The Role of Aesthetic Artifacts in Creative Writing Research: Casting Student Identity Narratives as Cultural Data

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THE ROLE OF AESTHETIC ARTIFACTS IN CREATIVE WRITING RESEARCH:
CASTING STUDENT IDENTITY NARRATIVES AS CULTURAL DATA

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: The Role of Aesthetic Artifacts in Creative Writing Research: Casting Student Identity Narratives as Cultural Data

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Drawing upon a postmodern ethnographic approach, the modes of inquiry into this qualitative study included observation and data analysis in order to represent a particular community of students: first year college freshmen from a mid-size, religiously-affiliated university in the southern United States. The methods included artifact retrieval/analysis of student narratives (identity constructs in creative forms) as well as demographic surveys from nine sections of first year composition classes from the spring and fall semesters of 2013. Fifty-seven student narratives, written in aesthetic forms, were analyzed in order to learn what the creative writing pieces revealed about student identities.

The study addressed the following research questions. First, how do students identify themselves through creative forms? Through metaphors, images, and subjective musings? Second, what do the patterns or themes that emerge from these creative narratives reveal about the presented self of the student? After codes/descriptors were determined using grounded theory, the creative narratives were categorized into six types or data sets. Next, the findings were presented in both a conventional form as well as in an alternative mode of data representation: a young adult novel. The six data sets from the study both informed and guided the six characters within the novel.
The rationale for using aesthetic forms of data seeks to consider, for one, how creative pieces can promote researchers/teachers’ understanding of student experiences and identities. Second, by recasting the data in the form of a young adult novel (an alternative, unconventional form of data representation), the sharing/telling of a culture within the fiction genre can provide productive ambiguity. By asking students to express thoughts and feelings through metaphors and images in creative works, and in turn doing the same myself as the researcher, I offer individual, complex human experiences in what Jerome Bruner calls “alternative possible worlds” (109).