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The Creative Precariat

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The Creative Precariat

A Review of *MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, edited by Chad Harbach

In the opening paragraphs of his introduction to *MFA vs. NYC*, *n+1* editor Chad Harbach asks us to read his collection “as a kind of jointly written novel—one whose composite heroine is the fiction writer circa 2014.” If such a heroine can be derived from the variety of aspirations and anxieties expressed in these pieces, then she is an over-intelligent and underemployed twenty-something narcissistic exhibitionist New Yorker living in Brooklyn, and she’s heterosexual, and she’s white. She is, in other words, Hannah Horvath, and she’s just been admitted to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, pinnacle of the pyramid scheme that propagated one of the two cultures pitted against each other in the title of this important book. The title is misleading, as these two cultures are less in combat than they are in a sort of uneasy collaboration; most of the contributors have spent time in both, shuttling between stints in one or more of the seemingly ever-expanding roster of MFA programs across the country (and, increasingly, the world) and sojourns in the city that remains home to all the major American publishing houses and literary agencies.

Harbach somewhat unaccountably claims that an affiliation between the writer and the university has always existed, but this is, strictly speaking, not true. Until the middle of the last century, American novelists, with very few exceptions, avoided American college campuses (and many avoided America *tout court*) as bastions of conservatism and conformity entirely unconcerned with developments in contemporary fiction. Writers were expected to be out in the world, not cloistered in the ivory tower; apprenticeships were in journalism, not in English departments. This all began to change after World War II, when, as we’ve recently been reminded by Mark McGurl’s groundbreaking *The Program Era*, creative writing programs, starting at the University of Iowa and quickly multiplying across the country, became the primary patrons of the literary arts in the United States. *MFA vs. NYC* appears in the widening wake of belated recognition that has been emerging in response to McGurl’s book, which has single-handedly inserted the historical term into our critical lexicon, sparking a long overdue discus-

sion among and between creative writers and literary scholars that is somewhat unevenly engaged in this collection.

MFA vs. NYC is tilted toward the creative writing side of this other divide (MFA vs. PhD), but within that community it offers a wide variety of contributions—from short reminiscences to long disquisitions, from book reviews to biographical studies, from manifestos to screeds—by a wide variety of contributors—from novelists to teachers to scholars to editors to agents to publicists. These contributions are organized into five sections—“MFA,” “NYC,” “The Teaching Game,” “Two Views on the Program Era,” and “The Great Beyond”—which helpfully provide a kind of cognitive map of the institutional locations, affective preoccupations, and socioeconomic anxieties that constitute the habitus of this loosely confederated community of writers and the people who work with and for them.

The collection opens congenially with a fifteen-point “mini-manifesto” by George Saunders extolling the virtues and conceding the liabilities of the contemporary creative writing program. Saunders’s “manifesto” is not only mini; it is also strikingly modest, and its ambivalence sets the tone for the contributions that follow. Two of his three opening points are short responses to the claim that “creative writing programs are bad,” the first countering that it only takes “one good example to disprove the generality” and the second following up with the questions “Which one?” and “When?” The remaining entries appear to be intended to offer Syracuse, at the very least, as “one good example,” but even these items are surprisingly defensive. Thus number five concedes that the “perils” of the workshop model are “many”; number seven opens by admitting that “there are, alas, a lot of problems with aspects of the creative writing program idea”; number eight reassures the reader that “you are not going to be doing this workshop crap forever”; number ten admits that “a CW program is neither necessary nor sufficient”; number eleven concedes that “there are probably too many CW programs”; and number twelve confesses that “there is something gross about a culture telling a bunch of people who are never going to be artists that they maybe are.” Saunders can only conclude that, “if [CW programs] suck when we do it wrong, let’s try not to do it wrong.”

A comparable combination of ambivalence and resignation is expressed by David Foster Wallace in a short piece excerpted from his longer 1988 article “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young.” After conceding that creative writing programs, economically speaking, can be a “sweet deal” for both teacher and student (assuming the student receives a fellowship), Wallace quickly affirms that, pedagogically speak-

ing, the “relation between fiction professor and fiction student has unhealthiness built right in.” This is because fiction writers want to write fiction, not teach it, and therefore “pupils represent artistic time wasted.” While fiction students also want to write fiction, this is not what they usually end up doing for a living, or even what they’re being trained to do in MFA programs. As Wallace both glibly and gloomily concludes, “The only thing a Master of Fine Arts degree actually qualifies one to do is teach...Fine Arts.” Originally published over twenty-five years ago, Wallace’s essay was intended to be cautionary, but given the high exponential multiplication of MFA programs since then, it doesn’t appear that anyone heeded his call. Rather, if this anthology is to be seen as representative, Wallace’s ambivalence has become internalized as the structure of feeling for fiction writers across the country: a resigned acceptance of the creative writing program as a necessary evil whereby an ever-expanding mass of mediocre writing subsidizes (while simultaneously threatening) a kernel of quality literary fiction.

Adding the insult of anti-intellectualism to the injury of ineffectiveness, Harbach has included in the MFA section Eric Bennett’s essay “The Pyramid Scheme,” which recently generated considerable controversy after being featured in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The term “pyramid scheme” was originally applied to creative writing programs by pioneering Iowa Writers’ Workshop poet Donald Justice, who was referring to the number of second-generation programs started by Iowa graduates, but Bennett deploys it in reference to Iowa’s renowned director in the eighties and nineties, Frank Conroy, for whom the pyramid was a pedagogical device conceived to absolve writers of the great sin of abstraction. Recklessly taking the part for the whole, Bennett tars the entire Program Era with his broad, dismissive brush, tracing the anti-intellectualism of the workshop phenomenon to the Cold War era of its origins, and particularly to its founding entrepreneur, Paul Engle. Bennett’s research on Engle is long overdue, but he is so determined to leverage his Harvard PhD against his Iowa MFA that he squanders the value of this research by subordinating it to a hackneyed critique that was never more than a half-truth. Its presence here only affirms the degree to which scholars and writers still seem unable to heed McGurl’s advice and “take the rise and spread of the creative writing program not as an occasion for praise or lamentation but as an established fact in need of historical interpretation.”

The MFA section concludes with one of the few statements from a writer of difference, Alexander Chee’s “My Parade,” which claims that, when it comes to “formula” fiction, Iowa is perceived as “the biggest

criminal of them all.” A queer Korean-American who moved to San Francisco and then to New York after graduating from college, Chee acknowledges that he originally applied to the Writers’ Workshop “as a cynic, submitting a story that included explicit gay sex, psychic powers, and the occult.” However, once he gets to the Workshop, Chee has a significant revelation: “Not only did no one try to make me write like Ray Carver, no one tried to make me write like anyone. No one even tried to make me write.” Indeed, it was not in the seminars but in the bars that Chee realized what the function of the creative writing program really is: “The bars of Iowa City we frequented had been frequented by writers for decades. Something was happening to us all, and we were all part of it, even the ones who wouldn’t speak to each other. It was a family.” The placement of Chee’s passage from cynicism to celebration at the conclusion of the MFA section appears intended to mitigate some of the ambivalence expressed in the contributions that precede it, but it is surely significant that belonging to a “community of writers” is more important than learning how to write. And it is worth underlining that, like so many of his peers, Chee quickly returned to New York City, which is also where the collection turns at this point.

The NYC section reveals why, despite all the critique, so many writers end up in creative writing programs: New York is too expensive for anyone without a trust fund or a blockbuster. We are offered some useful insights into the contemporary publishing field: literary agent Melissa Flashman explains what the industry means by a “platform” (so now I know what my agent meant when he said I don’t have one); publicist Jynne Martin insists that, in this age of social media saturation, “a publicist’s passion could make a difference in the life of an outstanding book”; and *Paris Review* editor Lorin Stein advises aspirants to “learn how to spit out boilerplate.” Together, these contributions establish how much the fate of a novel still depends on the social connections and business relations of the New Yorkers who bring it to market. But the real theme of this section (and, arguably, of the book as a whole) is summed up in the title of *n+1* editor Keith Gessen’s contribution: “Money (2006).” Gessen’s essay concludes the NYC section, and, to emphasize his subject’s importance, a sequel entitled “Money (2014)” opens the ensuing Teaching Game section. These two essays trace the arc of Gessen’s career from impecunious book reviewer for *New York* magazine to published novelist to adjunct professor at an unnamed, upstate liberal arts college. Though he feels eminently unqualified to teach, he admits that “it was nice to have a job.” Then he concludes, “but it felt precarious. It was precarious.”

Financial precariousness is the unifying theme of *MFA vs. NYC*. Thus in “Basket Weaving 101,” Maria Adelman provides us with revealing pie charts comparing her monthly spending in New York (\$3,421) and Charlottesville, Virginia (\$1,370); Emily Gould’s “Into the Woods” tells the story of how the author frittered away her book advance and then went into debt in order to complete the book; Jim Rutman’s revealingly titled “The Disappointment Business” reminds us that “a robust majority of all published books will not justify the advance paid by the publisher, even if that advance was a pittance, as it likely was”; and Jynne Martin parenthetically advises us that “no one should ever go into publishing to pay off credit cards.” As Ellen Litman succinctly summarizes in her contribution to the single-page section entitled “Advice”: “Don’t go into debt. Don’t go into debt. Don’t go into debt.” Her pithy mantra is followed by an only slightly longer contribution from Stephen Elliot, who emphatically states, “you should never go into debt to study creative writing.”

Interestingly, this advice directly precedes two reviews of *The Program Era*, a book that, among other things, helps explain why so many young Americans do in fact go into debt to get a degree that offers little promise for repayment. Unfortunately, neither of these reviews, both of which appeared in *The London Review of Books*, engages this explanatory element of *The Program Era*. Rather, both Elif Batuman and Fredric Jameson seem almost desperate to salvage “literature” from the creative writing programs they see as compromising it, if not in fact eclipsing it. Thus Batuman opens with a provocation—“The world of letters: does such a thing still exist?”—and concludes that “when ‘great literature’ is replaced by ‘excellent fiction,’ that’s the real betrayal of higher education.” Jameson’s review, revealingly titled “Dirty Little Secret,” willfully expands the specific “shame” McGurl associates with the workshop experience into a more general shame that all Americans apparently feel about the very existence of the creative writing program as such. He then proceeds to anchor his critique in a question—“Where is Faulkner?”—and concludes (with an implicit reference to Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*, in which Faulkner plays a major role) that Faulknerian fiction has generated a truly global genre in which “we glimpse, outside the confines of an American Program Era, the outlines of some wholly different world system of letters coming into being.” True to the tone of the anthology as a whole, neither critic can accept, much less celebrate, the Program Era, which, far from contracting, appears to be expanding across the globe. Unlike McGurl—apparently the only scholar willing to argue that the aesthetic value of American fiction has been enabled, not

compromised, by the writing workshop—these two reviews, and indeed all of the contributions to this volume, seem determined to maintain some ideal of the “literary” outside of, and indeed threatened by, the programs that were invented to maintain it.

Thus we end up with a paradox: an institution invented to protect and produce literature is seen as endangering it by the very writers maintaining and expanding the institution in the first place. *The Program Era* remains the best historical explanation of how this came to be, and it is worth briefly returning to its argument in order to contextualize this anthology, which has clearly emerged in response to it. As McGurl establishes early on, the ideology of the creative writing program works “to make populism and elitism indistinguishable.” And, he may well have added, it continuously fails in this endeavor, which accounts for the ambivalent tone of this collection. On the one hand, creative writing programs, more than the English departments that customarily house them, have sustained the privileged status of Literature with a capital “L” for at least half a century; on the other hand, their relentless expansion over that same period has been based in a philosophy of democratic access that inevitably dilutes, if it does not in fact undermine, the necessary exclusivity of any coherent doctrine of literary value.

This paradox is powerfully illustrated by the volume’s penultimate essay, Darryl Lorenzo Wellington’s amusing account of his stint as a judge for Amazon.com’s recent Breakthrough Novel Award. According to Wellington, “in no less than five of the twenty novels I slogged through, the lead character was a college English major who dead-ended upon graduation and supported him- or herself by working lowly service jobs.” This simple sentence succinctly indicates the relationship between the literary aspirations of so many young Americans and the socioeconomic contexts in which they are being realized or, more commonly, frustrated. The creative writing program as an institution exists at the intersection of contemporary neoliberalism and the creative class. The contributions to *MFA vs. NYC* reveal the degree to which the precariousness engendered by the former informs the career paths of the latter. At the same time, they reveal the degree to which the creative class has generated a sort of utopian fantasy for successfully navigating the neoliberal economy. If the “American Dream” was the ideology buttressing the capitalism of the Fordist era, “creativity” has become the ideology of the neoliberal era, which explains why so many Americans seem willing to take a chance on an MFA.

This relationship, it seems to me, also explains the much-maligned demographics of creative writing programs. They may not be quite

as white as Junot Díaz has recently claimed, but the impracticality of attending a creative writing program means that doing so will be more attractive to students with a sense of entitlement and something to fall back on. The apparently relentless expansion of creative writing programs may be a symptom of the downward mobility of the white middle class, resulting in yet another “new class,” which we might dub the “creative precariat.”