



Inclusion and Diversity: A Manifesto and Interview

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“Difference is at the crux of the challenges I am writing about here.” –Barbara Smith, from the introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983)

The lack of people of color (POC) studying, teaching and administrating Creative Writing programs has become a popularized topic since Junot Diaz’s April 30, 2014 article *MFA vs. POC* in *The New Yorker*. Largely an indictment that many Creative Writing programs fail to employ people of color on their faculty, this ‘sensitive’ issue has previously been hashed out in articles, books, conferences and fellowships mainly directed to and for other disenfranchised authors and groups. However, only within the dominant paradigm of white academia is this conversation uncommon. For many POC who seek Creative Writing degrees and positions teaching CW, as well as those who wish to break into the homogeneous mainstream publishing world, this is a very common conversation.

Although it is always necessary (but not always popular) to open a public discourse that changes the status quo, it is especially pertinent now that there is some national and international attention on the topic of POCs in CW programs; however, it is imperative at this point in history to open the floor to incorporate an even wider variety of divergent perspectives. The Diversity and Inclusion section of the *Journal for Creative Writing Studies* is devoted to broadening that dialogue to a multiplicity of voices not only for the marginalized choir, but for anyone who teaches or participates in Creative Writing Studies and recognizes the inevitable sea change. We want to focus on the need for meaningful and radical inclusivity in and beyond the classroom, to incorporate different perspectives of religion, social class, language, gender, identity, nationality/immigrant status and physical/learning (dis)ability in all arenas of Creative Writing.

Submissions to this section will explore how educators and publishers can adapt a multitude of perspectives into reading lists when challenged by institutional standards, as well as how to broach sensitive discussions about complex identities with integrity. We want to hear from students and educators with advice on how to/how not to prepare for the MFA as a POC or from any non-normative point of view, as well as from CW program coordinators who are committed to supporting inclusivity at their institutions. This section incorporates a non-normative historical analysis of Creative Writing Studies as an academic institution. Contributors may also examine inclusive pedagogy as a way to enact social justice principals in the classroom. We also solicit global perspectives on inclusivity and diversity in

publishing. The core purpose of this section is to enlighten and survey new ground for those who are interested in changing the system rather than hiding in it.

“But [inclusivity] must not mean a shedding of our differences, not the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.” Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984)

Many CW educators remind their students that writing creatively is foremost about adaptability, about learning to exist outside of one’s own existence. It also requires a vigorous and often painful recognition of one’s own prejudice and/or vulnerabilities within the workshop space. This section of the JCWS is one in which we can be open and honest about diversity and inclusion, to ask questions and formulate our own answers, ideas and actions before we enter any learning space as writers, educators and students. Although open to traditional academic discourse, because of the deeply personal and emotional repercussions of “otherness”, the format of this section will also rely upon conversational, self-reflective, experiential/experimental analysis reminiscent of foundational texts from the likes of *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, to more current work like *Writing the Other (A Practical Approach)* by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward, *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, edited by Anna Leahy as well as *The Racial Imaginary* edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda and Cap Max King.

When I questioned my first MFA instructor in 2012 on why he didn’t include a diversity of writers on the reading list, he said, “I didn’t think anyone would be interested in that.” I think this statement was harsh but real-- from what I gathered about his reading list, the writing he valued and what interested him was only by white people. Not that he would have said exactly that out loud, and he perhaps had even enjoyed writing from people of color, but for him, any “good” writing by people of color was an exception, and not meant for serious academic consideration. I had a few other (white) teachers who might have included one book by a person of color or people who dwell in the realm of “other,” but they were clearly unprepared to have deep conversations about the ways writing, reading and critical analysis are affected by a variety of minority perspectives.

Unfortunately, there are many disappointing stories from POC at undergraduate and MFA programs, ranging from simple confusion to downright hostility from peers and faculty. Often faculty are unsure of how to respond to work by POC. A Pakistani-American woman who attended an MFA program in New York City after 9/11 submitted to workshop a story about a Muslim woman who was raped by American soldiers after the attacks. Many of her classmates criticized the character for wearing hijab rather than discussing language, craft or even cultural authenticity, which effectually silenced the writer. Often POC say that when white writers in class write from their idea of a non-white perspective (using heavy vernacular and stereotypes), they are applauded for being so different. Some POC complain that their writing was dismissed when it didn’t focus on race-specific topics. Obviously this only cultivates confusion and mistrust which totally undermines the creative process.

In turn, there are some undergraduate and graduate institutions that value inclusivity and are committed to supporting diverse students. In this section we will also hear from students who learned how to write about difference and identity in a homogeneous space, as well as how to utilize criticism from diverse perspectives with the support of their CW programs. We all need creative discourse in order to validate our own internalized ‘isms’ and differences, to textualize otherness as a valuable part of the human experience. So many different types of students have transformational experiences in CW programs and it is important to document what those programs are doing right.

“If creative writing is to have meaning in the academy of the future, it needs to partake of those very qualities and purposes best representative of true scholarship—namely, broad, informed, intensive reading, thinking and writing and a commitment to social betterment of a troubled world.” --David Radavich, “Creative writing in the academy” in *Profession* (1999).

Diversity and Inclusion (or the lack thereof) is a pan-humanist issue reflected and magnified in the privileged space of the Creative Writing classroom by students and teachers. Many people feel like they either can’t or shouldn’t talk about race and inclusion; that they should leave it to those who are oppressed or disenfranchised. No one can be blamed for being afraid to tackle a problem in the shape of a Hydra, however this burdens the rest of the population to inhabit not only their own minority perspective but also the white, Judeo-Christian, middle class, hetero-normative perspective. This leads to what Paul Lawrence Dunbar poeticized in 1895 as “wearing the mask”. However, I think many people who exist within the dominant paradigm of privilege wear a mask as well, one that is forged from the fear of being labeled racist/sexist/classist, etc. and heavily ornamented only with items mined in our Anglo-centric educational system. Obviously a subpar education is not a free ticket to ignorance, but a challenge to step out of a binary existence and to embrace knowledge that is experiential and engages multiple intelligences.

Radical inclusivity on all levels is a pedagogical commitment. Although some might find it a necessity, many view it as peripheral at best. However, the modern academic Creative Writing classroom is a direct product of grassroots and community activism found in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, Beat Poetry, Spoken Word, Feminist, Queer and Disability studies. Without these pluralistic revolutions, we would mostly only be reading dead white men in literature classrooms and there would probably not be as many strong Creative Writing programs because the workshop is built to give tangible voice to the assertions of individual diversity; the demand to be heard. Embracing radical inclusivity in the classroom means that you are willing to engage in the difficult conversations, to read outside of your comfort zone and ask questions in ways that allows others to feel acknowledged and respected. CW studies has the potential to create lasting intercultural communication and mediation on multiple levels.

bell hooks’ 1989 essay *black woman writing: creating more space* addresses the paradox of

publishing for women of color, particularly black women. hooks explains that although we may see more books from marginalized people on the shelves, there are countless more who are systematically rejected by publishers, and those who do get published often quickly go out of print. Truly, the lack of heterogeneity in the practice and study of creative writing still exists and extends far beyond just people of color. In publishing, often when the few editors who do not subscribe to dominant paradigms of the business move to other houses, many writers find their work in the hands of someone who is less enthusiastic about their non-traditional work. Often contracts are dropped because there are no editors who are willing to take on books by writers who may not appeal to a privileged class of readers. Yet, there are more and more individuals striking out on their own to open small publishing companies or to publish in alternate independent ways that will still have the possibility to reach thousands of readers, even if their physical books do not reach the Barnes and Noble shelves. Divergent perspectives are in every genre, and some thriving sub-genres have been founded on rejection slips from mainstream publishers. Clearly, the writer of the future will not rely solely on a big publishing company to get their work into the hands of readers, for as we see, there are many avenues for people to distribute and market with a laser focus on the readers who crave to see “otherness” textualized. We must ask the question of how publishers and agents from small and large companies will address the needs of those writers and readers who transcend traditional boundaries in a variety of modes.

Rather than looking at a binary choice between (mis)appropriating a culture and avoiding its mention, we can consider a spectrum of roles it's possible for transcultural writers and readers to play. --Nisi Shawl, *Writing the Other* (2005)

The Diversity and Inclusion Section will occasionally provide interviews conducted with elders in the field who have long taught and published creative writing from a deliberately inclusive stance, and/or how they integrated institutional settings. The following is a conversation with former Connecticut State Poet Laureate Marilyn Nelson who battled for her creative work to be valued within her academic department. She went on to open the space in her English department for creative writing to be considered seriously as a mode of study and finally facilitated a multicultural writing retreat, Soul Mountain, from 2004 to 2010, with limited support from her university.

MARILYN NELSON INTERVIEWED BY TONYA C. HEGAMIN

Marilyn Nelson earned her BA from the University of California, Davis, and holds postgraduate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania (MA, 1970) and the University of Minnesota (PhD, 1979). Her honors include the 1990 Connecticut Arts Award, a Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship, two Pushcart Prizes, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. From 2001–2006, she served as the Poet Laureate of Connecticut. In 2013, Nelson was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Since 1978 she taught English at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. She is now a retired professor emerita. (Excerpted from

Academy of American Poets, www.poets.org)

TCH: Can you briefly relate your academic journey as a poet?

MN: I studied literature in college. There was no creative writing program at my school, I was just an English major. I went to grad school, stopped to teach full-time when I finished my M.A., then went back later and got a Ph.D. in English, specializing in Multi-Ethnic American Literature. I took one CW class as an undergrad and one poetry workshop in grad school. That's the extent of my academic education in poetry writing.

TCH: How did you start teaching Creative Writing?

MN: After my M.A. I taught expository writing at a community college. I didn't consider myself a poet, but I did occasionally teach the introduction to creative writing course. I mostly taught composition, Ethnic literature and maybe once in a while a creative writing workshop after I finished my Ph.D. I only very gradually starting teaching more Creative Writing courses, and then more Poetry Workshops as I progressed in my career, and as my department agreed (reluctantly) to offer them.

TCH: Having only taken a few classes, how did you approach teaching Creative Writing? How did you prepare for those classes?

MN: At first I used Introduction to Creative Writing textbooks, most of them were anthologies with questions about the texts and suggestions of what students could write creatively in relation to what they had read. Then the ground started to shift; suddenly there were creative writing programs all over the place, and people talking about how to teach writing. After AWP got off the ground, I learned a lot about teaching from going to presentations about teaching at AWP conferences, and reading essays about teaching in the new writing journals.

TCH: Did you have any teachers of color?

MN: The only teacher of color I had for poetry was [Etheridge Knight](#), but that was outside of academia. He changed my life, I learned so much from his workshop. People like Knight and [Gwendolyn Brooks](#), [Lamont B. Steptoe](#) and many other [Black Arts Movement](#) writers ended up teaching CW to the community. There's a long tradition of poetry workshops taught by African American poets outside of the academic world, which is (was?) where the people are.

TCH: You've taught poetry in a variety of settings and contexts, from undergrad to MFA. How did you approach teaching your first classes that has changed radically?

MN: After I'd been teaching for about 25 years, I became personally interested in meditation. So I applied for and got a fellowship to start including meditation in an experimental poetry course in 2000. Since then I've always tried to include at least a 5 minute meditation in the beginning of every class. My philosophy is that creativity comes out of silence. I encourage students to hear

the language in the silence. I'm also interested in using traditional forms, asking students to learn rhyme and rhythm. I enjoy teaching scansion, which I didn't do before because I became interested in it in my own work.

TCH: Can you talk about your journey teaching Creative Writing in the tenured academic world? What obstacles, if any did you come across? What advice can you give to people of color entering into the academic arena as instructors of creative writing?

MN: The English department where I taught didn't want me to teach poetry at first because I was hired to teach African-American Literature. They didn't value my work in poetry. Creative Writing was only seen as 'side work'. Another female poet and I wanted to develop CW in the department, but the institution didn't value CW overall. Publishing poetry was not considered adequate for publishing 'merit'. Academic merit and raises/promotions were based on criticism, not creativity. Faculty would get more merit for writing a review of a book than for having a major reviewer compliment their own work. My first poetry book was published by Louisiana State University, but I almost had to take the department to court to get my university press book recognized for merit! It seemed as if writing a short essay about Shakespeare's toenail would get more merit than publishing a poem. Other women poets had the same problem in the department. Women were the ones trying to develop the undergraduate CW and MFA programs, too. Only when I got my first NEA fellowship did my departmental colleagues start to recognize my poetic work. But for most of my career I maybe only taught one poetry class out of three in the semester.

MN: For people of color going into academia, if you're in a predominately white institution, learn to say no when you're asked to be a part of every event or committee for people of color. Be selective. Don't get bogged down in being a 'representative' of your race, or you won't be able to get on with your own work. Also, don't limit yourself to reading or teaching only people of your specific racial group. It's important to be as inclusive in your own reading as you want your classes to be. You need to be able to teach to a larger world. You do have to know more than everybody else; it's unfair, but you have to be prepared for that.

TCH: Do you have any anecdotes about teaching that supported students to challenge or transcend their own racial/gender/social ideologies?

MN: I strive for all of my teaching to challenge long held ideologies. I was teaching ethnic literature, asking students to read and respond to Native American, Asian, African-American and Hispanic authors from the very beginning of my career. My classroom discussions were always inclusive. Sometimes inclusivity is painful. I had some Jewish students who wouldn't read Baraka, and some black students who wouldn't read Huckleberry Finn. All students need help interpreting texts and incorporating the work into their own world.

TCH: You've spent a lot of energy developing your legacy as not only a poet, but as an educator. What have you most wanted your students to remember about you in the classroom?

MN: I just want my students to remember some of the tips I taught them about writing. I don't

remember much about my own first teacher in fiction except that he took everything literally. He taught me to be more careful in my writing. That was a very useful thing to teach. I want my students to remember I taught them one or two little things like meter or that the most important part of the poem is the end of each line. I would be happy if they remembered little things like the art of carefulness in writing.

TCH: Can you comment on writing programs specific to people of color?

MN: I taught at Cave Canem and I would say that it offers African American students a place for writing from a specific stance which is new and exciting. There's now a [Native American specific MFA \(IAIA\)](#)! I think that's amazing. It's creating a writing community where before there was none. It's really nice to see. But wish such resources had been available for me in the 60s and 70s. I suppose it's changing CW programs and it may be the most important result of the ethnic movements I and many others started teaching about long ago. To be a white kid in a CW class taught by an African American poet who is also a Pulitzer Prize winner, that's groundbreaking. It's changing the future of American literature. And I'm so glad to see that happen. Now there are people of color teaching CW all around the country. Editorially now, publishers are actually looking for people of color to publish and that's never really happened before.

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