The story of my early literacy is a story of successful mimicry. I learned to read when I was two; I read at a sixth-grade level at age five; I subsequently skipped first grade. My mother claims this rapid progress was made possible by plopping me in front of the television each morning, where I quietly watched *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company*. I mimicked the sounds of the letters and repeated after Bert and Ernie, and Morgan Freeman’s “Easy Reader,” until I had perfectly matched their words. I then learned to write the same way—watch, practice, and repeat, first the “big” letters, then the little ones. And so I became literate through a careful and purposeful routine of absorption, assumption, emulation, simulation, as do most other children.

As I got a bit older, I searched high and low for reading material that would engage me outside of school. In our house, however, the only available texts were magazines like *Woman’s Day* or *TV Guide*; ours was not a house held up by bookshelves. Lacking any good literature to dive into, a favorite *TV Guide* activity of mine was to practice the “art test” found in the back of each issue; this coincided with my brief belief that I was more of an artist than a writer. Those of a certain age will remember the test: draw a perfect replica of one of two sketches provided, usually a turtle or a pirate, and then send the drawing to the “Art School” and have it be judged. The ad promised that on the basis of your determined talent, you could be eligible for highly selective admission to this “school,” which I believe was a high-profit, mail-order enterprise located in California.

I practiced drawing that turtle over and over (I was never very good at sketching people, so I eschewed the pirate). Who knows how many hours I poured over the edges of the beak, the shape of the eyes. All the while, it never occurred to me that if I simply laid paper over the advertisement and traced the turtle, I would have the perfect replica that the contest required. After all, my older sister had won a competition in the ninth grade by reproducing exactly the cartoon dog Snoopy as part of
an advertisement she had designed for a local insurance company. Such reproduction, I was taught, could, and perhaps should, be done. We did not worry over copyright infringement or artists' rights. We did not speak of “authenticity.” Still, instead of taking the easier route to simulation (the tracing route), I repeatedly labored over my own inferior yet “original” take on the picture, which of course was, in truth, far from original.

This snippet of my childhood experiences illustrates a cultural and historical backdrop against which to interrogate the notion of “original” versus “copy,” as well as the ways in which authorship shapes our own identity formations. As much as our college writing students are sometimes baffled by the nuances of authorship—when one can/should/must quote; when one cannot/should not/must not assume ownership of an idea, word, or phrase; who can/can not/will not be an author—my sister and I were equally oblivious to the differences between “original” effort and rote replication. This distinction, when stripped of its linguistic and social nuances and repositioned as a key issue in higher education, and in the first-year classroom in particular, becomes the dichotomy of “writing” versus “plagiarism.” However, this apparently oppositional relationship may be far less clear-cut than it appears.

Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune’s article, “Toward a New Content for Writing Courses: Literary Forgery, Plagiarism, and the Production of Belief,” proposes an alternate, insightful take on the many more elemental complications of original in the production of visual and written texts. I hope to extend here the conversation begun by Robillard and Fortune, specifically exploring their examination of forgery and legitimacy as part of the functioning of simulation and replication in the learning process, and in the creation of student authors. Robillard and Fortune call for “introducing into . . . curricula an attention to forgery and plagiarism as a means of drawing out key issues central to the production of belief in writing” (188); I would like to consider, as part of their theory, how that critical belief—in the text, in one’s own authorial agency—is formulated in traditional schooling and complicated by the paradoxical role that reproducibility plays in our culture at large.

Surely I was being asked, in that art test, to be a plagiarist, in both competing senses of the word; I was, using common dictionary definitions, practicing both “close imitation” (studying and copying the image,
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exactly as it appeared) and doing so in an “unauthorized” manner (putting my name on it, and failing to secure permission from the original artist). Yet instead of being punished for this traditionally transgressive act, I would be rewarded. Surely my sister, in winning that newspaper contest (and providing that insurance company with fee-free graphic design), was also rewarded for illegally reproducing a licensed character in the name of a commercial contest, without checking with Charles Schultz first. While these exercises in reproduction may have demonstrated our relative talents for mimicry (hers superior, mine poor), in no way did these feats demonstrate our talents as “artists.” This, at least, would be the traditional view: art is original, the culmination of a vision of the world, the property of one mind/hand/eye. Art is, well, art: few can create it, let alone possess the aesthetic to try.

However, according to Robillard and Fortune, there is a way in which mimicry like mine and my sister’s can be viewed as a separate genre of authorship (or artistry)—a type of writing (or textual production, more broadly) which, backed by belief in the legitimacy of that product, may be viewed as authorial activity. Robillard and Fortune argue that at the heart of both forgery and plagiarism is the concept of belief. When a writer forges a work, he or she is working to persuade readers that the text is an authentic representation of someone else’s work. When a writer plagiarizes, he or she is working to persuade readers that the text is an authentic representation of his or her own work. Both processes are, more so than straightforward writing, consciously dependent on the production of belief. It is precisely when the plagiarized text is revealed as a plagiarized text or a forged text is revealed as a forged text that the beliefs on which readers based their evaluations become exposed. Plagiarism and forgery uniquely accentuate the complex factors outside a text that contribute to a text’s legitimacy. (187)

Further, Robillard and Fortune assert that the division between imitation and forgery is largely controlled by our culture’s authorization of the former over the latter. They remind readers that “imitation remains for many a valuable pedagogy while forgery is shunned as a kind of anti-writing completely irrelevant to the work of writing instruction” (192). These two types of “anti-writing” interestingly stand in gross opposition
to one another, although each is treated as a quasi-criminal offense. Plagiarism allows an individual to gain—if momentarily, until he or she is exposed—the coveted status of author. One may covet this status for any number of reasons: financial gain, social gain, academic/institutional gain, or all of the above. Forgery requires complete negation of authorship, yet for the individual forging the document or text, the satisfaction of creation, of successful mimicry, remains intact. Forgers create an internal agency, for themselves; they have replicated the master’s work, and in doing so have become the master.

Nowhere, certainly, is the odd triangular relationship among imitation, forgery, and plagiarism more clearly enacted than in the writing classroom, especially the creative writing classroom. Like my mimicry of the letters and sounds on *Sesame Street,* so too was I encouraged, in undergraduate and graduate creative writing classes, to mimic the style, tone, and literary devices employed by “published” or “famous” writers. Creative writers, by and large, are taught the principles of “good” fiction and poetry through an onslaught of models; many creative writing textbooks talk far less about the actual work of writing (or textual production) and rely much more heavily on illustrations of finished work; published poems and short stories mean to “show” the student how it’s done, sometimes to a fault. It is difficult to get around *some* lesson-by-example, however. Indeed, writing teachers continually preach to students that “good writers are good readers,” or some variant of that old saying. But many a young writer is encouraged, through classroom exercises or via direct orders from a thesis advisor, to try to imitate a particularly canonical or well-received writer under discussion in the course. Some instructors even ask students to pretend they are Shakespeare and write a sonnet in his name. In doing so, students transition from authors to forgers quite seamlessly, and they often find great pleasure in this shift. They additionally gain some sense of what it feels like to be a “great” author as well as receive praise for inhabiting this identity.

Because I was initially trained as a creative writer, my pedagogy is heavily informed by this subculture’s valuation of mimicry. In an introduction to rhetoric course that I occasionally teach, I ask students to formulate arguments masquerading as a popular star or public figure in order to concentrate on the skill of creating a believable *voice* and to
understand the perspective of another—how another rhetor might think about a problem. I assign a similar exercise in my introductory poetry writing courses—asking students to write a persona poem in the diction, syntax, and style of a particular character or star. Such imitation, as Robillard and Fortune point out, is widely accepted as part of the learning process because it helps students realize "the writing patterns of discourse not present in the model being imitated but valued in the culture to which [the writer] addresses the writing" (191–92). Such writing " impersonates texts already assigned cultural value," especially when the finished product closely resembles a canonical work or cultural artifact (191). In the case of a persona poem, I would argue that the "text" includes the speaker's identity—the originator of the value, the producer of capital. The path, however, from assigning this kind of work for the purposes of cultivating knowledge of various points of view and simply appropriating another's work, eliminating said person's point of view entirely, is perhaps a slippery one indeed for developing college writers.

Students imitate authors upon whom our culture has bestowed capital and agency in order that they might someday themselves gain these ancillary rewards of talent. The slippage comes, thus, in the how of this transference: how can a young writer achieve cultural agency, or perceived prestige, if he or she lacks the ability to go beyond the mimicry that is the first step in authorial transformation? An even larger problem, however, is the product itself. In a culture fueled by replication and simulation, wherein do we locate the "original," especially in research-based student writing, which is supposed to exhibit that heralded "conversation" between text(s) and writer, between published author(s) and student author?

To simulate is not simply to copy, but to believe in the innate value of the simulation, the reified simulacra. Jean Baudrillard, in his famous essay "The Precession of Simulacra," asserts that "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (Simulacra and Simulation 3). Further, "simulation... stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value" (6). To put simulation in the context of Robillard and Fortune's assertion about forgery and belief, once a forger completes his or her replication of the piece of art (or for a writer who
plagiarizes, the piece of writing), the replication is rooted entirely in the value of the original, in Bourdieu's terms, its cultural capital. Were observers/patrons to withdraw their interest in the original artist's work, the simulated text or object would lose its entire value.

At the same time, when exposed as a "fake," a product of forgery, the belief in the originality of the forged text/document/product collapses, even if its principle features are identical to those of the original artist's work. The forger then must assume the role of believer in revaluing the piece of forgery for audience consumption. In Baudrillard's terms, the forger substitutes "the signs of the real for the real, . . . deterring every real process via its operational double" (2). The original piece of art (or writing) no longer means in the way it did when it stood alone, in a prior history when it had no double. Simulation consequently erases the notion of "original," especially in a culture that sustains itself via the mechanism of replication. For Baudrillard, the "copy" is what thrives in the world. We are bound by the value of our reproductions, to the point that Baudrillard ultimately asserts there is no "original" or "real."

However, investing meaning via belief is a tricky process—especially when the agent of belief is an individual with lesser cultural capital him or herself, producing a text without much independent use value (outside the setting of the writing classroom). As Robillard and Fortune point out, "Student texts carry relatively little cultural capital; such texts must produce belief in readers without the benefit of preestablished legitimizing mechanisms except insofar as the instructor alone is a legitimizing mechanism" (186). Robillard and Fortune argue that instead of re-investing in these student texts, thereby providing some of that capital, that "legitimacy" which sustains belief, "composition and rhetoric specialists . . . ignore the concept of symbolic capital in favor of a discourse of immorality, transgression, and crime" (190). Hence, when students engage in textual production and go outside the prescribed lines of authorship (forgery, plagiarism), their texts, already lacking societal value, become re-valued as negative production—that is, as fraudulent documents, criminal acts.

Gaining academic legitimacy is a hard-earned process for student writers, especially in the mixed-message setting of the college classroom.
Gerald Graff has argued in Beyond the Culture Wars that faculty and programs simultaneously value and stringently promote study of and proper reference to the tangible record of the arts and humanities (the canon) while also demanding “originality” in thought and action (writing) from students (7). However, Graff notes that “nobody is born knowing how to talk and write Intellectualspeak” even though teachers imagine that students will gain this skill “through osmosis” (75). He asserts that “in a paradoxical way . . . the more we try to protect the teaching of literature itself from the ‘interference’ of criticism and theory, the more customers we produce for Cliffs Notes” (76). Similarly, Cheryl Geisler argues that academia is shaped by “the great divide between expert and layperson” (113), which requires that scholarship serve mainly to “redress” the misconceptions that the general public holds about topic X or Y (113). Student writers, such as Geisler’s research subject Janet, are unfamiliar with the process of “talking back” in writing; Janet and others like her have been “dominated by the ‘saying’ of others” in the early years of school, such that it is an intricate process to get the “‘I’ and others . . . on stage together” in college writing (122). Conflicting educational signals about present and past textual production and writing practices ultimately result in student authorship anxiety.

Baudrillard asserts that such double-reliance on the act of simulation and the over-valuation of history/tradition in our culture also dictates critical actions and motives within the university. As the “exchange of signs (of knowledge, of culture)” between faculty and students historically is “a doubled collusion of bitterness and indifference” (155), it follows that the end product of this exchange will fail to hold any agreed-upon cultural value, even though such a product will be universally desired:

The values of the university (diplomas, etc.) will proliferate and continue to circulate . . . they will spiral without referential criteria, completely devalorized in the end, but that is unimportant: their circulation alone is enough to create a social horizon of value, and the ghostly presence of the phantom value will only be greater, even when its reference point (its use value, its exchange value, the academic “work force” that the university recoops (sic)) is lost. (155)
Let us go back to that turtle of my childhood for a moment. Even though the art school was obviously a sham operation, kids like me (and maybe some really gullible adults) were motivated to gain acceptance, and maybe transform their identities, via the submission of a sketch. The promise of recognition—in this case, the promise of an art school diploma that would verify artistic capability—was motivation for entering the contest, and ultimately paying the tuition required. Replace the turtle with a piece of academic writing; replace the fly-by-night art school with an accredited, respectable university. The end point—for which students work, sometimes blindly and almost certainly motivated by the "social horizon of value"—is a college degree, even though the degree itself is a symbol of something upon which faculty and students, ultimately, cannot agree. Faculty believe degrees symbolize intellectual accomplishment; students believe that degrees are at least at some core level assurances of financial stability. The reproduction and proliferation of degrees are backed by a similar process of reproduction of texts and documents which will make the degree happen.

And this entire process is backed by belief—belief that even though individual pieces of work do not matter, the end result (degree) does; belief that continual reproduction, simulation, emulation will result in a financial good that has no tangible correlative but has tremendous market and cultural capital; belief that the recipient of a college degree has transformed him or herself into a person of value. Robillard and Fortune argue that belief itself is what drives whole-text plagiarism, even in portfolio-based pedagogies, in that

belief in the value of a text is dependent on factors outside the text—on a constellation of documents that together comprise the processes that compositionists depend upon as evidence of student writing’s authenticity. When students work backward to create the process of the absent, anonymous author of the texts they turn in, they demonstrate to us that we have been successful in teaching that writing is about process. They’ve repurposed our central concept. (205)

Such "repurposing" is the critical connection between forgery and plagiarism—the "work[ing] backward" to create a trail of documenta-
tion—evidence, if you will, that the final text produced is real, legitimate, authentic, *original*. I am reminded of a student whom I encountered in my second semester of full-time teaching, a young, intelligent man who produced such a "repurposed" portfolio. He went to the trouble of submitting "notes" and "drafts" of his final research essay, going through the draft workshop process with fellow students who quietly pointed out, in peer workshops, the many inconsistencies between his own writing and that of the drafts and revision. I put "drafts" and "notes" in quotes because they were fabricated documents themselves; the paper was downloaded from the Internet and in no way modified or re-imagined by my student. The paper was a "legitimate" text (a published research article), but it was not, of course, my student's text—so it was not "legitimate" in the context of our course. However, this student cleverly exposed the fault lines in blind use of portfolio-based pedagogy. He boldly challenged me to see that a collection of written documents does not (always) an "author" make.

In considering this student and the ways in which portfolios themselves can and sometimes do appear to students as just another means of "accumulat[ing] . . . relatively isolated documents" (Robillard and Fortune 195), I would also argue that *identity* is reformulated through both whole-text plagiarism and forgery. Forgers obviously give up their own true identities in order to be subsumed under the identity of the author or artist whose work they seek to replicate. Whole text-plagiarism also involves an erasure of identity, in that a writer who lays claim to the entire text of another assumes a *false* identity for him or herself as well—the title of "author." Actual authors who are complicit in these transactions—those who write papers and sell them to the paper mills, as well as those sometimes well-intentioned friends and relatives who write papers for the student in order to "help out"—are engaging in an act of forgery themselves. The well-meaning friends seek to produce a "quality" piece of writing that bears some resemblance to the student's work in order to be passed without suspicion. The paper mill authors *know* that their work only exists to be downloaded and taken, formulated again and again as the core of a false identity.

As Neal Bowers has detailed in his book *Words for the Taking*, identity formation may indeed be the key motivation for would-be writers
who plagiarize, especially, as noted earlier, creative writers. Bowers writes in detail as to how his poems were plagiarized by another man, a stranger who went by various names, including David Sumner, and who eluded detection for many years prior to Bowers’ own investigation. Sumner published many of Bowers’ poems in a wide variety of literary journals, sometimes republishing the same poem multiple times in different publications. Bowers also honestly and openly expresses his frustration with having his work plagiarized, noting that “bound up with my indignation and the feeling that my private life had been invaded was a wish for it all to go away” (29). Once Bowers catches up with David Sumner, Sumner writes a letter to Bowers and explains that he had compiled “probably two hundred poems” during his graduate school workshops and had, perhaps, inadvertently submitted some of them with his own name, and not the original authors’ names, attached. He expresses regret for “embracing and proliferating [Bowers’] genius as my own” (67–68). After researching Sumner’s publication history and seemingly sketchy personal history, Bowers sees through the evasiveness of the response, arguing that Sumner’s story accounts for how my poem may have come into his possession, how he may not have known the name of its true author, and why its title and smaller details were altered; but it does not explain how anyone could believe he wrote someone else’s poem. All of us wish, from time to time, we had written something we admire, though few of us are delusional enough to assume ownership. (70)

What I find interesting about Bowers’ experience is the way in which Robillard and Fortune’s theory of belief comes so strongly into play. Not only is Sumner plagiarizing Bowers’ poems (and the poems of others, such as Mark Strand); he is also using Bowers’ own “genius” identity to both justify and sanction his actions. Ultimately, it is not the poetry that Sumner seeks to emulate; according to his letter, it is the “genius” of Bowers, and other poets, that lures him into appropriating and reifying these poems to be published under his own name. Similarly, Bowers expresses anger of a violation of his “privacy” more than his written work; he also labels appropriation of others’ work as “delusional,” alluding to the presence of a personality disorder that is based in habitual emula-
Sumner’s plagiarism of Bowers’ poems seeks to ride the line between whole-text plagiarism and forgery in that he slightly modifies the poems to suit his own stylistic standards (alterations which Bowers finds sub-par to the original) and puts his name on them, yet he also capitalizes on the cultural capital of Bowers’ and others’ work—taking the work of high-profile poets whose work is widely read, rather than an obscure, unpublished poem. In other words, Sumner is not simply “lazy,” unwilling to do his own writing, as is the accusation against many students who plagiarize. Sumner is highly selective, and industrious. He does not just want to be published; he wants to use the work of particular authors whom he admires in order to achieve publication status equal to theirs. Bowers observes that plagiarism of poems is akin to “the creative process itself [being] mocked” (14) and laments that his non-sympathetic colleagues believe that “plagiarism really is a pat on the back and a boost to the ego” (42–43), something which we might link to motivations of the forger. Yet Bowers is also keenly aware of the role identity played in his case—especially after he realizes that David Sumner’s name is actually David Jones; the real David Sumner (a surgeon) points out that “one’s name is part of one’s identity” and asks that newspaper reports of Bowers’ case eliminate references to his name (qtd. in Bowers 133). Bowers notes the “perverse irony” of a plagiarist going so far as to take someone else’s name; in the context of Robillard and Fortune’s argument, such an action seems a natural outgrowth of the belief system within which plagiarism and forgery operate.

This intertwining of valuation and belief—in both the illusive “original” as well as the reified “copy” that forgers and plagiarists produce—is a critical step toward not only better understanding how and why students resist authorship vis-à-vis whole-text plagiarism, but also how pedagogy might further evolve to address this resistance. Robillard and Fortune ask us to take from their piece a few pedagogical cautions where plagiarism, authorship, and the teaching of writing are concerned, among them that process-based pedagogy alone is not the answer to avoiding or discouraging plagiarism among student writers. Instead, we must provide a much broader context for the act of writing itself—one which, I submit,
also gives significant attention to the slippery terms *copy* and *original*, cognizant of Baudrillard's seemingly simple but intricately layered observations of these phenomena.

The reproduction of texts (whether written or visual, or a combination thereof) is the very backbone of our culture. As such, I agree with Katherine Valentine when she argues that plagiarism "becomes plagiarism as part of a practice that involves participants' values, attitudes, and feelings as well as their social relationships to each other and to the institutions in which they work" (89–90; emphasis added). Valentine argues for teaching students to understand plagiarism as "negotiation" (90), given the value-laden context in which one becomes a plagiarist. As writing teachers, we are in the always-already act of composing—forward, backward, and in the continual present. Whether these negotiations of belief will ultimately produce student writers who believe in their own authorial talents, and who believe in not only the value of their own texts, but also the value of their own identities—formulated by sometimes dystopic, eschatological motivations that call into question the efficiency of replication ingrained in our schooling—remains to be seen.

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**Works Cited**


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Rhetorical Work: Social Materiality, Kairos, and Changing the Terms

Libby Miles

With his article "Redefining Work and Value for Writing Program Administration," Bruce Homer builds a crucial argument for the field: that to affect real change, *we must change the terms of the conversation*. Homer’s work is a call to act; in his formulation, it is now time for us to change the terms of our own valuation. I agree, wholeheartedly.

Homer illustrates how current discourses around writing program administration (WPA) “contribute to the debasement of both WPA work and the work of composition generally” (163). In Homer’s analysis, we undermine ourselves not only by accepting but also by promoting the means through which we have allowed our worth to be evaluated by others. In teaching and in scholarship, those invested in the field of rhetoric and composition tend to exalt the collaborative, the social. And yet, Homer notes, we undermine those very principles when we “participate in commodifications of the work of composition that operate to the detriment of its value in the economies in which those commodities circulate” (163). Homer demonstrates our complicity through his analysis of three types of WPA-centered discourse: a position statement on "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration" sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators; posts to *WPA-L*, a