



## Loren Glass, ed., *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*

Loren Glass, ed. [\*After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University\*](#). Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. vii, 277p. ISBN 9781609384395. US\$ 35.00 (paperback).

I remember being riveted by Mark McGurl's [\*The Program Era: Post-War Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing\*](#) (Harvard UP, 2009). It offered a grand unified field theory of post-1945 American fiction—a sophisticated, materialist account of how the conditions of literary production shaped American prose. McGurl argued that “the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history” (ix), making us rethink the relationship between higher education and the literary marketplace.

*After the Program Era*, as Glass describes it in the introduction, “explores the consequences and implications, as well as the lacunae and liabilities, of McGurl’s foundational intervention” (1). *After the Program Era* considers sites and genres outside McGurl’s purview—poetry, electronic literature, creative writing in transnational contexts, creative writing programs at the margins. The collection consists of an introduction by Glass, 14 essays, and an afterword by McGurl. The 14 essays are divided into three parts: I. Antecedents (writers and institutions that pre-date the post-World-War II Program Era); II. Revisions (writers and institutions contemporaneous with the Program Era that complicate or challenge McGurl’s thesis); and III. Prospects (the future of creative writing). The essays are universally strong, and Glass’s introduction and McGurl’s afterword provide the necessary historical and critical context for thinking about the essays together and for thinking together beyond them.

Glass situates *The Program Era* as part of the “sociological turn” in literary studies, informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and also by new work on the institutions of modernism by Lawrence Rainey, Susan Stanford Friedman, and others. What post-War creative writing programs did—especially those based on the Iowa Writers’ Workshop—was to preserve and institutionalize the aesthetics of interwar modernism (3). The Iowa Writers’ Workshop, directed by Paul Engle from 1941 to 1965, provided the model—peer review workshops, visiting scholars, fundraising—and also sent a slew of graduates into the world to begin and staff creative writing programs elsewhere.

There are many thought-provoking, well-written pieces in this collection. Greg Barnhisel places creative

writing programs as part of Cold-War cultural diplomacy, arguing that the modernism it institutionalized was de-politicized, reframed as a celebration of individual expression vs. Soviet collectivism. Sean McCann reads Russell Banks as an author whose career illuminates the outer limits of the Program Era. Donal Harris discusses the “peripheral realism” of Jonathan Franzen and Chad Harbach. Seth Abramson focuses on poetry and the MFA. Stephen Voyce reads the Black Mountain College program as offering an alternative, collectivist model of creativity. Matthew Blackwell sheds new light on the relationship between Raymond Carver and his activist editor Gordon Lish, whose admiration for gay writer James Purdy’s “politics of silence” got transferred “minus the political charge” onto Carver’s fiction. Other essays trace the careers of itinerant poet Vachel Lindsay and itinerant critic/scholar Malcolm Cowley, J. M. Coetzee, and hypertext fiction pioneer Robert Coover.

As the listing above should make clear, this collection skews white and male and is not always especially self-aware about it (3/17 contributors are women; subjects are overwhelmingly white and male). Eric Bennett’s chapter on “Flannery O’Connor, the Cold War, and the Canon” and Marija Reiff’s discussion of Protestant ideas of “calling” and Marilynne Robinson are notable exceptions. Ditto Michal Hill’s “Timely Exile: James Alan McPherson, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and Black Creativity” which considers models of African-American authorship and social/political leadership. This makes chapter 10, Juliana Spahr’s and Stephanie Young’s “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room” especially important and refreshing. The authors talk about the race and gender politics of literary functions they attend, of MFA programs themselves, and about the “climate.” If 2/3 of the students in MFA programs are women, why do 70% of literary prizes go to men? Why are women and ethnic/racial minorities over-represented in “debt generator” programs (those that do not offer tuition waivers and require large student loans to finance) (154)? How are these creative writing programs different from programs in the 1960s and 1970s that were free and closely tied to racial and social justice movements?

Nonetheless, this is a smart, important collection. McGurl concludes his afterword with a worthy send-off: “What seems to me perfectly clear, after reading this collection, is that an adequate historical understanding of postwar literature can be had only by paying close attention to the production and circulation of literature and literary practices in the culture of the school. Whether the Program Era as such is over or not, that scholarly project continues” (255).

Erin A. Smith  
*University of Texas at Dallas*

**Date Created**  
08/11/2018