

Food Stories as Embodied Writing: Practical Creative Writing Pedagogy

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Abstract: Stephens shows that the transferable skills obtained through creative writing pedagogy can also be taught in English Language Arts contexts. For example, intercultural food stories can illustrate Common Core standards through a case study which fulfills the emphasis on narrative as one of three necessary types of writing.

This essay has four parts:

- 1) Building on work in creative writing studies (CWS), which insists that creative writing is “an invaluable transferable skill” (Peary, 2015, p. 196), I respond to Drew’s (2016) call for “creative writing scholars and their pedagogies to become more influential within secondary teacher training programs,” in order to “export” creative writing pedagogies more widely (p. 3);
- 2) I lay out a case for “embodied expression” as an area of inquiry that unites writing and communication instruction in many disciplines and domains;
- 3) I use Lee’s (2007) “Sea Urchin” and Santiago’s (2006) “How to Eat a Guava” as examples of embodied writing. Lee’s humor illustrates the stakes involved in intercultural food encounters, and Santiago’s story is analyzed not only for its thematic material (what is lost and what is gained when moving between worlds), but for its utility in teaching transferable skills emphasized in Common Core standards, such as recognizing “*figurative language, ... and nuances in word meanings*” (National Governors, p. 51);
- 4) The details and the process of a creative writing assignment about food encounters is laid out and illustrated with examples from class instruction.

Practical Experience in Creative Writing across the Curriculum (CWAC)

I began formally teaching creative writing in 2014 in a Puerto Rican STEM university. Most of my students speak English as a second language, so I developed a writing studies version of creative writing focused on transferable skills (Stephens, 2017). This approach was different from the MLA-inspired creative writing in which publication in literary journals was supposedly the main goal. I adapted a “lifespan writing” approach (Bazerman, 2011, pp. 2-3), which sought to prepare students for their post-classroom writing and communication (Kostelnik, 2015, p. 144) and give them tools to use in their own disciplines. What seemed to be on the margins of the creative writing field at first came to seem like an alternate center as I learned more about creative writing studies. For instance, Healey argues for the importance of “creative literacy” as an exportable skill for the majority of creative writing students who do not become published writers (p. 170). This pragmatic approach has growing numbers of adherents as creative writing instructors work with secondary, science, and adult students. Drew (2016) calls this version of creative writing the “secondary creative writing movement”—which he sees “not as an activity with an end goal of professional, publishable work, but as tools” (p. 4). This Creative Writing across the Curriculum movement (CWAC) is becoming a primary face of creative writing to other disciplines, K-12 teaching, and the post-academic world.

The boom in CWS can be highly relevant to ELA teachers, but not if creative writing is “estranged” from the practical needs of educators (or employers). Some degree of translation is needed to “capitalize on this on this current moment of overlap between CWS interests and the needs of secondary curricula” (Drew, 2016, pp. 3-5).

In my view, practical experience is the most valuable resource teachers have. The *higher value* of real-life experience would seem to hold true, at least, for those who instruct adolescents and non-specialists. Let me give an example of my pre-creative writing career. From 2001 to 2002, I was a Rockefeller Fellow at the University of North Carolina, where I did ethnographic research on double immersion primary schools in North Carolina and Oklahoma. I had just gone through a divorce, had joint custody, and thus managed to be with my children in Oklahoma half-time. Then I got certified as a

Bilingual Teacher in Oklahoma City Public Schools. When I went to work in south OKC schools, where Mexican children predominated, I relied on what I knew rather than on theory. What I knew best was bilingual children's literature, an invaluable tool in teaching my first two children Spanish. In Oklahoma City, public libraries had a wide range of bilingual children's literature. I read all I could with my children and began to purchase my own collection, which I then used in the two elementary schools where I taught from 2002 to 2004.

Learning a second language was a bit like learning tennis, I had found. At first I spent a lot of time chasing stray balls, that is, looking words up in the dictionary. With side-by-side Spanish and English texts, my children, and then my students, could just glimpse at the parallel page and continued to build on their cognitive development in their first language. Aside from vocabulary and reading comprehension, which I knew both from research and from experience could be transferred from one language to another (Stephens, 2005). I also used these bilingual texts as models for writing. By working with fourth- through sixth-grade students individually or in small groups, talking out ideas in both Spanish and English, I helped them develop stories about their families and the experience of moving from one culture to another.

My principal commented that she didn't know how I did it, but my students turned out wonderfully expressive writing. I was working by intuition, grounded in experience (raising bilingual children). Only ten years later did I realize that what I'd been teaching was a form of creative writing pedagogy. Such real-life experience often serves as a go-to reservoir for meeting outcomes developed through theory and research. For example, my intuitive emphasis on creative expression and translanguaging was in accord with the way that Common Core standards define the pragmatic purposes of creativity as a "foundation for any creative and purposeful expression of language" (as cited in Drew, 2016, p. 5).

In Part III I will discuss how I use food stories to explore Common Core standards such as "well-chosen details," "attention to dialogue, pacing, [...] and narrator," "figurative language," and "nuances in word meaning" (National Governors, 2010, pp. 41-51).

However, I first want to ground my approach in the theory of embodied writing. As explained below, I prefer to use “embodied expression” as a uniting term for the kind of writing-plus-communication I teach to students in Writing Studies classes.

What is Embodied Expression?

Behind this question lies an effort to re-envision how we acquire and communicate knowledge. Old models which privilege a disembodied style are breaking down (Nagel, 1986). Alternatives include the self-reflexive turn in ethnography, and also non-academic genres such as writing for the media, technical communication, and creative nonfiction.

When I was looking for a one-word umbrella word to join to “embodied” (as a sort of updated “three R’s”), none of the available terms seemed adequate. Let’s look at three:

1. *Knowledge* gestures to domains in which “embodied knowledge” is central (Shapiro, 2011). As a *body of knowledge* martial arts expresses perspectives beyond the reach of rationality (Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2014). Studies of performing arts (McCaleb, 2014) and performative religious expression (Mellor, 2010) often start with embodied knowledge. But *knowledge* tends to connote something we possess or can access in our heads, or in libraries and databases, rather than a *way of being* that we express in various manners.
2. *Pedagogy* tends to have a musty smell; some people shut off on hearing that. The work of Giroux comes to mind: laudatory but preaching to the converted in left-wing circles.
3. *Rhetoric* as a field seems rather ghettoized. However, key terms developed by Burke such as *identification* remain crucial to understanding of how the variants of embodied expression negotiate or maintain a relationship with particular audiences.

Embodied expression infers opposition to “*disembodied knowledge*.” The concept carries a critique of how research is often written up: in a human-less, often humorless “unpopulated writing” (Billig, 2014, p. 95) that Geertz called “author-evacuated” prose (as cited in Hindman, 2002, p. 89).

The closer students get to college age, the quicker teachers are expected to move them toward a disembodied style. But the few who read such disembodied prose rarely gain pleasure or practical application. The critique of disembodied writing and knowledge, along with the practice of more attractive alternatives, has a multi-disciplinary history. The theory and practice of embodied writing is acquiring weight in rhetoric and composition and allied fields, not to mention its proliferation in non-academic genres.

Let us proceed to available definitions. *Embodied learning* is a satisfactory starting point. According to Lawrence (2012):

Traditional schooling forces us to check our bodies at the door, requiring us to sit at a desk and raise our hands, focusing primarily on cognition to the exclusion of other ways of knowing. By the time we reach adulthood, ‘being in our bodies’ is a foreign concept and a source of discomfort for many of us. (p. 1)

This is consistent with a counter-discourse in Composition Studies about the need to integrate personal voice and non-academic genres. The specific notion of embodied writing or “embodied reading” articulated by Hindman (2003) is one part of the required reading I used for graduate students training to teach first-year college writing or in public schools.

However, I’m after a broader understanding of “embodied knowing” not limited to pedagogical purposes. For purposes of inclusion, a definition from *Black’s Law Dictionary* seems useful: “*Information* our bodies know and use without conscious thought. Executed as routines, habits, and tasks. Also known as Instinctive Knowledge.” That sense of acts we perform without being conscious of them reinforces Williams’ (1976) concept of everyday culture and Geertz’ (1973) view of culture as patterns that

repeat themselves. Expressive culture (communicative action) is thus *embodied*, not only in human bodies, but in cultural artifacts, institutional bodies, and embodied expressions such as dance (Daniel, 2005).

In a classroom, Emig (2001) sees embodied learning as “tak[ing] place only through transactions with literal others in authentic communities of inquiry” (p. 273). This begs the question of what constitutes “authentic” communities of inquiry. Can they be o-line? Emig argues that “The embodied classroom is a place to learn tolerance while coping with the shock of diverse and alien opinions tightly held, eloquently defended, and to *attend to the other who will not go away with the press of a button*, who stays relentlessly, inescapably, there” (p. 279). There may be arguments about that. But the case for the importance of human bodies in learning is persuasive. This way of thinking about embodied knowing as transferable only through (or primarily through) direct human contact is at the root of Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development” (Artemeva, 2008, pp. 40-43).

The notion that knowledge is embodied in ways that can never be entirely rational, or entirely objective, has deep roots and wide dissemination. Bob Marley’s song “Running Away” repeats the following as a refrain: “*who feels it knows it*”... One academic translation of this aphorism is Williams’ (1977) work with the notion of “structures of feeling” (p. 128).

I encourage student writers to find ways to get outside their heads and reconnect with their embodied knowing, whether located in the physical body and in culturally embodied traditions. Let us look at how this can operate through food stories.

Teaching “Sea Urchin” and “How to Eat a Guava”

Most of the students I teach are in their late teens and acculturated to a disembodied style of reading and writing, so I always start each new story with a reminder of the importance of context. After allowing them to work through their provisional understandings of the word, I provide a definition for *context* to which we return

repeatedly: “background information which leads to a fuller understanding of a story or narrative.”

I use the biographical introduction to Lee’s “Sea Urchin” by Adiele and Frosch (2007), the editors of the anthology *Coming of Age around the World*, to challenge student preconceptions about who and what is American. My Puerto Rican students are American citizens, but they tend to have a narrow view of “American-ness.” I encountered the same blinkered view of “who is American” with my Saudi and Jamaican students. Over the past five years, when I ask students if Chang-Rae Lee is an American name, I hear an emphatic chorus of “no!” This shows, I tell them, that they are not paying attention to the details of the context provided in the author biography.

We go through this biography by practicing the DiYanni (2007) method of observe, connect, and infer (pp. 10-11): Where did the author grow up, go to school, and work? Students now see that Lee grew up in Westchester, went to the elite Philip Exeter academy, earned his BA at Yale and an MFA in Oregon, worked on Wall Street, and had his first story (“Sea Urchin”) published in the *New Yorker*. In short, the author is an elite all-American guy. This biography also gives useful context such as that Lee thought about changing Chang-Rae to a Westernized name (“Tom”), and that his family returned to a visit to South Korea during the student riots and massacre of 1979-1980. This context allows us to understand that the family of the fifteen-year-old narrator, who have been in the United States the last dozen years, are seeing Korean culture as outsiders.

This outsider-ness leads to some comic scenes. Moving by taxi through an area where “the air is laden with tear gas” after student demonstrations, the narrator relates that “I open the window and stick out my tongue, trying to taste the poison, the human repellent” (p. 214). Students know that dogs stick their tongues out the window, and begin to wonder, along with the mother, what is wrong with this kid.

The comic effect sharpens when the narrator stares at some very uncomely local girls—skinny, with bad teeth, wearing school uniforms, and stinking of fermented vegetables as they clear dishes in their parents’ food stands. Yet he finds them “stunning” (p. 214).

At this point it is not hard to get students to connect the dots, to see that the narrator is probably used to looking at white girls, and is exoticizing Korean girls. We work through *exoticize*, which will help in our analysis of “Guava,” as well as gaining a broader understanding of how the tourist industry sells places like Jamaica and Puerto Rico. To exoticize is to make something different or foreign more attractive than it really is, to project idealized or quasi-erotic desires for the “other.”

But if while travelling as tourists we can't get involved in local politics, or get close to the daughters of local merchants, we can always try their food: “In Itaewon, the district near the U. S. Army base, where you can get anything you want, culinary or otherwise, we stop at a seafood stand for dinner” (p. 215). There is a subtext about colonial relations: that the Lees choose to eat near an army base where anything can be had adds a layer to our view of them as outsiders.

Gendered parenting behavior ensues. Mom warns her son off raw fish, but Dad wants to rediscover the old days. The father not only eggs on his son, but messes with his mind: after watching an octopus being chopped up, Dad warns him, “You have to be careful ... or one of the suction cups can stick inside your throat. You could die” (p. 215). The mother's frightened warnings and the father's jibing do not sway the 15-year-old from his quest. By now readers see how desperate he is to fit in, to feel like he is a part of Korean culture. Fitting in is a concern for most adolescents, which is heightened in this “ancestral culture” context.

If we learn that the flesh cut out of the sea urchin is the sexual organs, another light is cast on the following passage: “I'm half gagging, though still chewing; its as if I had another tongue in my mouth, this blind, self-satisfied creature” (p. 216). When the kid throws up, the mother scolds the men-folk, but they are impervious. The father just chuckles, and the uncles joke about going back for more. Of course when the kid is better, he does return, and the same woman says, in multi-layered meanings: “I know what you want.” In the last line, the author waits, suspended, “my mouth slick with anticipation and revulsion, not yet knowing why” (p. 216).

For discussion, quizzes, and idea generation, I ask students to consider how he can feel both revulsion and anticipation, and why he is not fully conscious of his mixed response. This brief story is full of embodied writing and opportunities for vocabulary-building. Just exactly what range of meanings does “stunning” carry in the context of the stinky, bad-teethed skinny Korean schoolgirls that seem so exotic to the Americanized narrator?

Santiago presents readers with other challenges about what it means to be an American, again through the narrator’s relationship with a food item. I draw on my experience in teaching literature and other artistic genres to provide context. Context, I emphasize, emerges through connections. A root meaning of context is interweaving: *coherence that emerges through connections*. To cohere is to “hang together,” to tie together threads. Santiago represents the complicated way that Caribbean and U. S. cultures “hang together” and produce a new sort of coherence for those whose cultural context originated outside the U. S.

“How to Eat a Guava” is the prologue that Santiago provides as an entry point to her memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* (2006). I suggest three framing devices for how to read this text, in context:

1. “Guava” is the Prologue to a book in the Bildungsroman genre (Stephens, 2009);
2. This prologue parodies *How To* books or articles;
3. It *exoticizes minority literature as a “tropical fruit.”*

In each sense, Santiago’s text provides multiple opportunities to teach literary devices that will be valuable to students as readers and writers.

The *genre* of the book from which “Guava” comes is coming-of-age, a form of *bildungsroman*. The prologue also parodies “How-To” books or articles. Thinking about genre in a broad sense, the book is marketed as exotic literature. Finally, Santiago’s use of epigraphs is itself a form of genre. We must know how epigraphs work to understand how “Guava,” and the book, are framed, especially the movement between worlds.

Bildungsroman, as a novel of education or character formation, focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist. Santiago's evolution in "Guava" is seen retrospectively, mediated by the guava and the memories it evokes. Santiago's young alter-ego develops in several contexts. The author was uprooted from Puerto Rico at age 13 and taken to New York. This tale traces not only the passage from childhood to adolescence, or girl-to-woman, but from the Caribbean to the U. S., and Spanish to English. The story is a tool with which students can gain a comparative perspective on their own education or mis-education.

The ways in which "Guava" parodies *How-To* articles can be clarified by having students discuss varieties of this genre. Once they begin enumerating "for Dummies" books, there is no end to guides for the ignorant. "Guava" is a sort of *Eating Guavas for Dummies*. Puerto Ricans and other people from the tropics don't need guides on how to eat guavas. These are instructions for the uninitiated, which raises questions of Santiago's audience. She is, on one level, poking fun at her "mainstream" American readers by inverting expectations of tropical women. Seeing this text as a parody of the "how-to" genre also opens to discussions of tone, location, and point of view. "Guava" opens in a market, probably in New York, with a tongue-in-cheek tone. But soon the tone becomes melancholic: if the location has not precisely shifted to Puerto Rico, the story operates in memory. The narrator is still standing in the Shop-n-Save, handling a not-quite-ripe guava, but she is immersed in remembering her sensations as a girl.

There are many examples throughout of embodied writing. The passages describing the sensations of the young "Negi" use all five senses:

When you bite into a ripe guava, your teeth must grip the bumpy surface.....A green guava is sour and hard... You hear the skin, meat, and seeds crunching inside your head, while the inside of your mouth explodes in little spurts of sour. [The New York guava] smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hop-scotch under the mango tree.

Students can match what is seen, touched, smelled, tasted, and heard with lines from “Guava.” This and “Sea Urchin” provide models for how students can practice embodied writing, as the last lines reveal what Santiago is doing with the sense of guavas as an exotic fruit: “The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet.” The guava is a personification of Santiago, who, as a *tropical fruit*, was picked too young. The uprooting exacted a price but makes her a valuable commodity in the *exotic literature* section of the cultural marketplace. Students may help in recognizing what a big business “minority literature” or ethnic arts are in the U. S.

I encourage students to imagine alternatives to the facile interpretation that the ending shows Santiago turning her back on Puerto Rican culture. The text suggests that, knowing “real” guavas, she will not accept imitations. Rather than turning her back on Puerto Rico, Santiago is memorializing it, recreating it through memory. Santiago carries “*la mancha del plátano*,” as she writes in the Introduction to her Spanish translation. But her relationship to the Puerto Rican culture of memory is shaped by the necessities of telling the tale to non-Puerto Ricans. The author participates in exoticizing her life and her cultural roots (Stephens, 2009).

Discussion questions include: What is the *value* of the “remembered real”? What do we do with the knowledge that the “tropical fruit display” in the north cannot equal the real referent in the south?

The choice to exoticize young Santiago and her locale is evident in the cover’s design. In the background is a palm tree, a tropical setting. Young Esmeralda looks the part, like people from Puerto Rico to Venezuela who combine Spanish, African, and AmerIndian features. Esmeralda, the first of eight siblings, was known as “Negi,” as “little black one.” Born to a dark-skinned father and a fair mother, her siblings ran the range of the rainbow. In short, Negi is framed as the face of the tropics for American consumers. What does an outsider anticipate will be on offer when we “go there”?

With university students, I begin by discussing the epigraphs Santiago uses as framing devices. But for secondary students, this higher-order analysis might best be held in reserve until just before the writing assignment.

In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, the book's epigraph from the poem "Claroscuro" by Luis Lloréns Torres comes before "Guava" and sets a tone while shaping the reader's expectations. Torres is known as a poet of the *jíbaros*, who Santiago romanticizes. Following the DiYanni method again, we observe repeating motifs, such as: "A bird flies from its nest. The rooster jumps from his branch. ...[C]alves [are] separated from the cows. Butterflies swarm ... orphan flowers in search of the mother branch." Students come to see repetition of images of movement and departure at dawn as metaphors for the direction Santiago will take. Young Negi, at the dawn of her life, is also destined to fly away from the mother branch.

Then we are ready for the chord which Santiago strikes with the epigraph which she chooses for the prologue itself:

Barco que no anda, no llega a puerto.

A ship that doesn't sail, never reaches port.

This prologue, as well as the book itself, then, is about taking risks to go somewhere new. Something is gained and something is lost in moving between cultural worlds.

Case Study: A Food Story Writing Assignment

Before reading these stories, I have told students that the sequence will end with them writing their own food stories. During discussion of "Sea Urchin" and "Guava," we continue referencing the destination so they have the assignment in mind. Following is an abbreviated version of the writing assignment. I will then conclude with a few comments about student questions and concerns.

PROMPT: Write a food story starting with a “Sea Urchin” or “How to Eat a Guava” quote. *Themes:* Write a personal account about your experience with a food that illustrates (CHOOSE ONE): a) an intercultural encounter (trying something new); b) an unusual situation or event in your family; or c) something unique about a cultural dish in your family (write it for an outsider).

Use a quote from one of these two stories as an epigraph or starting point:

- 1) Chang-rae Lee, “Sea Urchin”
- 2) Esmeralda Santiago, “How to Eat a Guava”

Place the epigraph below your story’s title. The epigraph frames the way readers interpret your narrative, as Santiago’s epigraph “the ship that never sets sail never arrives to port” frames the way we read “How to Eat a Guava.”

GUIDELINES: Focus on *one scene only*. Be very specific. Use embodied writing.

Students often have questions about how to choose and use epigraphs, but once they take ownership of this concept, they usually enjoy the creativity of framing their own writing this way. With second-language students, I have found it useful to spend some time discussing frames, using windows or any other available object, as an illustration of how storytellers guide readers (or viewers or listeners) to look through a certain lens. The frame shapes what we see, but most material lies outside the frame. I of course provide freedom to students who want to use an epigraph from outside the two stories discussed in class.

I have written this assignment with the anticipation that teachers will be able to adapt the basic framework for different contexts. For instance, the way I teach the material was different in Saudi Arabia, when during the Eid holidays many families sacrifice a goat, from when I teach it in Puerto Rico, where the slaughter and roasting of a pig

during Christmas or “Wise Kings” celebrations is often accompanied by excessive drinking.

One of the barriers I face with students who are taking creative writing as a general education elective is their belief that their own lives are not interesting. Early in the semester, I have them start by narrating an everyday activity, in slow-motion detail, as a way to begin preparing them to take ownership of the idea that everyone reveals his or her character in commonplace gestures. As almost all creative writing instructors emphasize, all of us have interesting stories to tell. We don’t need to start with the “zombie apocalypse” to catch the attention of our readers. Describing our relationship to food, as demonstrated by Lee and Santiago, is a terrific entry-way to describing the particulars of our lives in a way that can entertain and instruct readers.

Regarding the larger purposes of this assignment, within the *lifespan writing* framework I have described, I agree with various Creative Writing Studies authors that “life-writing” has great pedagogical and social value. At the end of the process of an assignment such as food stories, we will have achieved a larger conception of self in a social context (Neilsen, 2012, p. 135). This has not only therapeutic value for the individual, but is also a practice which can be transferred beyond the classroom, where translating ourselves to others is an everyday necessity.

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