

Christopher Kempf, *Craft Class: The Writing Workshop in American Culture*

Review by Maxi Wardcantori

Christopher Kempf, Craft Class: The Writing Workshop in American Culture (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

Craft Class: The Writing Workshop in American Culture is a debut book of scholarship from poet Christopher Kempf, whose poetry collections include *Late in the Empire of Men* (2017) and *What Though the Field Be Lost* (2021). Though Kempf is not the first scholar to study the history of creative writing programs, he takes a unique approach, arguing that the field of creative writing “emerges less from the expressivist ethos of progressive education than from the constructivist ethos of the American Arts and Crafts movement” and that the rhetoric of creative writing instruction, so tied to metaphors of craft, construction, and work, is necessarily tangled with “transhistorical issues involving labor, education, and aesthetic and economic production” (6).

Kempf traces the use of this rhetoric through history, beginning with Plato’s view of poetry as an “inferior form of manufacture (4).” Although a lexicon of labor has long been favored by artists, the specific legacy of craft-infused pedagogy emerged more recently. Kempf connects this to an AAC craft ideal established in response to the expansion of an industrial capitalism that threatened to eradicate a history of expressive, artisanal labor dating back to medieval guilds. This fixation on craft migrated “from labor schools to an experimental arts college,” eventually assimilating into pedagogy and becoming a staple of creative writing programs across the country (24).

Having used the introduction to pinpoint an origin for the language that is central to his thesis, Kempf pivots away from the explicitly economic world of craft labor, turning instead to the covertly economic world of craft writing. The first three chapters of *Craft Class* explore three notable creative writing programs and historicize the circumstances of their operation. Chapters one through three follow, respectively, George Baker’s undergraduate theater workshop at Harvard, Meridel Le Sueur’s WPA-sponsored writing workshop at the Minnesota Labor School, and Robert Duncan’s materialist poetry workshop at Black Mountain College. In much of his poetry, Kempf writes through and about history; in *Craft Class*, he retains the specificity and care of a poet, profiling each workshop as one might a living thing. After all, a workshop speaks directly to the ethos of its facilitator. In these chapters, Kempf explores ideology on both an individual level and, recognizing the influence of critical movements, a collective level. We hear a variety of answers to the age-old question: what is the purpose of art?

Because the language of writing is so reliant on the language of labor, one’s opinion on the role and value of writing in society reflects an opinion on the role and value of labor. Though Baker, Le Sueur, and Duncan all urged their students to draw artistic inspiration from physical work experiences, each had very different ideas of how that labor should shape their students’ work. Baker required students in his 47 Workshop to assume a rotating role on the production team, believing their criticism would be “driven by their labor and understanding of how each

participant's work must imbue the production with a certain quality" (35). Le Sueur, Kempf writes, taught writing as "a practical labor rather than cultural capital" (88). Her own students were encouraged to use language as a tool to document the realities of their own exploitation under capitalism. Finally, at Black Mountain College, where students labored by day, Duncan taught a poetics that was submissive to materiality. The physical toil at BMC facilitated ego sublimation and communal engagement that allowed for a kind of spiritual ascension. To Duncan, "the art of the poem...is the art of long persisting and careful work" (142).

Chapter four addresses the cultural position of a more generalized creative writing pedagogy through the examination of poetry craft books. This is also where Kempf begins his discussion of universities, institutional learning, and modern MFA programs. He emphasizes that these craft books largely respond, critically, to the institution:

[L]ike the American Arts and Crafts movement, generally, craft poetry books served not merely as a cultural intervention, then, but as an economic critique of emergent professional-managerial values, a plea that labor remain both spiritually expressive and technically masterful. (160)

The book is roughly chronological, and this last chapter expands the scope of Kempf's argument by addressing a system of higher education that remains regnant in America today. A synthesis of history and contemporary criticism make for an engaging discussion on the ethics of the American university, as well as the effect of departmental structuring on creative writing pedagogy. What value does the institution find in creative writing? What value does the creative writer find in their own discipline? As Kempf convincingly argues, the two are closely related.

Craft Class is most compelling in chapter four. It is here that Kempf allows himself to personally engage with outside sources ("I graduated from and teach in MFA programs, after all") and his own institutional experience beautifully enriches this section (189). This voice remains present throughout the coda, too, as he devotes even more space to analyzing creative work to find evidence of authorial attitudes toward labor and art. While the close studies of historical workshops serve as solid examples of "sites where the relation between work and writing was explicitly contested," their weight imparts the book with a slight imbalance (201). Most notably, Kempf's examination of Robert Duncan and the Black Mountain College goes on for fifty-three pages. Baker and Le Sueur receive just thirty-six and thirty-nine, respectively, while the final chapter addresses past and present relationships between craft books, universities, MFA programs, and industrial-corporate labor in just forty-three. The level of detail afforded to Duncan's spiritual poetics is excursive.

Though *Craft Class* centers around issues of labor, Kempf notes the broad scope of his observations in the coda: "this book, it turns out, has been tracking not merely the incorporation of craft lexicons into an over-arching professional-managerialism, but the establishment of a particular mode of literary whiteness (221)." Just as experience, expression, and aesthetics in writing are policed to ensure specific depictions of class, so too can they be policed to ensure specific depictions of race. In setting out to identify the relationship between writing and labor, Kempf ends up exposing a network of culturally constructed barriers that constrain creative writing to maintain legibility and subordination.

Like Kempf, I graduated from an MFA program in poetry. We are both products of the institutional creative writing pedagogy that he critiques in the introduction to *Craft Class*:

[A]n explosion in graduate creative writing programs helps consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions. Specifically, such programs transcode professional-managerial soft skills—linguistic facility, social and emotional discernment, symbolic fluency—in the language of manual labor. At the same time, workshop ensures the university’s power as the central licensing agency in literary culture...(6).

Despite this grim perspective, Kempf urges the reader to envision opportunities for meaningful subversion within the system. The book’s final chapter theorizes that “the alignment of poetry and university opens space for a postmodernist poetics characterized by reflexive attention to its own institutional habitus” (161). American universities are structured around the same exploitation and authoritarianism that breed fascist ideology; though all college writing programs implicitly uphold the values of their parent institution, we as writers have the obligation to constantly examine our own *habitus* and the extent to which our work upholds and undermines authority. To create a more humane writing ethos, we must be always at odds with the institution even as we reside within it.

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