

“TRANSCENDENT EXILES”: THE CULTURES OF AMERICAN FICTION

By Vinh Hoang

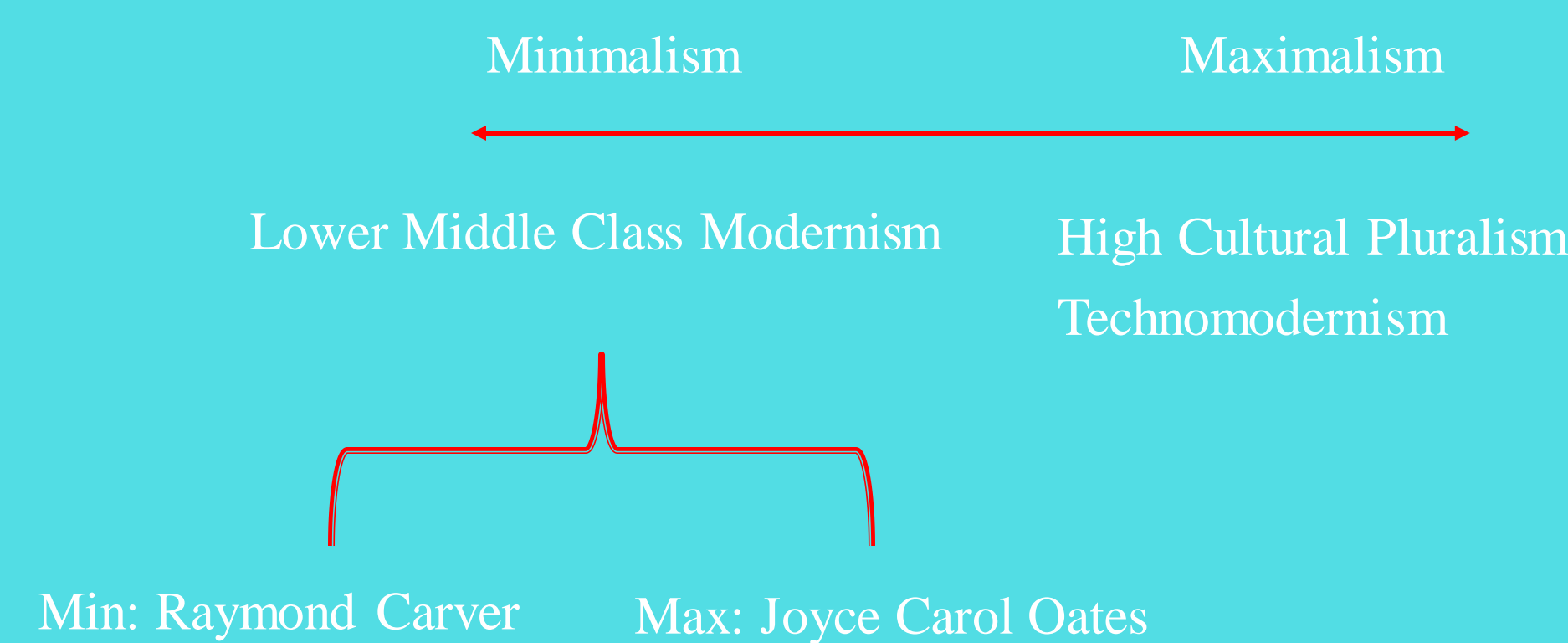
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Background & Methodology

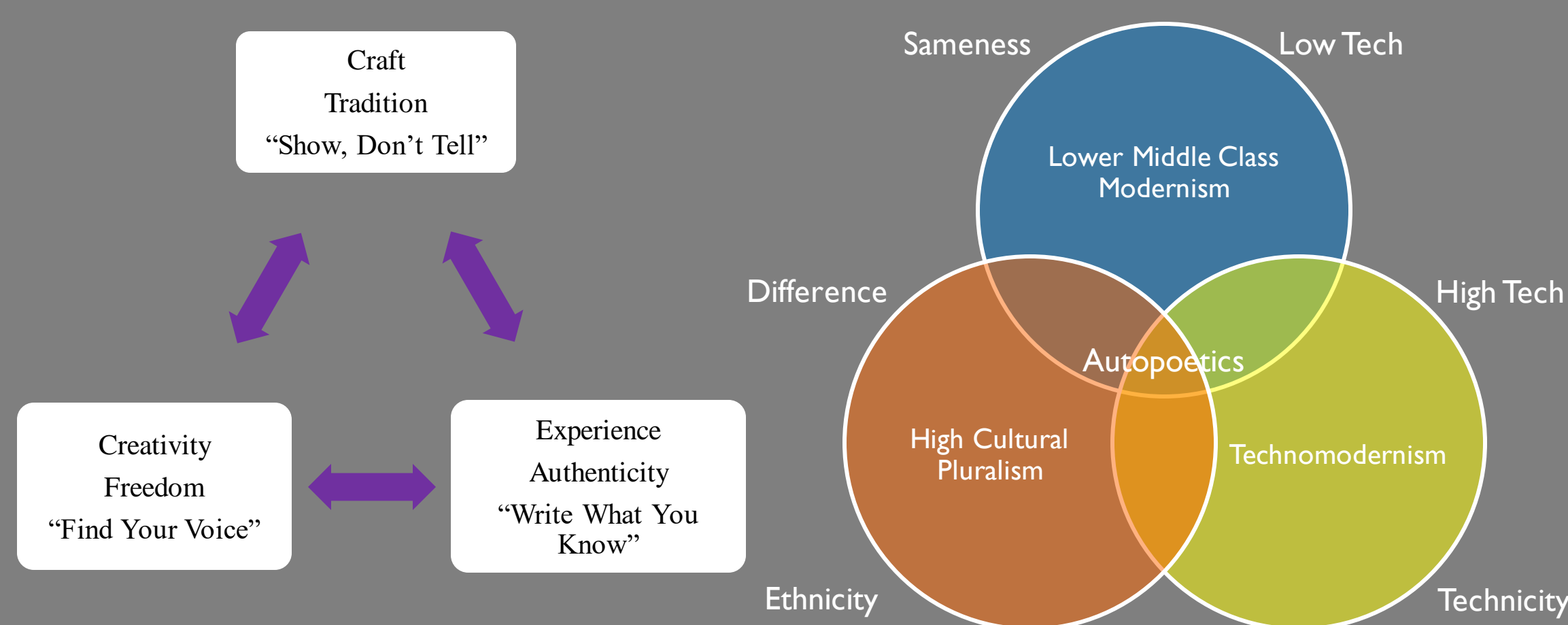
My research started when I read Chad Harbach’s *MFA vs. NYC* with the subtitle, *The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, which composed a collection of essays from different writers, theorists, and scholars who spoke to a startling phenomenon in the history of American literary production, the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, affectionately known as the MFA. MFA programs had expanded in number throughout the United States in the postwar period, but Harbach was not the first to remark on this phenomenon. Dr. Mark McGurl laid the foundation with *The Program Era* for the discussion on the rise of MFA programs and their significance in this changing landscape of literary production. For McGurl, an inextricable link between academia and creative writing has formed.

As a writer and person of color, I wanted to explore what this landscape meant for writers of color and female writers, and whether there existed spaces for their experimentation, through textual analysis and the aggregation of different perspectives on this matter. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the conversation around contemporary literature and literary production in the US.

Mark McGurl: Tripartite Systems and Dialectics

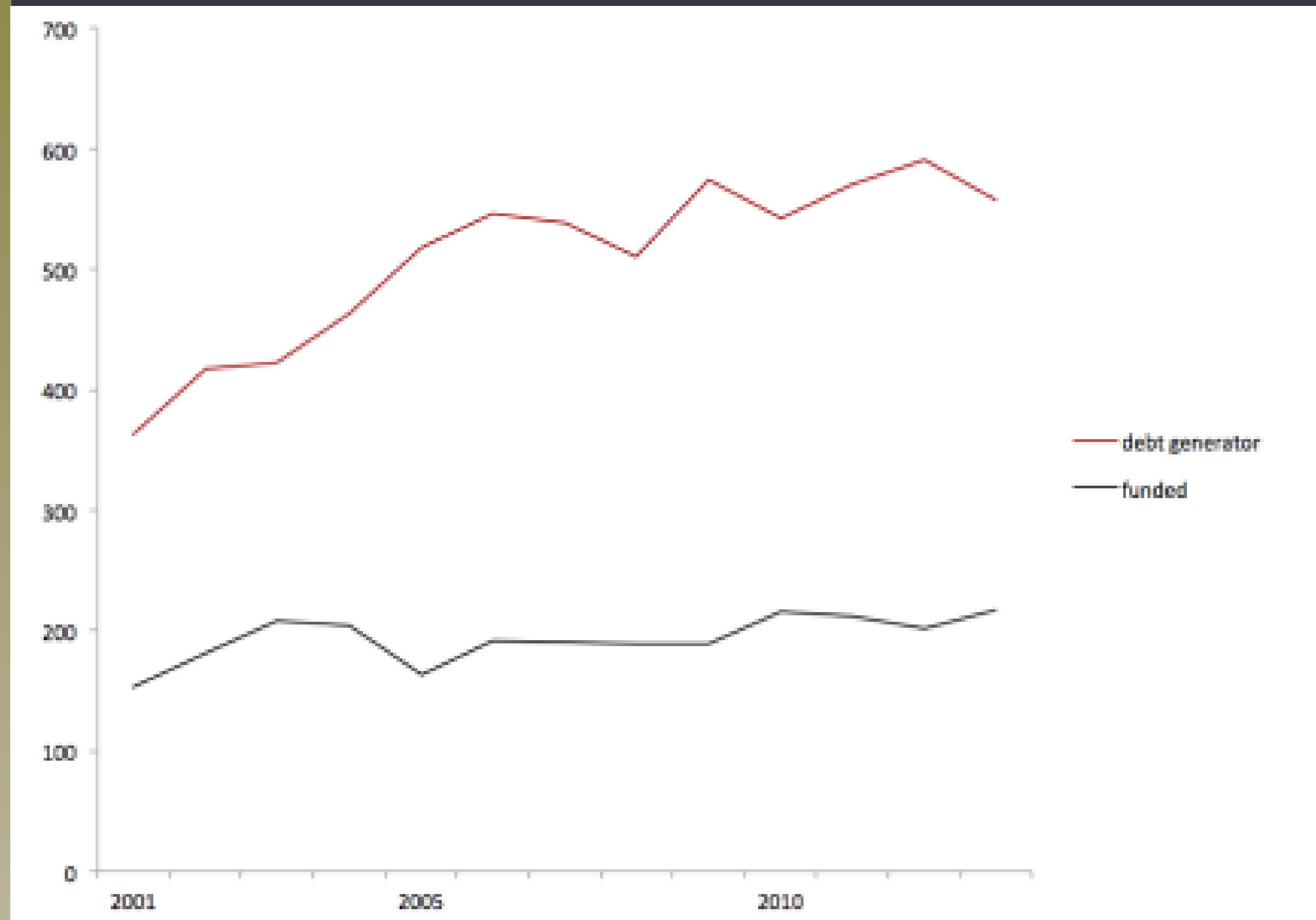


- For McGurl, fiction moves inside a dialectic of aesthetics alternating between Minimalism and Maximalism, through the types of fiction produced from MFA programs, to the short story and novel forms (Harbach 278).
- Creative writing programs emphasize the short story form as a workable text to analyze an student’s writing aptitude in a workshop environment, thus the short story form becomes the “house” form (McGurl 294). The short story, however, emerges as a vehicle that best portrays lower middle class modernist fiction due to its compatibility of the minimalist style.



- Autopoiesis refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself
- High cultural pluralism “describe[s] a body of fiction that joins high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice,” (McGurl 32).
- The ethnic writer in MFA program learns to “find their voice,” and write fiction about their experiences (writing “what you know”). The emphasis on visuals expresses the element of “show, don’t tell” to convey a narrative, a natural evolution of print culture storytelling, unlike oral storytelling, which is very much about “telling” through an oral “voice,” (McGurl 238)

US Literary Culture At Large



(Figure. Recipients of graduate degrees from debt-generator and funded programs who do not identify as “white only,” 2001-2013.)

Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young conducted a survey into what they perceived to be the “Mainly White Room” of US literary culture. In this case, the room of US literary culture involves all levels, including institutions, literary prizes, organized readings, publishing houses (Glass 143).

They surveyed 28 creative writing programs and divided them along economic lines, creating two sets: debt generator programs and fully funded programs. Their results:

- Those who get a degree of some sort in creative writing identify more often as women than as men.
- A small percentage of these same degree recipients identify as other than white.
- While the racial identification of degree recipients in higher education in general has over the last 20 years begun to resemble the racial identification of the nation at large, that of creative writing program recipients have not.
- MFA creative writing programs that offer full funding tend to enroll even fewer students who identify as other than white.
- “Not only are female MFA students at high risk of sexual harassment; they remain dramatically underrepresented in many of the aspects of literary culture...they receive less prize money...show up less often in anthologies. Their books are reviewed less often, and they are reviewers less often. While the total number of recipients of MFA and undergrad creative writing degrees identify as women 70% of the time, neither the writers for mainstream media, nor authors published by small presses, nor even the winners of major prizes are 70% women. Instead, they are 70% men” (Glass 155-156).

The act of writing is political, and the history surrounding writing and the university is complicated. While the McGurl praises the university system, Spahr and Young argue that just as much literary production also occurs outside of higher institution. Most importantly, these literatures form from socio-political movements, which in turn form from working class urban communities (Glass 162-164). During the 1970s, thriving literary subcultures broke away from the idea of a Great (White) Universal literary culture, e.g. The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School founded by Amiri Baraka (circa 1965). The various cultural nationalist movements created patronage systems: publishing houses, journals, anthologies, and reading series to promote their works (Glass 161). The frustrations of students who identify as other than white speaks to a structural problem such as the debt after graduation and the predatory lending nature of the MFA due to particular economic conditions (Glass 169). It could be that US literary culture is racist and sexist because US culture is racist and sexist, or it could be that it is segregated. Regardless, Spahr and Young conclude with McGurl’s call for “studies that take the rise and spread of the creative writing program...as an established fact in need of historical reinterpretation,” (McGurl 27).



James Alan McPherson represents an early example of an ethnic writer in a white institution of higher education, alongside others Junot Diaz, Gish Jen, Weike Wang, N. Scott Momaday, and Sandra Cisneros, and other writers show there is no one universal experience for a writer of color.

Toni Morrison never partook in a program, but she established the Princeton Atelier (French: “workshop”), which is a specialized kind of creative program much different from the creative writing workshop model pioneered by Iowa. As Keith Gessen writes in his essay titled “Money”, “Practically no writer exists now who does not intersect at some point with the university system,” (Harbach 176).

McPherson’s entrance into the Iowa Program represented a “historical reality” but also “reveal[ed] the plight of a black student in an overwhelmingly white institution,” (Glass 125). His experience could substitute for a lot of the experiences of other ethnic writers in creative writing programs, who themselves become inside-outsiders, a sort of exile.

The “institution provoked effective reflection” even if it “could not teach him to be a black writer,” (Glass 133).

A kind of alienation exists for such a writer in such a space, and McPherson defined the “alienation of [his] age” as “a talented individual who transcended the broader condition of his tribe even as his transcendence owed debts to that very condition,” (Glass 128).

Conclusions

The production of experimental fiction by writers who identify as non-white and/or female never had barriers, but when it comes time to spread this work, they face the gatekeepers in the form of the rest of the literary culture: the publishing houses, the prizes, the organized readings, and the university system. Given the shifting tide of a new generation of writers who identify as female graduating from the institutions into the wider world of literary spaces, we see sexism may be addressed. As Daniel Jose Older writes, “the underlying illness is institutional racism,” and that “maybe the word beyond diversity hasn’t been invented yet” (Kurowski 163). Spahr and Young call for a rethinking of the “Mainly White Room” by continually creating new communities and “burn[ing] down” existing ones, as a means of inspecting the pre-existing structures of our literary culture and the greater US culture beyond that informs our literature (Glass 170).

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