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Fear and Loathing in the English Department: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Composition and Creative Writing

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FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT:
THE STRANGE AND TERRIBLE SAGA
OF COMPOSITION AND CREATIVE WRITING

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: Fear and Loathing in the English Department: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Composition and Creative Writing

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This study seeks locations where creative writing and composition may find common ground. Through interviews with scholars and students working at the intersection of these two avenues of English Studies, this dissertation examines pedagogical, theoretical, disciplinary and institutional connections and divisions between creative writing and composition.

The study consists of interviews eight individuals who are actively involved in creative writing and composition. These individuals ranged from very widely published scholars to graduate students. My questions were, how do compositionists working in creative writing and creative writers working in composition find space for themselves in a very territorial world; and how would they like to see that world change for the future of writing studies?

The data from this study point out that there are underlying philosophical differences between creative writing and composition that make reconciliation unlikely at best. Rather than saving the marriage after years of separation, a better model for the future may be an amicable divorce in which both parties continue to come together for important events in the family that is English studies.

In addition, the study shows that there are serious problems within the use and abuse of the workshop model of teaching creative writing. The data show that while the original intent of the workshop may be noble, it has been warped in too many cases and become harsh, competitive, and unforgiving. Additional study is recommended to create a Best Practices model for the workshop.

Finally, the study brings to light the issues of gender and employment within creative writing and composition. Although this study employed feminist methodology and means of representation, there is still reluctance – both on my part as the researcher and the part of the participants – to speak to these issues. Suggestions for the improvement of teaching creative writing made by the participants are in line with feminist theories of writing and pedagogy, and point to the need for further exploration of the implementation of these ideas.