



Away from Workshops of Empire: Reinventing Creative Writing for the 21st Century World

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The first Creative Writing program in the United States, The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, commonly known as the Iowa Workshop, was founded in 1936. Since then, the teaching of Creative Writing has expanded exponentially in the country. There were 244 Creative Writing MFA and 50 Creative Writing PhD programs in the united states in 2016 (Brady). Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) claims in its 2017 annual report to have served over 550 writing programs across North America and beyond each year. Amy Brady reported in 2018 that a total of 20,000 applicants applied to MFA programs that year and more than 3,000 MFAs are “minted” every year (Brady). The AWP annual conference brings together more than 12,000 writers and professionals and more than 2,000 presenters present in more than 550 different sessions (AWP).

This development in America has had a direct influence on educational institutions around the world, and, as author Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, “the American way of teaching writing is beginning to spread globally.” There’s no data available on the exact number of programs that teach Creative Writing around the world, but it is not hard to see that Creative Writing instruction has spread around the world at a fast pace, to universities in Hong Kong and India to Australia, the UK and Africa. This “American way of teaching writing” that is spreading around the world is the way of the workshop, which, as Eric Bennett argues in his 2015 book *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, And American Creative Writing During the Cold War*, is a construct of the “empire” perpetuating a certain ideology. Nguyen rightly contends that the workshop pedagogy is “a model of pedagogy that is also an object lesson in how power propagates and



conceals itself,” and this pedagogy is being followed around the world “with all its unexamined assumptions.”

In this presentation I contend that, given the epistemologies of Creative Writing’s signature pedagogy (Leahy, Donnelly)—the workshop—the Creating Writing programs that are burgeoning around the world need to be mindful of the ideologies and assumptions the traditional Creative Writing workshop propagates.

The Workshop and Its Discontents

Creative Writing in America has its roots in a course in composition (Advanced Composition at Harvard), the progressive education movement, and writers’ colonies, according to D. G. Myers. In essence, the teaching of Creative Writing was a new humanist project, the idea that teaching and studying great books (of literature) was the path to knowledge, and ultimate salvation. Paul Engler, Wallace Stegner, and Norman Foerster, perhaps the most important figure in the history of Creative Writing instruction in America, were all committed humanists; it was their faith in literature that made space for Creative Writing in the university. Norman Foerster said that creative writing was a way of studying literature from inside, i.e. studying literature by writing it.

The workshop was established as Creative Writing’s default pedagogy in the 1920s as a result of the progressive education movement’s enormous faith in children’s ability to learn from nature and on their own. The workshop made space for students to come forth with their own ideas, hence become “creative,” and learn. This naturally helped confine their practices to what they—the classroom participants—thought and believed conducive to their learning, and New Criticism readily provided them a tool. As a result, the workshop helped New Humanists, who established Established Creative Writing in the university, steer the program toward the personal instead of the social and political, toward the individual author’s “earnest craft” instead of theory and ideology.

And creative writing “gain[ed] a distinct character after 1945” (Bennett 16) as the “empire” saw opportunity to manipulate its pedagogy to serve its own ends. Eric Bennett argues that in around the 1950s the workshops at Iowa and seminars at Stanford “heralded a new academic discipline created by men who not only loved literature but also reacted to the pressure of political anxieties, felt the lure of philanthropic money,



and placed enormous faith in the role literature could play in the peace that followed World War II” (32). Bennett further argues that the “philanthropic face of Standard Oil” from the Rockefeller Foundation “ignited programs in education and public health around the globe” to contain forces that might “endanger a national and international atmosphere conducive to stable markets” (58-9). “Anxieties about totalitarianism, the containment of Communism, the repudiation of American radicalism, the newly powerful mass culture, and the nature of literature all contributed to the contours of the emerging discipline” (Bennett 8), and it all got epitomized in its signature pedagogy, the workshop. The workshop became a space for the discussion of techniques in terms of writing skills and the personal in terms of the subject matter for the writers.

This helped turn the teaching of the writing of literature into a “pacifist” enterprise, resulting in the production and consumption of a specific kind of literature. McGurl explains this phenomenon in his book *The Program Era*. And this development and this consequence of Creative Writing programs (namely, the workshop, and a synonym for the MFA program) has become a subject of critique in recent years.

Anis Shivani sums up the discontent about the new development in his near “infamous” book among MFAs, *Against the Workshop: Provocations, Polemics, Controversies*, thus: “Contemporary American fiction has become cheap counseling to the bereaved bourgeois. Its scope is restricted too much to the trivial domestic sphere. It promotes grief, paralysis, inaction: a determinism for the post-politics society, where ideology has no place” (12). He continues, “The vacuum in political ideology is being filled today by an anti-politics, or personality and charisma, leading to gradual submission to authoritarianism among all potential sources of resistance” (19). Shivani declares, “The MFA programs are killing writing in this country” (19), and claims, “[A]ll American fiction is minimalist in a sense—there is no European or Asian or Latin American-style maximalist pursuit of the indefinable” (23).

The MFA (hence, the workshop) has come under fire from authors coming from outside the “mainstream” (i.e. white) American authors. Junot Diaz, the 2008 Pulitzer winner, lambasts the the lack of attention in workshops to issues that matter most to authors of other races and cultures. He writes in a *The New Yorker* article, “In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing—at



all. Never got any kind of instruction in that area—at all. Shit, in my workshop we never talked about race except on the rare occasion someone wanted to argue that “race discussions” were exactly the discussion a serious writer should not be having.” Diaz impersonates the standard, “mainstream,” white containment, “I don’t want to write about race, I want to write about real literature.” That “real literature” is the anti-political voice of the workshop. He quotes one of the MFAs complaining about one of her peers saying, “Our workshop is about writing, not political correctness.” The US exported MFA/Creative Writing program does not have what Diaz says most MFAs in the US, without diverse faculty, lack—“the tradition of resistance.”

Nguyen rightly takes an issue with the signature pedagogy, and the ideology it propagates, which is “the nobility of craftsmanship”—he qualifies it—“physical (not intellectual) labor—and masculinity.” This ‘nobility of craftsmanship’ is supposedly achieved by excluding “political and historical concerns” that Nguyen would be worried about as he participated in workshops.

The Creative Writing that’s been practiced in America and is being exported is the workshop, which equals craft, which equals textual analysis and study and the “surface manipulation of language” (Mayers) at the the cost of bigger issues of literary study and production. Though not explicitly acknowledged, New Criticism is the pedagogy of the workshop, in which, Nguyen sums up, “Politics and the spirit of collectives would not be in fashion.” Nguyen continues, “What would be in fashion: voice, experience, and showing rather than telling. So it is that workshops typically focus on strategies of the writing “art” that develop character, setting, time, description, theme, voice and, to a lesser extent, plot.” This is codified, practiced, and expressed as “craft” and/or “technique.”

Creative Writing at Ashoka University: An Anecdotal Look

Ashoka, a new Liberal Arts University in India, offers a minor in Creative Writing. The program was designed by an MFA graduate from a US university (Personal Interview). The program offers four difference courses in Creative writing: Introduction or Creative Writing (2 genres), The Craft of Writing (genre specific—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction), Creative Writing Workshop (“A laboratory for working writers”), and Critical



Thinking Seminar in Creative Writing. A cursory look at the course descriptions will tell us instantly that they are not different from US creative writing programs, i.e. they explicitly function within the ideology of the workshop and tend to teach the craft of writing.

The description of the first course, “Introduction to Creative Writing,” includes, “The emphasis will be on generating a lot of raw material, and advancing a chunk of this work toward completion.” It adds, “At the end of the course, students will learn how to look at literature from the point of view of a practitioner and apply writing techniques to a variety of rhetorical situations.” The description of the second course, “The Craft of Writing,” says, “Exercises in the technique of writing, such as rhythm, metre, point of view, voice, narrative, pacing, will be combined with discussion of student writing and texts selected by the instructor.” “Creative Writing Workshop” is described as “a laboratory for working writers” which implicitly focuses on technique, as the main task will be to “write in each class, share new work with peers and help each other to develop early drafts with honest, critical feedback.” The last course is titled interestingly, “Critical Thinking Seminar in Creative Writing,” but the goals and pedagogy are not any different (of course, it is yet another Creative Writing course): “The goal is to reflect on writing methods, techniques, and reading literature with the eyes of a writer.” (“Minor in Creative Writing”)

My purpose here is not to fault the program in any way, but to exemplify how the US Creative Writing is being replicated abroad. Here, as we can see, the focus is on craft, the technique; there is no room for theory of literature and literary production, issues of socio-cultural and political ramifications. In the true fashion of New Humanism, students are treated as individuals and they are encouraged to develop their skill sets to write their stories, at the most with the help of each other; in essence, they are functioning within the epistemologies of the workshop pedagogy, with its roots in the progressive education movement that relied on the individual’s experiment with truth and inherent talent, in the fashion of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s idea of education as expounded in *Emile, or On Education*.

So the question today is—what do we want from Creative Writing? Do we really want to practice the traditional Creative Writing pedagogy unexamined? As this brief



historical and theoretical discussion shows, by sticking to the pedagogy of the traditional workshop we are only helping certain political ideology and power to prevail and doing disservice to our students.

A Way Forward

Encouragingly, though, alternative models of the workshop are emerging in other parts of the world, namely in Australia and to an extent in the United Kingdom, though U.S. Creative Writing programs were instrumental in the establishment of their programs too.

Unlike the American model, The Australian model (if we can call it a model at all), as outlined by Paul Dowson in his book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, erases the line that exists between Creative Writing and literature, and presents Creative Writing not as a solely craft practice devoid of theoretical and “intellectual” dimensions. Dowson contends that Creative Writing should become the new torch-bearer of the English department creative writers should be new public intellectuals. Hence, the workshop in this model functions very differently than the traditional U.S. creative writing workshop.

Dawson details, “Creative Writing has an interdisciplinary presence in Australia, and would find itself covered by three of the ten electoral sectors of the Australian Academy of the Humanities: English; Cultural and Communication Studies; and Fine Arts” (158). What distinguishes the Australian model, as outlined by Dawson, is the program’s scholarly dimension. Creative writing is no less academic and theoretical enterprise than any other university discipline; it is not removed from literature, and it doesn’t limit to New Critical analysis of literature and techniques of mastering the craft of writing, devoid of socio-political and cultural dimensions of literary production and consumption.

As such, Dawson places creative writers squarely at the center of the university’s intellectual life. He imagines of a New Humanities in which Creative Writers assume the position of public intellectuals. It’s possible by not only placing literature at the center of what creative writers practice but also making Creative Writing an interdisciplinary enterprise. What makes it all possible is the place of theory in Creative Writing. He



argues, “Creative Writing Needs to answer the critique of authorship and of the category of literature offered by Theory, rather than simply rejecting this critique as unhelpful or deleterious to literary culture” (161). He suggests three models of theory application in creative writing: a) integration model, b) avant-garde model, and c) political model. Of the three, the political model gives Creative Writing the most radical departure from “craft” based writing pedagogy. He writes, I quote him at length:

The focus [of this model] is not on formal experimentation but on the pragmatics of production and reception within the framework of Cultural Studies. In this model of teaching, the workshop is not a neutral zone for the development of literary craft, but a site at which critiques of the poetics of representation and analysis of the circulation of literature across different institutions become part of the ethical and professional training of students who will emerge, not as writers who know the avenues of commercial publication, but as professionals who have a critical awareness of the power relations at work in the field of writing. (172)

As such, he espouses the “sociological poetics” of creative writing in which we not only discuss craft but also employ “oppositional criticism precisely to interrogate the assumptions about literature underpinning these responses and then to consider how the work in question differs and interrelates with a range of non-literary (scholarly, political, journalistic, legal) discourses of gendered power relations” (206).

How much is Dowson’s model being practiced in Australian Creative Writing programs? We need to do a more extensive study see the exact picture, but a quick look at the University of Sydney’s Master of Creative Writing program shows a good promise. The overview of the program states:

Explore and develop your skills in fiction, non-fiction, poetry and other forms of writing. Gain a deep understanding of theories and histories of writing and develop the core skills of writing, structuring and editing. We give you intimate access to Sydney’s literary life, including a constant calendar of readings, performances, major literary and cultural events, and a host of celebrated visitors. (“Master”)

The UK model comes closer to the Australian model in that it also promotes critical approach to practicing Creative Writing. Diane Donnelley explains it in terms of



UK Creative Writing programs' requirement of a substantial critical introduction to accompany a creative dissertation, like in Australia. (One important thing to note here: many Creative Writing programs in the US are also requiring it progressively). Michelene Wandor, in her book *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else*, claims, "Despite the immediate influence of the US, explicitly evident in the MA at UEA in 1970, and still a prevalent presence, the preconditions for CW were very different in the UK" (81), and she credits its "social and educational histories" (81) for it. Wandor claims, "CW's methodology may have come to us from America, but the UK had its own distinctive influence and cultural formations, which raise rather differently inflected questions" (4). Wandor also places theory and literature squarely at the center of Creative Writing to distinguish it from the program in America.

Conclusion

The expansion of the teaching of Creative Writing at universities around the world is an encouraging and a welcome development. Because of Creative Writing's potential to reconfigure the teaching of literature and its potential impact on our students' creative and critical faculties and the socio-culture life of a society as a whole, this developed should be embraced with open hands. However, the traditional workshop pedagogy that's been practiced after the American Creative Writing model, needs to be reconsidered, and more space should be made to theoretical and critical understanding of literature production and consumption instead of continuing to focus on craft and writing techniques, especially in the context of different literary traditions and heritages that students bring to Creative Writing classrooms around the world. The Australian model, as explained and proposed by Paul Dawson, is a way forward for the teaching of Creative Writing around the world.



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