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The MFA in Creative Writing: The Uses of a “Useless” Credential

Abstract: Over half of today’s Masters of Fine Arts programs in creative writing in the United States were founded after the year 2000. Has the MFA-CW become a necessary credential for novelists? Relying on participant observation field research in the American literary field and interviews with authors, publishers, MFA graduates, and instructors, this work focuses on a paradox: Despite widespread agreement that the credential doesn’t “teach” enrollees to be a good writers or open up a pathway to a professional writing career, many involved in the literary field hold an MFA-CW. In this paper, we look at the uses of the MFA-CW, finding that although the degree serves little if any jurisdictional or closure-related functions it is made useful in a variety of ways: for students as a symbolic resource for artistic identity, for working writers as a source of income and community, and for editors in publishing houses as a signal for possible marketing and publicity potential.

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The first Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (MFA-CW), the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, was founded in 1936 by Wilbur Schramm. The “Iowa Model”, which would diffuse across MFA-CW programs throughout the latter half of the 20th Century and early 21st Century, centered on writing workshops in which students take turns critiquing each other’s work. Although for brief time periods fiction writers could find stable employment in the creative literary arts (i.e. the Federal Writer’s Project from 1935-1939), the more recent rise of MFA-CW programs has provided a historically unprecedented avenue of employment for creative writers, as teaching in these programs is carried out by practicing novelists and poets (Myers, 2006).

Despite relying on a model created in the 1930s, this new avenue for employment first emerged in the 1960s, with 11 programs being founded between 1960 and 1969, and another 61 programs founded by the turn of the 21st Century. Since 2000, the number of offered programs has more than doubled, with over 150 MFA-CW degree granting programs now in operation. Given this widespread and historically unprecedented proliferation of the MFA-CW, according to McGurl (2009, p. ix), the rise of the degree is “the most important event in Post-War American literary history,” and has had the latent effect of institutionalizing the literary arts in the United States (McGurl, 2009; Radavich, 1999).

To date, the vast majority of academic treatment on the proliferation of the MFA-CW has been centered on two questions: 1) can creative writing be taught (e.g. Harper, 2006; Lim, 2003; Neave, 2006), and 2) what effects, if any, has the

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widespread adoption of the MFA-CW had on the quality of American literature (e.g. Aldridge, 1990; Gioia, 1992; Myers, 2006)? The former question, a pedagogical one, is of great importance to those tasked with teaching creative writing in post-graduate degree programs. The latter question, nominally an empirical one, takes up long-term trends of the “quality” of American letters. Yet both of these questions share the core assumption that the quality of creative objects are fixed and can be objectively defined (Gans, 2008; Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Frith, 1978). Instead, the appraisal of literary quality is dependent on time (Barker-Nunn & Fine, 1998; Rosengren, 1985) and place (Griswold, 1987), is subject to processes of interpersonal influence (Childress & Friedkin, 2012), professional reputation management (Van Rees, 1987), the desires of literary elites (Corse, 1995) and other extra-textual factors such as the gender (Corse & Westervelt, 2002, Tuchman & Fortin, 1984), race (Chong, 2011; Corse & Griffin, 1997), activities (Janssen, 1998), networks (Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995), and reputations (Dubois & François, 2013; Rusch, 1999; Verboord, 2003) of authors. The subjective classification and reclassification of what constitutes “quality” creative literature is, finally, subject to the organization of literary value and values within evolving literary fields (Anand & Jones, 2008; Baumann, 2007; Bourdieu, 1993).

This article breaks from the two central frameworks through which MFA-CW programs have been analyzed, while maintaining that the arts generally are a valuable case for researchers interested in the professions. The proliferation of the MFA-CW has eluded sociological analysis, and in particular comprises a problem for the study of the professions, in which creative work, despite recent professionalization and the embrace of professional status (Bain, 2005), remains only problematically professional. The vision of professionalism advocated for here, with an emphasis on commitment and meaning, is much closer to Spillman’s definition (2012) than to more traditional views of the boundaries of the professions with their markers of professional status (Abbott, 1981, 1988).

The paper proceeds by considering the two major research streams in the professions literature—human capital theory and occupational closure theory—that might serve as the “usual suspects” in analyzing the adoption and diffusion of new postgraduate degree programs. After showing that the MFA-CW presents interesting divergences from the expected outcomes of these research streams, we argue that to begin to theorize the rise of the MFA-CW we must first establish how the degree is and is not *used* in the practice of the U.S. literary field. Findings point to diverse uses of a “useless” credential with variation dependent on one’s role within the field—this despite common agreement that the degree does not teach specialized knowledge or improve one’s position in the labor market for creative writers. Three roles are considered in the paper that follows: aspirant authors, working authors, and acquisition editors.

Occupational closure and human capital theories of professional work

A long tradition of sociological research centers on processes of professionalization in which occupational categories are defined through the institutionalization and legalization of specialized forms of knowledge and professional association, such as in the case of lawyers (Abel, 1989), doctors (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 1970), accountants (Hanlon, 1994), economists (Fourcade, 2006) and the like. Credentialism, involving the restriction of the labor pool in an occupational category to those who have completed the relevant professional licensure or academic degree, is one manner through which field configuring professional bodies and organizations institutionalize control over the labor market (Abbott, 1988; Brown, 2001; Collins, 1979; Derber et al., 1990).

Building off of Weber's (1978) work on social closure, occupational closure theory posits that along ascribed demographic demarcations—and increasingly along achieved status demarcations such as education credentials or professional licensure—professionalization projects work to limit entry to sectors of the labor market by rendering pools of applicants as ineligible participants (Larson, 1979; MacDonald, 1995; Weeden, 2002). As Parkin (1979) notes, limiting “resources and opportunities to a...circle of eligibles” may be achieved through social, legalistic or educational means (3), and may exist as a form of “opportunity hoarding” within market niches (Tilly, 1999). Both through restriction and control of the labor supply, rewards for labor within the market niche can be made or kept artificially high, even when claims to expertise or specialized knowledge are inaccurate or overstated (Luker, 1984). As such, one explanation for the widespread adoption of MFA-CW programs could be that they are part of a professionalization project in the creative literary arts.

We may however question these assumptions in the literary field, especially since those with the most vested interests in using the MFA-CW as a tool for occupational closure do not see the degree as useful in this regard, and instead question whether and how the degree provides meaningful training for any occupational category at all. As Michael Collier, Professor and Co-Director of the University of Maryland's MFA-CW program notes, “an MFA is not meant to professionalize you as a writer. Rather, it is an opportunity to live as fully as possible in a community of writers for two to three years” (Kealey, 2005, p. 201). In the Modern Language Association's journal *Profession*, David Radavich (1999) furthers this claim, writing that “there is no profession for which an MFA or PhD in creative writing provides direct training” (110). In fact, in its introductory “Q&A” section the leading guidebook for MFA-CW degree seekers leads with a question: “So, we need degrees in order to be writers?” and responds: “of course not. If you want to be a writer, write” (Kealey, 2005, p. 2). We do not see similar statements among the leaders of our nation's medical and law schools, or in other fields that have undergone occupational closure (nursing, accounting, librarianship). Given that the MFA-CW neither blocks entrants nor is intended to block entrants from being writers, it is unlikely that the rise of the MFA-CW can be best understood through straightforward occupational closure and jurisdictional frameworks in the professions literature.

The accumulation of human capital is a second avenue through which we might understand the proliferation of the MFA-CW. Building off the work of Adam Smith (1863) and as elucidated by Lewis (1954) and particularly Becker (1964), human capital theory posits that knowledge and competencies can be invested in through formal education and exchanged for financial gain in the labor market. The returns on human capital can be “specific” (Becker, 1964) to a particular industry, such as is the case for a surgeon with a degree in medicine receiving financial rewards for her accumulated knowledge while employed in the field of medicine, but not for employment in the field of architecture. Alternatively, as exemplified by Spence (1973; 2002), human capital may serve as a “signal” of competency in information asymmetrical exchange on the labor market.

Using the former approach, we would expect the acquisition of specialized knowledge in MFA-CW program. The acquisition of specialized knowledge in the MFA-CW is unlikely, however, as “for most of its history creative writing is a field that has avoided scholarship” (Donnelly, 2011, p. 1), and even those tasked with teaching in MFA-CW programs (i.e. those with the strongest incentive to advocate for the usefulness of their labor) have significant doubts about whether the ability to write creatively can be taught at all (Harper, 2006; Lim, 2003; Neave, 2006). Using the latter perspective—the MFA-CW as a signaling mechanism—we would expect MFA-CW graduates to improve their position in the labor market for creative writing, as their graduation from a degree granting program is a sign of their

ability within the creative literary arts. However, as discussed below in the findings section, acquisition editors—those tasked with selecting novels and novelists for publishing contracts from pools of hopefuls—do not treat having graduated from an MFA-CW as a signal of ability, and instead, regard the degree with suspicion vis-a-vis the creative quality of the work. One might look to employment within the professorate as the “real” outcome of the MFA-CW, but such employment requires not the MFA-CW credential (indeed, many teachers do not hold it) but, rather, a well-regarded publication history; for this reason, we include acquisition editors as well as aspirant authors and teachers in our discussion below.

Occupational closure theory and human capital theory, despite their uses in other fields, are unlikely explanations for the rise of the MFA-CW, at least through the predicted channels. Instead, creative workers more broadly rarely achieve the closure considered by some necessary to the professional project or agree on organizational representatives (Berman, 2006, Menger, 2014). This may be due to the literary field—and the arts in general—envisioning multiple knowledges as valid (Rueschemeyer, 1972), with “skill” and “expertise” largely functioning as network artifacts rather than objective quality measures (Eyal, 2013). How, then, to understand the rise and uses of the “useless” MFA-CW? In this work we contribute an analysis of the professionalization of the arts through less frequently discussed mechanisms: meaning-laden professional identity formation, the construction of professional community, and the development of norms of professional practice. To do this, we look to the uses of this useless degree in the literary field among aspiring authors, teachers, and acquisitions editors.

Methods

Data were collected over 18 months between 2008 and 2010. The first author interviewed over 120 authors, publishing professionals, reviewers, creative writing teachers, bookstore owners, and bookstore employees and engaged in six months of sustained participant observational research in a publishing house. This included observing both for-pay and not-for-pay workshops and informal writing groups with aspiring novelists. Observations were also conducted at a wide range of author readings and signings in venues including major-chain and independent bookstores, public libraries, and coffee shops, and regional and national industry-sponsored events.

The topic of MFA-CWs first emerged inductively in interviews with authors during early phases of field work, when asked to narrate their path into becoming novelists, authors—particularly from younger age cohorts—brought up their time in MFA-CWs. As the interviews were semi-structured, the first author began to ask follow-up questions about why authors decided to apply to MFA-CW programs, how they picked programs to apply to, what they learned during enrollment, and what if any lasting effects they felt their attendance had on their writing and careers. Eight authors interviewed (of 25) also currently work or have worked as professors in creative writing programs, and they shared how they viewed their “jobs” as professors in relation to their “work” as novelists. As the first author was concurrently interviewing authors and engaging in fieldwork within a publishing firm, he began to ask acquisition editors at the firm about how *they* viewed MFA-CW programs, which was supplemented with interview data from literary agents (N=15) and acquisition editors from other firms (N=42).

Due to the nature of data collection, this work only speaks to those working in the teaching, creation, and production of literary fiction, and cannot speak to MFA-CW graduates in poetry, or to those who have been either unsuccessful or uninterested in securing a contract for publication or a job in another position (e.g. acquisition editor, reviewer, literary agent) in the literary field. This paper aims instead

to focus on investigating how MFC-CW programs are used *within* the creation and production of literary fiction

Findings

Findings are broken out into three subsections: authors, teachers, and publishing professionals. This is not meant to imply that teachers at MFA-CW programs are not also working authors—in fact, they are—but only to provide analytic distinction between the roles and occupational rhetorics (see Fine, 1996) that teacher/authors use in relation to the MFA-CW.

Authors: time and symbolic resources for artistic identity

Respondents expressed a range of reasons why they decided to apply to MFA-CW programs. In line with a 2010 survey of MFA-CW applicants in the *Poets & Writers* 2012 MFA Rankings (Abramson, 2011) in which the most frequently cited reason for applying was to have “time to write” (55%), our respondents frequently reported that “buying time” was a major factor for them. As Kelsey, who has gone on to publish two novels, explained: “Well, when I was graduating [from college] I knew that I wanted to go to an MFA program to keep writing and have more time to [do so].” The MFA-CW provided “time” for Kelsey, who would otherwise have felt compelled to find employment, most likely in a “day job” that would take time from her writing. Like others below, Kelsey’s calculus made the decision to “buy time” with potential tuition fees and lost wages a clear one.

While Kelsey saw herself as “buying time” to write, she could have, as recommended in *The Creative Writing MFA Handbook* (2005), simply taken the time to write without paying for a degree granting program. Instead, as it was for Michael, an author living in the Northeast who worked in marketing out of college, the MFA-CW served a symbolic purpose in making occupational aspiration of being a writer seem more “real”:

I was working crazy hours and then going home and trying to work on a novel and I had this realization that, that, I didn’t want to be one of those people who is *always* working on a novel...It was a real gut check moment...Even applying made my dreams feel more real. This is who I am and this is who I want to be.

Michael’s motivations were not atypical among respondents. While some, like Kelsey, “always” knew they wanted to be novelists, others like Michael first tried “a real job.” Yet despite this distinction, most respondents, in a variety of ways, felt that their desires to become novelists were made more “real” somehow by attending MFA-CW programs. Morgan, who also worked a “real job” after college, explained:

It gave me something to say that I was doing...so my friends went from joking “how’s the novel going?” because they knew that it wasn’t [when I was working at my day job] to asking “what’s it like there? What are the classes like?” and I had progress to report and things to talk about again.

For students, enrollment in the MFA-CW was itself a form of professional identity formation. While the “time to write” was sometimes real for entrants who were trying to balance their writing with paid employment, for others, “time to write” served a more symbolic function in that it was being enrolled in a program, rather than simply writing, which made their time spent writing feel like a legitimate investment in a professional identity rather than a hobby.

Once enrolled, respondents did not feel that MFA-CW coursework improved their writing, but found that it served other purposes, including the time and identity resources discussed above. Kelsey said that her MFA-CW workshops allowed her to “think about writing a different way and to have a vocabulary to talk about writing which, for my own work, has not been too helpful. But when I write [freelance] reviews for magazines or websites, I know how to.” Colton, who has published two novels, cited his MFA-CW workshops as making him more accepting of negative reviews for his novels: “I just kinda take the good ones as encouragement and then—I don’t know, once you’ve been to workshop so many times...you just kind of lose the emotional aspect of it.”

For Kelsey the “sideline activity” (Janssen, 1998) of reviewing the work of other novelists is a skill she feels she honed and developed from having to critique others’ work in her MFA-CW program, whereas on the other end of the writer/reviewer exchange, Colton harnesses his experience of having his writing critiqued in MFA-CW workshops to manage his response to negative reviews of his work. While neither Kelsey nor Colton spoke much about how “workshopping” dramatically changed the quality of their writing (it provided “just things to think about,” according to Colton), both ultimately found the experience useful for their careers, particularly in learning the “softer” skills of the professional identity: learning the language to *talk* about writing, how to deal with criticism of one’s work, and how to critique the work of others. These less instrumental and more implicit forms of skills acquisition also extended to informal education in the machinations of the publishing industry.

This was the case for Maggie, who wrote what would become the “lead” fiction title for a major publisher and be heavily promoted by them in her third year of an MFA-CW program in the Midwest. She remembers her time in her MFA-CW as “a vital turning point. So moving into that community after the theoretical discussion of writing and the workshopping... that’s where I really sort of began to learn a lot about the agenting process.” She felt that the two most important things she learned in her MFA-CW program were that a manuscript “almost has to be ready to put on the shelf [before submitting to an agent], and... that agents really function a lot like editors now.” Maggie found that although most of her professors resisted discussions of industry concerns—lest the MFA-CW be confused with a vocational or professional program—older students were more apt to privately share information about the publishing industry:

Here were people who were a couple years...ahead of us who had finished and were now ready to market their books...[T]here was just the talk between students, everybody wanted to sell their books so everyone was there for a purpose...It wasn’t so much the education [in writing] I received, but being surrounded by 12 other writers basically in every course, every day [was useful].

For Maggie, and many other respondents, this informal information swapping within a like-minded network of aspirants was quite important. For other novelists, like Colton, his time in an MFA-CW created social ties and a “collaborative circle” (Farrell, 2003; see also Hargadon & Bechky, 2006) which he has relied on throughout his career. Colton has three people that he met in his MFA-CW program who continue to read and edit his work:

John [another student], I sort of consider him my line-editing specialist...Alison [one of his professors], she’s always very good with parsing out the characters’ emotional journeys, saying this isn’t realistic or you need more of this here...David [another fellow student] is more like just “let’s look at the events, let’s look at what happens and see if that’s what should happen.” So they all have their own concerns and it’s complimentary.

Maggie and Colton both reference the networks that their MFA-CW programs afforded them, though they talk of networks with different benefits. Maggie saw herself most benefiting from the informal “rumor mill” or “grapevine system” of industry news she acquired from other students, whereas Colton found a social circle of likeminded authors who provide feedback on each other’s work. Barbara, a successful novelist in her late mid-60s who did not attend an MFA-CW, provides evidence of the negative case, lamenting that she doesn’t have the social resources that MFA-CW graduates possess:

I’m happy [with my career], but I envy people who have a circle; I envy people who were in MFA programs together where they bonded. I envy people who were in MFA programs because they have mentors...I’m missing the context. I’m not saying I feel uneducated... I mean I don’t have a certain sort of [social] structure in place that some people do that are tremendous resources for writers.

Just as MFA-CW attendees do not feel that they learned how to write in MFA-CW programs, Barbara does not feel that her lack of attendance has hampered her ability as a writer (i.e. “I’m not saying I feel uneducated”), but instead provides evidence of the negative case that is positively asserted by those who did attend (i.e. “I envy people who have a circle”). Overall, while MFA-CW graduates do not feel that they learned how to “write” in their graduate degree programs, they describe gaining other key skills and building networks through the MFA-CW that have served them well in their chosen careers. MFA-CW programs gave them time to write and a venue in which their aspirations to be novelists could be made to feel more real both to them and to people around them. In turn, although their programs were oriented toward ostensibly insulating them from the “business side” of writing, they learned about the *practice* of being a working novelist and engaging in sideline activities, swapped information about the publishing industry with each other, and established creative circles within the programs that they would go on to rely on during their careers. Similarly, novelists who work as professors at MFA-CW programs are uncertain about how their teaching relates to their work as writers, but find many uses for MFA-CW programs, including the same sorts of creative communities found by students, as well as the provision of a steady and livable income that gives them time to write.

Teachers: a sense of community and teaching the unteachable for wages

Teachers in MFA-CW programs express a range of feelings about their occupation. Most think of their teaching as a “day job” which supports—intellectually, socially, and most frequently, economically—their passion as novelists. Mallory, who has written four books, has worked as a professor in an MFA-CW for over a decade. Most important to Mallory is the sense of community she finds from her work, which isn’t always available to her in her career as a novelist:

I used to say teaching just interferes with my writing because in terms of time it does. But you can only write for so many hours a day. And it’s really lonely just writing. You need to have community and the writers group is great but I only see them like once a month usually...It can be good to write for a while in the morning and then go to school and talk to young people...So it’s more about community.

Many of the MFA-CW teachers reported that the sense of community they found in their programs was important to their mental health, and broke up long stretches of

writing alone. While most did not regularly lean on other faculty or students for support in their writing, simply being around people who shared their passion made their lives as writers more meaningful.

Despite this, many teachers felt reservations about being paid to teach a skill that they feel is outside the bounds of formal education. Jasmine, an MFA-CW professor in upstate New York expressed the common opinion that creative writing cannot be taught: “I don’t know why we do it. I know why *I* do it, but we’re tasked with teaching the unteachable.” Some, like Greg, justified this disconnect by simply stating “it’s a job, it’s a way to earn a living.” While this commonly professed inability to teach what one is ostensibly being tasked with teaching—creative writing *cannot* be taught—could be dismissed as a core facet of the *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1996) of the literary field, rather than simply serving a power-laden rhetorical function it is deeply embedded in the very structure of MFA-CW teaching practice. In MFA-CW programs the reliance on the workshop format, which decenters not only the professor, but also formal instruction more generally and forbears the attainment of pre-defined knowledge acquisition, ensures that even if creative writing *could* be taught it will not be taught. As such a belief in the impracticality of even trying to teach the ability to write creatively is reinscribed in pedagogical practice.

For some MFA-CW professors, such as Zach, creative writing, which cannot be taught, is based on personal experience and personal discovery, for which working in MFA-CW programs limits engagement with life outside the academy:

Most writers now have to teach in universities because it's the way that we support ourselves, and it's a very odd thing to be going on to have all the people in the country who are recording what life is like now, doing this really odd thing, which is the academic world [and] is not the same as the rest of the world. It would be nice if we could go back to living from writing.

While Zach references wanting to “go back” to a time when novelists could make their living from writing novels, he does not specify the time period to which he refers, and its historical existence in the U.S. is dubious. While the early and mid-twentieth century have been reinterpreted as a “golden age” of literature in the United States, the book market was comparatively quite small (Thompson, 2012), and most writers could not expect to make an income from their books. Randall, who served through much of the 1970s on the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Panel thinks that this history has been lost, and replaced with an assumption that novelists have always, and should be able to, live off their work as novelists:

Certainly Hart Crane never thought society owed him a living. So there was that radical shift...and now you have people who are so firmly entrenched in [the] second generation and beyond, so firmly entrenched in the MFA program that they have no other idea, they have no traditional grounding.

Many MFA-CW teachers describe having come to a difficult peace with the tension of ostensibly training a next generation of novelists who will not be able to make livings *as* novelists, and doing so despite not actually believing that the skills required to become a novelist can actually be taught. Yet overall, while teachers at MFA-CW programs do occasionally feel that their work as teachers can be beneficial to their students’ writing, more often, they find teaching to be beneficial to their own writing. And most often, they use their employment in MFA-CW as a productive social outlet to spend time around other writers. Most centrally, MFA-CW programs provide a livable income to already-working writers who cannot subsist solely off the advances for their book projects.

Publishing professionals: networks and promotional resources

In May and June, literary agents begin to receive the bulk of their submissions from that year's MFA-CW graduates. Some of these will trickle into publishers' inboxes quite early, but the deluge really comes during the fall or winter publishing seasons. Literary agents and acquisition editors take a range of stances on submissions from MFA-CW graduates, finding pragmatic reasons mostly related to the industry knowledge respondents like Maggie discussed, and indirect and informal promotional opportunities attendance might provide. Like MFA-CW students and professors they are highly dubious of the claim that one learns how to write well in MFA-CW programs and instead take a more negative position, complaining that the quality of writing can even be adversely affected by MFA-CW attendance.

Some literary agents, such as Laurel, an agent in New York in her mid-40s, appreciate the increase in submissions to her office around graduation season, as she feels it makes one aspect of her job easier:

When I started as an assistant, I was out hunting for authors, reading all the literary journals for short stories and then following up to see if the writer might have a book in them, going to amateur readings, always asking around if people knew anyone, which, all of it is really a lot of work. We still do that but even if we did not they, all of these people with novels, now know how to find us.

Laurel, who does not comment on the quality of submissions, believes that the MFA-CW funnels would-be authors to her agency, and she believes that the most important training young writers receive from an MFA-CW program is how to find the appropriate literary agent, how to write a query letter, and other minutia of the publishing industry which is informally traded between students and more frequently avoided or expressly rejected by professors in formal MFA-CW classroom spaces. Alex, an acquisition editor at a major New York imprint, echoes Laurel's impression, stating directly that "those programs cannot teach you how to write." Instead, making a distinction between writing and being an author, he feels that MFA-CW programs should be more oriented toward teaching how the publishing industry works, downplaying the possibility that the MFA-CW helps students learn to write well:

The only value [MFA-CW] have is teaching students how to be authors, either in the one course where they do that sort of thing, if that, or through osmosis from their professors who talk about the industry and their experiences; how things work.

While Laurel assumes that students are learning about the industry through professors and not through the informal "grapevine system" of information sharing between students, like MFA-CW students themselves she also makes reference to the softer skills of professionalization—which may be an inadvertent outcome of attendance in the program. She is distinguishing between being a "writer" (who may or may not have the ability to write creatively) and an "author" (who may or may not have the ability to write creatively, but has at least some understanding of the publishing industry and how it works).

Randall, who works at an independent publishing house on the West Coast, finds a "sameness" that bothers him when describing what he sees as a twice-annual "dump" of submissions to his publisher:

The fact is that twice a year here we will get a huge flood of submissions because everyone is ...told by their professors to submit their work... But the interchangeability of, especially fiction in the MFA program, is readable and noticeable... because there will be a couple of hot writers and the next year every-

body in the MFA program will try to write like that guy. Sam Lipsyte is the current hot guy, um, George Saunders is the current hot guy so next year I'll get a lot of short story and novel manuscripts that will be mimicking those two guys. Just like Dave Eggers led to a whole blast of dysfunctional family memoirs.

Although this type of mimicry may be more valuable to editors of popular fiction who are looking for hits that can be marketed and promoted in accordance with trends, for acquisition editors who are seeking a “timeless” quality in works they hope will contribute long-term (if slower) sales on publishers’ backlists, mimicry of the “current hot guy” is a significant impediment to publication.

While Randall is quite critical of the trend-hopping and what he believes to be the inferior creativity of creative writing produced in MFA-CW programs, he does not feel that the MFA-CW is entirely without value. While claiming that he would “hope not to notice” whether a submission came from an MFA-CW graduate or not, he is somewhat disheartened when acknowledging a second logic of sales and promotability for the submissions of some graduates:

If you're going to go to Virginia, “did you study with XYZ and could we get a blurb from them?” And you can see that infecting the whole blurb business. So you can look at these people, realizing that's how they got the blurb, they studied with them one place or another and managed to create some sort of tangential relationship with them that produced a blurb.

Blurbs, the short snippets of praise from well-known writers or reviewers that appear on book jackets, are thought of as one form of “advertising” for books. They are often used in catalog copy to signal to bookstores that the author has famous friends who may assist him/her, and to others in the industry that the author should be treated well given that their famous friend may hold a grudge if they are not. It is also believed that for general readers, positive appraisal from an author they like or have read before may induce them to pick up the book while browsing. Just as authors describe the accrual of social capital from their attendance in MFA-CW programs, Randall describes another way in which this social capital is converted in the “blurb business.”

Agents and publishers also see benefits—both in relation to networks and sales—from representing or working with professors at MFA-CW programs, all despite doubting that the ability to write well has actually been learned through attendance. This was described by Sophia, a literary agent in New York:

I represent an author who is a professor at one of the top programs and that's a plus for me because I'm not just working with him. Because of his job, he can send people to me. If he thinks one of his students is really talented he can say “I want to introduce you to my agent,” which has happened a couple times. He's their teacher, so they want to please him and they're really excited about the opportunity and he can also explain what working with me is like and why they should work with me [instead of another agent].

Whereas MFA-CW students may be able to get blurbs from their famous professors, their professors also serve as intermediaries to the literary field. For Sophia, it is not merely the social connection, but also the social trust and influence engendered through the professor/student relationship that makes representing a novelist who works as a professor an added bonus. Some acquisition editors also feel that working with MFA-CW professors provides an additional sales potential, as professors are tied into an academic network of others who might buy their books, or perhaps even assign them in classes. Nathan, an editor at an independent press who is quite critical of the rise of the MFA-CW in the creation of new writers, optimis-

tically hopes that MFA-CW graduates—the vast majority of whom he believes have “no chance” of ever securing a publishing contract—may create a new generation of readers, when he tells us that creative writing programs make students “better readers”, not better writers.

Overall, while publishing professionals are either indifferent to the quality of writing coming out of MFA-CW programs or critical of it, they acknowledge that the existence of the programs make their jobs easier in many inadvertent ways: Despite purporting to train students how to write well, they train students in how the industry works, and the social ties formed within programs can be of benefit to publishers, both during the promotional practice of “blurbing” or in attracting new authors. In turn, with regards to increased sales, authors who work as professors in MFA-CW programs may be more attractive to publishers if they are tied into networks of other MFA-CW professors who may read and assign their books. And finally, while MFA-CW programs might not train their students in how to “write well,” they may train their students in how to “*read well*,” creating new markets for modern literature that publishers depend upon.

We have seen how the MFA-CW is used in diverse and divergent ways by aspirant authors (who use the degree to “buy time” to work and symbolic resources for the writer’s identity, and who gain professional practice knowledge), teachers (who use the degree as an ideal “day job” and source of community), and acquisitions editors (who use the degree to simplify their position and to market books). Although not through the more widely recognized jurisdictional or closure-related processes, this landscape of practice is crucial for the functioning of the U.S. literary field today, and the formation of professional identity through “soft” skills and symbolic resources, which make the degree far from useless.

Discussion

Despite the relative incongruities between existing literatures on the professions and the careers of novelists, to date, the proliferation of the MFA-CW has eluded sociological analysis, and in particular serves as an important and neglected test case for research on the professions. This article has aimed to take the first steps down a path that takes creative writers as professionals seriously, and takes as its starting point an investigation of the role and uses of the MFA-CW degree in the literary field and the ways it is understood by field participants. In turn, it aims to re-center discussion of the MFA-CW by starting from the initial building block of how the “useless” credential is actually used by field participants.

With regards to the question of what an MFA-CW is “good for,” the answer this article provides is a multivalent one: the degree serves different uses and different purposes depending on one’s position in the field. This points to the variability of value within fields, dependent on position in a more subtle and less mechanized form than the competing “poles” of fields as discussed by Bourdieu (1993; on this point see Childress, 2012; Moeran, 2014). Instead, even in “circuits of commerce” (Zelizer, 2010) within fields—value may take on incongruent and position-dependent forms within the same transaction: in the case of an accepted manuscript, an MFA student’s “time to write” may be an acquisition editor’s access to blurbs, a professor’s stable income, or an opportunity for an author and editor to reaffirm their social tie and shared interpretation of “quality” literature.

For such a transaction to be successful, no party needs to believe that the MFA-CW degree imparts specialized knowledge in the construction of creative works, nor need they believe that the MFA-CW is a useful signal in marking “quality” literature, or that the degree should or even could be used to limit the supply of potential manuscripts available for contract. Although the initial catalyst for the widespread adoption of the MFA-CW existed as a form of state-intervention to

“hide” the funding of already-working novelists within institutions, in practice the degree has been used as a means to a variety of ends. Although the MFA-CW may not provide any form of specialized training in creative thinking or creativity it has nonetheless proven to be of quite creative use.

This draws into question the degree to which these findings are mirrored across creative degrees more broadly—Bachelors of Fine Arts (BFAs) in painting and photography, Doctors of Fine Arts (DFAs) in social practice, and related forms of creative training—as well as technical programs in arts related fields. Are credentials as multivalent in painting as they are in creative writing? Does the DFA signal professionalism in performance art to the same degree as it does for acquisitions editors, or does it signify increased remove from the demands of the market in that field? This possible remove from the market may be suggestive of a Bourdieusian polarization in American artistic fields which, although present in France in the middle of the 20th Century, looked quite different than it does in the American context today.

Through the MFA-CW we have witnessed a wide-scale change in the coordination of the literary arts in the United States since the 1960s, based on a model founded in Iowa in the mid-1930s. This change—the proliferation of advanced degrees in creative writing, especially pronounced in the last decade—has been credited with fundamentally reshaping American arts and letters (McGurl, 2009). While the emergence and rise of a new post-graduate degree program more broadly might be explained through research on occupational closure and human capital theory, these theoretical trajectories seem less applicable to the case of the MFA-CW. The existing literature from the study of the professions on occupational closure and human capital may simply be poor fits to explain the proliferation of the MFA-CW, or they may be problematic more broadly for the arts and artistic careers in general. This, in turn, may signal a broader disconnect between contemporary scientific research on occupations and professions and occupations and professions in the arts more broadly. One strategy for dealing with this disconnect may involve a look to the “Production of Culture” approach as first elucidated in the 1970s (see Peterson & Anand, 2004 for review). In treating creative industries as a special class for organizational analysis, one of the early goals of the approach was to serve as an “accounting device,” engaging in similar exploratory analyses to see if scholars could collaboratively build up to general rules and principles across culture producing industries and fields. While this early project in the Production of Culture approach remains somewhat incomplete, it can be reignited through an analysis of the rise of degree specialization across occupations and practices in the arts and arts related industries (e.g. see Porcello, 2004 for sound engineers, Rabkin, 2013 for artists, and more generally SNAAP at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research).

Both the study of the creative professions and research on professions and professionalization more generally will benefit from increased attention to the integration of meanings and practices and, in particular, to an investigation of the uses of meaningful objects. While the professions and professionalization literature has mostly focused on jurisdiction, closure, and an objective expertise, the creative professions highlight the extent to which less visibly instrumental but no less meaningful mechanisms contribute to professional autonomy, market control, and power.

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