

Engaging with Critical Race Discourse: Discussing how to write people's experience '--And Love Them'?

By Elle Donnelly

In the first of a series of three masterclasses offered by the English department featuring Professor Thomas Glave, and moderated by Dr. Lucienne Loh, students and faculty alike were encouraged to delve into colonial and imperial contexts surrounding creative writing and critical practices. The masterclasses explored the creative process and building blocks of racism and police brutality and offered an insight into both engaging with relevant literary and creative material while confronting the difficult and heavy-laden topic of post-colonial discourse.

The literary material on which the first masterclass was based involved '*And Love Them?* (1992), a short story by Professor Thomas Glave, the 2021 Centre for International Writing's Writer in Residence [supported by *The White Review*. The story navigates the consciousness of a white woman who engages in a brief, tense and ultimately thought-provoking sexual encounter with a black man. The story in itself struck attendees of the masterclass as innately familiar, the voice of which multiple students remarked that they 'felt they knew this person'. Supporting the varied modules across the English department's curriculum this term, these masterclasses aim to start conversations around postcolonial perspectives, identity and the creative process in crafting a body of work. In the first masterclass, we looked to Glave's short story and to him in discussing how to approach such texts and also, how we can enhance our academic and personal development in widening our range of literary sources. By exploring authors and works that speak to these experiences, we can confront fear or hesitance surrounding the complex racial discourse that prevails over our history.

To set up the context for his short story, Glave discussed how he was compelled to write the story whilst an undergraduate in 1992, mainly in response to the social unrest of the beating, and murder, of Rodney King in Los Angeles, California that year. In what he comments was 'possibly the first instance of video documentation of police brutality captured by the public', the sense of injustice that ran through US communities and beyond at the four white officers acquitted in the trial is a hauntingly familiar situation as seen in March of 2020 with George Floyd. The parallels between King and Floyd were certainly present in the minds of attendees during the class. Whilst Glave was 'not necessarily aware of [his] contribution to a decades long history', his aim of exploring his own emotions and feelings at the time certainly articulated his voice within a heated discourse on racism and police brutality. Furthermore, like the protagonist of the text herself, we can see that there is an interesting relationship emerging between our

immediate present and our distant past, leading Glave to discuss the confluence of journalism and fiction, and how we navigate telling stories dealing with racism with integrity and humility.

Responding to topics such as migro-aggressions, racial stereotypes and sexuality, Glave's *--And Love Them?* uses the they/them pronoun as an anchor for the idea of the 'other'. By omitting coded language of her relationship and race from her vocabulary, the protagonist distances herself from her experience, and denies from her consciousness the complex reality it struggles to navigate. The protagonist directly addresses the reader and labels an African-American man 'one of them'. In doing this, she equates his race with the collective context of our racist history, making us as readers complicit in her bigotry through her assumption that we know who 'one of them' is meant to be.

This generalisation borne from ignorance and fear is commonplace, and it is this very commonality that allows Glave to craft such a compelling and resonating character within the narrative. As Glave states in the masterclass, combining colloquial, witty language with a "totalising generalisation of an entire community of people" shapes this narrator as a person in her ignorance. She is confounded by, and stuck in, a revolving circle of intrusive thoughts and apologetic overcompensation, and Glave felt that it was important for him as a writer to set aside his own thoughts and experiences, and totally "inhabit her and give her honour, sidestepping landmines set by herself and set there by the consequences of history". In the group discussion, the main collective thought was a question of how we can enter into this discourse respectfully, and for white or non-POC participants in particular, how we can set aside any feelings of guilt, shame or fear in contributing to these talks. The narrator herself battles these thoughts and preservations, and it is her [and our] 'good intentions' that indicate the outcome of our involvement. In crafting a character or a text that deals with these issues, Glave says that it is important to not shy away from a 'memory that cannot be denied', and that further avoidance of speaking about race, injustice or prejudice (for fear of our perspective being 'wrong') is doing more harm than good.

Overall, both the short story by Thomas Glave and his insightful comments during the class provided listeners with a wealth of information, support and more importantly, awareness. Whilst the class is just one small aspect of beginning to decolonise the curriculum and expanding our range of discourse, all of our perspectives have room to grow and diversify with such thoughtful and emotionally charged content. Engaging with these optional masterclasses allow us as students to enrich our studies and personal interests, as well as hearing from amazing academics in the community. As stated by Dr. Lucienne Loh, by simply engaging with this text, we expand our consciousness and mold our reality as we perceive it. The information we take in allows us to continue the conversation after the text is closed, and it is only by

doing so that we make progress. In agreement with Thomas Glave, 'movement equates progress', something which --*And Love Them?* humbly aims to initiate in the right direction.