**TITLE: The Programmatic Era: Creative Writing as Cultural Imperialism**

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# Abstract

In recent years, Creative Writing has spread far beyond its origins in the Anglophone higher education institutions of the global north. Positioning Mark McGurl’s much-lauded *The Program Era* in the global(-ized) arena, the essay asks: how, why, and to what end might the Creative Writing Program influence global literary production, given the cultural and historical particularity of its teaching models and craft devices? Moving beyond a discourse on pedagogy, the essay draws on wider debates around cultural and linguistic imperialism, as well as literary production in the global marketplace. It uses the key example of the subject’s recent expansion into China, and focuses on the ‘workshop model,’ writing anthologies, and ‘plot’ as it is articulated in canonical writing guides. The essay argues that the subject must better articulate its historical and cultural particularities. If not, it risks enacting a form of cultural imperialism on the production of future ‘World Literatures,’ limiting the potential for experimental writing in a globalizing world.

# Keywords

Creative Writing; globalization; cultural imperialism; linguistic imperialism; global literary marketplace; orality; China; narrative structure; workshop; craft; World literatures.

# Introduction

In *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl argues that Creative Writing (henceforth CW) programs in the United States have had ‘the single most determining influence on postwar American literary production’ (38). He notes ‘the high degree of partiality inherent in the subject’s broadest – and hence least visible – parameters, those born in its origins and development’ (133). While McGurl does not claim CW programs *invented* in the post-war era such ‘craft devices’ as show-don’t-tell and finely-tuned points of view along the Henry Jamesian model, rather it ‘codified’ and ‘disseminated’ them to ‘unprecedented numbers of students’ (*Letter* 8). Such codification had (and has) the result, I suggest, of reifying such craft devices, historically and culturally particular as they are, into *universal* *truths* rather than *culturally particular* *options*.

As I contend, CW’s current global expansion, and its relative lack of cultural and historical self-awareness, threatens to unfold a new form of cultural imperialist hegemony, whereby literary production and experimentation are restricted by the allure of using seemingly universal truths about writing craft. As Graham Huggan (among others) has shown, such allure is augmented by the glamour of the market, with its Booker Prizes and J.K Rowling fame and fortune (105-119).

What is needed now, [McGurl suggests], are studies that take the rise and spread of the creative writing program…as an established fact in need of historical interpretation: how, why and to what end has the writing program reorganized U.S literary production in the postwar period? (*Program* 27)

Expansive though they may seem, these questions are limited by their narrow cultural frame. Instead, I want to ask: how, why, and to what end might the CW Program influence *global* literary production, given its rapid spread, and its origins and ‘codified’ craft devices born in the English Studies programs of the late nineteenth and early-mid twentieth century American academy? These are not questions with answers as yet, the process is too new. Instead, I want to try, at least, to begin articulating the issues.

To do this, I draw on wider debates around globalization, cultural and linguistic imperialism, and literary production and the global literary marketplace. I focus largely on the key example of CW programs recently developed in China to show how such faux universalisms take root. I analyze the cultural particularity of craft through the key example of ‘plot.’ CW is less concerned with issues of *content* or subject matter than it is with those of *form*. Franco Moretti set out to research the development of the novel beyond the Western European ‘core.’ ‘Four continents, two hundred years, over twenty independent critical studies,’ he writes, ‘and they all agreed: when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s *always* as a compromise between *foreign form* and *local materials*’ (*Conjectures* 60 my italics). Differing from the majority of critical work on world literatures thus far, my focus here is solely on such ‘forms,’ rather than ‘materials’ (or ‘content’).

A few words to summarize my argument, and to elaborate my use of the terms ‘globalization,’ ‘hegemony’ and ‘imperialism’: Stuart Hall describes globalization as ‘a hegemonizing process in the proper Gramscian sense’ (np): for my purposes a neo-imperialist enterprise. As CW expands around the world – bringing with it very particular cultural and historical concepts of writing ‘craft’ and the allure of the literary market – a subject that prides itself on free creative expression in fact risks enacting a form of cultural imperialism on such expression. In so doing, it may reduce or homogenize the creative milieu, and the range of formal, stylistic and genre experimental opportunities for writers in a global literary environment. As such, it threatens to hegemonize certain literary forms and craft devices at the expense of investigating other storytelling and creative literary forms it might encounter if its eyes were more open. This may limit the potential for experimentation with such forms in a globalising world. This essay feeds the wider discourse on ‘new imperialisms’ through offering a specific example of how an ill-articulated globalizing process can threaten cultural diversity. What are the differences between the new and the old imperialisms? This is a subject beyond this essay’s remit. New imperialisms are bound up in massive and complex global shifts, of course, that I can only touch on here.

# Workshop and Craft[[1]](#footnote-1)

The University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop (IWW) is CW’s ‘Eve,’ the ur-program from which (virtually) all others evolved (see McGurl, D.G. Myers, Paul Dawson).[[2]](#footnote-2) When recently I asked the director of Leipzig University’s German-language CW school, the Deutsches Literaturinstitut, if their teaching was influenced by the ‘Iowa model,’ he replied, ‘It is all Iowa!’[[3]](#footnote-3) Whether ironic or accurate in its assessment, such a comment indicates Iowa’s conceptual prevalence within CW circles. Although there exists a significant literature already on the nature of the ‘Iowa model,’ its articulation nonetheless forms an important staging post in the trajectory of my argument.

The IWW opened in 1936, offering – as it does to this day – a Master of Fine Arts in *English*: thus literary production conducted through the lens of English Studies. CW had its origins in the constructivist, democratic free expression of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American academic English Studies, which foregrounded continuing literary production, rather than merely analytical study of existing texts. Harvard’s composition studies modules, with their peer-review workshop tuition model, would lead over the following forty-odd years to the teaching methods used by IWW. Born very particularly in progressive liberal American academic notions of freedom of expression, then, the workshop peer-review model became swiftly central to CW pedagogy. Kate Leahy suggests that if CW must have a ‘signature pedagogy…that signature is the workshop’ (65). For Diane Donnelly, ‘when one speaks of the pedagogy of creative writing…the workshop is implied in the address’ (5). ‘The emergence of the workshop as an independent entity, or academic specialisation, at the graduate level, leading to the award of an MFA,’ Dawson writes, ‘is the point at which Creative Writing becomes a discipline’ (*Humanities* 49). Norman Foerster offered creative MA theses at Iowa from his arrival in 1930 to direct the university’s School of Letters. ‘This innovative practice lead [sic] to the founding of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop’ (Stephanie Vanderslice 66). Foerster, who later became a leading exponent of the New Criticism, saw CW as criticism’s ‘natural ally…[c]reative writing was an effort at critical understanding conducted from within the conditions of literary practice’ (Myers, 128, 133).

This new discipline of CW used New Critical approaches to peer-review criticism within a workshop environment. For Dawson, CW ‘craft’ remains to this day ‘the conjunction of formalist criticism with the concept of artistic training associated with the fine arts.’ (*Humanities* 49).[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘Craft,’ Mayers writes, ‘is probably one of the central concepts – if not the central concept – within professional discourses of creative writing’ (65). The contained aesthetic object (the produced creative text) in New Critical/formalist criticism is reviewed for its *form* and *structure*, rather than for its cultural or social meaning or value: its content. A very particular version emerges, then, of what creative authorship and practice came to mean in academic CW programs: a focus on academic rigor and meticulous research; a wide reading of the canon as substance for one’s creative material and supporting critical craft; a consideration of that craft as technique, with certain ‘devices’ derived from English literary studies written into practical guides. (Dawson considers it best to conceive of craft ‘as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse’ (211), to enable a sense of contestation for that intervention in the ‘discourse’ of literary production.) The workshop model of peer review uses, then, such craft devices, conducted through New Critical close reading of the work as a contained aesthetic object.

Eric Bennett’s excellent work on CW and the Cold War American university needs consideration at this point. His essay provides an illuminating overview of the ways that the US government (including the CIA) and, particularly, The Rockefeller Foundation funded and assisted the development of both national and international CW programs. It did this in part to help ‘avert a third world war and preserve the global stability on which markets depended’ (380). David H. Stevens was an English professor from the University of Chicago and in charge of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities Division from 1932 to 1949. Interested in the role of the writer in society, in 1945, he planned to ‘seed the Midwest with creative writing programs’ (ibid.). In the years to come, the Foundation ‘underwrote creative writing on a much grander scale, starting in 1953, giving a three-year grant of $40,000 to the Iowa Writer’s Workshop…enough…to transform Iowa into the national bellwether that it soon became’ (ibid.). IWW director (1941-1967) Paul Engle, and Stanford’s Wallace Stegner, received direct sponsorship from the Rockefeller Foundation for their international activities. Both travelled to Asia in the fifties to speak, and Stegner’s *Pacific Spectator* – ‘a journal where the literature of the American West and the Far East mingled’ (381) – was funded in part by RF (as were the Kenyon, Missouri and other literary review journals). For three decades, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, Engle undertook

fundraising pitches that invoked the threat of Communism and described how creative writing programs created for artists a politically hygienic refuge from bohemia – from the ideologically suspect urban centres where the literati, at least until 1939, had mingled with Communists and shared the spirit of the Popular Front. After the war, full of Hemingway-bedazzled veterans, the Workshop cleansed the writing life of the taint of pink or red affiliations’ (ibid.).

Engle’s International Writing Program at Iowa (launched in 1967) was supported by the US government’s State Department and the CIA, despite Engle’s later suggestion that it was a spontaneous creation of the mid-1960s. ‘In fact,’ Bennett writes, ‘the international program merely continued and purified the financial and ideological dynamic of the Writers’ Workshop of the 1950s’ (382). The Iowa model, then, from which virtually all CW programs have followed, carries with it not just significant cultural and historical baggage, but political as well.

The 1960s saw the next dramatic rise in CW graduate programs. ‘Many of these programs,’ notes Stephen Wilbers, ‘were founded, directed and staffed by Iowa Workshop graduates’ (105).[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1967, IWW graduate and instructor R.V Cassill (along with author and CW academic George Garrett) founded the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, CW’s first and largest professional organization. The Iowa model had a direct and overwhelming effect on the development of British (Michelene Wandor *Author* 1-23), Canadian (George McWhirter 101) and Australian/New Zealand (Nigel Krauth *passim*) CW programs. Its expansion to virtual ubiquity in recent years in these countries hardly needs me to detail here. The model was Iowa’s, and that model was informed by constructivist freedom of personal expression, that freedom constrained by very particular New Critical approaches to textual analysis and canonical comprehension, devised in a Cold War social, political and cultural milieu that inevitably informed its wider nature, directly and indirectly. An aside, now, on the writing anthology, as it has come to be used in CW.

McGurl notes how CW incorporated the textbook anthology into its pedagogic model: constituting, as they do, of creative work, ‘along with suggestions for further study and editorial commentary, commentary very much along the lines of the New Critical approach of close reading’ (*Program* 133). Such led inevitably to a canonizing of certain texts over others and also of a certain type of technical, craft style. This McGurl terms a ‘circulating aesthetic institution’ (132) that esteems impersonality, ‘limitation’, the fine-honing of prose in brutally defined and adhered to points of view (after Henry James), and a stress on ‘show don’t tell’ that has become arguably ‘the dominant aesthetic style of post-modernist fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ (ibid.). The literary canon is, of course, highly contested, involved as it is with ‘cultural capital’ of the kind John Guillory (1994) and Pierre Bourdieu (1993) separately describe. Within CW, such contested discourse might best be exemplified by the 1980s debate on ‘minimalism’ and ‘maximalism.’ In her article, ‘Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!’ Bharati Mukherjee argued that post-war American literature had become overly fixated on the type of writing exemplified by Hemingway, Faulkner and CW program graduates and attendees such as Flannery O’Connor and ‘gritty realist’ Raymond Carver. O’Connor’s severe prose style might the purest example of this. Her point of view, McGurl notes, remained in the third person limited ‘in every one of her stories without exception’ (*Program* 129).[[6]](#footnote-6) Minimalistic in style, absorbed in the fine-honing of prose to its most austerely reduced form, it bore little resemblance to the rich prose styles, or ‘maximalism,’ Mukherjee suggested ‘immigrant writing’ offered. As McGurl puts it, ‘the autopoetic processing of experience as creative writing cashes out, in the literary marketplace, as a dialectic of ‘minimalist’ and “maximalist” narrative forms’ (286). By autopoetic here, McGurl means a focus around the creative self. The growth of writing anthologies used in CW programs, with their ‘New Critical’-style accompanying commentaries, contain very particular stylistic foci. Witness the latest edition of the *Norton Anthology of Short Stories*, edited by Richard Bausch (IWW attendee) and R.V. Cassill (IWW graduate and AWP founder). The collection contains a section titled ‘The Author in Depth.’ The three chosen authors are Alice Munro, William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, ‘minimalists’ all, and much favoured CW Program exemplars.

Surely the CW Program model I describe is long superseded? I suggest not. CW has risked becoming ‘soft, fat and sassy with its success,’ Joseph Moxley writes, ‘providing a haven from academic challenge and…intellectual rigour’ (253). Jed Rasula argues that, through its refusal to interrogate its origins, CW remains in a ‘pre-postmodern’ context; CW programs ‘have doggedly claimed diplomatic immunity from disciplinary reconfiguration. The cost, however, is…intellectual xenophobia’ (419). My issue here lies not so much with the particularities of this claimed diplomatic immunity (about which, see Harry Whitehead 2013), as with the potential for cultural hegemony that such a lack of critical engagement threatens as the subject expands. In recent times, as Bennett notes, ‘a writer comes from the Bronx or Bangladesh, from Haiti or Halifax, and speaks for his or her region. The demographic pluralism takes the pressure off formal experimentation and allows for the standardization of form’ (390). CW positions itself as a model or at least a learning environment for writing creatively that works anywhere and everywhere, as we shall see in China. The model has been predominant in CW’s evolution in the UK, Canada and Australia/New Zealand. I want to ask: what of the subject as it has travelled beyond? But first, let us turn to craft.

# Losing the Plot

‘Every time I receive a new writing book in the mail, or read a review of one,’ observes Jeri Kroll, former Chair of the Australian Association of Writers Program, ‘a stale aroma rises from the pages’ (174). In three recent studies on CW practical guides, Steve Evans & Jeri Kroll, Michelene Wandor (*Pedagogy*), and S. Westbrook separately note an absence of, or reluctance to, engage with theory, even to air the writer’s preconceptions and assumptions, and an *uncritical* focus on craft. As a case study, in this section I focus on one specific craft device ubiquitous to practical guides on prose fiction and dramatic writing.

Plot has tended to travel two (often connecting) paths in CW: 1) universal ‘monomythic’ paradigms (e.g. Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler); 2) the Aristotelian three (or more) act model (Robert McKee, Syd Field, Gustav Freytag). ‘Storytelling has a shape,’ writes John Yorke in *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them*.

It determines the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginning of the recorded word. It’s a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it’s a shape that may be – though we must be careful – a universal archetype. (xi)

Unfortunately, Yorke proves far from careful, not least in his leap from Euro-centric Renaissance history to a universal ‘beginning of the recorded word.’ Yorke ‘read everything on storytelling…there was one unifying factor…they all shared the same underlying structural traits…the three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal’ (xiii). He travels us back to the Romans, nineteenth century French dramatists, Shakespeare, Jonson. ‘[I]f there really was an archetype, it had to apply…to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all’ (ibid.). His became a ‘historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling’ (xiv) – although evidently not an *anthropological* journey. Ensconced in his own cultural paradigms – Rome, France, Shakespeare – nonetheless he makes the unstudied hop to the ‘universal.’ Yorke’s ‘journey’ into storytelling led him to realize that story ‘is simply a logical beat-by-beat progression from A to B via a *symmetrical arc*. It’s a *natural shape*. It occurs…unconsciously, which is why it appears both in *Beowulf* and *Jaws*…a *natural* by-product of how we order the world’ (226 my italics). Yorke misses the point that *Beowulf* has participated directly in the construction of a narrative tradition of which *Jaws* plays its part, certainly since its popular re-emergence in the early-twentieth century.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Chris Jones describes it: ‘*Beowulf* continues to have cultural “use”…across three millennia, and…Anglo-Saxon poetry continues to be productive in contemporary imagination’ (14). J.R.R. Tolkien is merely the most obvious example: ‘Anglo-Saxon England,’ Maria Artamonova explains, ‘was always at the background of Tolkien’s mythology’ (73).[[8]](#footnote-8) Yorke’s rhetoric requires *Jaws* and *Beowulf* to be unrelated to make sense of his naturalizing yet ethnocentric cultural expression of universality.

Let me cite an example of alternative narrative structure to illustrate Yorke’s limited cultural and historical perspective. In 2005, British filmmaker Sue Clayton was invited to collaborate on a project to write a screenplay in Bhutan. Clayton, a Bhutanese filmmaker, producer and actor devised a storyline whereby an American IT expert, Ellis, consulting on a Bhutanese satellite station, decides to climb the mountain Jumolhari. However, Jumolhari is sacred and climbing is forbidden. He sets off anyway. An avalanche forces him to retreat, injured, into a cave, where he is ultimately saved and helicoptered to hospital. However, as the writing progressed, Clayton explains,

certain concepts relating to Bhutanese Buddhism…began to have an effect on the narrative structure itself. These were concepts around time—principally about cyclical or non-linear time structures; around subjectivity; the dream; and the Bhutanese take on the “look” or point-of-view (*Mythic* 219).

The Western hero’s active nature, in charge of his destiny, self-willed, became problematic as they discussed Ellis’ karma, in which every action had consequences for himself and others that could not be gainsaid or avoided. Thus, while Ellis makes ‘his linear journey’ climbing the mountain, ‘his actions are observed from another perspective or point-of-view’ (220). But whose? The Bhutanese were clear that, with their animist-inspired Buddhism, the dominant participant was Jumo, the mountain’s guardian deity (indeed, the mountain itself). The script required a split point-of-view, both Ellis’ and ‘an implied subjectivity from another position’ (ibid.).

Thus we developed the idea that the linear narrative of Ellis’s quest was enveloped…by a more complex temporal and point-of-view narrative structure where Ellis’s past and future deeds, and the deeds of others, are perceived as part of the story’s cause-and-effect, and are interpolated by Jumo, the organizing spirit, the dispenser of karma (220).

Given that Ellis does not believe in – and so cannot see – Jumo, they needed a device to bring them into contact. A Bhutanese audience would have no problem seeing a deity on screen, but a secular audience might, Clayton explains. So they set the story in the hospital to which he is taken after his mountain rescue. The interaction between man and deity became a series of dreams, removing him to another level of the narrative in ‘a more appropriate register’ (ibid.). In their final dream meeting, Ellis becomes more object than subject, since ‘the dreamer in Buddhism *is seen by the dream*…and not vice versa’ (221). The dream world is literally—not metaphorically—more significant in Buddhist cosmology than the everyday world or samsara. ‘Bhutanese ideas around narrative cause-and-effect,’ Clayton concludes, ‘and the notions of points of view beyond that of the individual hero, seemed to me to offer important challenges to both the classical and the ‘monomyth’ model of mythic storytelling’ (ibid.).

Clayton’s experience in Bhutan provides a counterpoint to Yorke’s ‘natural shape,’ his ‘symmetrical arc’. Consider also Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives,* which won Canne’s 2010 Palme D’Or. Described as ‘an episodic, non-linear, open-ended head-scratcher’ by *The Guardian* (Steve Rose np), it hardly constitutes Yorke’s ‘symmetric arc’ nor some inexorable movement toward a satisfying conclusion by way of escalating linear tension or character resolution. ‘But that's life, no?’ says Weerasethakul. ‘It's like tapping into someone's mind. The thinking pattern is quite random, jumping here and there like a monkey’ (ibid.). Hardly Yorke’s ‘natural by-product of how we order the world.’ Of course, Weerasethakul’s work might equally be described in relation to modernist narrative styles with their streams of consciousness, questionable subjectivity, open endings and so on, and I would agree (what Brooks describes as the ‘“crisis” in the understanding of plots and plotting brought about by the advent of Modernism’ (238)). Indeed the modernist aesthetic – if I can so simplify it for the purposes of this essay – of course reacts to the closures of such strangled linear narrative. Even more reason, then, for questioning the reductive narrative structures described in the majority of practical writing guides on offer. Author Tom McCarthy notes a ‘naive and uncritical realism dominating contemporary middlebrow fiction…[a] doctrine of authenticity peddled by creative writing classes the world over’ (21).[[9]](#footnote-9) This elision between film and prose fiction here is deliberate. Although my focus has been on prose fiction, nonetheless film – and specifically American big budget film – has come to dominate narratives on plot, as we shall see. Many practical guides elide between the two, and CW numbers writing for the screen among its taught forms.

Yorke might be considered a soft target – an over-simplistic work for a popular market. However, as managing director of a major UK production company producing successful British television series, previously Head of Channel Four Drama and Controller of BBC Drama Productions, and founder of the BBC Writers Academy – an important breeding ground for upcoming screenwriters – he is a leading arbiter of cultural capital. Nonetheless, let us consider a more serious canonical contender in CW’s pantheon of craft guides: Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories.* Oddly enough, Booker also begins with *Beowulf* and *Jaws*. ‘Are we to assume that the author of *Jaws*, Peter Benchley, had in some way been influenced by Beowulf?’ he asks.

Of course not…In *our modern civilization…*at any given moment, *all over the world,* hundreds of millions of people will be engaged in [telling stories]…*We* spend a phenomenal amount of our lives following stories…fictional stories play such a significant role in *our lives*, as novels or plays, films or operas, comic strips or TV ‘soaps…*We* take it for granted that the great storytellers, such as Homer and Shakespeare, should be among the most famous people who ever lived…even when *we* look out from our own world into space, *we* find that we have named many of the most conspicuous heavenly bodies – Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Perseus, Andromeda – after characters from stories (2-4 my italics).

Booker appropriates the first person plural, implying initially that he speaks for ‘our modern civilisation…all over the world,’ then continues by focusing almost solely on European and American narrative. Whatsoever ‘our’ modern civilization may be – his ‘we’ is universal – certainly ‘we’ who give the heavenly bodies those names constitute a global minority. A bibliography that included George Dumézil’s monumental body of work on comparative *Indo-European* mythology might have helped Booker, since *The* *Seven Basic Plots* remains seemingly blindly rooted in the Indo-European narrative and mythological paradigm. It also chooses to ignore modernist narrative paradigms, as do all my examples cited in this section. Thus, it may not be said to have successfully argued archetypal storytelling strategies, any more than did Yorke.

In her discussion of variations in storytelling style among Maori and white schoolchildren in New Zealand, Ruth Page cites William Labov’s work on narrative style. Labov posits this storytelling model: Abstract-Orientation-Complicating Action-Evaluation-Resolution-Coda. However, Page finds this does not to apply directly to Maori schoolchildren’s storytelling, at least in the earlier stages of their participation in the national school system (before they become ‘schooled’), especially with narrative closure and evaluation. Maori storytelling is described as more of an ‘ongoing practice,’ passing from speaker to speaker with shared, implicit knowledge, shortening story components, and especially the frequent absence of story resolution. This means they often appear unfinished to the non-Maori listener. ‘The apparent open-endedness of [Maori English] storytelling stands in marked contrast to [the dominant English] narratives which appear much closer to the Labovian pattern with a clearly marked beginning, middle and end *so typical of European North American stories’* (155 my italics).

All of which brings us to James Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, surely the most influential work on narrative structure in the CW craft canon and beyond. Campbell describes the ‘hero’s quest’ as an essential global ‘monomyth’ (a term, ironically enough, that he borrowed from modernist masterwork, *Finnegan’s Wake*). Here is that monomyth summarized by Campbell (and folding in Labov’s model):

a ‘hero ventures forth from the *world of common day* [Point of Orientation] into a region of supernatural wonder: *fabulous forces are there encountered* [Complicating Action] and *a decisive victory is won* [through Evaluation i.e. better understanding the enemy/situation]; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man [Resolution]’ (23).

And, I might add, lives happily ever after [Coda]. This is Yorke’s ‘symmetric,’ linear arc. Campbell’s work is indebted to James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which first set the tone for the so-called ‘comparative method’ in anthropology and folklore studies. As Frazer notes in his short book *Passages of the Bible Chosen for Their Literary Beauty and Interest*, he acts ‘that a service might be rendered to lovers of good literature by *disengaging these gems from their setting*.’ (qtd. in Marc Manganaro 48 my italics). This *aesthetic* disengagement from cultural setting became exactly Campbell’s, delineating universality so that he could draw his own (aesthetic) conclusions, innately ‘ahistorical’, constructing a diachronous deductive cacophony of voices that elicit Campbell’s consciousness as much as any grand truth. As Manganaro writes, everything, in the comparative method, becomes ‘a well-wrought urn that stands outside of process’ (49).

Comparativism in anthropology was killed off by participant observation and the growth of the monograph. As far back as 1934, Ruth Benedict would write:

Comparative ethnological volumes…build up a kind of mechanical Frankenstein’s monster with a right eye from Fiji, a left from Europe, one leg from Tierra del Fuego, and one from Tahiti, and all the fingers and toes from still different regions. Such a figure corresponds to no reality in the past or present’ (49).

Anthropologist Muriel Crespi describes Campbell's ‘ethnocentrism,’ and ‘his analytic level’ as ‘so abstract and devoid of ethnographic context that myth loses the very meanings supposed to be embedded in the “hero”’ (1104). Comparativism, however, embedded itself in literature and folklore studies. This from a description for an English Studies conference in India in 2012:

The oral telling/re-telling of myths/legends/narratives was marked by inventiveness as well as considerable improvisation *even though* *the basic narrative frame would remain the same.* James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) have remarkably demonstrated ritualistic and *archetypal patterns* in representative narratives from different parts of the world’ (my italics).

How is it that such discredited perspectives should so linger on in CW and wider circles? Perhaps, as Manganaro suggests,

[t]he powers of Frazerian comparativism are inextricably tied to the allure of the literary; the anthropological and the aesthetic functioning symbiotically within a grand stratagem of control. For an anthropologist like Frazer, for example, the use of a “literary” style ultimately became a defence, when faced with attacks on theories and methodology, that his texts were artistic creations (17).

They certainly are not used as such now. Universalizing comparativism has been out of fashion for decades in anthropology, and yet remains in CW guides. Like astrology or fascism, the comparativist method proves a malleable heuristics suggesting much, yet dangerous for its tendency to close argument, to seem to ‘solve’ and so reduce. Even the strongest advocates of George Dumézil’s (Francophone) work would only suggest that ‘perhaps’ (Ruth Finnegan 32) it might extend beyond the Indo-European area. However, as Robert Ellwood succinctly puts it, in his critical work on Campbell, Mircea Eliade and Jung: ‘a tendency to think in generic terms of people, races...is undoubtedly the profoundest flaw in mythological thinking’ (28). Such might equally be said for the universalizing tendency in the majority of CW practical guides and, arguably, implied in much of CW’s wider perspective on the nature of writing itself.

As poet C.P. Nield notes, Campbell ‘has had an incalculable impact on the Western world through its adoption by Hollywood and the mass entertainment industry’ (np). American cinema accounted for around 64% of global cinema receipts in 2012 (Phil Hoad np): a statistic of limited value, given DVD sales, online views and other media, of course, but nonetheless an indicator of its continuing influence on the international cultural economy. Moretti’s analysis of cinema in 24 countries between 1986-1995 shows ‘American films make up between 75 and 90 percent of the decade’s top hits’ (*Hollywood* 93), although this analysis excludes China and India. The hero’s quest bestrides the globalizing world – merged as it is so completely into craft guides and American big budget cinema. George Lucas’ adoption of Campbellian monomyth while making *Star Wars*, and Christopher Vogler’s reconstruction for Hollywood executives is too well-travelled a tale to repeat here. It is easy to see how Campbell’s comparativist anthropological ‘universal archetype of the monomyth’ might breed blind piety, with its tempting one-stop key and its easy-read for the passive viewer. In the spectacle and simple solutions of the hero’s quest, mass conversion becomes all too easy. Manganaro writes:

The comparativist text…encourages multiple weldings of seeming contraries (literature and anthropology), as the encyclopaedic tendency to move outward is complemented by the urge toward fusion and thus becomes *a way of extending one’s grasp*...A profusion of voices may stand out as diversity, but they ultimately move toward the system or idea that unites, *destroying variation in the process* (17 my italics).

‘McMyth,’ in Nield’s dry description. An historically and culturally un-self-referential CW risks propagating a cultural uniformity redolent of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s culture industry, undermining (perhaps ‘destroying’ is a tad harsh) variation and, hence, experimental potential. The argument often made against CW programs – that they lead to bland, standardized ‘workshop fiction’ (see McGurl *Program*, for instance) – becomes, in a global arena, potentially a far more serious threat to local or indigenous literary form and craft: to the cultural heterogeneity of global creative writing in all forms. Remove the heart from how a people tell their stories, transplant another’s, and you create new, alien rhythms, a Baudrillardian ‘Simulacra’ leading potentially toward a global entropic uniformity. ‘Under monopoly, all mass culture is identical’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 149).

Melodramatic over-statement, perhaps, but one with which to take CW’s highly history, pedagogical and craft models on into the next section. Let us look now at how the subject has arrived in China.

# China

Chinese universities introduced a number of writing degrees in the 1980s, during a brief period of ‘opening up,’ but all were subsequently banned by the government (Nicholas Jose np). Alexander Kuo believes ‘the first creative writing course taught in a Hong Kong university occurred in 1996 at Baptist University, and the first in China in 2005 in Beijing Forestry University’ (np). Certainly, CW arrived in mainland China on the back of English language training courses (Fan Dai *China*). Modules have run at Sun Yat Sen, Renmin and Sichuan Universities since 2006, and also a Wuhan University (Kroll and Fan Dai 81). With all the contested issues of linguistic imperialism involved with English-language tuition, nonetheless one might suggest CW taught as part of an English course implicitly better recognizes its Anglophone cultural particularity. Meanwhile, Hong Kong CW lecturer Eddie Tay notes that, for many Chinese CW students in Hong Kong, at least, ‘the English language is viewed [not as an imperial language so much] as a space of possibility and emergence’ (103), a space free of the suffocating nationalistic embargoes of Chinese. Anyway, my focus here is on new CW courses in Chinese languages, principally Mandarin. Fan Dai credits author Zecheng Xu as among the founders of Chinese-language taught CW in mainland China (*English-language* 22). Xu spent 2009 as writer-in-residence at Creighton University and, in 2010, attended Iowa’s International Writing Program. 2009 saw the Research Centre for Literature and Creative Writing established at Shanghai University, although Fudan offered the first master’s program in Chinese-language CW in 2009. Since then, Nanjing, Zhejiang and Peking have all established Chinese-language units or programs (Fan Dai *China* np).

Diao Keli at Renmin University ‘translated from English two of the four books in the first creative writing series ever published in China’ (ibid.). These four were Dorothea Brande’s seminal *Becoming a Writer*, Jerry Cleaver’s *Immediate Fiction: a Complete Writing Course*, and two works in the series *Now Write!*: 1) *Fiction Writing Exercises from Today’s Best Writers and Teachers*; 2) *Nonfiction: Memoir, Journalism and Creative Nonfiction Exercises from Today’s Best Writers*. Since then, Renmin University of China Press has published or is in the process of publishing about twenty writing craft books, ‘mostly translations from English’ (ibid.). (Fan Dai notes more are due and some ‘will be craft-related books by Chinese writers,’ which will prove a fascinating development for the broader discourse I hope might develop from the publication of this essay.) Cleaver’s *Immediate Fiction* is promoted on his own website as the ‘bestselling writing book in China’ (np).[[10]](#footnote-10) The only three non-Anglophone authors mentioned in the work are Tolstoy, Mann and Flaubert. Of the forty-three authors directly referenced in the index, thirty are American, and the only one non-American still living is John le Carré. The other non-Americans are Agatha Christie, Conrad, John Fowles, James Hilton, Maugham, Milton, Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and Wilde. One, at least, is female. All the authors referenced, American and non-, are white. The second paragraph of the Introduction begins, ‘The craft and technique of *Immediate Fiction* are those used by *all great writers’* (ix my italics). Later: ‘craft is neutral’ (13); ‘in its purest form a story is just three elements: conflict, action, resolution…CONFLICT + ACTION + RESOLUTION = STORY’ (25-6). I hardly need spell out the scale of such bias, yet packaged as neutral craft used by ‘all great writers.’ This, the ‘bestselling writing book in China.’ *Now Write!: 1) Fiction*, a collection written almost exclusively by American MFA and writing workshop tutors, contains sections on Point of View, Character Development, Dialogue, Plot and Pacing, Setting and Description, Craft., almost identical to early-twentieth century American practical writing guides, with their focus on character types, plot and structure, conflict, action, setting and theme.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Whether taught in a Chinese language or otherwise (and more on language shortly), the new programs are modelled on, and draw their practical guides from, English Studies-originating craft models. This from Shanghai course director, Chen Si: ‘[m]any universities in English speaking countries offer this degree, and successful writers such as Bai Xianyong…Yan Geqin…and Ha Jin…all have degrees in creative writing…we are going to hire these writers to teach this course’ (Xiao np). Pham Thi Hong Thanh notes how classroom passivity born of the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in China (and in Asia generally) provides a significant issue for the workshop environment, given students ‘believe that the truth is not found primarily in the self’ (cited in Kroll and Fan Dai 79; Thanh 2011, 522). Thus they do not easily engage in peer critique or debate the authority figure. The workshop model, then, requires significant cultural critique before it is blithely accepted as a viable model for teaching CW in China, and, beyond the pedagogical, how the workshop might foreground certain types of writing and writer. This is true of the workshop model generally, of course, but when applied to global literary production, the implications become that much more dramatic.

I trust by now my wider point is made that the American, Iowa model of CW has had a potent presence at least in the very recent development of CW as a taught subject in China. The implications for its effect on literary production will take time to become visible.

Andrew Plaks notes how 1919 witnessed the birth of the ‘modern Chinese novel…when the old Chinese novel was consciously rejected by idealistic cultural reformers as an expression of the moribund values and effete culture of the ancient regime, in favour of the new Western narrative model adopted with great fervour’ (184). He describes a

thin transitional band stretching over the last decades of Manchu imperial rule, during which time some premature experiments with the new imported *forms* of prose fiction were undertaken, and certain attempts were made to introduce more ‘modern’ story *content* into narratives presented in the traditional format. In the best cases, we find in late Qing fiction a bit of heady new wine in old bottles, and some mellow old wine in new-fangled containers’ (185 my italics).

China has undergone among the world’s most powerful modernizing-nationalizing programs in the past century. Whether CW programs in Chinese languages (and let us be clear about the plurality) will revisit such ‘pre-modern’ fictional forms is yet to be established. China is home to dozens of languages, cultural and ethnic identities, from the Muslim Uighur of the far west to the high mountains of Tibet. Contested identities and multiplicitous linguistic and creative prose, poetic and other forms will surely prove as problematic as they are in contested minority representations in the UK, US and elsewhere in the Global Anglophone North. I hope CW will offer not just a platform for those voices to be heard (‘content’), but also for local literary forms and styles to propagate. Enrique Gálvan-Álvarez’s fascinating recent study, for instance, of the four English language Tibetan novels thus far published offers a glimpse of alternative narrative patterning in Tibetan written storytelling history. The *gter ma* (or ‘treasure texts’) constitute a ‘narrative pattern’ that

re-appropriate[s] the authority associated with Buddhist teachers and kings from former times by claiming to have composed or “discovered” texts originally written or inspired by them. The *gter ma* tradition is thus a visionary strategy for presenting new texts and ideas arising from the imagined golden age of Tibetan history…[The] question of agency in the process of *gter ma* writing is…complex…since…the *gter ston* [author] is neither a mere empty channel possessed by the spirit of a past lama, nor is he said to be contriving the whole process through his own efforts. The *gter ma* tradition was and remains a highly ingenious form of not only introducing novelty within tradition, but also setting up alternative sources of spiritual and scriptural authority (29).

The institution of CW programs with craft and pedagogical models based on Anglophone English Studies offer little space for discovery of other forms and crafts, focused as they are on the accepted forms of the global literary marketplace. Experimentation thus becomes focused solely on content – ‘heady new wine’ – rather than form – be it, for the globalized author, ‘new-fangled’ Chinese containers or even relatively forgotten ‘old bottles.’ As Fredric Jameson notes – introducing Kojin Karatani’s *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* – as Japanese novels evolved, ‘the raw experience of Japanese social experience and the abstract formal patterns of Western novel construction cannot always be welded seamlessly together.’ (xiii). Complicated problems, Moretti sees, arise ‘from the encounter of western form and Japanese…reality’ (*World* 58). As Pascale Casanova shows, dominant canonical literatures from certain culture-languages invite imitation and aspiration. ‘Certain authors,’ he writes, ‘writing in ‘small’ languages have been tempted to introduce within their own national tongue not only the techniques, but even the sounds of a reputedly literary language’ (18). CW, in its propagation solely of established Anglophone, certainly ‘Western’ (I use the term as its consumers might) literary forms participates then in this kind of cultural imperialism and hegemonizing. Experimentation might be the correct word of a budding Chinese author new to stream of consciousness in a CW class, perhaps, but CW nonetheless risks not revitalizing its own centre by ‘bringing back’ new forms and craft devices. Moretti appositely posits a ‘*law of literary evolution*: in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside of Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials’ (*World* 58 his italics, my underline). However, ‘the import of foreign novels doesn’t just mean that people read a lot of foreign books, it also means that local writers become uncertain of how to write their own novels’ (Moretti *Hollywood* 105). This is what Masao Miyoshi describes for Japan as ‘an impossible programme’ (4), and Roberto Schwarz ‘dissonance’ or ‘compositional defects’ (41). Nonetheless, the agency of the resisting, critical author is not in question, merely the uncritically interrogated formal elements of CW pedagogy as they travel out into the wider world. As Moretti is keen to stress,

every now and then one of those impossible programmes *works*…the clash of symbolic power of Western Europe produces major paradigm shifts, like the Russian novels of ideas, or Latin American magical realism (or the slightly different case of the Kafka-Joyce generation). Although these remain *exceptions*, they occur often enough to show a counter force at work within the world literary system’ (*Hollywood* 106).

# The Programmatic & Beyond

‘Every now and then’ is surely not good enough. Are the storytellers themselves to become instruments of Hall’s ‘Gramscian’ hegemonized globalism? Will CW participate in a blind, liberal globalization, flattening all toward a global literary economic and cultural centre (even if, after Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, that centre can no longer confidently be situated geographically)? Hollywood, J.K. Rowling millions, Nobel-Prize-winning speeches, the Booker. As Graham Huggan notes, (citing H. Eakin): ‘the Booker [Prize], despite its ‘multicultural consciousness’, has arguably done less to further the development of ‘non-Western’ and/or postcolonial literatures than it has to ‘encourage the commerce of an “exotic” commodity catered to the Western literary market’ (Huggan 105, Eakin 1). Yet the allure of that market! The spectacle! How is an indigenous, long-poetic narrative form, for instance, born of an oral storytelling tradition – doomed in print to sell a few hundred copies locally at best – to compete with that? The international writers with their Pulitzer prizes jet in for a semester’s writing in residence. Practical writing guides explain craft devices using literary examples from successful Program Era graduates, the guides themselves written by the same. Those ‘exotic’ authors who win Bookers might elaborate exotic content, far less often *formal* innovation – Bennett’s ‘demographic pluralism,’ taking ‘the pressure off formal experimentation,’ standardizing form (390). Meanwhile, the very workshop itself – seemingly so naturalized, so fundamental a pedagogic principle: so universal – proves in fact a highly culturally particular critical-pedagogic environment, *un*-critically applied to local contexts.

To develop an MFA or other CW program in a university is to argue for success within the established global literary marketplace, and nowhere else. Witness the abrupt closure of City University Hong Kong’s CW MFA program in April 2015. This occurred in the aftermath of the ‘Occupy Central’ resistance movement, which many of the MFA students participated in and wrote essays about. The university’s administration claims the MFA was not successfully recruiting, although it was doing so to its agreed remit (Madeleine Thien). A program turning out bestselling novelists is one thing, but evidently articulate dissenting voices do not constitute ‘success’. In the neo-liberalising environment of global higher education, results equal students receiving publishing contracts from leading global publishers, and winning awards. IWW’s website: ‘The program claims among its graduates winners of virtually every major literary award.’ Non-conformity can invite punishment, as City University shows us.

Global CW needs to speak not of craft per se, but of *options* and *alternatives* as broadly expressed as possible. As Kroll and Fan Dai suggest, for CW a ‘heightened awareness of how social and cultural contexts affect writing and reading practices must alter the way in which teachers construct assignments and choose course content’ (78). Many teaching practitioners do precisely that, of course. It is a shame that so few practical guides seem to follow suit. It is imperative that CW expresses itself in a more nuanced an culturally sensitive manner, especially in its practical guides. Why? Because, as I hope I have shown, currently it risks enacting a sort of subtle neo-imperialist creep out into the wider world with its programmatic pedagogical models and its eye toward the orthodox macro-corporate literary market – Sarah Brouillette’s transnational, corporate, conglomerated publishing industry (vii). Jane Camens of Asia Pacific Writers and Translators (APWT) notes that ‘most of the writers I met in Asia who were writing in English aspired to have their work published in North America or Britain’ (276). Her reference to writers working in *English* is, of course, also critical to the issues in this essay, if I only have space enough to touch on it really. Since language ‘forms a major component of literary capital, certain languages, by virtue of the prestige of the texts written in them, are reputed to be more literary than others, to embody literature’ (Casanova 17). How to wrestle such prestige away? Determinedly refute the dominant language of the global literary marketplace? Embrace it? An African writer, Chinua Achebe argued in his well-trodden debate with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, should ‘aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and *able to carry his peculiar experience’* (82 my italics). Can CW involve itself in contesting established *forms, styles* and *crafts* to help better carry that experience?

The ‘literary marketplace’ invokes a notion of audience that is equally complex and contested, of course. Asia-Pacific Writers and Translators’ recent development of a World Reader’s Award is an interesting case in point.

The world’s authors are creating work for the wrong audience [APWT’s website explains]. Every week, tens of thousands of manuscripts and screenplays arrive on desks in the US and the UK. But that’s not where the readers are…Three out of five members of humanity lives in Asia. By 2050, 75 percent of the human race will be in Asia and Africa. If you want to succeed in the creative industries, simply write for the world’s readers. (*Wrong Audience* np)

In the global literary marketplace perhaps the readership is changing. However, Hardt and Negri’s imperialist power diffusion evokes a cultural power centre that – for our purposes here – fully retains its Anglophone Global Northern characteristics. The World Reader Award winner receives ‘help towards finding a publisher who will sign a contract for print, e-book, movie and game rights,’ since while ‘the printed book business may be suffering in the West…it’s still growing in the East, and the need for great narratives is expanding worldwide as the markets for modern fiction formats grow, from e-books to movies to games to graphic novels’ (ibid.). New audience, same literary forms, and no critical discourse on craft. Cultural capital, Huggan points out (following Bourdieu), ‘is transmitted, acquired and accumulated through a complex process of legitimation negotiated through the interactions between the producers and consumers of symbolic goods [here, literature]’ (4). As Bourdieu himself puts it, ‘what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer’ (1993:42). Writer and audience participate in the same process of legitimation. When CW travels beyond the boundaries of its origins, bringing with it culturally particular literary forms, craft devices and pedagogical models, it is imposes certain types of cultural capital on to the local, a form of cultural imperialism that threatens the potential breadth for formal and stylistic experimentation.

Not all the news is bad. And it is far from my intention to question human agency. As Brouillette recognises, writers engage in a complex process of ‘indulging, resisting and critiquing’ their imagined market (viii). Not all are committed to the market as the best or only form of literary dissemination, of course (even if Samuel Johnson did think any writer not in it for the money a ‘blockhead’). For Arjun Appadurai,

[t]he critical point is that both sides of the coin of global cultural process today are products of *the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference* on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures (*Disjuncture* 308 my italics).

Globalization is a ‘world of things’ with ‘different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations, or societies’ (Appadurai *Modernity* 4). When I read IWW graduate and City University Hong Kong writer in residence Marylin Chin’s comment that ‘[o]nce I blended the epigrams of Horace with the Haiku of Basho and came up with a strange brew of didacticism and pure image, which made a powerful political statement,’ I see the potentiality for formal innovation that such a transcultural aesthetics makes possible, experimentation with different global forms. Indeed, it might well be argued that poetry has done more than other literary forms in seeking out crafts from every global quarter (Jerome Rothenberg’s ‘ethnopoetics’ in *Technicians of the Sacred* constitute a genuine interrogation into the unique - rather than comparativist - splendours of global poetic forms). The Haiku enriches poetry and illustrates that English literature, of course, is not solely ethnocentric. Sociolinguistics and anthropology argue for awareness of variation in narrative structures (that narratology is not part of all CW teaching seems scandalous). In a 2010 blog, Myers writes, ‘I believe that creative writing ought to return to its original model. Literary criticism and even literary scholarship ought to be integrated into the writing of stories, poems, and memoirs’ (*Against* np). Myers recognizes CW’s origins and limits, and seeks to make them explicit.

I suggest CW positions its origins and epistemological particularity in all its teaching materials and textbooks. David Fenza, long-time director of AWP, writes,

Creative writing programmes have helped North America to develop writers whose works embody the lives of a big continent—all races, ethnicities, and economic classes…Democratic access to higher education has helped to accomplish that (213-4).

Fenza’s general point is inarguable, but for its blind acceptance of literary forms – his ‘poets, novelists, short-story writers, and non-fiction writers,’ as he describes – and those forms’ craft devices within prescriptive practical guides. Is the *Mahabharata* a novel? A poem? The question itself is the problem, of course – the epistemological position from which the question is asked. Must a story be linear? Ruth Page notes that for ‘minority group students’ in New Zealand schools, ‘narrative styles [come to] appear necessarily constrained at the price of academic progress…with potential consequences for the student’s sense of cultural identity and right to express themselves’ (177). CW at tertiary level must not unwittingly repeat such a situation. ‘Recitation holds an important place in Maori cultural values…but expertise in this skill does not necessarily transfer…to mainstream school practices’ (169). Rukmini Bhaya Nair believes that, in South Asia,

the great intellectual revolutions of the 21st century are likely to arise out of the struggles of various disadvantaged groups and communities to enter the literacy stakes and insert their own texts, and even more excitingly, their orality-based theories of text into the canons of ‘World Literature’ and ‘English Literature’…How can we as writers, readers and academics learn from vital oral traditions of knowledge and performance when conceptualizing creative courses in Asia? (10-11)

Among many excellent ‘impractical’ tips, she suggests we should ‘[h]ave the courage to admit those who are formally illiterate into the great box of the Asian academy, not necessarily as learners only but as *teachers’* (17 my italics). Intersecting productively with debates around orality, the spoken word and literary status (see, for instance, Corinne Fowler *Manchester*), such a suggestion as Nair’s remains revolutionary.

Moretti moves beyond dichotomy of *form* and *content* in analyzing World Literatures. He sees a triangle at work: ‘foreign plot; local characters; and, then, local narrative voice’ (*Conjectures* 65). It is in the last of these that we see the true instability of these ‘novels of the exotic’ (after Huggan). This would make sense to Moretti, since ‘the narrator is the pole of comment, of explanation, of evaluation, and when foreign ‘formal patterns’…make characters behave in strange ways…then of course comment becomes uneasy – garrulous, erratic, rudderless’ (ibid*.*). However, Moretti is far from uniformly gloomy. ‘[T]he encounter of western forms and local reality,’ he writes, ‘did indeed produce everywhere a structural compromise [but] the compromise itself was taking rather different forms’ (ibid. 62) CW should keep in mind firstly, that all craft or formal instruction should be culturally and historically contextualized; and secondly, that what Moretti describes as the ‘constriction’ of foreign form can also give rise to ‘rather different forms,’ in the always active and reactive writer. CW should be on the look out for such innovation, such experimentation, hoping both to participate in its free evolution, and to feed back such innovation into the grand corpus of CW studies.

Every now and then, one of those impossible programmes *works*…like the Russian novels of ideas, or Latin American magical realism (or the slightly different case of the Kafka-Joyce generation). Although these remain *exceptions*, they occur often enough to show a counter force at work within the world literary system’ (Moretti, *Hollywood* 106).

In a globalised or globalising twenty-first century world, my argument risks sounding like that of a Victorian armchair anthropologist bemoaning the loss of pure, pre-Lapsarian cultures. However, as my examples from Bhutan, China and Tibet illustrate, there remains much to enrich and challenge craft devices within established literary forms of storytelling, and potentially even the extent of literary forms themselves. For CW not to be aware of such local potential would be disappointing at best, or destructively homogenizing. Instead of ‘bringing back’ new forms, new principles of storytelling from ‘elsewhere’ to fertilize CW’s ‘centre’, the subject risks formalizing English Studies paradigms globally.

CW programmes offer much to the new global bourgeoisie – and why not? Yet let them also seek out new *form* and *craft* as well as technique, new *teachers* as well as students­. This might relate to the translation of oral texts to ‘writing’ (and the subject’s very name provides its own challenge here), or it might relate to other forms of that creative endeavour that uses words as its base material. For it would be terrible for a subject with its heart so firmly in the celebration of human creative expression instead to become the instrument of a subtle yet invidious programmatic cultural imperialism.

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ENDS

1. This section draws heavily on several excellent critical histories detailing CW’s development as a taught subject in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand. These include D.G Myers’ *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996) and Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* (2008) for the US, Paul Dawson’s *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005) for Australia (which includes a convincing critique of Myers’ work), Michelene Wandor’s *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (2008) and Rebecca O’Rourke’s *Creative Writing: Education, Culture and Community* (2005) for the UK. I have found none to match for Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a forthcoming paper, tentatively titled ‘Socialist Creative Writing Programs: Cold War Alternatives to the Programmatic,’ I will discuss the few places where CW developed entirely autonomously to the Anglophone model discussed in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Personal interview 23rd May 2014, Leipzig. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There have been a number of works on the development of CW programs alongside the rise of Theory. It would take too long to summarize these arguments. Although relevant, they are not vital to the essence of my argument. See for reference: Dawson *Humanities* 122 & passim; Reginald Gibbons 1985; Mike Harris 2011; Andrew Melrose 2007; Laura Ramey 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wilbers notes that, in 1975, of the 15 CW programs offering MFAs, nine were founded by IWW graduates, and of the thirty-two offering MAs, half were IWW graduates. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Surely the beginning of an interesting undergraduate essay title. ‘Discuss…’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Detailing *Beowulf*’s influence on the contemporary imagination goes far beyond the remit of this essay. However, see Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness*, and the collection of essays *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*, edited by David Clark and Nicholas Perkins. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Artamonova’s essay provides an excellent elaboration of the part *Beowulf* played in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By ‘doctrine of authenticity’, McCarthy means that ‘nineteenth century’ notion of Realism reflecting an authentic version of the real world. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I have been unable separately to verify this statement; I received no response to my enquiries with Renmin University Press, although since that email was sent, I do now receive an inordinate amount of Chinese written character spam. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for instance: Carl Grabo 1908, *The Art of the Short Story*; Robert Wilson Neal, 1914, Short Stories in the Making; Charles Raymond Barrett, 1898, *Short Story Writing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)