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Toward a Decolonial Creative Writing Workshop: *Mbari* as a Case Study in Examining Intercultural Models for Arts Education

James Ryan and Steve Westbrook

Abstract: *The creative writing workshop has been the subject of sustained critique for its tendency to reproduce dominant cultural norms, especially in spaces where admissions to the workshop do not reflect local ethnic and cultural diversity. In an effort to aid the search for alternate models/foundations for creative writing instructions, the authors turn to the history of mbari, a cultural practice among the Owerri Igbo of Nigeria, which was briefly adapted into the pedagogical foundation for a visual arts workshop conducted between the time of Nigeria's independence and the onset of its civil war. In its original form, mbari was a sacred, collective arts ritual through which practitioners cemented social bonds among diverse groups within the local community. In its later adaptation as pedagogy, mbari became an effort to produce "authentic" local art in a global marketplace. This essay examines the values and local social norms that made mbari so vital for the Owerri Igbo and then teases out cautionary lessons from the appropriation of mbari as a workshop pedagogy. The authors argue that, by examining the successes and failures of previous efforts to adopt "non-western" arts practices into workshop pedagogies, instructors and pedagogues can be more mindful about their efforts to reform the creative writing workshop.*

In recent decades, the rapid expansion of creative writing programs across the United States and the active recruiting of minority and international students by many universities have led to an influx into writing workshops of individuals with diverse backgrounds. Today, creative writing programs reveal more diversity than at any other time in the history of the discipline. The writers emerging from these programs have advanced a literary movement Mark McGurl calls "high cultural pluralism" and a body of literature that "joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference" (32). This statement of praise—imbued with sincere reverence and potential danger—reflects an ideological paradox that continues to define much academic thinking on the subject. It recognizes the profound cultural worth this and related movements have added to contemporary literatures of the US in all of their expansive plurality. At the same time, lauding this "type" of writing (and, by extension, author) risks reinscribing a colonial history defined by the superficial or voyeuristic understanding of others—represented here by the term "fascination." At worst, depictions of these writers and their works may inadvertently echo the curiosities of Euro-colonial fantasy.

As teachers of creative writing studies in the US, we (James and Steve) find ourselves inhabiting subject positions that require us to continually reflect on our own roles in the perpetuation or cessation of this ideology. White males of European-American descent who work as critical educators within US universities, we inhabit a privileged and para-

doxical space of our own. A recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin's PhD program in Composition and Rhetoric, James works as a teacher, scholar, freelance writer, and game designer; at Cal State Fullerton, Steve serves as an associate professor who specializes in creative writing studies and composition-rhetoric. Enfranchised within these structures, we value the intercultural communities of writers we collaborate with on a daily basis. But in order to adequately support the writers in our classrooms—to practice what Frank Martin and Fatima Pirbhai-Illich have called a “non-Othering pedagogy” (369)—we find ourselves increasingly working *against* the very model of education that (in part, at least) has provided us our privilege. Specifically, we refer to the legacy of the creative writing workshop.

To this end, we join an array of writer-scholars who have taken on two tasks: (1) to critically examine the ways in which the workshop—a mode of education with formalist and colonial roots—has failed to adequately address the complex pragmatic and theoretical challenges facing writers of varying cultural backgrounds, and (2) to create more socially just and inclusive strategies of reinvention from other traditions of knowledge-making. While this work does not fit in a neat timeline, it can be roughly characterized as follows. Early critiques of the workshop often arose from feminists seeking to disrupt patriarchal power dynamics (e.g., Domina, Haake, Miner, Shelnutt); their work was expanded by writers of color who often narrated their lived experience of alienation in MFA programs (e.g., Diaz, Kearns). More recently, a number of writer-scholars (e.g., Adsit, Chavez, Lee, Mura, Saleses) have built on these critiques to analyze the workshop as a historical site of intersectional oppression and to define pedagogies that intervene in this history. From their particular stances, they argue the writing workshop must learn to become inclusive not only of diverse bodies and identities, but also of diverse, even conflicting, aesthetic principles, modes of expression, artistic goals, and intended audiences with their varied tastes, expectations, and values. In sum, and to borrow from Felicia Rose Chavez's title, we join these writer-scholars in seeking to “Decolonize the Creative Classroom.”

In order to expand this decolonizing work, we engage in a form of what Walter D. Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience.” Mignolo uses this term to describe practices that seek to disrupt “the coloniality of knowledge,” an ideological inheritance that controls what kinds of knowledge-making are deemed legitimate by upholding situational and biased Eurocentric norms as somehow universal or superior to localized, indigenous ways of knowing (176). Rather than buttressing the traditional workshop—the controlling norm of our universities—we draw from a non-Eurocentric episteme to reimagine and improve our teaching practices. Specifically, we examine a model of arts education from southeastern Nigeria called *mbari*. Once a thriving communal and ritual arts practice of the Owerri Igbo, *mbari* was celebrated by novelist Chinua Achebe as a set of uniquely African aesthetic principles at the dawn of Nigeria's independence. In turn, Achebe's reinvention of *mbari* was further adapted for classroom use by Ulli Beier, a German-born phonetics instructor at the University of Ibadan, and his English spouse, Georgina Beier, a studio artist. In the discussion that follows, we treat the story of *mbari* as a case study in the nuances, potentialities, and pitfalls that accompany the use of a culture's indigenous artistic practices for the intended purpose of decolonizing arts education. While we explore the problem of cultural appropriation, we nonetheless attempt

to articulate the potential value of a *mbari*-influenced approach to creative writing pedagogy. We begin this work by first outlining the historical development and expansion of the dominant US workshop model, revealing how its formalist biases reflect deeply rooted colonial prejudices that all too frequently continue to define contemporary educational contexts.

Unshared Silence: The Fiction of the Monoculture

The traditional workshop model we recognize today came into being at the University of Iowa in the 1930s. Transplanted from the university's existing PhD curriculum and placed into a new MFA program, creative writing classes quickly evolved into workshops based on the studio arts model, or European atelier, in which a master artist taught students the conventions of creative writing through a pedagogy of aesthetic formalism. The underlying theoretical influence was New Criticism, and the method was decidedly centered on the study of craft. Wilbur Schramm, who directed the Iowa Writer's Workshops from 1939 to 1942, touted the ability of this new model to enable students to approach one another's poems and stories "with the intelligent understanding of a fellow craftsman in order to see how others have met the common problems of the craft and to estimate the effectiveness of their solution" (165). While Schramm's statement clearly reveals the dominant practice of conceptualizing creative writing as a "craft," it also offers insight to the rather homogenous culture of the early workshop. It is an understatement to claim that in the pre-Civil Rights era of the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Iowa workshops were not rich in cultural or gender diversity. Schramm's "craftsman," indeed, inhabited an exclusionary Euro-American patriarchal space.

Given this reality, it is important to note not only the lack of diverse demographics but also the assumed singularity of aesthetic purpose that characterized the early workshop. When Schramm states that participants share the pursuit of "the common problems of the craft," he reveals a goal defined more by similarity than difference. The major assumption is, of course, that problems of craft are indeed "common," or universal: i.e., they do not particularly vary from writer to writer. This belief was supported by the reigning aesthetic theory of New Criticism, which suggested that the artistic quality of a piece of literature was to be determined by the sophistication or artistry of its deployment of internal poetic devices. In New Critical parlance, a mastery of craft was evident when these devices called attention to their own strangeness and beauty; in doing so, a successful literary work ultimately "embodied meaning" in the "vital unity" of its aesthetic form. It was to function as an *objet d'art*—to be appreciated for the way it revealed its artistic splendor without particular reference to the world outside (see Brooks and Warren 11-16). In fact, the New Critics regularly characterized writers who attempted to move beyond the boundaries of "the text itself" to address civic concerns, engage in community activism, or lobby for social change as inferior. For example, when discussing the work of W.H. Auden in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Cleanth Brooks states the following: "In general, Auden's poetry weakens as he tries to rely upon an external framework—a doctrine or ideology" (126). Brooks goes so far as to label poets Langston Hughes and Genevieve Taggard, who attempted to use their work to intervene in social affairs, as "propagandists" (51). In fact, he criticizes and "convicts" them for being "pre-

occupied with the inculcation of a particular message” (49). Given the tenor of the time, we don’t think it is entirely coincidental that the writers criticized by Brooks happen to be a gay man, a black man, and a socialist woman, respectively.

From a distance of history, it may not seem surprising that in the 1930s and 1940s writers of a similar background were brought together at Iowa to learn to produce a similarly defined version of literary art. We might say this problem was a product of its era, and it would be convenient to suggest that it was, indeed, *confined* to its era. However, this is not the case. While the demographics of creative writing classes have changed significantly, the dominance of the New Critical approach to craft has remained entrenched in their pedagogy, largely because of the way in which the Iowa model reproduced itself. As D.G. Myers suggests, the system started at Iowa became “a machine for producing more and more creative writing programs” (146). Eric Bennet similarly notes that “More than half of the second-wave programs, about 50 of which appeared by 1970, were founded by Iowa graduates.” He goes on to state, “Third- and fourth- and fifth-wave programs, also Iowa scions, have kept coming ever since.” In other words, the influence of the Iowa paradigm still runs deep. Surely, we don’t mean to suggest that the workshop remains a monolithic entity entirely defined by its past; however, we can’t deny Iowa’s formative, expansive, and lingering effect on current articulations of creative writing pedagogy.

Today, our increasingly diverse student body brings with it issues of difference and inequality that are not always easy to address in a workshop model based on the Iowa paradigm. Students of various backgrounds and home discourses sometimes make use of language in radically different ways than what founders of the Iowa workshops might have envisioned. They also have divergent sensibilities about what good writing should look like and for whom it should be written. In workshops not prepared to accommodate these divergent sensibilities, minority students can feel ostracized by professors and classmates alike. For example, as Rosalie Morales Kearns suggests, the traditional workshop’s “gag order”—the practice of *literally* silencing student authors by requiring them to refrain from speaking while their work is being critiqued—tends to marginalize some populations of students. For Kearns, the practice is strange and limiting, since it runs against the grain of her own cultural heritage: “The expectations about spoken interaction that I have internalized as a woman of Puerto Rican descent include the understanding that staying silent or imposing silence is unacceptably rude.” As an MFA student, when Kearns saw how easily the other students in her workshops “acquiesced to the gag rule,” she knew she was “in a profoundly foreign place” with values that did not match her own (794). As she was kept silent and required to witness the predominantly white writers of her program responding to her creative work, Kearns noticed that her classmates critiqued especially strongly those aspects of her writing that did not jibe with the values of the majority. From this experience, she concludes:

the MFA curriculum assumes the existence of a particular type of student, a student firmly located in the Euro-American cultural tradition.... [T]here are many ways for students to be marginalized in relation to this “ideal” student: if our work alludes to authors and cultural practices about which he knows nothing; if we use narrative devices he dislikes or has never even seen; if we ignore his particular standards of coherence and intelligibility; if we write about

subjects he considers unimportant; if we do not valorize a lone individual; if we write about topics in a way that seems “ideological” to him because he holds different values. (800-801)

Within the context of the craft-based workshop, deviations from the “common” conventions by writers of color are sometimes too easily dismissed as instances of aesthetic immaturity—especially if workshop participants are unprepared to respond appropriately to creative work defined by profound inter- and intra-cultural disparities.

Jay Caspian Kang, author of *The Dead Do Not Improve* and *The Loneliest Americans*, recently shared a moment from his own MFA experience that echoes the problems described by Kearns. He discusses a workshop session in which his fiction was pigeonholed into an all-too-familiar genre of “immigrant narrative.” Kang’s professor offered the following feedback: “[W]hat we need to do is figure out a way to *elevate* it [the narrative] so that it’s not just a telling of the way things are for a certain type of person.” This advice prodded Kang to write his story for an audience that was decidedly *not* an eclectic group of Korean-Americans. It put him in the position of representing the immigrant experience and bearing the onus of “explaining all the nuances of the immigrant struggle to a presumed white, upper-middle class audience,” an audience reflected most immediately in the demographics of the workshop, and more distantly as the presumed readership of an emerging US author. Privately, he began to question, first, why he should be writing for this audience at all and, second, if he were to do so, why he should be lumped into a broadly defined tradition of Asian-American literature including authors like Amy Tan, with whom he wanted no particular association. Ultimately, Kang suggests, this was one of many experiences that led him to fixate on the problem of his Korean-American authorial identity in relation to his potential audience in what he describes variously as a kind of “neurosis” or “anxiety”: “Every capitulation to the ‘white gaze’ comes with shame; every stand you take for authenticity triggers its own questions about what constitutes authenticity.” Kang admits he did not consider his professor’s comments intentionally racist but given in a good-faith effort to improve the *quality* of his fiction. However, the limitations of this and similar “craft” conversations that assume universal aesthetics and a common audience failed to make room for larger, more nuanced questions about culture and identity. Kang says, at the time, he didn’t bring up these questions with the professor because he was “too embarrassed.” The culture of Kang’s workshop may not have come with a literal gag order, but nor was it particularly accommodating to this author’s need for more substantial inquiry about issues of diversity, representation, authorship, and audience.

As Kearns and Kang reveal, the devaluing of difference is not limited to the style of writing produced in the workshop but also concerns the style of *talking about* writing. In fact, we’d like to suggest that acts of marginalization too often occur because of an ideological inheritance that defines how writers are supposed to talk (or not talk) or more generally *behave* in workshop settings. Specifically, we mean that upholding the fiction of a universal quality of craft, above all other priorities, often creates a tacit code of etiquette that writers are expected to follow. In this sense it upholds what Mignolo defines as the two functions of colonial institutions: (1) the “training of new (epistemically obedient) members” and (2) the “control of...what knowledge making is allowed,

disavowed, devalued, or celebrated” (176). In order to help improve each other’s writing, workshop members are supposed to limit their conversations to discussing internal formal concerns *instead of* talking about larger more disruptive issues such as writers’ attempts to claim different forms of power, texts’ variant artistic *and* cultural functions, or profound variations in the discursive practices of different communities. As Kearns perhaps suggests, a rather ironic turn tends to occur when writers who represent minority positions find themselves confronting a radical difference in values. Instead of an author’s difference being allowed to illuminate the very strangeness of the workshop system itself as hegemonic—the unnaturalness of craft-dominated approaches to study—this difference can be easily subsumed by the culture of the workshop; in its effort to create docile subjects or Mignolo’s “epistemically obedient members,” it writes the offending author off as naïve or unsophisticated. In this reinscribing of colonial ideology, instead of the writer being allowed to provide the group with a valuable moment of collective estrangement, in which workshop members may be inspired to see their own seemingly normative practices from an alternative perspective, the writer is faulted for their unfamiliarity with (or resistance to) the way the workshop is supposed to “naturally” work.

In other words, creative writing pedagogy too often replicates the limitations of what Martin and Pribhai-Illich call the “object-based” intellectual tradition. This tradition, which is at once a product and enabler of colonialism, is defined by categorical thinking that produces “a separation of self and identity from language, and language from culture. Static and universal ideas about culture hold sway, and construct difference as ‘Other’ and as deficient when compared to the dominant group’s standards” (360). Education in an object-based context consistently holds the colonized subject to the standard of the colonizer, without any acknowledgement of the interconnected nature of knowledge, language, identity, and culture. Martin and Pribhai-Illich contrast the object-based tradition with a “relational” one, grounded in the understanding of knowledge as a reciprocal phenomenon, one that comes into being through dialog and difference. A relational education is one in which “differences are revealed through relating to each other, and...this goes beyond superficial, visible differences (where culture is equated with race and ethnicity, for example, skin colour, first language) to differences that are not so evident (where culture is understood in the broadest sense to include religion, community, language, gender and so on)” (361). Rather than examining each student’s work to see if it adheres to or strays from an inherited, “objective” aesthetic standard, relational-based creative writing pursues all students’ work—collectively and holistically—as an effort to understand and value “not so evident” differences.

Although they do not necessarily apply Martin and Pribhai-Illich’s terminology, a number of programs have effectively redefined the workshop model as more relational. At Cal State Monterey Bay, Frances Payne Adler founded an innovative undergraduate minor in Creative Writing and Social Justice, which “brings together the study of creative expression, culture, communication, and community involvement” (“Creative”)—an exploration of differences that radically departs from object-learning and craft-based pedagogy. Somewhat similarly, Hampshire College’s Art and Social Action program and the University at Buffalo’s Poetics Program have sought to break down barriers between creative writing classrooms, the politics of difference, and practices of cultural interven-

tion. While we recognize and support these reform efforts, we'd like to explore the possibilities of moving even further away from inherited approaches to creative writing in US institutions and, as we've suggested, draw from a model well outside the parameters of Euro-American education: the Owerri Igbo practice of *mbari*.

Mum's Not the Word but Mbari Might Be?

We explore the possibility of *mbari* here precisely because it challenges the perceived disparity between issues of craft, representation, and culture that too often marginalizes writers of diverse backgrounds within the conventional creative writing workshop. Like the atelier tradition and the workshop model, *mbari* involves established artists teaching apprentices. However, the practice focuses not on the development of individual talent (as arts education is understood in the US) but on the enhancement of community life and the deepening of understanding across segments of society through artistic expression.

Historically, the term *mbari* made its way into U.S. educators' lexicon largely through the work of Chinua Achebe, who celebrated the Igbo tradition as an indigenous Nigerian aesthetic with relevance to the larger field of post-colonial literature. Perhaps his most comprehensive treatment of *mbari* appears in his essay "Africa and Her Writers," where he contrasts the term with two predominant, binary "streams" of European aesthetics: (1) the notion that art should always be created in the service of politics (a traditional Marxist stance), and (2) the idea that art should be "accountable to no one" and need "justify itself to nobody except itself" (the central tenant of aestheticism) (30). Achebe compares this polarized situation to a Yoruba story in which "Eshu, god of fate and lover of confusion" decides to play a trick on two farmers who work fields on opposite sides of the same road. Making himself half black and half white, Eshu walks along the road, causing an argument between the farmers over what color he is. Art, claims Achebe, is like this. It can neither be placed wholly in the service of politics nor can it exist entirely for its own sake. In this sense, the system Achebe describes does away with false bifurcations between propaganda and art, culture and craft, which have defined US creative writing pedagogy since its earliest manifestations (31). Achebe proposes that in Igbo society art has traditionally encompassed both the political and the transcendent, and that these two are not in conflict with one another. Rather, the political and transcendent are complementary and mutually dependent features, for art is simultaneously a sublime and communal experience. Achebe suggests that this relationship is perhaps most apparent in the tradition of *mbari*, which he describes as an artistic, cultural, and religious festival of "startling power and diversity" (33).

In this manner, Achebe uses the term variously to refer to an operational aesthetic and a specific cultural event. To better understand the complexity of *mbari*, we need to examine the latter in more detail (and move beyond the confines of Achebe's treatment). First and foremost, the term *mbari* describes the process and product of a religious ritual—the building of an artistically adorned house for a god, complete with what we might familiarly call a sculpture garden. The meaning of this term also includes the festival celebration of the house's completion. Thus, the making and celebrating of art are all enclosed within the same word. A unity is thereby expressed in *mbari*: an artistic

artifact, in this context, cannot be meaningfully extracted from the community who invented the art, made it together, and gathered to celebrate its completion and beauty. To remove a statue from an *mbari* house and place it in a foreign museum, for example, would strip the statue of its meaning, which is to say its *purpose*. Behind glass in a foreign land, such a piece can only communicate the colonizer's object-based values: craftsmanship, artistry, and, above all, the "fascinating" foreignness of its shape and design. As we will see, *mbari* statues are not in any way made for the colonizing gaze. In fact, they are made specifically in response to emerging needs within a local community.

Although no longer practiced, *mbari* once thrived in the Owerri region of Igboland, home now to the modern city of Owerri, state capital of Imo, Nigeria. Henry Cole, the most frequently cited scholar on *mbari*, estimates the origin of the practice at least as far back as 1850.¹ It flourished in the 1920s and into the 1940s, and then, with the increasing influence of "European education and European missionaries," the practice of *mbari* began to decline and eventually disappear (3). As practiced by the Owerri Igbo, *mbari* was never intended as a system of arts education, nor was it meant as the proof or expression of an aesthetic theory. Instead, the construction and celebration of an *mbari* house was always the outgrowth of Igbo cultural and religious life. The decision to build an *mbari* was prompted by the will of an *agbara*, a god, frequently Ala, the Igbo earth goddess. When a deity "fears herself slipping in relative position," she "troubles her priest, asking for more attention, more wealth, more servants, a new house (*mbari*), all in an effort to regain her proud place in the conference of gods" (Cole 59). The deity does this by sending signs and omens. A surge in infant mortality, drought, or unexplained deaths of livestock might indicate that local life is out of proper relationship with the divine. States Cole: "In such major, pervasive crises when nature and the gods have tipped the scales against a community, no ordinary sacrifice can redress the balance... An *agbara* is calling for the greatest offering it can demand: *mbari*" (71).

Building an *mbari*, then, is meant to restore the community to right relations with its gods, and to boost a particular deity's standing among her peers. But *mbari* is a cultural as well as a religious endeavor, and as such, it has social consequences. From the villages that agree to participate in an *mbari*, a priest and a diviner select family groups who must send participants to a compound where they will live and work together for one or more years. This is no small sacrifice, and it binds all the villages and families who contribute. Because groups, and then individual participants from those groups, are chosen by divination, rather than being chosen on the basis of interest or talent, they "vary

1. While a significant body of scholarship covers artifacts that emerged from the *mbari* tradition, exceedingly few available resources discuss *mbari* as an extant cultural practice. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie summarizes the problem of the "extinct tradition" this way: "The demise of *Mbari* among the Owerri Igbo...means that there are few ways to engage this practice except through focus on the archival record," which is largely based on the work of Cole, an art historian whose field observations remain "the most significant research on *Mbari*" (64). For this reason, we find ourselves joining the likes of Ogbechie and others in relying heavily on Cole's scholarship for our reconstruction of *mbari* as a cultural practice.

widely in age, occupation, temperament, and sex" (80). In short, a diverse cross-section of society is selected this way.

Once selected, participants leave their lives and families and move to the priest's home for three eight-day weeks, during which time they are initiated into *mbari* with ritual scarification, the adoption of new names, and the assignment of new spousal couplings, which may or may not be platonic. Following their initiation, the participants move to the *mbari* site, where they are to live as spirits in a parallel world, in which they will be born, married, labor and (symbolically) die in the service of their god. These "spirit-workers live a life...as sacred actors in the cosmic drama" (Cole 217).

Overseeing the labor of *mbari* participants is an artist, who learned his² trade through an apprenticeship lasting six to ten years. As Cole suggests, the artist serves as "architect, sculptor, painter, building supervisor, and priest" (77). However, though the ritual and his role in it are both religious, "little mystical aura appears to surround the artist; he is appreciated simply as one who does well the job he knows. Both his attitude toward himself and that of others toward him suggest that 'craftsman' may be a more appropriate description of his function" (77). At the same time, the craft of each *mbari* artist produces work of distinctive quality and style. Quoting from several respondents, Cole offers the following statement on craft: "Skilled workers always do what comes out of their minds; they each do their own work and their handwork is varied. Their work cannot be the same" (169). It seems that, for the Owerri Igbo, the unique talents of individual artists are not shrouded by the "mystical aura" often attributed to artists in Europe and the US. Artistic craft is respected, even in a religious context, without attributing undue powers or status to its practitioners. The entire concept of craft is not an issue of pedagogy. Participants working under the main artist are not necessarily aiming to acquire the skills of *mbari* building; they are here to perform their religious duties as a service to their community. It is this service, rather than the unique skills of the artist, that is seen as bearing the greatest relevance. As Cole puts it, "Here ideology obscures personality; an *mbari* is made by and for a specific community, and this, rather than the handiwork of [any specific artist], is the sociological reality" (169).

After one or two years of isolated labor to construct the house, populate it with statues, and paint the whole project, the *mbari* is complete. In a review process of sorts, patrons are invited to view the work and give critical feedback, which the artist and participants address before the approaching festival. Then, people gather from all around to celebrate the completion of the work, the appeasement of their god, and the return of their loved ones from this long ordeal. Now that their work is complete, the participants undergo a ritual death before returning to their lives and families. They leave behind their assumed names and never mention themselves in relationship to the *mbari* house again. There is a strong taboo against claiming any ownership over the completed artwork, for to do so would anger the deity and defeat the overall purpose of promoting the betterment and longevity of society as a whole. Now that their work is done and those identities discarded, the spirit-workers who built the *mbari* are considered to be deceased.

2. According to Cole, *mbari* artists were always male.

Reanimating the Social Function of Craft in Festivals of Power and Diversity

In addition to the obvious disparities in religious and secular contexts, radical contrasts are apparent between traditional *mbari* practice and creative writing pedagogy in US institutions. The multiple ways in which art and community life intersect and inform one another set *mbari* apart from the workshop tradition that would have specialized aesthetes writing for specialized aesthetes. For example, Schramm's "craftsman" ideal for writers is quite different from the Igbo concept of the "master artist." The Iowa model suggests that the craftsman's job is to create finely made objects of art and place these on display; the public's job is then to admire and celebrate the craftsman's talent. Only a few people are talented and well-trained enough to qualify as craftsmen, and only these few have any business making art. The Igbo master artist, like the craftsman, devotes his life to perfecting artistic craft, but does so in the context and service of his community. The master artist's job is to create a *festival*, rather than individual objects of art, and this requires the participation of diverse community members. The role of the master artist is that of an expert mentor, someone entrusted to provide "discipline, instruction, and guidance" to *mbari* participants (34). As Achebe puts it, "Mbari does not deny the place or importance of the master with unusual talent and professional experience. Indeed, it highlights such gift and competence by bringing them into play on the seminal potentialities of the community" (35). In other words, the festival these artists produce is not meant to celebrate their own talent, innovation, or genius but rather the whole of Igbo life.

Further, *mbari*'s unification of artists and their community sets it apart from the workshop tradition, which, as we have seen, sets a rigid barrier between makers and consumers of culture, one that defines what qualifies as creative writing and who is permitted to inhabit the role of creative writer. Advantages have traditionally been given to cisgender males of European descent, and now, even in more diverse settings, privilege goes to those writers who are most comfortable working in the Euro-American literary tradition. As we have suggested, students outside of that tradition who point out its limitations are too often silenced or sidelined. This phenomenon might be found in any number of artifacts within creative writing culture. Perhaps the most glaring example occurs in Robert DeMaria's *College Handbook of Creative Writing*. Here, DeMaria claims his book "takes the writer's approach," which is concerned exclusively with "the practical aspects of craft." In contrast, he states he simply will not address the needs of a group he defines as "*special interest readers*, who have politicized the study of literature and are pre-occupied with such things as race, ethnicity, and gender" (1). From page one, students who write outside the white, patriarchal tradition of aestheticism are asked to leave the conversation (before it even begins). They can be consumers, or critics, or "readers" of culture, but not its producers, not its writers. In contrast, *mbari* participants are selected precisely for their differences, which are valued as essential to art. The process of *mbari* "crafts" the culture as much as the works of art, but not in some didactic way. *Mbari* is not agitprop; instead, the inclusive practices of the master artists allow them to shape culture by inviting many to participate. Or, as Achebe has famously stated, "*there is no*

rigid barrier between the makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all and is a 'function of society'" (34).

Finally, it is worth considering the power and effect of *mbari*'s participant selection procedure. Through divination, Igbo religious leaders arrive at a pool of participants that represents a cross section of society. It is due to the differences among this set of participants that *mbari* is able to both represent Igbo society and bind it together. In other words, *mbari*'s primary artistic value and effect arise not from the skill of the master artist but from the selection of diverse participants who are not artists and do not even aim to be. Achebe tells us that not even the combination of divine appointment and expert instruction "would insure infallibly the emergence of a new, exciting sculptor or painter. *But mbari was not looking for that*" (34, emphasis added). Instead, *mbari* was looking to make *good art*, "good" in the sense that art was good for the Igbo ancestors, who "created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose.... Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society and created their works for the good of that society.... *Good* in that sense does not mean pretty" (29-30). Rather than objects of exquisite beauty whose primary purpose is to be admired, these artists produced objects that were aesthetically rich *and* produced social value in an effort to bring their communities together. In other words, *mbari* primarily produced *relations* rather than *objects*, for the objects it did produce were created for the purpose of redefining and/or reinforcing social bonds among participating groups and their dieties.

We would like you to imagine, for a moment, how a creative writing workshop would work if it were to take these values and procedures seriously. What would a workshop look like if it placed social good and community unification over (or at least on par with) "beautiful" or "talented" writing and therefore selected its participants primarily on the basis of their representative and relational diversity. Imagine that the goal of writing workshops was not to produce *publishable* and *literary* writers working for an audience of strangers, but to produce *good writing* (under Achebe's definition of this term) that is unifying for subgroups of an immediate or localized culture. How would our approach to teaching creative writing change if it were developed with these values in mind?

From Practice to Pedagogy: *Mbari* Clubs and their Visual Arts Workshops

As much as we perceive *mbari* as a valuable model for arts education, we don't mean to idealize it as some sort of overlooked or exotic panacea for addressing the inherited problems of the creative writing workshop. Like any systematic production of culture and art, it may have contained its own exclusionary practices or been subject to prejudices within the strata of Igbo society, of which we—from our distant positions in history and location—are completely unaware. More importantly, as we consider the potential influence of *mbari* for creative writing classes in the US, we don't want to engage in harmful acts of cultural appropriation: i.e., we don't want to serve as the curators taking the *mbari* sculpture out of its cultural context for display behind glass on a museum wall. Rather than discussing strategies for creating a "*mbari*-style workshop," we turn instead to a complicated, somewhat cautionary tale from Nigeria's post-colonial history, which

speaks to the possibilities and problems of understanding *mbari*'s relevance to global education, writing, and arts initiatives.

For our purposes, this part of the story begins with an unlikely character: Ulli Beier, a Jewish refugee who fled with his family to Palestine during WWII. In 1950 he secured a position as a professor of phonetics at the University of Ibadan, later transferring to the Extra-Mural Studies department where he had greater freedom in his research and service. In the late 1950s, Beier became interested in supporting Nigerian artists and writers, in hopes of cultivating a cultural scene that would put Nigerian art and literature on a global stage. In 1957, he co-founded *Black Orpheus*, a literary magazine "conceived of as a laboratory of new ideas, practices, and activities spanning theater, fine arts, and literature by an emergent postcolonial generation" (Okeke-Agulu 156). Four years later, he brought together a community of writers (including Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbo and Ezekiel Mphahlel), and co-founded a club with them. This new club ran a publishing house and an art gallery with a courtyard where plays were performed. When trying to come up with a name for the group, Beier recalls receiving a phone call from Chinua Achebe, who suggested "*Mbari* Club." Beier's reaction reveals his enthusiasm for what he considered the indigenous aesthetic: "Immediately I knew that this was it. *Mbari* suggests creativity in its purest, most vital form. Creativity as a ritual act, rather than a commercial activity for the production of marketable objects. Creativity as a communal act, as a revitalizing force" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 84). Even though Achebe had little to do with the Mbari Club after suggesting its name, the club soon became a center for Igbo artists and luminaries, especially those associated with Ibadan University. However, the flourishing arts and literary scene that emerged from this center was not to Beier's taste. In spite of his enthusiasm for *mbari* in name, Beier quickly lost interest in the Mbari Club at Ibadan, which he saw as a mere "rendezvous for intellectuals" from the university rather than an expression of creativity on par with *mbari* as formerly practiced in Owerritown (Beier, "When we see" 102).

Beier became interested in seeing if he could produce artists from among untrained Nigerians who had not been exposed to European traditions and who therefore would produce their art from the perspective of, Beier thought, a more authentic local aesthetic. At the same time, Duro Ladipo, a Yoruban musician and primary school teacher, became inspired by Ibadan's Mbari Club and decided to start one of his own in Osogbo. Ladipo converted his father's bar into an art gallery and built a stage in the back. He began writing and performing plays and hosting exhibitions for local artists. Ulli Beier hosted several visual arts workshops at Ladipo's club, named Mbari Mbayo (translated from Yoruba: "When we see it, we will be happy"). These workshops reached their peak effectiveness in Beier's estimation (i.e., they produced the most unique and famous artists) under the leadership of aforementioned artist Georgina Beier. Out of Georgiana Beier's workshops came artists who won acclaim in European art circles: Adebisi Fabunmi, Jimoh Buraimoh, Rufus Ogundeke, Muraina Oyelami and Twins Seven Seven.

Ulli Beier described the Mbari Mbayo workshops as successful for two primary reasons. First, they kept participants grounded in a local aesthetic. The location of Osogbo, in contrast to Ibadan, was well positioned to keep workshop participants from the distractions of European tourists and artistic sensibilities. Back in Ibadan, "the intellectual,

university-trained Nigerian artist is chiefly concerned with establishing a new identity.... His problem is that he has to proclaim it to the European audience.... He establishes his newly gained identity in the art galleries of Europe more often than in the villages of Nigeria" (Beier, "When we see it" 109). For the participants in the Beiers' workshops in Osogbo, on the other hand,

the problem was how to retain the inspiration they could draw from their own environment and how to develop their talent within the framework of their own society.... In the end it was this local participation that made it possible to obtain local commissions: murals in palaces of Yoruba kings, decoration of an Esso petrol station opposite the Mbari Mbayo Club, church doors and theatre sets. Firmly rooted in such local activity, the artists could sell to European collectors and could work for exhibitions abroad without losing their bearings. (109-110)

It was the central location of Ladipo's club, visited regularly by Yoruba market women and government officials alike, that gave workshop artists a grounding in the tastes and values of their local audience. Ulli Beier saw this locatedness, rather than any specific pedagogical intervention, as the primary value of the Mbari Mbayo workshops.

Accordingly, the second reason for the Mbari Mbayo workshops' success was their very lack of pedagogical intention. In fact, the Beiers both suggest that Georgina Beier's skill as an "instructor" was, essentially, her lack of instruction. Instead of a teacher, Georgina reports acting as a peer of her students, learning alongside them and, in Ulli's words, "aiming at...a working community in which artists stimulate and criticise each other" (Beier, "When we see it" 110). Her pedagogy "was unpremeditated...and one had no time even to conceive theories or formulas that could have been imposed on the artists" (111).

In Georgiana Beier's reflections on the Mbari Mbayo workshops, she describes starting with a set of untrained, local painters and gently guiding their individual development without forcing them in any particular direction. At the same time, Beier required multiple paintings per day from students, and she picked out their best work for display each evening. In this way, Beier says, the developing artists were guided to see what was unique about their individual styles. Beier also moved from paint to linocut in hopes of exaggerating the differences among participants: "It was through this medium that Rufus and Afolabi matured in different directions: Rufus's work became more and more angular and energetic, while Afolabi's shapes acquired an undulating flow" (68). After some days of working this way, Beier believed she had gained "an instinct for discovering the visual element that is unique to a person. Running a workshop is not simply a matter of providing materials and 'encouragement' and letting anything happen. It is like hunting for the original element, trapping it and making it safe, before it gets confused with so many other, alien elements" (68). In short, according to the Beiers, the location of Mbari Mbayo along with Georgina's "teacherless" teaching style were sufficient to produce several accomplished visual artists with an international audience.

Careful readers will, of course, recognize the bias of European primitivism shaping the Beier's perception of Nigerian artists. Here, the "instinctual," "native," or "primal" creative act is valorized as uniquely authentic, superior to supposedly more adulterized

versions of Nigerian art. Indeed, critics of the “Osogbo school,” as it became known, suggest that this particular bias played a far more active role in shaping the art and artistic careers of the workshop participants than the Beiers would be willing to admit. In délé jégédé’s view, for example, the Osogbo art school was established specifically “to demonstrate Beier’s academic art degeneracy theory...Osogbo art attempts to validate anti-formalism...a concept in which Beier strongly believes: less sophistication equals more imagination” (78). In other words, the Beiers—far from uncommitted bystanders who watched passively as their workshop participants made art—created conditions at Mbari Mbayo that were meant to prove a preexisting theory of artistic production, namely that formal education in art and literature was bad for artists, who would naturally produce better, more distinct and personal work from a state of artistic naivety. We can see this theory at work in Ulli Beier’s interest in Osogbo for its lack of university connections and its involvement of untrained participants. We can also see Georgina Beier’s hand on the scales of the Osogbo experiment in her selection each day of each student’s “best” art for display, guiding each participant to a “personal” style that was, in fact, largely shaped by this feedback. Finally, the “success” of the Osogbo school artists, due to Ulli Beier’s promotion of their work, is measured in conflicting terms by Beier. He suggests that Mbari Mbayo successfully kept its participants grounded in a “local” aesthetic while simultaneously pointing to their international acclaim as proof of the workshop’s effectiveness.

In sum, the Beiers’ workshops were, at best, a distant cousin to the practice of *mbari* from which they drew their name. Ironically, in their quest for “authentic” art, the Beiers helped facilitate a pedagogical experiment that did not actually resemble the cultural practice of *mbari*. The goal of Mbari Mbayo workshops did not arise from the community but from outsiders looking to prove a theoretical premise. Rather than working to produce a cultural *festival* created by and for the community, the workshops aimed at the production of individual artists, whose paintings and linocuts would prove themselves “authentic” largely through assessment by foreign-born art instructors and their appeal to an international, mostly European, audience. In a sense, this conundrum presents a kind of loose precursor to the more diasporic, post-colonial workshop problem faced by contemporary U.S. writers like Jay Caspian Kang and Rosalie Morales Kearns, which we discuss earlier in this essay: despite the locality, the artist is positioned within a Euro-American market defined by the values of a white upper-middle class audience.

At the same time, we would be remiss not to point out that the Beiers’ workshops were successful on their own terms. They produced artists with unique personal styles, who gained a local and international following for their work. Even though this “success” had little if anything in common with the “success” of an *mbari* house, it still had real value for a newly post-colonial nation seeking to establish itself politically and culturally in relation to other countries, including its former colonizers. Chika Okeke-Agulu sums up this complex predicament:

As it happened, most of the Mbari Mbayo artists, in coming to terms with their postcolonial condition, simultaneously drew from indigenous notions of being and creativity, and a modernistic imaginary of the artist persona as an individual creator and mythmaker. In this sense, Mbari Mbayo presents a complex scenario of collapsed boundaries, a nonlinear flow of artistic influences,

and a compelling manifestation of an aspect of modernist experience in which émigré Europeans, black diaspora, and postcolonial Nigerian artists created a laboratory where local and appropriated forms from diverse artistic genres and disciplines coalesced to produce a thriving, contemporary visual culture. (157)

***Mbari* and not *Mbari*: Coming to Terms with Community**

What can we learn from this story about an indigenous Nigerian cultural practice and a German-born educator's attempt to reproduce this practice within the format of the fine arts workshop? The Beiers, like us, were outsiders to the *mbari* tradition. They were not Owerri Igbo; they never took part in an *mbari*; and they held values and perspectives different from those of the *mbari*-makers. In spite of (or perhaps *because of*) their outsider status, the Beiers were inspired by the tradition of *mbari*: it seemed to hold the answer to a pressing question for them, as it seems to hold a promising possibility for us. And so they charged ahead with perhaps more passion than reflection and attempted to create an arts workshop they thought would represent the essentialized "spirit" of *mbari*. In doing so, they dropped the religious aspects of the tradition (which, of course, were not "aspects" to the Igbo, but rather the entire point), and in doing so, they dropped *mbari's* process of selection. Instead of gathering local stakeholders and discovering who would and who would not participate in an *mbari* and then divining which families from these groups would contribute laborers, the Beiers selected their participants more or less by hand, focusing on a particular type of individual. In fact, they moved from Ibadan (in Igboland, where *mbari* was invented) to Osogbo (in Yorubaland, which had no tradition of *mbari*) in order to avoid participants with university training. In place of the social and religious purposes of *mbari*, the Beiers substituted an educational one: although grounded in a specific locality, the function of their workshop was to produce talented artists who would be recognized as such on a global stage. In their "instructionless instruction," the Beiers at once erased and inhabited the role of "master artist," the experienced craftsperson who was responsible for training apprentices and constructing *mbari*. By suggesting that there were no teachers in their workshop, the Beiers devalued the role of a trained artist in *mbari*, and by actually performing instruction (unacknowledged and under another name), they took on the role of a guiding force—based largely on their primitivist ideology—in the artistic development of their students.

As we imagine what an *mbari*-inspired creative writing workshop might look like now, we find ourselves moving well beyond the precedent set by the Beiers and trying to avoid the pitfalls of cultural appropriation. We see potential in *mbari* not for any kind of "authentic" representation of African art, but for its cultural value as a system of community-driven creative activity that blurs the lines between artistic producers and consumers, or in our case creative writers and conscientious citizens. In this regard, the representative cross-section of participant selection—ignored or undermined by the Beiers—is of paramount importance to us. We want to imagine how a creative writing workshop could change if it involved collaborating with community stakeholders: churches, mosques, temples, unions, hospitals, treatment centers, non-profits, community organizers, activists, government offices, K-12 schools and districts, community colleges, and so on. Securing support and participation from as broad a selection of

stakeholders as possible, we imagine a workshop that represents a diverse set of perspectives in terms of age, gender, orientation, race, class, occupation, religion, political affiliation, and life experience. Ideally, participants would learn the art of writing precisely by understanding and valuing each other's differences. In fact, this process of mutual understanding through creative action would serve as the primary purpose of this kind of workshop. Rather than serve to produce literary authors, advance American literature, realize a particular theoretical notion of beauty, or pursue other object-oriented goals, this relational workshop would serve the primary function of bringing a local community together.

What we describe above may sound like familiar variations in service learning or project-based pedagogy. Why, then, turn specifically to *mbari* as a model for this kind of learning—especially given its postcolonial entanglements and appropriative history? We do so largely for two reasons. First, we see a need for US institutions of higher education to offer more diverse models of arts education from different areas of the world. With the diversification of student demographics should come a diversification of approaches to learning. Second, it offers a key difference from many entrenched models of service learning through its emphasis on the festival, in which community members produce art in a celebration of their own image and for their own betterment. Here, creative writers would work not, *per se*, in service of other communities (in acquiescence to the university's inherited and problematical *noblesse oblige* model); rather, community members—working alongside creative writing mentors—would use their work to fulfill the needs expressed by the very communities to which they belong. In other words, the festival would enable participants to share their work in an effort to unify, stabilize, and celebrate their own social cohesion.

Although rare in the world of creative writing, examples of this kind of festival-influenced practice certainly exist. For instance, several years ago, U.C. Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender and Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies collaborated with community organizations, master artist Favianna Rodriguez, and *CultureStrike*, a literary/activist magazine focused on issues of immigration, to produce UndocuNation!, a cultural event created by and for Americans of undocumented status. Undocumented students, artists, writers, and allies developed a series of performances aimed at “spotlighting the consequences of violence against immigrant communities and liberatory visions for interventions based on creativity and art practice” (“UndocuNation!”) The student and faculty organizers of the event sought very consciously to strengthen the festival through the inclusion of as diverse an assortment of voices as possible, perhaps in an effort to represent “the total life of the community.” In their promotional materials, they state:

Artists from different racial and sexual backgrounds, immigration history and documentation statuses will be sharing artwork and cultural interventions about the current immigration crisis through performances, film excerpts, installations, music and readings. The collaboration of these creative artists attempts to use images and stories to facilitate dialogue that can inspire. (“UndocuNation!”)

The creation of this temporary, public performance echoes some of the central tenets of *mbari* we have outlined.

Another example of a related approach to arts education comes from the organization Herstory, which promotes a style of memoir workshop developed by novelist Erika Duncan (Burke and O'Neal). Working in a community setting with untrained writers, Duncan bases her workshop on what she calls "the dare to care." In essence, the memoir writer must dare a stranger to invest their time and attention in the writer's story while also daring themselves to trust that someone will hear their story and care about their wellbeing. Since its early development in the 1990s, this empathy-driven approach has proven powerful not only in helping new writers to grapple with complex issues of narrative craft but also in creating a communal bond among the participants, thus uniting the pursuits of artistic and community development.

Through the years, as the Herstory network of empathy-based workshops spread into college classrooms and women's prisons, stories surfaced of survival from trauma, war, immigration, and criminal abuse. Some of these stories garnered large readerships and effectively intervened in social and legal policy. Denise Irby, for example, participated in a Herstory workshop in a women's correctional facility where she wrote about giving birth while incarcerated. In the detailed scene of her traumatic birth experience, Irby described being shackled during labor. Because her state was considering legislation to outlaw the practice of shackling prisoners as they give birth, Irby was able to read her story first to fellow workshop participants and then to state lawmakers, who were moved by her story and subsequently passed the bill. In this way, the Herstory workshop created a broader circle of relationality and empathy. As we see it, Herstory loosely approximates *mbari*'s underlying ambition: through communal artmaking, it unifies diverse community members who work for their own individual and collective wellbeing and, in turn, enable broader societal interventions.

So where does the history of *mbari*—coupled with these examples of community artmaking—leave us? We want to recover *mbari* as a valuable model of artistic production, one that has the potential to dethrone an entrenched colonialist model through Mignolo's vision of "epistemic disobedience"; i.e., we believe it can supplant an inheritance of object-based, colonial education with a localized, indigenous Nigerian artform and relational way of knowing. At the same time, however, in our survey of loosely related models within the contexts of public, secular universities and US nonprofit arts organizations, we have moved further and further away from its actual history and practice. In doing so, we are by no means presenting a faithful approximation of a ritual that was never intended to serve a pedagogical purpose. Further, if we seek to design a specifically *mbari*-style workshop, we risk replicating the kinds of appropriative practices and unconscious biases that defined the legacy of the Beiers. In this context, we want to echo Aimée Knight's observation that writing instructors involved in community-engaged pedagogy must attend to the many emerging "opportunities for continuous reflection and improvement, for humility, for recognizing where we may cause harm and where we made the wrong choices." Without serious and ongoing self-assessment of this kind, "we risk the danger of contributing to the reproduction of systemic oppression" (93). For these reasons, we would like to conclude our work less with any sort of prescription about how to engage in *mbari*-style education and, instead invite readers to examine the

potential value of the “festival” models we have briefly surveyed while reflecting on how they might engage in their own decolonizing work.

With this thought in mind, we *would* like to advocate for disrupting the creative writing workshop in two practical ways. First, we suspect that many instructors still conduct workshops based on colonial, object-based notions of “talent.” In such cases, we recommend that careful interrogation of the structures that produced these conditions be followed by relationship-building efforts with local community groups and aggressive restructuring of workshop admission policies. If there is one principle we would borrow directly from *mbari*, it is to treat the workshop as a liminal space where communal relations are first negotiated and then strengthened. Second, we would ask readers inspired by *mbari* to take Martin and Pribhai-Illich’s call seriously and cultivate relational understandings of language, art, identity, and knowledge. The learning that takes place in a creative writing classroom is never merely about craft, for all craft conversations come wrapped in cultural assumptions that, if left unexamined, reproduce the logics of colonialism. We feel it is our responsibility as instructors to explore models of education that allow us to more expressly value difference over talent, identity over aesthetics, and dialog over critique.

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