

Cultural Worker, Not A “Creative”

I made the mistake of calling myself a “creative” for several years into my career.

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Devyn Springer Oct 23, 2018 · 7 min read



Augusta Savage, “The Harp” (1939)

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“In our struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people there are various fronts, among which there are the fronts of the pen and of the gun, the cultural and the military fronts. To defeat the enemy we must rely primarily on the army with guns. But this army alone is not enough; we must also have a cultural army, which is absolutely indispensable for uniting our own ranks and defeating the enemy.” — Mao Tse-Tsung

I made the mistake of calling myself a “creative” for several years into my career. More than this, I followed popular language and called the entire class of career artists and creators “creatives.” Referring to career artists as creatives always felt a little strange to me, it always slipped from my tongue with a strange taste, on that I’d grown used to but never questioned because of the popularity of such terminology. And, beyond just a handful of people, the move to list artists and artistic creators as *creatives* has only grown exponentially in the last two years, especially in 2018. **Chance The Rapper, Kanye West, and Wale** are among the celebrities I’ve seen use the term in this month alone, and all across social media the trend of using it in place of ‘artist’ has gone viral.

While I am often **critical of language** and constantly find myself **exploring and examining** the ways in which certain uses of language can hurt us — even when we think we’re challenging or reclaiming some white supremacist, or colonial, or imperialistic construct of words; even when the intentions of a language construction are pure — I find this particular instance particularly bad. What occurs when people refer to a specific class of artistic laborers as *creatives* is a profoundly capitalistic, hierarchical, and somewhat problematic (though typically unintentionally) evisceration of labor and class.

First, and possibly most importantly, on a basic level the use of “creatives” assumes there is a set class of people who have some natural talent towards creativity. Following this logic, we’re led to believe that creativity, and thus creative labor, is something reserved for a few people; a small artisan class? Artists? Marketing execs and brand influencers? If a specific group of laborers, and thus intrinsically a specific labor, are labeled as “creatives,” then what does that mean for everyone else? The reality is that the ability for creativity is — or should be — native to all occupations, however capitalist alienation hinders this creativity from flourishing. Many calls to “support Black creatives” and other popular sloganeering are done in good faith, but massively leave out a large majority of workers who are not artists or writers; manual laborers, scientists, sex workers, agricultural workers, and so forth; workers whose paychecks may not come from the stroke of a paintbrush or movement of an ink pen, but who nonetheless deserve the right and freedom to allow creativity to flourish within their work. Again: calling oneself a “creative” in place of artist or cultural worker deepens this process of alienation that many workers feel, which is a core tenant to the capitalist mode of production, and aids in the perpetual stripping of workers’ freedom and control by the capitalist class.

Another aspect which I find troubling is the individualism that’s seemingly ontologically attached to the term’s use. Who does the “creative” create for? What are they working towards, and for what intentions? Money, fame? For their creative ability to be affirmed? When one calls oneself an artist, it is understood that they create art. That the basis of their passion, and presumably some portion of their career as well, is creating art. When one calls oneself a writer, the same can be said; that their passion must surely be writing, or that is what they do for a living. In both cases, creativity is *assumed* almost instantaneously to be inherent to the specific forms of labor. In the case of the creative, we’re told that creativity itself is the labor, and subsequently must orient ourselves and our own labor in relation to this. Are creatives skilled laborers, professional laborers, or artisan laborers? An intentional vagueness necessarily remains around the term, as its ill-defined and misguided use upholds a dichotomous hierarchy in which creativity is reserved only for certain careers, which are un-ironically those at the forefront of the “creative” movement.

Finally, we have to examine the alternatives to such a term and try to reason with their better nature. As previously mentioned, there has been a concerted shift from “artist” and “cultural worker” towards “creative.” Artists are generally regarded as people who create art, which is a straightforward and understandable concept. Of course there are various kinds of ways people self-describe as artists; visual artists, musical artists, performance artists, professional artists, etc. For me, the use of “artist” often works, and works well. However, I personally prefer the term “cultural worker,” which was once a common term used to describe literary and art workers by socialists, Black nationalists, and other radical organizers.

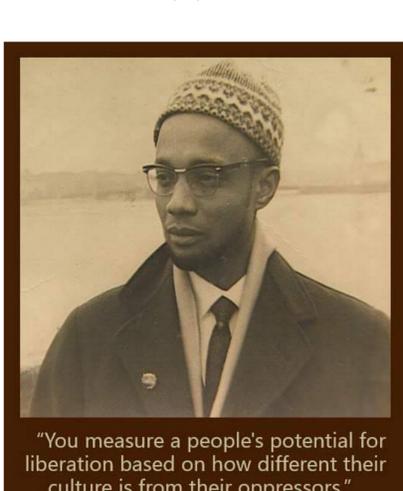
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“Do I remain a revolutionary? Intellectually — without a doubt. But am I prepared to give my body to the struggle or even my comforts?... Comfort has come to be its own corruption.” — Lorraine Hansberry, Black playwright and writer

Cultural worker has a moral positioning embedded into it, as well as an inherent accountability. To call oneself a cultural worker, as opposed to a *creative*, is to essentially say that your labor, or at least a particular fraction of it, occurs with the intention to uphold a certain culture. It proposes that your labor as an artist, your work in art and literature, is accountable to the idea of *culture*. And, if we as organizers and anti-racists and socialists and communists and revolutionaries are committed to upholding a revolutionary culture, then our labor as cultural workers is accountable to the notion of working to uphold that revolutionary culture. That is, that we are not simply creating art for arts sake, or writing for the sake of writing, but have a moral obligation to use our artistic and linguistic talents in the service of liberation. “Cultural worker”, in its intended language, assumes an art or literature production which lends itself to upholding this culture of eventual revolution and subsequent post-revolution, and uphold the notion that culture indeed can be a powerful weapon, as Amilcar Cabral and Nikki Giovanni and Robin D.G. Kelley and Amiri Baraka and Audre Lorde and many revolutionaries before us have said.

During what is now known as the Black Arts Movement, one key factor which distinguishes their work from the budding “pro-Black” movement of today was the ideological, theoretical, and political intentionality. Artists were not creating for the sake of creating, or being pro-Black for the sake of simply being Black as hell. They were not creating independent of their political ideologies, and they were certainly not creating independent of organizing and grassroots movement. Many (most) of the artists of that era who were intentionally aiding in the budding arts movement were also very clear on progressing a political, ideological line in their work; whether they were Black nationalists, Marxists, Pan-Africanists, Womanists, or anywhere in between, their art was a clear product of not only artistic creation but intellectual labor. Moreover, they doubled as organizers: teach-ins, public forums, party meetings, direct action trainings and planning meetings were held in places that doubled as artist studios; poets organized as a community, like when Audre Lorde organized a protest of poets and raised money to pay Amiri Baraka’s bail; writers wrote to win a global, and institutional ideological war which was taking place between the Black World and the milky white power structures; music, spoken word poetry, and photographic arts were interwoven into protest spaces; the movement of artists and cultural workers was not stratified from that of organizers and the movement of workers, rather they were an energy and lifeblood encharging such electric movement.

Top highlight



“You measure a people’s potential for liberation based on how different their culture is from their oppressors.”

Amilcar Cabral

We, as cultural workers, people who labor in paintbrushes, camera lenses, Photoshop, pen and paper, and other forms of artistic labor, have to see ourselves and our work as weapons in a war for liberation. Our task is heavy: to create a culture of revolution. We should not bare this task lightly, nor should we carry it alone; our role is to work alongside organizers, unions, the Third World, political prisoners, immigrants, the incarcerated, Palestinians, political parties, and all others who share in a struggle for creating a better world, and assist. We have to create proletarian art, workers art, peasants art, and infuse it into a culture that, like Walter

Rodney said, *encompasses a total way of being*. We must move away from the false neutrality of “creatives” and begin to again see ourselves as bearers of culture. We have to understanding that “all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines” (**Mao, 1942**) and that that means we must **“prepare the ground ideologically before the revolution comes...**” in a fighting front in the general revolutionary front during the revolution.” In a world void of neutrality, our creativity must also choose a side of liberation.

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