthika and Ashley’s creative writerly becomings included reconciling with their, what I have termed, “literate difference” in relation to two dissimilar communities of practice *not* expressly related to creative writing. For Hasanthika, this community of practice was represented by her educational institutions, and, for Ashley, her family of piano players. Hasanthika and Ashley each identified that their disciplinary development as creative writers not only included engaging with multiple, heterogenous systems of activity, but also rejecting or deviating from others. This rejection, or deviation, allowed them opportunities to re-identify themselves with regard to their writerly, artistic, and identity-based goals and seek out communities that could nurture those goals. The non-linear and seemingly contradictory paths of semiotic becoming that Hasanthika and Ashley traversed not only further complicate popular narratives of writerly development, but also hint at novel approaches to creative writing studies research, creative writing pedagogy, and validating creative writers’ narratives of literate development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing a study of the role extra-disciplinary and extra-literate activities play in the formation of creative writerly development and identity, including how writers take up these activities in other rhetorical contexts, involves drawing from literature across a number of fields. First, I discuss scholarship highlighting the importance of holding larger, socio-historic perspectives on learning in order to challenge common assumptions of the linear, mono-contextual nature of writing knowledge

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4 The history of the term “uptake” in rhetoric and writing studies is complex, spread across numerous subfields, and worth diving into. Here, I discuss the term primarily within the context of studies in writing transfer and development. Angela Rounsaville, drawing on work by Anne Freedman, argues that uptake “foregrounds the role that heterogeneity, selection, and problem-solving play in how literate learners encounter and make sense of new writing tasks at the convergence of prior genre knowledge and current, local genred events” (Rounsaville). This article’s theoretical framework draws from these conceptions of uptake and transfer; however, it also complicates them by suggesting that it is through broader, amalgamated processes of becoming that literate and literate-adjacent activities, such as interactions with communities structured around certain activities (speaking, writing, piano playing, etc.), are understood, deconstructed, renegotiated, and ultimately inform one’s actions in new rhetorical situations.

acquisition. Second, drawing from writing studies scholarship that is itself informed by discussions of linguistics' markedness model of language use, I detail how activities seemingly unrelated to the work of a discipline may nonetheless help learners develop literacy in that discipline. And, finally, I outline scholarship on the relationship between literacy and identity, highlighting the crucial role that the metaphors of "difference" and "position" play in conceptualizing identity.

### **Learning Across Domains of Activity**

Writing studies scholars have long concerned themselves with questions of how the larger social, cultural, and historical contexts of writers' lives affect their literate development. Over two decades ago, Paul Prior's analyses of graduate students' academic writing affirmed the advantage of viewing disciplinary development through these wider lenses. "In order to understand writing and disciplinarity from a developmental perspective," he writes, "it is important to take up perspectives that are longer in term, more diverse in setting, and, not incidentally, *less* grounded in the dominant institutional perspectives" (*Writing/Disciplinarity* 134, emphasis mine). Here, Prior identifies the need to break away from the standard perspective that disciplinary development, and so professional development based thereon, is homogenous, linear, and only hierarchical. Drawing from Prior's work, Roozen & Erickson have, more recently, continued to challenge prevailing methods of development that entail unidirectional mappings of literate progress within writing disciplines. They suggest that such methods of mapping end up "locat[ing] writers and their writing within a particular disciplinary world and chart development along a pathway that begins on the periphery and leads toward some central core..." (1.01), often imagined as a hub of power, knowledge, and agency.

These methods of unidirectional mapping take off from two erroneous premises. First, they mistakenly characterize these "central cores" as stable reifications of values shared by singular, bound discourse communities that hold them. Characterizations like these help account for lore-based perspectives of creative writing such as: the creative writing workshop as the singular, signature, and most effective manifestation of classroom pedagogy; creative writers needing to be isolated misfits in order to produce quality literary work; and even such pedagogical aphorisms as "show, don't tell." Second, in this process of charting, these acts of mapping forego considering the roles played by the diverse sets of activities—across multiple communities and situated throughout time—in which writers participate throughout their lives. Put another way, these maps identify ecologies of literate activity as discretely bound and, in doing so, fail to ask the questions with which Jay Lemke, from whom Roozen & Erickson draw, opened his seminal article "Across the Scales of Time:" "How do moments add up to lives? How do shared moments together add up to social life as such?" (173).

Views both Prior and Roozen & Erickson offer instead are of disciplinary development as

heterogeneous, temporally unfolding, and socially situated. These identities are constructed across the innumerable lived moments that reinforce, erode, and remake one's sense of self as an agent in one's social world(s). Many of these moments are therefore extra-disciplinary<sup>5</sup> in that they reference forms of work and learning, which, although outside the commonly assumed bounds of disciplinarity, find purchase with activities performed within those contexts. An individual's participation in a community of professional grant writers, for instance (and to preview an example from Hasanthika's data), can have a profound impact on the construction of their identity as a creative writer. Rebecca Woodard's study of the middle-school educator Lisa's multiple literate practices that inform her teaching, for instance, reported on how Lisa's extra-disciplinary participation in a creative writing workshop served to move her across her "everyday and professional contexts, influencing the way [she] taught" (53). Namely, what Lisa learned in these workshops she recontextualized for a different audience (her students) and brought to bear in her lessons inside her own English classroom. These extra-disciplinary forms of learning have similarly contributed to my participants' disciplinary developments as creative writers as vitally as studying literature, nurturing a fascination with language, and working with peers and mentors within the context of the academies where they received their formal, graduate training.

To illustrate this claim, I track the trajectories of participants' aforementioned "semiotic becomings" as creative writers. I take this term from Paul Prior, who suggests it as a model of learning that exists in contrast to those that emphasize "step-by-step [progress] along a sequentially graded curricular path." Prior states that the story of learning he tells sees learning instead as:

...embodied, dispersed, mediated, laminated, and deeply dialogic. Becoming happens not inside domains, but across the many moments of a life, where no space is pure or settled, where discourses and knowledge are necessarily heterogeneous, and where multiple semiotic resources are so deeply entangled that distinct modes simply don't make sense. ("How Do Moments")

Viewing the interviews as data that tell portions of participants' stories of semiotic becoming, I consider the roles that non-disciplinary literate activities and, even more to the point, extra-literate and extra-disciplinary activities have played in these becomings. These activities take such forms as employment in non-creative writing fields, familial literacy communities structured around music

5 It's worth taking a moment to now clarify a term I've been using. The prefix "extra-" here is something of a misnomer. While "extra-" as "beyond" is fitting, "extra-" as "supplementary" is not. If learning and disciplinary development happen across the contexts of a life, no singular domains of learning need be thought of as holding a privileged place over others. Work and learning done beyond the context of the disciplinary is complementary to that done within it. For clarity's sake, I still use the prefix "extra-" to denote activities and engagements outside the normative conceptions of disciplinary and institutional structures. For example, participating in a freewriting poetry exercise would be an activity that takes place within the disciplinary context of creative writing, whereas working as a clerk in a retail store could *possibly* be considered extra-disciplinary to the pursuit of developing an identity as a creative writer.

education and practice, and participation in seemingly status quo grammar school classrooms. Both Hasanthika and Ashley's experiences suggest their abilities to recontextualize and repurpose these activities for their practices of creative writing, habits of mind attendant to those practices, and construction of writerly identity.

### **A Markedness Model of Developmental Engagements**

The activities with which these participants practiced and engaged included both those "marked" and "unmarked," terms at which I arrive by way of Buell and Prior ("How Do Moments"). Over-viewing the "markedness model" discussed in Myers-Scotton's 1998 *Codes and Consequences: Choosing Linguistic Varieties*, Buell identifies how this model:

holds that speakers and writers will use unmarked or neutral language until they feel there is a need to use special forms to define social relations, establish solidarity, take on authority, or signal nuance. However, what is considered marked varies across situations and speakers as illustrated in discussions of literary moves and cross-lingual translations... [and] interactions within families or workplaces. (120-21)

These concepts of markedness take off from Jakobson, who observed that "every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute ("markedness") in contraposition to its absence ("unmarkedness")" (85). Translated into the domain of semiotic becoming, activities undertaken by individuals either do not stand out within the commonly understood context of a discipline (unmarked), or else do (marked).

Prior, discussing the disciplinary development of his daughter Nora, a biologist/zoologist, for example, identifies several marked activities Nora undertook that have informed the formation of her identity, which, in turn, informed her becoming a scientist. Within the immediate context of Nora's science-oriented development, Prior identifies how unmarked activities included those traditionally disciplinary-based: "interacting with an exhibit in a science museum or participating in a local astronomy club"; while marked activities included those not traditionally disciplinary-based: "having pets, fishing, watching the sunset, collecting stuffed animals." Prior "sees a coherent arc across these moments that add up to Nora's ways of being-in-the-world as a person and a biologist," ultimately arguing that, from a perspective of semiotic becoming, "learning happens not *in* domains but across the trajectories of a life" and ultimately "identity leads learning" ("How Do Moments"), instead of the other way around.

These activities' significances to participants' becomings are informed by the immediate and social-historical context(s) in which they took place. Participants who were part of my study did not

develop as creative writers by progressing along a predetermined and above-mentioned “pathway that begins on the periphery and leads toward some central core.” Rather, their development progressed across “trajectories that trace[d] key developmental pathways for their disciplinary writing, learning, and socialization,” which “stitch[ed] together the tapestry of their richly literate lives” (Roozen & Erickson 1.01). My participants reported that “learning” how to write creatively and assume the identity of “creative writer” went through a number of via points, including: formative and troubling educational experiences, unrelated professions, and forays into other art forms. Instead of understanding these via points as delays in their becomings, Hasanthika and Ashley associated the marked experiences concomitant with these points as strongly with their disciplinary identities as they did many of their typically unmarked activities (reading in their preferred genre(s), writing in their preferred genre(s), honing tools of the craft, etc.). Engaging in these marked activities played key roles in developing these writers into the writers they identify as today.

This view of becoming informed by unmarked *and* marked engagements upends notions of identities as readily “available within the well-policed borders of the discipline” (Roozen & Erickson 1.01) and set to be assumed. Identities based in the disciplinary are constructed through processes of idiosyncratic linkage and knowledge propagation extending to activities beyond those borders. This is because disciplines are constructed by similar means. Individuals who are part of communities interact with those both inside *and* outside the community; they engage in unmarked activities within the context of those communities, as well as those marked. These individuals bring to these communities their extra-communal knowledges. Communities interact with one another over time and to the evolution of all. As an analytic frame, then, this alternate understanding of marked and unmarked engagement helps us see how creative writers form their disciplinary identities across activities, within multiple communities, and throughout their unique histories.

### **A Literacy Studies Perspective on Difference, Position, and Identity**

With a few, mostly recent, exceptions,<sup>6</sup> creative writing studies has not often drawn from literacy studies scholarship to help inform frameworks for investigating creative writers’ developments. Instead, the creative writing studies scholarship that broadly orbits the field of literacy studies often concerns itself with questions of (creative) literacy acquisition.<sup>7</sup> While this approach has had monumental benefits to the field, as well as pedagogies informed by the field, one drawback to this acquisition-informed orientation has been literacy’s rendering as an artifact or object of attainment. This, as opposed to viewing literacy as a contextually- and ideologically-weighty term referencing complex sets of social relationships informed by communicative acts and the modes of

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6 For a couple examples of these exceptions, see Kim and see Gilbert & Macleroy.

7 For examples, see Healey and see Korenblat.

knowledge surrounding those acts. Drawing on work by Moje & Luke and other literacy scholars (Frankel & Fields; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje; Luke; Nabi, Rogers & Street), I approach literacy from this more theoretical lens as a way to highlight and provide insight into the relationships among difference, positionality, and identity. I do this to provide context for the acts of literate differencing Hasanthika and Ashley performed as part of their processes of semiotic becoming.

Moje & Luke's review of identity scholarship suggests "difference" is perhaps the most common metaphor through which identity has been conceptualized. This is in part because difference acts as a multifunctional metaphor, one through which we may identify the situatedness of ourselves and others. Difference, along with other dominant metaphors, Moje & Luke argue:

acknowledges identity as something fluid and dynamic that is produced, generates, developed or narrated over time... [It] assumes some level of the social, acknowledges the changing nature of identity, and builds in varying notions of recognition. (418, 419)

They go on:

Identity as difference focuses on how people are distinguished one from another by virtue of their group membership and on how ways of knowing, doing, or believing held or practiced by a group shape the individual as a member of that group. In other words, identity from the metaphor of difference is always articulated to group membership... Identity-as-difference metaphors situate literate practice as an artifact of the targeted difference, so that literacy itself is seen as differently practiced dependent on the group to which one's identity is attached. (419-420)

Tethering this metaphor to perspectives from literacy studies, Moje & Luke note how the metaphor of difference "tend[s] to situate decisions—conscious or not—to participate in particular literacy practices...within the individual's sense of self as tied to a social group." Connected with this, they observe how the identity-as-difference metaphor "leave[s] a space for the learner to identify or not with the literate practices" (421). Feelings of social belonging through a shared literate practice would seem to play as much a role in the formation of one's identity as those of social alienation. An inability or conscious decision to not share in that practice may also constitute difference.

Literacy studies scholarship on position and positionality reinforce and expand on this view. Moje & Luke show how the identity-as-position metaphor brings together many of the dominant metaphors of identity, including that of difference. "Positioning metaphors," Moje & Luke state,



“situate the developing or constructed subjectivity and its resulting identities... in relationships with other human beings” (431). Luke’s 1993 study of adolescent children’s reading practices, for example, showed how children’s failure to position themselves in alignment with school practices resulted in overwhelming negative positions for them (“Stories of Social Regulation”). However, such an outcome is not always the case.

Examples of another, more positive form of positioning via literacy include both Skerret’s and Hall’s respective studies of reading literacy in young students—both of which, it’s worth noting, ended with corrective outcomes that aligned students’ efforts with their school’s expectations. Frankel & Fields, in their case study on identity, agency, and positioning report:

Skerrett examined the literacy practices of a ninth grade reading classroom and how those practices supported one student who had been institutionally positioned as a “struggling” reader to reposition herself as a capable reader in the school. Similarly, Hall found that literacy curriculum focused on building reading partnerships between middle school students and their teacher was effective in supporting students to become the kinds of readers they wanted to be. (145)

In both these cases and the ones on which Luke reported, however, success and failure (meeting or not meeting reading expectations), as well as adolescents’ resulting identities as students, correspond with students’ abilities to align themselves with institutional expectations. In other words, with students’ abilities to shuttle from a space of metaphorical difference in practice to one of metaphorical similitude. While my analysis below shares certain assumptions with these studies, it also suggests that for the creative writers in question, a third outcome existed. Deviations from literate practices associated with success within an institution, i.e., literate differencing, can also be understood as acts of agency that have fostered identity formation.

## METHODS

This article’s two focal cases issue from a 10-participant qualitative study of how institutionally-trained creative writers—understood here as those having earned advanced degrees in the discipline—have negotiated and constructed their personal, professional, and disciplinary identities. Though not a direct part of this article’s discussion, this study also examined how these creative writers drew from literate practices stemming from these identities in order to teach post-secondary writing courses, including composition. Hasanthika is a university professor and fiction writer whose creative work has appeared in numerous literary journals and whose short-story collection *The Other One* won the 2016 Juniper Prize for Fiction. Ashley is a writer of fiction, poetry, and hybrid genres, who has published multiple book-length works and was the recipient of the 2017 Los

Angeles Review fiction award for her short story “Parting Shot.”<sup>8</sup>

This discussion focuses on Hasanthika and Ashley for three primary reasons. First, both provided rich personal-historical data; second, I view both as professionally successful creative writers, in that they each have published numerous well-received works; and, third, because of these two aforementioned characteristics, both represent fitting cases for considering how myriad non-disciplinary experiences may shape a creative writer’s identity across contexts. Further, both writers represent different social and regional backgrounds and pathways toward self-identifying as creative writers. The interview data from each, then, strongly depicts that the crucial role extra-literate and extra-disciplinary activities have played in the development of their creative writerly identities can further inform generalizable understandings of creative writers’ pathways of disciplinary development (see Flyvbjerg).

Although I collected an abundance of both interview and textual data (drafts of creative works, teaching materials, written comments to writing students, etc.) from many of this studies’ participants, I draw the bulk of my data for this article from interviews. These interviews largely focused on participants’ literacy histories (see Brandt), histories of extra-literate and extra-disciplinary activity (i.e., those not directly related to reading or writing within the context of creative writing), and professional histories. They lasted anywhere from 60-90 minutes, and in them I employed an interview approach heavily informed by the semi-structured interview model, which Prior describes as “consist[ing] of asking questions that have been worked out to some degree in advance, but also involves leaving the script behind” and “mov[ing] between scripted questions and open-ended conversations” (“Tracing Process” 187, 188). This approach allowed for interviews to be co-generative and “dialogically and discursively engag[ing]” and located the goals of the interviews less in the project of “extracting information” and more in the project of “sharing knowledge” (Selfe & Hawisher 39, 36). I asked participants open-ended questions about their writing backgrounds in order to engage them in more organic and amicable *discussions* about their literacy histories and professional histories.

I spoke with Hasanthika once over the phone in 2016 in an interview that lasted approximately 80 minutes. She and I further corresponded over email and at the 2018 Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Tampa, FL. In our interview, we discussed topics including Hasanthika’s formal education, personal histories related to creative writing and other literate activities, participation in multiple communities, and professional histories with writing and the teaching of writing. Over 2017 and 2018, Ashley and I met over Skype three times for interviews, which totaled almost four hours. Ashley and I covered topics similar in range to those I covered with

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<sup>8</sup> I identified Hasanthika and Ashley as participants for this study through convenience sampling. I.e., I knew both prior to the start of the study and reached out to them directly to become participants.

Hasanthika. In addition, Ashley and I dedicated portions of our interviews to her family history, specifically highlighting the significant role that music literacy (in the form of piano practice) played in the life of her mother, as well as in the literate development of her brothers and herself, who were taught by their mother.

In our first interview together, Ashley remarked on her dislike of learning to play the piano. Further, she relayed how her perception of her brothers' proficiency at the piano threw into relief her belief that she was a poor piano player by comparison, which caused her to dislike playing even more. Ashley then recounted how metaphorically pushing away from piano playing ended up pushing her toward an interest in creative writing, which represented an art she felt more comfortable and capable of practicing. This story stuck with me to the degree that, as I began the data analysis of the interview transcripts (including but not limited to Ashley's), I felt compelled to code transcript data in multiple ways.

First, I coded my data for the presence of extra-literate and extra-disciplinary experiences across participants, searching for patterns of idiosyncrasy (see Saldaña 118-22) that suggested comparable ways these experiences contributed to the formation of writerly identity. (As an example, Ashley's negative work experience fielding complaint calls for an office building helped her value her free time more and further commit to endeavors such as writing, for which she felt a strong passion.) Second, I returned to all of my transcripts to code for the presence of stories similar in theme to Ashley's story about her personal and familial history with piano playing. I found such similarly themed stories highlighting feelings of improficiency, illiteracy, outsider status, etc. in the majority of this study's 10 participants. Finally, to remain as transparent as possible and invite my participants to act in the capacity of the "co-researchers" (Roozen, "Journalism") I understood them to be, I invited Hasanthika and Ashley to review any transcripts and recordings produced from our time together.<sup>9</sup>

By taking as my unit of analysis Hasanthika and Ashley's semiotic becomings, I attempt to show the roles that myriad "extra-" experiences have played in the construction of these participants' disciplinary and professional identities as creative writers. For this discussion, I believe this process also entails tracing the role that "literate difference" or "literate differencing" played in the construction of these identities. Both Hasanthika and Ashley's individual trajectories of becoming offer evidence of the sociocultural and material dimensions of writerly identity formation that expressly challenge long-held romantic and ahistorical understandings of how writerly identities are formed.

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<sup>9</sup> Neither took me up on this offer, but, since all participants retain full control over their data's existence, the door remains open.

## CREATIVE WRITERS' BECOMINGS

Challenging lore-based conceptions of creative writers' becomings, both Hasanthika and Ashley identified the formidable role extra-literate and extra-disciplinary experiences have played in their creative writerly development. Through processes of recontextualization, each writer identified, reframed, and applied certain social and educational contexts of these experiences to new rhetorical situations. Importantly, early on in both writers' literacy histories, this process of recontextualization and/or reframing manifested as an agential rejection of or "deviation" from (see Frankel & Fields) the institution (school, family, etc.) underwriting this activity, an act I call "literate differencing." In navigating new rhetorical situations shaped by these acts of rejection or deviation, both writers often became "multiply positioned in ways which demand[ed] they invoke an identity or identities through which they [could] perform themselves" (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje xvi). One of these invocations included a creative writerly identity.

My analysis starts with Hasanthika, focusing on her schooling, largely informed by her status as a non-native speaker, and on her post-college work as a grant writer. Then, I turn to a discussion of Ashley, focusing on her participation in a community of piano players, her rejection of the signature practice of that community, and the physical and work-oriented roles the piano has played in her life. These narratives of development are neither tidy nor linear. The processes of recontextualization and reframing that have taken place in both cases suggest the messy inter-experiential, multi-referential, and temporally complex social and material nature of becoming.

### Hasanthika...

#### ...positioned within early educational institutions

Hasanthika discussed her initial failing grades on both American-English spelling tests in her early schooling and graded papers that would come later in her education. She traces these failing grades to her status as a non-native speaker, which often concerned her immigrant background, as well as her previous education in British-English. Regarding these spelling tests, it was not that Hasanthika spelled many words incorrectly; rather, at times she simply spelled them differently. The perceived error type included such alternate spelling formations as "colour" for "color," "realise" for "realize," etc. Hasanthika's initial failing marks, none of which indicated an incapability of learning to write certain words with zees in place of esses, relegated her to a "negative position" or status of "not capable" in the eyes of her educational institution, a phenomenon in line with that which Allan Luke observed in his study of the classroom as a site of patriarchal social regulation and the ideologies that drive it ("Stories of Social Regulation"). As I have argued elsewhere, to the detriment of students and itself, English classrooms have long posited an ahistorical and ideological view of difference in language as incorrectness that has hindered its pedagogical goals (Udelson).

Hasanthika explained what it was like strongly identifying as an immigrant and non-native speaker whose scholastic efforts were viewed through this lens of difference-as-incorrectness:

I learned English a little later [in my life]. So, when I was growing up, I actually made really bad grades in English. I remember in school, they even wanted to put me into remedial English or something because I was just not writing at a certain level according to my teachers. And this went into college, my first or second year of college... I can see looking back.

Here, Hasanthika describes a process of institutional subordination by the dominant practices and cultures represented in her early schooling and, more specifically, its system of grading. Her statement supports Girouxian perspectives of grades as the “ultimate discipline instruments by which teachers impose their desired values, behavior patterns, and beliefs upon students” and as patent expressions of “the correlation between power and subordinancy” in the classroom (Giroux 84). These impositions often reinforce the dominant institutional perspective on what is sanctioned (read: “correct,” “right,” etc.) action on a student’s part. Failure to model sanctioned forms would be articulated through the assignation of, as Hasanthika says, “really bad grades” and an institutional recognition of a flaw she possessed.

For Hasanthika, this character flaw expressed itself through her perceived inability on the part of her teachers and administration to execute on such sanctioned forms. The outcome of this perspective was a determination that Hasanthika be enrolled in remedial classes, the site designated for those with said “character flaws.” However, if we understand our institutional systems of education as expressing the agendas of its society, then we accept that “developmental progress [is] derived from those who hold dominant and controlling interests in that society, and will silence, coerce, and stigmatize other[s]” (Beach 53) to prevent sharing that control. The sites of this potential silencing, coercion, and stigmatization were Hasanthika’s filled-in tests, written pages, and the form of spelling present there. This identified difference, however, later lead to her appreciation for creative writing classes once she had the opportunity to enroll in them.

### **...discovering more agential languaging practices**

Perceptions of Hasanthika as “not writing at a certain level” continued into her undergraduate education. This, despite Hasanthika placing out of her university’s first-year composition classes. Hasanthika reports that in other writing-intensive classes she “was still getting low marks on papers and things like that” for reasons similar to those above. Once she enrolled in creative writing classes at her university, however, Hasanthika “started doing great” in these classes, which in turn gave her “some confidence, which was really what [she] needed all along.” For her, classes in creative writing

provided the latitude to engage writing activities that valued certain aural features over those of correctness from both Standard Written English (SWE) and American-English perspectives. As well, Hasanthika discussed how style became, among other things, a curricular affordance for her; it was, in other words, an avenue toward better grades:

...I now know that one of the reasons I was getting good grades [in creative writing] was that I may not have been that great in craft, my grammar was off, my spelling was off, but they saw something interesting in a voice. And a creative writing teacher could grade me on voice.

From then on, Hasanthika began to more critically consider the communicative force of features in writing not emphasized in either her English classes in her early schooling or in some of her writing-intensive classes in college she continued to take concurrently with creative writing classes. She identified what an “openness to style and styling” and “being sort of open to syntax” could afford a writer regardless of genre or discipline. In this, Hasanthika discovered for herself a discrepancy among the curricular demands of multiple courses that were, by all measures, each based heavily in writing. More specifically, Hasanthika discusses how she did not:

understand how you could be making a low mark on a paper in one class, and then your teacher is saying “Oh this is fantastic” in another [when utilizing similar styles of writing in each] ... I was like, well how do I get good grades, how can someone say, in your creative writing class, “Oh, you’re a writer,” and not say the same thing in your English *Hamlet* class?

Hasanthika’s articulation of the curricular differences between her literature and creative writing classes suggests her identifying the two types of writing done therein to be either different literate activities across different identifiable groups or else similar literate activities with discernable differences that, likewise, accounted for different social groupings. Identifying these programmatic differences existing within the same English-departmental structure further suggests how Hasanthika articulated “group membership” (Moje & Luke) in the programs. In this case, the textualist ideology<sup>10</sup> that permeated into the structures of grading endemic to Hasanthika’s early English and undergraduate literature classes came to describe literate practices that impeded her membership into affiliated literacy groups. However, the literacy group based in creative writing, a discipline that often watermarks its identity through the notable existence of *difference* in writing (Horner), represented one Hasanthika could unimpededly join.

10 A textualist ideology assumes there exist universal, style-based characteristics of “good” writing (see Collins).

According to Frankel & Fields, despite scholarship suggesting that acts of deviation be interpreted as “evidence of disengagement,” such acts can actually serve as forays into “meaning-making” and “self-authoring,” or, aspirations of identity formation (159). Hasanthika’s story is one both of the extra-literate experience of rejection and of challenging and rejecting the language values of one literacy group most saliently characterized by SWE English practices and her membership in another by creative writing-based practices. This recognition of her literate difference within the aforementioned group served as an anchor for helping Hasanthika bridge to her identity as a creative writer. The literate activity of creative writing, and the linguistic affordances it provided, stood in contrast to those offered by her early schooling and certain writing-intensive college classes. Creative writing represented an alternate pathway by which Hasanthika could form a relationship with language and explore other grammars of communication.

### **...learning “how to be a writer”**

Hasanthika also cites her professional work within the broader field of writing as intimately informing her practice and identity as a creative writer. Prior to receiving her M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Hasanthika worked as a grant writer. She characterized this position by its writing tasks on which she “couldn’t give up” or “couldn’t feel bad about herself” when attempting to accomplish because she was “being paid for this.” Hasanthika often described, by using words such as “brutal,” the criticism she received from her bosses on her initial drafts of grant proposals. She further described receiving the criticism as something she would have to “sit there and take,” or, professionally endure if she wanted to keep her job.

However, Hasanthika also described such criticism as “super honest” and identifies these experiences as both comprising “the moment when I learned how to be a writer” and providing her the “bravery” to face criticism of her fiction. She points out that, with regard to the criticism, “you didn’t have to believe everything,” showing that, for her, the process of taking criticism and believing criticism represented two separate facets of becoming a creative writer. The latter speaks to one’s training as a writer, and the former to the perceived social realities of the writing industry. Translated, however, into the world of writing and publishing fiction, Hasanthika notes that it was this ability to “take” the criticism that lent her the ability to work with harsh and, at times, unaccommodating editors. Working with the types of criticism provided by both her grant writing supervisors and editors, “helped [her] as a [fiction] writer” because it helped clue Hasanthika in to writing for publication, which is often contextually different than writing for a professor or program. These insights Hasanthika shared further extend into material concerns tied to her writing that she grew to understand as well.

With deadlines constantly looming, Hasanthika often found working as a grant writer meant

“not being released from the process of writing,” and that, unlike disciplinary writing for classes, it was certainly possible to succeed or fail in ways that would impact her material security. But learning to write grants was, for Hasanthika, like learning anything else: the more she practiced this particular form of writing, and the more deeply she conceptualized it within the appropriate rhetorical context (i.e., in ways that would satisfy her bosses and secure the grants), the greater number of grants she secured. Through this work, Hasanthika came to understand several lessons she folded into her development as a fiction writer: the material dimensions of the writing process, how writing directly impacts a community in material ways, and that the written is always “for” someone—an audience within particular contexts and with particular sets of expectations. And in a very experiential way, it “taught [her that] you get better the more you do it.”

From a perspective of linear disciplinary development, such activities within the context of grant writing would find no purchase with one’s development as a creative writer.<sup>11</sup> However, from a “trajectories of becoming” perspective, we may note that the extra-disciplinary learning that happened within the domain of grant writing and its surrounding discourses supports Prior’s perspective of how true disciplinary development happens across “the trajectories of a life” (“How Do Moments”). Hasanthika’s grant writing work, an engagement that Anne Ruggles Gere would identify as part of writing’s “extracurriculum” (86) for its salient characteristic of occurring within contexts outside of school, speaks to Hasanthika’s success in creative writing workshops, with professors, with editors, and with agents. These disciplinary-turned-professional successes, in other words, find connections with previous models of critique and learning from a writing field outside of creative writing.

**Ashley...**

**...hating piano**

Ashley identifies piano playing as a formative experience she had outside of writing that significantly shaped her development as a creative writer. She identifies her mother as an accomplished piano player, who obligated Ashley and her brothers to learn how to play. As Ashley puts it, it was “a discipline I was raised with.” Emphasizing the centrality of its role in her and her brothers’ upbringings, Ashley reports that learning piano was “the only thing I did [as a child] that I wasn’t allowed to quit.” In contrast to her brothers, however, Ashley did not believe herself to be skilled with the instrument. While her brothers were “incredible” piano players, who came at the undertaking “from a place

<sup>11</sup> Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare have offered a strong contrasting view of this phenomenon in *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic Workplace Contexts*. In this work, Dias et al. conclude that “the title of this book is not so hyperbolic as it appears...we write where we are. Location, it would appear, is (almost) everything” (222-23). However, see Bilbro, Roozen & Erickson, and Prior (“How Do Moments”), among others, for sharp takedowns of these conclusions.



of love and an intuitive connection and kind of a deep knowledge,” Ashley admits, “I never brought myself to it.” In fact, in terms of her literate development as a writer, Ashley recalls that her “very first bits of writing [were] writings in a journal where I write about how much I hate piano.”

Similar to Hasanthika, it was Ashley’s sense of *not* being a member of this particular group of music lovers and aficionados that threw into relief the artistic affordances of creative writing. If Ashley’s exploration of creative writing was a movement toward one literate activity, it may also be seen as a movement *away* from another—one that highlighted creative writing’s affordances through a process of contrast. The following are two separate insights Ashley shared about creativity and the affordances of contrast:

I think I found through [my practice with piano] that piano wasn’t creative. So, I think that’s an interesting thing, that not all art forms are necessarily creative to the person doing...

[B]ut I think in having something to contrast my love of writing and reading with, that it underscored what I did find exciting art-wise, where I did feel I could be creative and inventive and playful and weird, and all those things.

Moje & Luke argue that “sustained group memberships may be less important to a social view of identity than is the idea that identity is constructed, produced, formed, or developed in any and all social interaction” (418). While participation within a community of creative writers is often important for one’s development as a creative writer, it is not the only social participation that helps one construct that identity. (For instance, and while not representing communities wherein she felt negatively positioned, Ashley reported that associations with various groups—martial artists, spiritual practitioners, feminist activist groups, etc.—strongly informed many of her projects as a creative writer.) In this case, Ashley’s engagements with the musical arts and a concomitant community offered her an opportunity to consider the role that the arts, more broadly speaking, and creative writing, more specifically, might play in her life.

The literate engagement of piano playing, itself embedded within a familial structure and history that emphasized its importance as both an object and mode of literate activity, represented for Ashley a means to develop as a creative writer by way of a more circuitous path that contests principle conceptions of disciplinarily linear paths of learning. Ashley’s rejection of the piano—along with the artistic and literate affordances it represented—exemplifies how literate differencing showcases the “interplay of both [the horizontal and vertical] dimensions” of learning that enabled this writer to “draw knowledge and abilities from the horizontal dimension into the vertical

(from other literate engagements into disciplinary ones)” (Roozen & Erickson 8.03). That said, other instances of reframing and recontextualization happened as well, ones which highlight the importance of Ashley’s non-deviatory engagements with the piano.

### **...learning from sound**

Beyond the piano serving as a point of deviation that helped frame her act of literate differencing, Ashley also reflects on the number of direct benefits the practice provided her on her pathway toward becoming a creative writer. At a more conceptual level, Ashley’s musical training nurtured her relationship with language, which, as a creative writer, informs much of the work she produces and is interested in reading. Ashley reports she:

...played piano for a long time and didn’t love it the way that I could go to writing and enjoy that more instead. Some I think by comparison—okay, this is where I want to be versus at the piano bench...[However,] [m]usicality in writing is something I really value. And rhythm and cadence sonics. And I imagine somewhere back there piano has shaped that attention I pay to those things.

While a number of works on poetics, craft, and creative writing pedagogy exist that express the importance of sound in writing and how to develop one’s “ear,” and a number of craft-based essays exist on how writers have developed their appreciation for sound in poetry and prose (see Lutz’s “The Sentence is a Lonely Place,” an essay Ashley and I would often discuss, for one popular example), little discussion exists in creative writing studies’ literature on methods by which to *systematically* identify how writers came to value sound as a vital feature of their own writing and the writing they appreciate or seek to emulate. This article does not offer a full approach to that systematic work; however, looking to scholarship on (il)literacy and social (dis)engagement might begin to offer rich perspectives.

Nabi, Rogers, and Street argue the importance of considering the role both literacy and conceptions of contextual *illiteracy*—as that which can hinder one from determining identities available for them to claim—play within the identification of one’s standing within a social stratum, as well as an individual’s larger ecology of literate activity. They observe that “formal literacy,” with which they frame illiteracy, insofar as it has been conceptualized by their study participants, as existing in contrast, has an additional:

functionality which many of [their] respondents [participants] did seek—and that is status. Several of the respondents valued this functionality and therefore sought after it...It was the

search for identity, which led [certain of their respondents] to take such efforts to teach themselves their own kind of formal literacy. (103-04)

While it is doubtful that either Ashley or the familial literacy group from which she felt apart saw her as “illiterate,” an important question about claims to identity still remains regarding Ashley’s experience. Nabi, Rogers, and Street task us with considering where and how else literate identity might be sought, or might be perceived to be sought, when it is not or cannot be sought through the proficient practice of an immediate groups’ dominant literate activity. Ashley’s case shows a pivot might be possible, so long as participation in an alternate literacy group is also possible. As Moje & Luke suggest, Ashley brought with her into various future literacy groups (graduate school, creative writing communities, teachers of writing, etc.) prior notions of her identity as shaped through her participation in her earlier literacy group collected around piano playing.

Yes, creative writing and associated community memberships allowed Ashley a way to explore her artistic desires through the practice of a non-music craft. However, not only did she identify these artistic desires, at least in part, through her musical training and association with a group of perceived musical adepts, but she also recontextualized other important, more craft-based lessons as well: the importance of sound (rhythm, cadence, sonics, etc.) in her own prose, poetry, and hybrid creative works, which she learned by engaging with this community of musicians. This all said, it is likewise important to discuss the recontextualization and reframing of physical and work-oriented knowledges Ashley performed as well.

### **...learning from playing**

At more physical and practical levels, Ashley reported on how learning to sit for long stretches of time to play the piano prepared her both mentally and physically for sitting for long stretches of time to write in the various genres that characterize her creative writing practice. Further, even though Ashley pivoted away from engagements with the piano that would directly cultivate her adeptness at the instrument, she nevertheless was able to draw on her knowledge of the piano enough to earn income by teaching piano lessons as she continued to develop her identity as a creative writer.

Drawing from Scollon’s theory of the “nexus of practice,” or, “network or matrix of intersecting practices” (16), Roozen seeks to foreground “several key issues” regarding networked relationships across literate activities. Such a foregrounding, he writes, first:

...unanchors literate practices and tools from any single domain and maps them onto more extensive networks of circulation that link multiple sites of engagement...Second, it attends to the creative repurposing of literate practices and tools across activities, to the ways they are

taken up and transformed throughout the entire network...Finally, it posits multiple and diverse forms of literate participation rather than any single for the basis...of what others have referred to as a “literate identity,” one’s sense of oneself as a literate person in the world. (“Fan Fic-ing’ English Studies,” 140-41)

First, we can view Ashley’s learning to sit for long periods to write as both a mapping on and transformation of a practice and tool within one domain to that of another. This “creative repurposing” spans the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge to show the importance of the extra-disciplinary domain of knowledge acquisition. Second, Ashley working as a piano teacher—even though she came to dislike the practice herself—a mode of work that financially supported her while developing her creative writerly identity, speaks to the more networked view we must hold of literate activities *across* domains as supporting development *within* particular domains.

While it is easy to dismiss the relationship between Ashley earning income by teaching students to play the piano and her own development as a creative writer, that ease of dismissal is what this article seeks to contest. That this particular instance of money-earning work could have taken any number of forms (dishwashing, day trading, busking, etc.) is *exactly* the point. By holding a more networked view of literate activity that requests we consider how “multiple and diverse forms of literate participation” (“Fan-Ficing” 141) *intra*-act as a dynamism of connected, influencing forces and practices that inform an individual’s sense of agency (Barad) and, as I have argued, identity development, we can see that disciplinary development in creative writing largely takes place outside of the discipline’s immediate educational and institutional contexts and evinces the physical and material dimensions of disciplinary identity formation that often go overlooked in favor of those more conceptual dimensions.

## IMPLICATIONS

This article has showcased two creative writers’ beliefs in the role that extra-literate and extra-disciplinary engagements have played in their disciplinary development and offered a framework for analyzing or regarding *some* of the ways these engagements have impacted these writers. The findings discussed above challenge existing lore-based notions of creative writers’ becomings by offering a perspective that helps legitimize the role of various social and material dimensions of writers’ literate development. Acknowledging the roles played by creative writers’ myriad practices and engagements beyond the discipline of creative writing holds a number of implications for expanding the scope of our research methods for studying creative writers, teaching creative writing, and validating creative writers’ experiences outside the discipline that nevertheless shape their development within the discipline.

### Expanding the scope of research into creative writers

Studies of creative writing have often focused on processes of knowledge acquisition and identity formation that exist in institutional-educational spaces. An abundance of research, however, posits identity as dependent upon a confluence of *seemingly unrelated* activities over individuals' histories (see Bourdieu; Latour; Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity*; Scollon; &c.). This outlook implies there exist no objectively unrelated activities, but rather only activities that are not perceived to be integrated in accordance with common expectations of literate and disciplinary development. Since creative writers' experiences can and often do integrate these various activities by setting them in relation to one another, we should continue to look beyond the walls of the classroom for insight into how non-institutional experiences shape identity formation and, extending research even further, professionalizing habits of and adaptability in creative writing practices.

Thus, attending to these “extra-” engagements is vital to continuing to map the theoretical landscape of creative writerly becoming. Ashley, for instance, discovered an appreciation for “musicality” from her piano practice that deeply informed her crafting practices as a writer who values “rhythm and cadence” in her and others' writing. In this study's emphasis on the importance of literate differencing—or the process by which one may locate their literate agency in deviation from or rejection of signature practices that chiefly characterize particular literacy groups—we have seen how Hasanthika, in receiving failing grades, discovered a space in the form of the creative writing classroom where she could instead be graded on “a voice,” which, in turn, instilled in her “some confidence” as a writer.

Since we, as researchers and writers, are invested in understanding how creative writers construct their identities across contexts, we might continue on by asking ourselves: what other *types* of engagements are important to creative writerly becoming and conceptions of becoming? Since these conceptions of identity influence how writers engage with other socio-professional situations as they exist in relation to creative writerly practice, researchers ought to consider the broader networks of activity that inform these practices.

### Updating pedagogical perspectives on teaching creative writing

Creative writing pedagogy has long drawn from lore-based teaching methods (see introduction) that have often failed to consider the social and material realities of students. Even when writing pedagogies do seek to consider these realities, as Roozen & Erickson have pointed out, we have often limited the number of potentially “literate landscapes...to classrooms, colleges, libraries, and writing centers” (8.04). Expanding on Ryden and Sposato's call to broaden our perspective of writerly development and consider the “coming together of knowledges” from multiple domains in order to recognize a process of disciplinary “convergence” (4), I advocate for a mode of creative writing pedagogy that makes this act of convergence more visible to students.

Taking off from Prior's notion of "semiotic becoming," we, as teachers of creative writing, could support and integrate a process of what we might call "semiotic discovery"—an exploration of our own and others' semiotic becomings—in our pedagogical approaches. To support students of creative writing as they seek to identify their engagements across time and contexts as each part of the larger nexus of practice that informs their identities as literate agents in their communities, we might encourage these writers' broad range of literate, extra-literate, and discursual knowledges that extend beyond the classroom and institutional domain. By inviting creative writers to challenge these traditional notions of how we disciplinarily "become," we also invite them to consider how their "richly literate lifeworlds" (Roozen & Erickson 8.04) beyond institutional domains impact the disciplines in which they participate *within* those domains, which also leads me to my final point.

### **On validating creative writers' lifeworlds**

All creative writers can, no doubt, cite experiences beyond creative writing that have mattered to their practice. Recognizing these experiences as valid will not only help us further study creative writing as a phenomenon but will also help us reconsider what Creative Writing, as a discipline, might value. (See Woodard for a similar discussion of teacher-writers.) Hasanthika's experience as a grant writer, for instance, not only informed her mentality of success within the context of creative writing, but it also obligates Creative Writing, as a discipline, to consider broader connections across workplace and creative writing activities, which have been largely left out of our literature. The same can be said about Ashley's work as a piano teacher, which afforded her financial support as she negotiated her pathway toward a creative writerly identity. By validating the importance of our lifeworlds as integral components of our semiotic becomings as creative writers, we create an opportunity to reflect on how Creative Writing curricula might change in light of this validation. Since the Creative Writing curriculum is often conceived through sometimes-problematic lore-based approaches and practices, we might, in turn, foment an attitude that asks teachers and students to "work with, around, and sometimes *against* the (official writing) curriculum" (Yoon 171, quoted in Woodard 56, emphasis mine). If current students, teachers, and scholars of creative writing fight to validate their own pathways toward disciplinary development now, future generations of creative writers might find themselves much more easily shrugging off that weighty yoke of lore.

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