BLACK STUDIES, ALL STUDIES

What Can Black Studies Teach Creative Writing?

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Black studies, unlike nearly every field that preceded its entry into academe, is the direct product of dynamic and sustained social, political, and cultural activism and revolt. The early pioneers in and advocates for the academic study of African-American life and culture were social and cultural activists. They included W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, and St. Clair Drake, among others. As intellectual trailblazers, particularly in DuBois's case, they eventually espoused political radicalism as well.

It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, that Black studies programs and departments were officially inaugurated, several decades after an era defined by the rise of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, the spread of McCarthyism and the suppression of leftist organizations and figures in the United States, and growing social conformism and political conservatism. Black students emerged empowered from this atmosphere, which also included the civil rights protests in which many of their peers served as leaders and participants. Their work was influenced by the rhetoric of Black equality and liberation, nationalism, power, and cultural autonomy that Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and later Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka, and many others had espoused over the course of the late nineteenth and early and mid-twentieth centuries. A series of popular uprisings, in Newark, Los Angeles, and other cities across the North, also incited Black student protests and uprisings at universities and colleges across the country.

The protesters' demands of colleges and universities usually included practical steps, such as increased admissions of Black applicants, programs for these students once they arrived on campus, and more Black faculty. They also recognized the pressing need for the formal, institutionalized study of Black life in all of its aspects, both for its own sake and as a counterweight to the racism and white supremacy that characterize the academy and all sectors of American life. Alongside pioneering Black scholars, critics, and artists, Black students realized that it was not enough to be objects of academic study—if that occurred at all, and at most institutions it did not. Instead, the student activists recognized the need for research and scholarship, informed by activism and social and political engagement, in order to engage Black people as the subjects of their own inquiry. Given the social justice–informed nature of the protests, the direct role of nonacademic discourse and the influence of nonacademic activists and reformers, many of the calls for Black studies departments also demanded an acknowledgement of academic research's connections to local, national, and international Black communities, and their broad array of concerns. Students centered African-Americans but included calls for research on and the study of Black people in Africa and across the diaspora, including the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe. To put it another way, Black student activists did not see themselves as separate from the Black communities from which they came, and Black studies, as it developed, would not be separate—or ever fully separable—from those communities either.

Creative writing programs and departments, on the other hand, had much different origins, which I will not fully rehearse here. Suffice it to say that the rebellions of the kind that produced Black studies played little part. Instead, as Eric Bennett has pointed out in *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, early graduate creative writing programs emerged in the middle of the twentieth century as part and parcel of the structures of authority and power that defined the Cold War. A wide swath of leading scholars, critics, and literary artists, in conjunction with US governmental figures and private foundations, advanced an anti-communist and anti-Soviet, as well as anti-totalitarian ideology. This assemblage viewed literature, and the novel in particular, as vital vehicles to inculcate the individualistic, liberal democratic ideological vision of US society across the globe. To put it rather bluntly, perhaps too much so, American literature, and the workshop, were instrumentalized and weaponized in the service of anti-communism. The main ethos and techniques of this template for the creative writing workshop—which would champion writing focused on the interior, private self and attentiveness to craft; and mostly bracket off overt discussion of politics, community, and ideology—have to a great degree carried through to today. This

has had significant effects not only on creative writing as a field, but on mainstream American literature writ large.

As undiscussed as it is, for many students and faculty members of color it is this template and approach to creative writing workshops that is most difficult. By its very nature, this template reinforces a narrow understanding of what literature and art are and do. This approach also silences minoritarian, dissident, and nonconforming voices—not just racial and ethnic voices, but also the voices of women, LGBTQIA individuals, religious minorities, differently abled writers, economically disadvantaged people, and so on. This template fosters the racist atmosphere, discourse, and attitudes that students and faculty of color are rightly criticizing. In far too many creative writing workshops, what values and beliefs are students steeping in and what are they being trained to write or being dissuaded from writing? Particularly in the face of a society currently in transition and crisis, as one might describe the United States? Particularly in the face of an imperiled globe characterized by rising nationalist and authoritarian movements, climate change, and the threat of thermonuclear war? Is this workshop model even viable anymore?

This is where I think Black studies, from its origins to its ongoing development as a field of study, might beneficially inform and invigorate creative writing programs going forward. At the most fundamental level, Black studies programs are a response to racism and white supremacy, and thus carry in their DNA a foundational anti-racism and class critique. As the field has expanded, it has engaged with areas of inquiry such as Black feminist studies, LGBTQIA and queer studies, disability studies, and other vital, emergent fields, transforming itself in the process. It would not be difficult to argue that while individual creative writing departments and programs—and more likely individual creative writing faculty—have adopted anti-racist practices, the field as a whole has not. In fact, it would not be a stretch to assert that outside of specific crises that make the national news or at least public precincts of social media, creative writing in academe still has a racism problem. Programs have yet to consider what the incorporation of anti-racism as a starting principle might look like and how it would reshape creative writing as a field. In this regard, creative writing could and ought to learn from Black studies and similar programs.

Moreover, Black studies departments have not completely severed their ties with Black communities. It is fair to say that the field has become increasingly institutionalized, and thus must necessarily attend to academe's many requirements of standardization and bureaucratization. Yet it also is the case that, even today, many Black studies scholars and students still feel a strong connection to the Black communities that have produced them, to those based in surrounding and nearby locales, and to Black people

throughout the United States and the globe. They also engage in a great deal of research and scholarship shaping the conversation in ways that improve and ameliorate the experiences of Black people. This is not to suggest that Black studies scholarship is or even should be viewed as instrumental, but rather to say that for Black studies as a discipline, "Black lives matter," and not just in a figurative sense.

How might this play out with regard to creative writing? One might ask with which communities, beyond the community of writers fostered by particular institutions and segments of the literary and publishing world, do many students in creative writing programs feel a connection, let alone a sense of duty? Is it that outside of specific programs—such as those that place faculty and students in elementary and secondary school classrooms, prisons, hospitals, hospices, and so forth—creative writing students are urged to sever connections with communities? Are they in turn asked to favor a neoliberal model in which writers are indebted only to themselves and their own careers and potential success? Are they only indebted to the banking and financial industries that finance them if they do not attend a fully funded program or receive a substantial scholarship? What would it mean for more creative writing programs to actively engage in a conversation with the nonacademic, nonliterary communities around them? How might this shape how faculty teach, and how students see the world and learn to write?

Black studies departments and programs are by their very nature political, even if they do not adhere to a singular, specifiable political ideology, because Black lives are inherently and unceasingly politicized in the United States and across the western hemisphere. Black studies has taken up the task of grappling with this fact, and with key questions of the Black past, present, and future. While individual departments and faculty members may not proclaim their own ideological and political stances in courses and classrooms, the field does not shy away from studying and analyzing how ideology and politics in material and discursive form shape American and Western society and lives, and more specifically Black societies and lives, from the micro to the macro levels, and have since the first Africans were brought to these shores in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What would happen if creative writing programs began to openly acknowledge the guiding ideologies and politics of writing in the United States? What ideologies color and shape US creative writing programs? How might that change how US literary history and production are taught in creative writing classes? How might it change how writers consider and engage politics and the political in their writing? At a basic level, what if creative writing programs actively pursued anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic and -transphobic, and anti-classist approaches as part of their writing pedagogy

and practices? What if they shifted from their current focus on the self toward a perspective that took into account neighboring local communities, as well as the larger society, and the planet? What if, instead of avoiding discussions of ideology and politics, they confronted both, and wrestled with their implications?

Lastly, Black studies is an interdisciplinary field. Comprising inquiry across the arts, humanities, and social sciences—history, literary and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, economics, linguistics, the natural and applied sciences—Black studies aims to offer a rich, often holistic, if never fixed, understanding of the Black world, in all its nuance and complexity. The training that students who major or minor as undergraduates in Black studies, or who pursue it at the graduate level, receive is thus marked by interdisciplinarity. Concomitant guidance aims to teach students how to understand and discuss the points of convergence and divergence, as well as the distinctive methodologies and protocols among the varying disciplines. While many creative writing programs, particularly at the undergraduate level, do encourage the study of multiple genres, most graduate programs are still more strictly tracked. What if creative writing programs, especially at the graduate level, expanded and encouraged more cross-genre study, ensuring that all genres were always part of the picture? What if they connected with other artistic fields—visual art, music, performance—and even humanistic ones? What would a graduate of such a creative writing program look like then, and how might this impact the work they created while in school and later sought to share with the world?

Many of these suggestions might run up against practical institutional considerations, but as someone linked to both disciplines, I feel compelled to raise them. These are but a few of the possibilities suggested by Black studies as a historical and contemporary model. It might be worth considering how creative writing, as a field and as a series of pedagogical approaches and set of practices, still tends to operate under the ethos established under the McCarthy era. Maybe if we did this work of revolt and transformation we might begin to see a new and more progressive society written into being.