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Appropriation as Introduction to Creative Writing

> My students know how to express themselves in conventional ways; they've been honing those skills since grade school. They know how to write convincing narratives and tell compelling stories. Yet, as a result, their understanding of language is often one-dimensional. To them, language is a transparent tool used to express logical, coherent, and conclusive thoughts according to a strict set of rules that, by the time they've entered college, they've pretty much mastered. As an educator, I can refine it, but I prefer to challenge it in order to demonstrate the flexibility, potential, and riches of language's multidimensionality....[T]here are many ways to use language: why limit to one? A well-rounded education consists of introducing a variety of approaches. [...] I think writers can learn a lot from these methods. (Goldsmith 216-217)

The standard introductory-level creative writing course has long been concerned with the teaching of one or multiple genres to a group of undergraduates, typically incorporating discussions of craft, analysis of literary forms and devices, and, of course, a good deal of reading and workshopping. While this has undeniably proven to be a successful model in the past, the growing influence of appropriation-based writing, from Flarf and Conceptualism in poetry to the publication of bestselling author Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*—a novel literally cut out of another novel, *The Street of Crocodiles,* by Bruno Schultz—provides an opportunity to examine what role appropriation has to play in preparing introductory-level students for upper-level creative writing courses. What skills does appropriative writing, which is defined as the appropriation and/or manipulation of source texts in the composition of new creative work, foster in beginning writers? How can appropriation, which certain critics have argued is no more than inventive plagiarism, serve as an introduction to creative writing and key concepts within the

field—such as authorship, originality, and the function of ethics in creative writing? What, ultimately, might students learn from these methods?

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I designed and taught an Introduction to Creative Writing course in the Fall of 2011 that focused solely on appropriative writing. Rather than covering creative writing genres, such as poetry, fiction, or various modes of creative nonfiction, everything in the class, including readings, lectures, class discussions, and assignments, was geared toward introducing and building familiarity with various methods of appropriative writing. Free to compose within or outside of genres, students experimented with erasure, transcription, overheard language, cut-ups, collage, chance operations, and homophonic translation to create new work while examining the nature of authorship, collaboration, and originality first-hand on a practical and experiential level. While I by no means intend to presume that this one classroom experience is able to answer, in any definitive way, questions about the value of appropriative writing to the introductory-level creative writing course, I at least intend for this essay to open a dialogue about the role of appropriation as a means toward the development of some basic skills that are valuable for any student aiming to succeed in upper-level creative writing courses and beyond: namely, the sophistication of concept (what is said) and language (how it's said) as it relates to a more critical understanding of authorship, originality, and the function of ethics in the production of literary art.

While the teaching of appropriative writing remains largely under-theorized, there is certainly precedent for the presence of appropriation in a college curriculum which predates my own experiment. Kenneth Goldsmith, one of the leading scholars and practitioners of conceptual poetry, includes in his book *Uncreative Writing* a chapter on "Uncreative Writing in the

Classroom." In this chapter, Goldsmith provides "a brief treatise on pedagogy and how the digital environment impacts the way we teach and learn writing in a university setting" in addition to discussing a number of appropriative writing assignments given to students that focus mostly on retyping and transcribing various sorts of print texts and overheard language (13). An excerpt from the description offered for Goldsmith's course, which was offered at the University of Pennsylvania and advertised as "Experimental Writing Seminar: Uncreative Writing," reads as follows: "It's clear that long-cherished notions of creativity are under attack, eroded by file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication. How does writing respond to this new environment? This workshop will rise to that challenge by employing strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering, as compositional methods" (201). Goldsmith's course description is brief and should be seen more as an advertisement to students than a full pedagogical discussion, but I find it appropriate that he frames the course with a question: How does writing respond to this new copy-and-paste, download-and-seed, digital environment? While his mention of "long-cherished notions of creativity" that are "under attack" fails to offer a very nuanced or entirely accurate view of how perceptions of creativity have changed over time, the exploratory framework that he establishes through his description remains useful, as it provides a space for students to engage appropriative writing in the spirit of exploration and play that so often helps to foster creativity.

Much of Goldsmith's theorization of conceptual poetry, and the significance of appropriation in the contemporary cultural moment, is derived from this question of how the workings of the internet, namely the proliferation of acts of copying, sharing, and repurposing information in cyberspace, affect creative writing practices. As a result, his work, and his

teaching of appropriative writing, is mostly concerned with similar moves; transcription and retyping, rather than the larger range of appropriative writing methods such as cut-up, erasure, and homophonic translation, are the central focus of the class. Students are encouraged to think more about concept than the crafting or manipulation of text, because, as Goldsmith writes, "In the act of retyping, [what] differentiates one student from another is the choice of *what* to retype" (203, emphasis in text). It is the individualized parsing of information and subsequent recontextualization that ultimately produces meaning for the work, replacing content with concept and context.

Thus, in addition to granting students students a greater familiarity with transcription as an appropriative practice, Goldsmith's course asks students to continually think about how recontextualized language both affects and reflects meaning, thereby encouraging them to "leave the class more sophisticated and complex thinkers" (Goldsmith 217). Poetry more generally seems to invite this type of critical thinking, but what sets appropriative writing apart in this regard is the heavy emphasis on the conceptual meaning resulting from the composition process. In Goldsmith' case, the question of *why* a text was chosen and recontextualized in a certain way is paramount to the meaning of the work.

Mark Amerika, "remix artist" and Professor of Art and Art History at the University of Colorado, has also taught a course that focuses on appropriation-based art practices. The description for his "Remix Culture" seminar portrays the course as one that "investigates the emergence of interdisciplinary media art practices that experiment with the art of remixing...and other art forms that engage with renewable source material" (Amerika, "Remix Culture," NP). Likewise, Amerika's *remixthebook*, as well as its accompanying site remixthebook.com, attempts

to theorize remix culture through "a hybridized publication and performance art project" (xi). Unlike Goldsmith's "Uncreative Writing" course, Amerika's "Remix Culture" seminar is not concerned with writing, but with "interdisciplinary art practices." Still, Amerika's pedagogical exploration of appropriative art practices, by focusing on remix as opposed to transcription, provides another potential model for the implementation of appropriation in the creative writing workshop, as it suggests *mixing* found materials rather than reproducing them in new textual environments.

When an author alters and mixes texts and voices in this way, the author becomes a manipulator (rather than replicator) of materials. This allows for a different kind of conceptual engagement, one which likewise produces different kinds of ethical concerns. An erasure, for example, invites one to think about the meaning that arises not only from this new text that is left behind, but from the act of erasing the source text (is this an act of domination? silencing? an act of opposition? or merely playful reconfiguration?) as well as the relation between erasure and source text (do the two stand at odds with one another? in conversation? or does the erasure elucidate something about the source text?). Beyond recontextualization, there is a need to analyze interaction. That these questions are commonly so pivitol to the meaning of the "remixed" appropriative work allows for students to grapple with constructing and learning to identify and understand various kinds of conceptual meaning that result from such interactions in and among the texts.

I see two key differences between what I will call the remix and transcription models: first, remix emphasizes the manipulation of materials through cut-up and other methods, while transcription is primarily focused on repurposing whole materials by retyping or transcribing–

think of the difference between a mad scientist mixing chemicals and a filmmaker repurposing a job training video as an art film; second, while transcription is concerned primarily with *concept*, the remix model embraces both conceptual meaning *and* surface aesthetics. Consider the difference between Goldsmith's *Day*, a book written by transcribing all text that appeared in a day's edition of the *New York Times*, and M. NoubeSe Philip's *Zong!*, which creates poetry by breaking and recombining language from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* court case following the 1781 Zong Massacre. While the former is interested primarily in the conceptual meaning and value of the work, the latter embraces meaning and value that is both conceptual *and* aesthetic. Goldsmith has expressed a desire for conceptual poetry to promote a thinkership rather than a readership, but I believe that a remix model allows for the possibility of both, and, as such, a remix model might be able to develop in student writers skills that reach beyond the conceptual and into the practical level of craft. Specifically, I mean that when the content of appropriative writing *does* matter, students must appropriate text in ways that are both conceptually interesting *and* aesthetically engaging for a reader. It is this combination that I believe marks appropriative writing as potentially beneficial for introductory-level creative writing students.

In developing my appropriation-based Introduction to Creative Writing course, I introduced to my students a wide range of appropriative writing methods and emphasized the importance of both concept and content in creative work. In workshop, the primary point of focus was on the content itself, the words on the page, while the concept was evaluated as any other aspect of the piece: an extension of content. Students were required to submit with each completed assignment a critical statement, a document in which they would discuss their process for writing the piece, along with their intended effect on the reader. My primary instruction to

students for writing these critical statements was for them to show their thought processes behind each piece and to demonstrate how the conceptual element contributed to the content. In paying attention to both the words on the page and the concept-driven process of appropriation, students soon began to realize that the two were actually quite intertwined, and that the conceptual element could contribute to or even strengthen the meaning of a piece. One student wrote, "I found I could help my statement along, or make it stronger, based on the works I choose to borrow language from. For example, my piece on world hunger was strengthened by my use of a cookbook. I can create irony through the appropriated work."

In addition to strengthening students' implementation of concept in their writing, appropriation methods suggest their usefulness in fostering more sophisticated language use in student work. While during my past experiences teaching creative writing I encountered a good amount of clichéd phrases and archaic syntax (marks of the inexperienced writer), the pieces written via appropriative methods were, by and large, devoid of such stale language. Ironically, the writing my students composed from source texts featured some of the most original and fresh uses of language I have seen at the introductory level. Students were combining appropriated text to create surprising juxtapositions and unexpected phrases and images. They were assembling gathered materials to form something entirely unique. I believe that this is due to the fact that appropriation requires an active pursuit of compelling language, which is to say language that stands out and catches the eye for its aesthetic or conceptual value. If the language did not appeal in these ways to the writer, it would not have been appropriated. This principle is illustrated in the following excerpt from a student's critical statement:

> When I first began this project, I knew I wanted to write about sexual assault on campus. [...] I began with a handout that was placed in the middle of my table in the Watterson dining center. It was titled "10 ways to make NO heard!" I looked over the list on the back and thought perhaps I would create an erasure poem out of it. In the end the words were not abundant or interesting enough to do this, so I decided to walk around campus instead and write down phrases that were interesting to me or in some way alluded to sexual activity.

By demanding that a writer look outside of herself to find text, appropriative writing fosters an attentive and critical eye for compelling (what the writer calls "interesting") language. When language selection is made explicitly manual in this way, the automatic language of cliché becomes dropped from the writer's vocabulary. Not just any word will do. It must, above all else, be compelling.

The only appropriative writing method that was explicitly taught as a significant part of the course was homophonic translation, a largely un-theorized and un-taught method of appropriative writing which attempts to re-sound a source text in order to compose new creative work. While erasure, cut-up, and transcription are fairly straightforward methods, homophonic translation is a much more difficult and time-consuming process. After initially discussing the assignment, which required students to write a homophonic translation of a text which they found to be unethical, I gave an introductory lecture regarding the history and various approaches of homophonic translation, including both the more commonly used method of phonetic approximation and my own rules for re-sounding a source text based on each individual letter's potential to make sound. I demonstrated, for example, how "cat" could be translated into

"ash" by sounding the 'c' as silent (as in "indict") and the 't' as an 'sh' sound (as in "ration"). For more information on homophonic translation, see my essay "Teaching Homophonic Translation" featured in Issue 1 of *Something on Paper*.

Just as one could re-sound "cat" as "ash," students took an "unethical" text and transformed it into something else, perhaps something more ethically aware and less damaging than the text they chose to translate. Homophonic translation, through this re-sounding method, thus presents an opportunity for students to study intensely the most minute parts of language, to become aware of new linguistic possibilities, and to exercise a degree of ethical agency in re-sounding texts as they learn to construct new narratives out of the phonological excess of those messages they find to be unethical and damaging.

The majority of the class, however, predictably expressed frustration with the method, most often stemming from the lack of control on the part of the writer. One student commented, "This assignment was extremely frustrating in that it was very hard, if not impossible, to control, at least to the degree that I'm used to." The response to this lack of control offers an interesting point of discussion, I believe, because it moves us into a discussion of authorship. While other appropriation methods allow room for authorial intent and control, largely through the selection of texts to appropriate, homophonic translation requires a writer to cede a much greater amount of control over the writing process. As my students learned, it is difficult to form meaning through this method, especially as a beginner. While a few found success, such as a student who translated Hitler's speech into an anti-war poem, each student was challenged to think about the correlation of authorship and control, discovering for themselves that the inability to control the meaning of their translations resulted in discomfort and frustration.

This relationship between control and feelings of authorship was a major focus of the course, especially at the start of the semester, as the first two writing assignments were designed specifically to challenge students' views of authorship in relation to appropriative writing. While the first assignment offered an opportunity to create a piece through appropriation, without any restrictions, thusly providing students room to experiment and feel-out the style for themselves, the second assignment required them to experience what it is like for their own original work to be appropriated, as students were each required to provide a sample of their original writing to another person who would then create a new text through appropriation. With the first assignment, a common trend among critical statements was an expressed hesitance to appropriate the words of others. The moral dilemna surrounding appropriation and whether it constitutes theft—with or without attribution—had gone from being an abstract discussion topic to a practical experience. This is perhaps unsurprising given the typical conditioning of undergraduate students. As one student commented: "For years the idea of using another person's work without proper citation was looked upon as plagiarism. In high school and in the first couple years of college, plagiarism was looked upon as the biggest sin to commit as a writer."

The most significant shift in students' understandings of appropriation and authorship occurred following the completion of the second assignment. By having the class experience first-hand the other side of appropriation—the side of the appropriated—there was a new kind of discomfort. Some students expressed frustration and even some slight resistance at the idea of turning in a piece of their writing which had been altered by someone else, because so much of the tradition behind creative writing (and so much of what students perceive about creative writing) is wrapped up in the concept of the individual genius author, the sense of authorship as a

solitary act, and so if this piece of writing goes against that standard, then they no longer view it as their work. Perhaps because of this discomfort, the second assignment proved quite effective in pushing students to think about appropriation and authorship in new ways, as it demonstrated authorship as a far more complex concept than they had previously thought. One student affirmed this idea in reflecting on his experience with the assignment:

> It wasn't until my second piece...that I began to expand my understanding of authorship. [...] Once I had gotten my work back, I felt that it was no longer my own piece. The changes were slight and not dramatic in any way, but the piece had changed, the purpose was different and I had not been involved in that change. At that moment, when I realized that I was not the author of this new piece, I began to understand the term more fully.

When I set time aside in class to discuss how students' views of authorship had changed as a result of having completed these two assignments, the discussion was full of energy, and everyone seemed to contribute. The most compelling comment was the idea that the amount of premeditation that went into a piece of writing directly correlates to the level of authorship felt by an individual. Thus we can see how authorship can be thought of as something more like a spectrum, with varying degrees of authorship that are possible depending on various factors, including, for instance, the amount of premeditation and arrangement. This became our consensus for the purpose of our discussion, and I believe it served as a new baseline for many of us in terms of how we thought about authorship.

Students' views of originality were challenged in similar ways after working with appropriation methods. This came about somewhat organically for several students, as this was

never addressed explicitly during class. One student wrote about her revised understanding of originality in the critical reflective essay assigned at the end of the course: "Something I learned in our class is that no thought is really original; someone and some previous place or time has probably already thought exactly what I have. Once I kept that in mind, I found myself much more willing to use source texts without feeling apprehensive about it."

While the apprehension initially felt at the beginning of the semester by several students gradually faded away after they experienced increased familiarity with appropriative writing, I remained interested in how the reconceptualization of key terms, such as authorship or originality, is perhaps ethically driven, brought on by a need to feel comfortable and not apprehensive. Is the reconceptualization of authorship and originality necessitated by logic, or is it felt, a direct result of ethical conflict? I am thinking in particular about how my students' early views of authorship were impacted by concerns about ownership, plagiarism, and who has the right to another's language, and then how it later shifted when their own work was manipulated by another person. Here, I believe, is one place where further research regarding the teaching of appropriative writing could stand to benefit the larger creative writing community. If, as Goldsmith says, "digital media has set the stage for a literary revolution" (15), then what role does ethics play in the way we reconceptualize writing, authorship, and originality? Despite conceptualism's claims of ethical neutrality, there seem to be very real and negative emotional reactions toward the act of appropriation, as felt, for example, by many of the students in my class at the beginning of the semester, not to mention the potential for legal repercussions. Thus, regardless of whether or not creative writers need to be concerned with ethics in their writing, we

ought to at least concern ourselves with how ethics influence the ways in which we conceptualize writing.

Appropriation seems particularly well-suited to opening the door to critical engagement with key concepts in creative writing; because of this, I believe that appropriative writing can serve as a useful introduction for undergraduate students to the production of literary art. By practicing a style of writing that encourages the seamless combination of concept and content, while necessitating the active selection of compelling language, students will be challenged to become more sophisticated creative writers, ones who are prepared to move into advanced courses in which they will add genre-specific elements of craft. While more research is necessary to uncover how the skills developed through practice with appropriation transfer over to writing within specific genres, we also need to begin having real conversations about the potential value of teaching these writing methods as an introduction to creative writing.

Works Cited

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