



# (Re)Considering Craft and Centralizing Cultures: A Revision of the Introductory Creative Writing Workshop

**Zoë Bossiere**

Ohio University - Main Campus

[zb240716@ohio.edu](mailto:zb240716@ohio.edu)

**Micah McCrary**

Syracuse University

[rmmccrar@syr.edu](mailto:rmmccrar@syr.edu)

---

**Abstract:** *This article explores options for introductory creative writing curricula that allow for and encourage a greater consideration of personal identity and audience on the part of the student-author. It reaches toward possibilities for revising the introductory creative writing course as a space for student-authors to not only consider the cultural positions of the professional authors they study, but also the ways in which their own subject-positions influence their writing practices, craft choices, and understandings of genre. The article overall proposes a holistic revision to the standard, introductory creative writing curriculum, moving student-authors beyond considerations of “good” creative writing, and toward a more common consideration of cultural inclusion and diversity.*

**Keywords:** *creative writing, workshop, pedagogy, student-centered, classroom, introductory course, genre conventions, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, inclusion, diversity, teaching, canon, craft*

## INTRODUCTION

Established writers have long called attention to creative writing (CW) as a field that privileges white, Western, and often male perspectives. While this privileging is pervasive in both publishing and institutional spaces, introductory CW pedagogies and practices in particular stem from a more than 75-year-old workshop culture that centers editorial technique, or “craft,” over nurturing individual student-author identities and perspectives in the CW classroom (Myers 133, McGurl 131). As a result, much of the contemporary teaching of creative writing might be condensed to “manuals” and “how-to” (field) guides, many of which privilege the text as an end-product. Pedagogical discourse provided by scholar-practitioners such as Katherine Haake (*What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*), Barrie Jean Borich (“The Craft of Writing Queer”), and Matthew Salesses (“Pure Craft is a Lie”) are in the minority, in that they focus specifically on writing processes that are *also* tied to student-author identity/ies—while many CW-centric texts still rely on tired craft phrases

such as “find your voice,” “show, don’t tell,” and “write what you know” (McGurl 81). Such phrases can be problematic if used in introductory courses, as rote craft advice can be difficult for student-authors to break away from or unlearn as they further develop their unique identities as writers. In our own teaching experiences, for example, we have found that student-authors who are introduced to CW in this manner are often quick to adopt traditional ideas about “good writing,” and slow to revise them when presented with alternatives.

Following Janelle Adsit’s belief that “the onus is on the creative writing curriculum to expand the terms of reference that a writer can engage, so that they can move between different audiences” (Adsit 99), we explore here the notion of an introductory CW curriculum not only allowing for, but encouraging, a greater consideration of personal identity and audience on the part of the student-author. Whether taking the form of an audience-oriented, student-centered workshop, a global literature survey—or some combination of the two—we attempt to articulate possibilities for revising the introductory course as a space in which student-authors not only consider the culturally specific subject-positions of the professional authors they study, but also the ways in which their own subject-positions influence their writing practices, craft choices, and understandings of genre. From the assumptions student-authors are taught to make about audience and readership in the workshop, to the cultural dexterity of instructors who often teach creative writing courses, the CW classroom has historically operated as a white-centered space. We therefore propose a holistic revision to the standard introductory CW curriculum that moves student-authors beyond narrowly focused considerations of “good writing” toward a more common consideration of cultural inclusion and diversity.

First, we deconstruct these components in order to consider how these classroom conditions contribute to a focus on tradition and craft at student-authors’ expense. Then, we provide examples from our own genre-specific CW courses of how these elements might be best revised in an intro-level CW class. Finally, we make recommendations for both genre-specific and multi-genre introductory CW courses in order to prepare student-authors to engage with, and contribute to, the diversity of 21<sup>st</sup>-century creative writing.

## **COMBATting ASSUMPTIONS IN THE WORKSHOP**

The CW workshop is an experience often cited by student-authors—regardless of how they identify—as difficult or stressful. In her essay, “On Unsilencing the Writing Workshop,” author-teacher Beth Nguyen investigates attitudes about the workshop, writing, “When I asked a group of writers how they would describe their workshop experiences, responses included: crushing, nightmare, hazing ritual, test of endurance, awful, ugh” (Nguyen). Though the pedagogical structure of the traditional CW workshop (sometimes called the “Iowa model” after the university it is thought to originate from) has not been significantly altered in its more than 75 years of use in writing classrooms, this model remains the preferred pedagogical method in CW

classrooms today. From the dissonance between the commonly negative feelings many writers report toward workshop practice and the fact that the workshop continues to be the primary pedagogical model in the field, we can infer that the workshop is tacitly understood as a “rite of passage” or a “necessary evil” in the production of “good” or “successful” writing which must be endured in order for a student-author to become a writer.

However, at the crux of this concept lies several other assumptions about which audiences and readerships student writing in the workshop should be revised toward and for—namely, a white audience and readership. These assumptions are particularly damaging for nonwhite student-authors. In a recent interview with Sabina Murray, poet Ocean Vuong describes how nonwhite authors “often enter the page with lexicons, vernaculars, syntax, and/or styles unfamiliar to a white patriarchal tradition” (Murray). When brought before the judgment of the CW workshop, “in this prescriptive gaze, their work is often mis-read, perhaps being labeled as ‘wrong’ or ‘weak’ or worse, ‘incomprehensible’” (Murray) to the assumed white reader. Writers whose work does not fit within the limited scope of what the (teaching) canon deems “good writing” often face significant critical discouragement in the workshop setting under the guise of “constructive criticism” from peers and instructors alike. If the goal of a CW workshop, as it has been for decades, is to help student-authors craft pieces within the most normative (Western) literary traditions, then this common practice of discouragement can be understood to function as a systemic method of gatekeeping.

Furthermore, positioning the traditional CW workshop model as the status quo has only helped to maintain what might also be recognized as a system or body of knowledge native to student-authors *not* from minoritized/marginalized backgrounds. The model remains tangibly unfamiliar to international student-authors, as well as those for whom literary discussion takes place within an exchange—rather than within what has come to be known, in the traditional workshop, as the “gag rule.” This rule often serves as a one-way route for communication rather than as something more circuitous, akin to a “banking model” existing specifically within CW’s workshop environment, which does not serve to empower or create an inclusive space for all student-authors. The notion of the workshop as a model constructed to benefit only certain student-authors, while dismissing the work of others, must be revised from the ground up.

## **REPOSITIONING THE CW INSTRUCTOR’S CLASSROOM APPROACH**

In his article, “White Writing Teachers,” David Mura discusses the problem of white unconsciousness among CW instructors, many of whom have not done the work of questioning the workshop’s pedagogical traditions, or the CW canon. Mura hypothesizes that this is because “[w]hiteness views itself as central, universal, objective, essential, all knowing” (Mura 2), making it difficult for white instructors to step back and “see what whiteness leaves out, what whiteness is ignorant of, what whiteness does not know” (2) and argues that writing

teachers must actively attempt to look beyond their own perspectives in order to work toward more inclusive classroom practices. This becomes echoed in a more autobiographical take on pedagogical ties to white unconsciousness in Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, wherein Chavez notes that

[b]y the time people of color hit high school, we're experts on the intricacies of real and imagined whiteness. And yet secondary and post-secondary English classes insist on an in-depth study of "the classics," a learning standard that privileges white narratives and reinforces white superiority. The fact that English Departments so often house creative writing programs proves problematic, for the infrastructure inherently biases workshop curriculum. (Chavez 22)

To note "the intricacies of real and imagined whiteness" further points to white unconsciousness in CW, in that its "reinforce[ment] of white superiority" by way of utilizing a canon at both secondary & postsecondary levels of education, establishes a framework for workshop curriculum that is not as broad as it might otherwise be. Such a framework could instead encourage student-authors toward self-representation *as a result* of seeing themselves reflected in the texts they read in the course—seeing such reflections exist outside of the "classics" and instead be connected to a wider array of literary traditions.

This (white) pedagogical unconsciousness is, finally, also reflected in *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing*, in which Janelle Adsit describes how CW instructors often function as gatekeepers of the (primarily white) teaching canon in the classroom, writing, "[t]he teacher's pedagogical practices are discipline-centered, rather than student-centered" (50). Many existing CW curriculums privilege teaching students how to write within the "tradition" and "craft" of the discipline, often at the expense of student-authored work that engages more diverse literary perspectives, without conscious consideration of the pedagogy behind these practices.

These issues of white unconsciousness and gatekeeping are further compounded by a culture of rote duplication in mainstream CW pedagogy. Few graduate programs, even at the master's/MFA and doctoral levels, offer practicums for graduate students assigned to teach an introductory CW course.<sup>1</sup> Due to this lack of institutional support, many graduate student instructors model their pedagogies after the CW classes they have taken themselves as students, and few are asked to critically examine their own teaching practices. These unexamined practices can have real consequences for undergraduate student-authors whose perspectives are invalidated in the face of traditional expectations about what encompasses "good" writing.

To counter these complex issues, we need to reimagine instructors' approaches to their CW classrooms, centering greater instructor cultural dexterity; student-led, audience-aware workshop practices; and a curriculum of diverse literary traditions. As teachers invested in our

---

<sup>1</sup> As a potential resource for CW pedagogy materials, we also refer here to the Syllabi Bank housed at *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*: <https://www.assayjournal.com/assays-syllabi-bank.html>.

students' developments as writers, it is in our power to build new pedagogical models flexible enough to accommodate and acknowledge the specific identities of the student-authors in the classroom in order to create a more inclusive CW learning environment.

## **THE GENRE-SPECIFIC INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

With these concerns, we propose a holistic revision to CW introductory courses in order for student-authors to consider the ways their own subject-positions influence their writing practices, craft choices, and understandings of genre—all situated within the greater culture of the many literary traditions that make up the writing world.

We recognize, additionally, that many institutions separate multi-genre introductory courses from their genre-specific counterparts—creating potential hurdles for each model. One issue unique to genre-specific courses, for instance, is the presumption of student-author expertise within the genre. Though they are no more likely to enter a genre-specific course having read widely in that genre than in a multi-genre course, student-authors of the former are often expected to have read enough to offer meaningful critique of peer work in workshops. The knowledge gap caused by this presumption means that student-authors must depend on the course readings and the instructor to teach them which writing is valued, and which writing falls outside the purview of the teaching canon.

The other presumption, endemic to both multi-genre and genre-specific courses, is the preparedness of the instructors, themselves. New CW instructors—especially as graduate students—are only offered practicum training about pedagogy and best practices in the field in some institutions. Though there has never been such a diversity of CW pedagogy scholarship available to instructors as in recent years, the availability and scope of this knowledge in CW practicums has been, in our collective experiences, limited.

For example, my (Bossiere) current institution, Ohio University (OU), neither offers nor requires graduate students teaching CW to have taken a practicum. Similarly, graduate instructors are not required to consider contemporary CW pedagogy, or to be observed by a faculty member while teaching. I point this out not to disparage the practices of my institution, nor to criticize the quality of its introductory CW courses, but simply to supply an example of a practice that is common within the CW discipline. Minimal preparation is required of graduate students teaching CW, with most graduate instructors receiving far more training in teaching introductory composition courses than they do CW. Thus, teaching practices are based largely on how that graduate student was introduced to the subject as an undergraduate student rather than any intentional pedagogical approach.

These presumptions, both (1) that student-authors have a greater knowledge of genre conventions and (2) that instructors have a greater knowledge of CW pedagogies than either

group really does, are problematic because they unthinkingly perpetuate cultural ignorance and exclusion in the CW classroom space. A thoughtful, holistic reimagining of the introductory CW course, then, must begin with a stronger awareness of the self (subject), and the place (position) of that self within the world, which includes the CW classroom.

Another consideration toward genre-specific intro CW courses is that while some student-authors may enter CW via the genre-specific course, many others may take such a course as their second (or third) genre, entering with pre-set expectations about what CW “is” and “does,” thus dividing the class into two sets of student-authors—those with preconceived expectations and those without. One way to bring both sets together may be to ask the class to think more critically about CW as a discipline, additionally helping those student-authors with little to no workshop experience to dialogue with those with experiences in other genres about how the workshop might be conducted—as well as about which texts are being read in the classroom, and who is represented or excluded via the choice to include those texts. This requires engineering an environment that prepares a classroom community to discuss issues beyond craft—specifically, those issues underlying student-authors’ individual motivations toward creative writing in the first place, which may be tied innately to their identities and lived experiences.

Below, we outline how such attempts are enacted in our own courses at two separate institutions in order to consider potential interventions for both multi-genre and genre-specific CW courses, with consideration for the many varying identities, experience levels, and expectations of student-authors who make up the communities of these classrooms. While our stances are shaped by our own institutional parameters, we have endeavored to be inclusive of the differing practices of institutions at which other CW instructors may teach.

### **Examples from Creative Writing: Nonfiction**

At my (Bossiere) institution, introductory CW courses are split into fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. I teach a course called Creative Writing: Nonfiction. The course description provided by the university describes Creative Writing: Nonfiction as a “Beginning course in writing nonfiction with emphasis on invention, craft, and criticism of student writing and published nonfiction.” While this description is broad, in practice the course is typically structured to incorporate one or two workshop sessions in addition to assigned readings and generative writing exercises. My course objectives for Creative Writing: Nonfiction (below) were gleaned from one of my professor’s syllabi, who had previously taught the course.

- By the end of the semester, students will:
- Understand and define the genre and various subgenres of creative nonfiction.
- Create works of creative nonfiction utilizing specific craft components.

- Develop critical reading skills.
- Understand the importance of revision and discovery.
- Develop an eye and ear for language and its effects on the reader.

Additionally, students will leave this course with:

- A working definition of the term “creative nonfiction.”
- The ability to employ key nonfiction vocabulary words.
- Basic knowledge of significant contemporary works and writers of nonfiction.
- An understanding of standard writing workshop etiquette and procedure.
- A developed curiosity and excitement about their own writing.

In my most recent section of Creative Writing: Nonfiction, I organized the class as a survey into the genre with two workshop components. The course itself was designed not around a specific textbook or reader, but rather four different books, each intended to provide a different perspective to student-authors, both in terms of content and form. The books I assigned included *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater (a memoir), *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Though* by T. Fleischmann (a book-length essay), *The Collected Schizophrenias* by Esmé Weijun Wang (an essay collection), and selected readings from *Bending Genre*, edited by Nicole Walker and Margot Singer (a diverse collection of essays about the essay).

In addition to these texts, student-authors read a number of essays separately, either because they had not been anthologized or were available online, by writers such as Claudia Rankine, Roxane Gay, Jennine Capó Crucet, Danielle Geller, and other contemporary voices. This decision was in part to avoid assigning many works from the established “teaching canon,” and in part because few anthologies, readers, or textbooks on the market at the time contained works both diverse and contemporary enough to represent a broad array of styles and perspectives in creative nonfiction today. Additionally, texts were carefully chosen to represent multiple perspectives from women, BIPOC writers, queer-identified and trans\* writers, and writers with disabilities.

During our class discussions, we paid structural attention not only to the form of the text, but also to the text’s material conditions and context. Some common questions we used as a basis for our discussion included: *Who is the writer? How does the writer position themselves as the authority of their own life and arbiter of their own experience? What audience(s) is the writer addressing in the text, and how does the text reflect this readership?* These questions were then, in turn, used as points of reference for student-authors to begin to build an understanding of themselves as writers, including identification of their subject-positions, such as their social privileges and disadvantages, and how these might affect their writing practices, craft choices, and potential audiences for their work. While I did not expect

student-authors to come away from the experience with a perfect understanding of how to answer these questions, the goal was to get students to think about the writing world as a vast and dynamic space, and to consider their own positions within that space as emerging writers.

We held two workshops in Creative Writing: Nonfiction—one small group, and one full class. The small group format followed the traditional workshop feedback procedure of offering praise and constructive critique. The submissions to this workshop were short—only 2–3 pages in length—and the groups small, at 3–4 students in a class of 12. The purpose of this small group workshop was twofold. The first goal was to familiarize student-authors with speaking about writing—both their own and others—in a group setting. Second, as stipulated in the course objectives, the small group workshop gave student-authors without previous CW workshop experience a sense of the traditional format and structure (albeit with the “gag rule” not imposed), a basis from which we worked later in the semester to design a workshop model unique to our class. From this experience, student-authors were able to voice both what they felt worked and didn’t work for them in the small group setting and transfer these ideas to suggestions for our full class workshop.

Our second, full class workshop was conceptualized through student-centered pedagogies in Peter Elbow’s seminal *Writing Without Teachers* and designed with input from student-authors. To prepare for our class discussions on creating a new workshop model, student-authors read meta-texts on the CW workshop, including Viet Thanh Nguyen’s “How Writers’ Workshops Can Be Hostile,” Beth Nguyen’s “Unsilencing the Writing Workshop,” Claire Vaye Watkins’ “On Pandering,” Sonya Huber’s “The Three Words That Almost Ruined Me As a Writer,” and Junot Díaz’s “MFA vs. POC.” Intro to CW students are unlikely to have encountered texts about the CW workshop, peer critique, or literary traditions outside of the teaching canon before (or during) CW courses. I provided student-authors with these meta-discourse materials both to increase their awareness of the power dynamics and historical context of the CW workshop, and to inspire them to imagine workable alternatives to a system that has disadvantaged so many generations of writers.

Our discussions took place over several class days, and asked student-authors to think critically about what workshop format might best support both their own writing and the writing of their peers in our specific classroom community. In addition to class discussions, each student-author submitted a Workshop Proposal which provided an opportunity for student-authors to share their ideas, questions, and concerns with me, their instructor, privately. With notes from these discussions and the Workshop Proposals, I drafted an outline for our workshop model, which I then proposed to the class. After another discussion and a few minor alterations, students agreed to the model, and we were able to proceed with a workshop that centered the needs of our community.

To ensure we were on the right track, I attempted to evaluate my performance, as well as the impact of the workshop creation process on students, through direct feedback collected in the form of anonymous surveys (IRB 20-E-36). In their post-workshop responses, students were eager to articulate their contributions to the workshop model's design and facilitation, both individually and as a class. For example, one student wrote, "I feel that students played a role in basically all aspects of creating this workshop. My feedback felt recognized and was included in the workshop plan." Another student emphasized the collaborative aspects of the process, writing, "I think this workshop was a great demonstration of taking students' opinions on the workshop model into account. We all offered ideas and methodologies for the workshop approach, suggesting possible ways to handle it, and I think that was represented in the final workshop process." Students also seemed to feel empowered in the creation of our workshop model, with many taking direct ownership of it, evident in statements such as, "I felt that the students were essentially in charge of the workshop model; we were able to discuss what we thought would be most helpful to us and work together to create a workshop that was more about workshopping than criticizing." Overall, students who participated in our workshop creation process seemed to be invested in the success of the workshop as well as tuned in to the needs of their peers as members of their classroom community.

As a white instructor teaching Creative Writing: Nonfiction, I strove toward antiracism, gender equality, and diverse representation, seeking ways to organically incorporate these principles into my curriculum in the form of course readings, workshop practices, and a student-centered classroom culture. I also made a habit of dialoguing with student-authors in class in order to determine their needs in the moment and adjust my teaching practices accordingly. Through these steps, I sought to create an inclusive community of learners and redefine my role as the instructor—upholding tradition and craft—to a figure whose purpose in the classroom is to center the needs of student-authors rather than to enforce the teaching canon. The hope was to provide a more inclusive foundation to the genre not just to students of color, but also to student-authors for whom the teaching canon was designed. My goal was for all student-authors to gain awareness of the many diverse audiences for their work, and how their work fits into multiple literary traditions. More, I wanted student-authors, especially white student-authors, to leave my class open to diverse literary traditions so that if, in a future workshop setting, a peer has submitted a work that departs from the teaching canon, that student-author might then be the voice of encouragement and change the literary world needs.

### **Examples from Writing Culture: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction**

At Syracuse University (SU) I'm (McCrary) within a Department offering three nonfiction courses with distinct descriptions. The intended introductory course is called Writing Culture: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction (WRT 114), and a short course description is as follows: "Nonacademic writing; creative nonfiction, memoir, the essay. Students write texts

experimenting with style, genre, and subject; read contemporary nonfiction texts by varied authors; attend lectures/readings of visiting writers.” This course perhaps ideally prepares SU’s student-authors to move on from an introduction, and into more advanced forms of literary nonfiction writing.

Learning objectives for 114 are as follows:

- Students will read and critically engage with creative nonfiction texts representing a diverse range of topics, subgenres, and perspectives.
- Students will learn about, and put into practice, conventions and characteristics of creative nonfiction.
- Students will compose a series of creative nonfiction texts, and take them through the processes of composing.
- Students will explore relationships between research and creative nonfiction, and learn conventions for incorporating research into their texts.
- Students will develop an awareness of audience, and work to construct an ethos and voice that responds to audience needs and expectations.
- Students will experiment with voices, styles and forms.
- Students will reflect on their writing processes.

In my own 114 course planning I’ve applied Janelle Adsit’s “The Writer and Meta-Knowledge about Writing: Threshold Concepts in Creative Writing” as a foundational reading, ideally positioning student-authors to consider their own nonfiction as social and rhetorical, in addition to being creative. Adsit’s article presents twelve CW threshold concepts, and I work through every concept by covering one per week in an attempt to illustrate every concept through the course readings. For example, we can examine how a particular short memoir (or excerpt) might help illustrate the concept of *Community* (“[w]riters are formed by the communities they engage. An analysis of craft must be grounded in an understanding of the varying orientations of readerships. Diverse audiences come to their texts with diverse needs”). Or, for another example, how a piece of literary journalism might help demonstrate the concept of *Attention* (“[c]reative writing involves specific modes of attention as writers learn to be close and critical observers of the world. Writers learn to account for the ethical considerations involved in perceiving and reinventing the world through their research and observation”). Altogether, this offers a foundation usable not just for student-authors as *students*, but also as *authors*, considered simultaneously to be those whom Adsit calls “cultural producers.” Through this, I can also imagine guiding SU’s student-authors to explore (especially because the course is titled “Writing Culture”) various ways of writing *about* culture, and about themselves within culture, using nonfiction to do so. As demonstrated via one student-author’s course evaluation: the course design “invited me to engage with ideas, perspectives, arguments, and genres that I, as a straight white male, wouldn’t normally engage with.”

While the above could take the form of memoir, the essay, literary journalism, etc., in my own courses I also deliberately encourage student-authors toward conversations about how CW as an area of study and practice can prepare them to better consider those whose lives they may not routinely consider. I do so in part through one required text on the syllabus, *How Dare We! Write: A Multicultural Creative Writing Discourse* (ed. Sherry Quan Lee, 2017), an anthology with a lens particularly focused on authors' cultural identities. (I also assign work from texts located on the Internet as well as in other anthologies, all posted to Blackboard.)

One thing I've noticed about student-authors in 114 is that they want writing time. And, because a number of courses in our Department are designated "studio" courses (so there must be allotted in-class writing time not just on a whim, but planned into the course), by providing student-authors a list of prompts (one day per week, with the course meeting twice weekly) we're able to open one class session per week (say, Tuesday) with 15-20 minutes of writing at the beginning of class. From there, we can spend the middle portion of Tuesday discussing an assigned reading and its ties to a threshold concept then, finally, regroup to share what had been written at the beginning of the session. Conversely, an hour or so of Thursday's session will be spent in small-group workshop, wherein student-authored texts are freely discussed.

A combination of these aspects is also meant to encourage student-authors to think more considerably about what nonfiction is, does, and might be. Writing prompts are gathered from a combination of my own, adapted from courses I took previously as a student myself, and, finally, those I've adapted from a combination of Quan Lee's anthology and Janelle Adsit's anthology *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft* (2019)—all of which intend to get student-authors to exercise simultaneous creativity and metacognition about what they're writing (as well as for whom) and resulting, as a student put it in an evaluation, in "provid[ing] a diverse range of genres and styles to read from." Prompts and exercises might include, for example, "Draft an essay in which you focus on language as being central to the essay itself. Consider how this language (e.g., Chinese, English, Spanish) is used amongst family members and friends, as well as ways language(s) help(s) you navigate the world." Or "Compose an essay meant specifically for one target audience. As you draft, consider: Who's *excluded* from that audience? (Consider aspects of gender, race, language, class, sexual orientation, disability/nondisability, etc.)." Such exercises allow student-authors to dialogue not only about what they've written and where they might see the text going, should they decide to carry it beyond the "rough" draft stage—but also how their drafts may confront issues related to genre(s), tradition(s), and/or community representation(s).

I've also noticed student-authors at this level *wanting* to workshop in small groups. I've offered the option for full-class workshop, though student-authors in 114 have been less interested in this than in receiving small group feedback. As a result, they gather in groups of

4-5—wherein they login to Google Docs/Airdrop/email one another their work, perform a cold read of their peer’s text, and begin to dialogue immediately. Every workshop is therefore generative, and every workshop fosters conversation. This is nothing like the “Iowa” tradition many teacher-practitioners come up through in their own CW educations, with small group workshops offering no possibility for a “gag rule,” and no possibility for student-authors to *only* offer “constructive criticism.”

I also provide peer feedback worksheets, which contain questions for student-authors to be answered by their peers, for example: “What do you think the text/project is attempting to do *at this stage?*” and “Where’s the ‘heart’ of this project? How is it communicated or established?” These questions, and more, not only place the focus on potential revision—rather than outright critique—as a goal for the conversation surrounding a student-author’s text, but they also ensure a full dialogue that’s more than just bidirectional.

Finally, although 114’s student-authors have elected to work in small groups, it might instead be potentially helpful (in future sections) to deliberately establish group work as a foundation for in-class conversations around their work. This might take the form of “writing groups”; for example, establishing firmly that for the first unit (4-5 weeks) of the course, students *will* work in their groups. As described above, a student-author might present work to their writing group—in a class of approximately four groups—then receive peer feedback worksheets one day per week. This takes the place of the full-class workshop, and through this model instructors might also witness student-authors establishing ways to dialogue about one another’s work within parameters likely to offer more comfort than a full-class workshop. It could also give them practice with peer feedback, especially if some student-authors enter the class with more experience than others.

If the unit containing writing groups takes 4-5 weeks, the class might afterwards proceed in a manner that’s left up to student-authors. That is, the class community could be surveyed to see how everyone might wish to continue—they may elect to continue in their writing groups, they may elect to form new writing groups. They may elect to move away from writing groups entirely and into a full-class context, for whatever the next project/assignment may be. This can be aided by conversations about the workshop tradition from texts by those like Felicia Rose Chavez, Karen Craigo, Beth Nguyen, Aisha Sabatini Sloan, etc., so that student-authors are capable of making informed decisions about the kind(s) of feedback they want to receive—as well as the kind(s) they’d be comfortable giving. This is to say that forming writing groups up-front may help student-authors more firmly root themselves within a class community, by taking less time to perceive their classmates as strangers.

There’s also room to discuss the intended versus actual effects of student-authors working in writing groups in a course like 114. One intended effect, of course, is to offer them comfort with workshopping—likely new to many student-authors, especially because so many of them

do not come from backgrounds (e.g., high school) where their writing is shared with someone other than their instructor. This then extends a perhaps exciting opportunity to hold discussions about their work with peers through a method of writing evaluation that isn't attached to a grade, i.e., tied directly to an instructor's power and authority. This ideally allows undergraduate student-authors to consider creative writing in a more social manner, especially given that the comments they hear about their writing comes (often) from people their age, at similar writing levels, and with similar writing interests. It's potentially helpful for student-authors to pair this with instructor feedback, which is, of course, attached to their overall grade in the class.

This is also helpful for student-authors to be able to process and think about feedback, especially when their focus can be on the feedback of four peers rather than, say, fourteen. This additionally allows for opportunity for careful revision, on top of ways to perhaps more clearly outline student-authors' goals for a given text/project as they draft it from one iteration to the next throughout different stages of the course.

One other effect of this course design arrives in the form of a drawback: If the student-author up for workshop does not come to class on the day they're scheduled to present, it can leave the rest of their working group hanging to dry. This places additional considerations of power on the table, with the instructor needing to think about any potential consequences for missing a workshop, how to guide student-authors to spend their time during a missed workshop, etc. I (McCrary) can say that this has happened very rarely for me, and that student-authors are almost always happy and, even, excited, to bring their texts into group workshop.

Finally, even in course evaluations student-authors have commented on the helpfulness of group feedback (as well as, during the Pandemic, drawbacks of not being able to participate enough in group work with the course being online). This leads me to perceiving an appreciation for group work on the part of student-authors, whether it pertains to their working through drafts with their groups, or merely participating in a social element of the course.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REVISING THE GENRE-SPECIFIC INTRO COURSE**

In addition to the reading list approaches in the courses modeled above, we suggest that new and flexible curricula can build on a set of readings outside of the "canonical" texts/anthologies repeatedly taught since CW's institutional inception decades ago. Within the 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape, the work of many published authors is readily available online for use in CW classrooms, and such work does not always appear in widely circulated anthologies and textbooks. Many of these more contemporary works also depict experiences offered by authors writing from minoritized and/or marginalized identities, whose voices have traditionally been excluded from the teaching canon.

Another way to go about broadening the perspectives of introductory CW curricula may be for instructors to consciously work *with* students through a set of readings focused on a diverse, expansive range of author identities, as well as through distributing writing prompts/exercises that centralize the student-author's identity—whether such an identity is tied to nationality, race, sexuality, gender identity, disability, etc. Such a curriculum would allow and encourage student-authors to write in ways that reflect the diversity of readings on the course syllabus, as well as to examine the unique ways their identities have shaped their experiences in the world and on the page. This might result in an overall more diverse survey of introductory literature on which introductory CW curricula can (and perhaps should) stand.

We additionally suggest that the genre-specific workshop space must adapt not just to institutional realities but also to student-author motivations, locating ways to fuse what they want out of their genre-specific CW course(s) with the offerings of programs at particular institutions. In these cases, a revised introductory pedagogy can serve to open student-authors to the possibilities within their own practices. At some institutions this may offer student-authors, firstly, more possibilities for seeing themselves reflected through the diverse literature distributed in the course. Secondly, this can break student-authors away from notions that their own creative writing practices must reflect or imitate the work seen in the teaching canon—allowing for a more flexible introduction to practices and readings for student-authors genuinely interested in practicing CW but who, because of an institutional design, may not get as many chances to practice as they otherwise would. In terms of their writing practices, this also ideally offers opportunities for student-authors to engage in CW in ways they may not have thought they were even “allowed” to, given potential presumptions about who participates in CW and how they participate based on the traditional teaching canon and workshop model.

In the case of nonfiction praxis, for example, an instructor can ensure their course covers material exploring different nonfiction subgenres (e.g., personal essay, lyric essay, memoir, literary journalism) and tie these materials to discussions about how such subgenres can highlight aspects of CW's potential toward inclusion and diversity. This offers a way for student-authors to explore the forms in which they're interested, as well as take into account the greater considerations of CW as a cultural area of study/practice.

Because some institutions offer introductory courses only by genre, while others combine genres into a single introductory CW course for student-authors before they move into intermediate/advanced courses in a single genre, we take into account the existence of both scenarios within the college/university environment. In all, this calls for an overhaul directed at those institutions suited to make such structural changes. Such an overhaul can contribute to a growing conversation about the role of inclusion and diversity in both creative writing studies (CWS) and CW pedagogy at-large, regardless of the types of institutions at which student-authors study/practice.

## THE MULTI-GENRE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Though genre-specific courses are popular in many CW undergraduate programs, several institutions structure their CW programs around an introductory, multi-genre course, typically including separate units for (most often) fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Though we've never been assigned to teach a multi-genre course, we nonetheless recognize that numerous institutions require such a course before moving student-authors into genre-specific CW, especially when the intro/survey course serves as a prerequisite to intermediate or advanced study in a particular genre. Much like our vision for the genre-specific course, we propose a holistic revision to multi-genre CW courses that centers student-author considerations of the ways their own subject-positions influence their writing practices, craft choices, and understandings of genre, all situated within the greater culture of various literary traditions that make up the writing world today.

The multi-genre course is how many students, including myself (McCrary), are introduced to creative writing in the Academy. As a first-year undergraduate I took an introductory CW course at a community college with three units, focused separately on poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. The course itself was structured as an introduction to CW genres, as opposed to CW practices. It certainly wasn't structured to focus on authorial identities or authors' cultures—and yet, for my part, I never saw myself as a Black or queer student-author reflected in the texts we read throughout the course.

Using the “Iowa model,” there was a full-class workshop. We were asked to workshop two texts per student-author—the writing genre was left up to us individually. I remember bringing a short story into class, for instance, and a short screenplay (though we didn't study screenwriting in the course), and both pieces were evaluated by all my peers as well as our instructor. The emphasis for this model seemed to be on introducing us to genres first as readers, then as writers, including broad “instructions” about what, for instance, distinguishes a villanelle from a sonnet, or the question “What is creative nonfiction?” or exploring “the art of the short story.” The result was that I felt, at the time, that we emphasized CW *methods* in the course—or ways of composing different types of CW projects. In retrospect, this emphasis didn't engage us with a range of traditions or literary conventions outside of what we'd been introduced to in the class, or to the literary traditions we may have imported into the class, ourselves.

### Recommendations for Revising the Multi-Genre Intro Course

Considering my (McCrary) experiences in the course I contend that, rather than split a multi-genre introductory CW course into units *by* genre (as was the case in my experience as a first-year student), instructors might instead structure syllabi via considerations of CW threshold concepts. This way, instructors and student-authors together can utilize multiple

genres for greater consideration of the concepts' key points, creating an overall more comprehensive survey of essays, poems, short stories, etc. provided to introductory CW student-authors as forms of cultural production. For example, I use Adsit's twelve threshold concepts (operating within the timeline of a school term) in my own course to offer attention to aspects of inclusion, diversity, and representation as they relate to the texts and assignments/projects. For instructors of multi-genre introductory courses, there's potential to "hop" between CW genres in order to best illustrate the concepts however instructors may see fit. This also offers an opportunity for them to view their curricula as building on top of a foundation not constrained by genre.

Building on these concepts, instructors might also take into consideration how the multi-genre introductory CW course is uniquely suited not only to reflect on genre(s) themselves, but also on CW as a field and a discipline more broadly. Borrowing from a popular concept in writing & composition studies by scholars like Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, a "writing about creative writing" curriculum—mindfully tweaked toward the needs of CW's student-authors via meta-discourse about the CW world and workshop, in addition to a survey featuring a wide variety of works across genres—could foster necessary classroom conversations about CW practices and conventions as they pertain to issues of inclusion, exclusion, and power. Such a curriculum and reading list would also prepare student-authors to enter genre-specific intermediate and advanced courses (and indeed, other disciplines and fields) with knowledge of problematic or exclusionary practices in institutional spaces like the CW classroom; such as, for example, the traditional CW workshop model.

As Tim Mayers states in his "Notes Toward an Inventive, Process-Oriented Pedagogy for Introductory Multigenre Creative Writing Classes," multi-genre courses are uniquely challenging for instructors because the class size is (often) larger than that of the single-genre workshop and because the multi-genre course, by its nature, must cover more material in a shorter length of time than a single-genre course would be expected to (Mayers 11). Additionally, student-authors may enter the course with varying levels of interest in and experience with each of the two or three genres (Mayers 11). Like the course Mayers describes, I (Bossiere) took a multi-genre survey course as part of my CW undergraduate program. The course was required for the major but could be taken at any time—even after multiple single-genre workshop classes. For some student-authors, the course served as an introduction to CW while for others (such as myself) the class worked to challenge the preexisting assumptions about genre conventions we had constructed from our genre-specific workshop courses. The course did not include a CW workshop component, allowing student-authors to instead focus on critical analysis of creative texts and the generation of our own writing. Though some student-authors may want a workshop, in multi-genre CW classroom environments, a writing workshop may not always be the most inclusive—or indeed, effective—way to introduce new students to the discipline.

While true that the workshop has become an expected component of most CW courses, student-authors in multi-genre courses are uniquely tasked with learning the conventions and literary traditions of several writing genres (and subgenres within those genres), as well as saddled with the expectation of critiquing peer writing based on what they have learned in the classroom setting. With such rudimentary, incomplete knowledge of the genre, such workshops are unlikely to be of substantial benefit to the development of most student-authors at that stage of their writing/educational careers. We therefore propose that the multi-genre course be structured instead as a generative CW survey. Such a curriculum could be focused, as Tim Mayers suggests, on reading a wide range of work within two or three genres and on the development of a robust writing practice. However, we also suggest that the multi-genre course should include readings on CW as a discipline and a field, including those about the CW workshop, in order to prepare student-authors to enter single-genre/other courses with an awareness of racial/cultural disparities in the writing world and beyond.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FORWARD

While rethinking common introductory CW curricula—including diversifying reading lists, combatting assumptions in and about the writing workshop, and repositioning the role of instructor as an ally to student-authors rather than a gatekeeper of tradition—might seem like intuitive or obvious strategies for promoting a more inclusive CW classroom, the success of these methods in many ways goes beyond the purview of the classroom itself and into the institutional space surrounding it. That is, in order to establish these changes effectively in the long term, CW programs in departments must make individual commitments to better educate graduate students and other instructors assigned to teach CW courses (whether single-genre or multi-genre) with comprehensive, contemporary CW pedagogy-informed practicums. Without such institutional support, articles and essays like this one will not reach those instructors and educators who need them, and the cycle of the CW “teaching canon” will continue unabated.

In addition to the introduction of teaching practicums in those departments where such courses are not already integrated into graduate teaching instruction, many programs could also benefit from a new approach to existing introductory courses, including what they are called. Deliberately naming introductory courses “Threshold Concepts in Creative Writing,” or “Threshold Concepts in Creative Writing: (Genre),” for example, might be a helpful way to reposition the introductory CW classroom as a space where student-authors simultaneously consider CW as a field and their own subject-position within the field. This context is especially important for student-authors who expect to continue beyond introductory courses both within and outside of their genre(s) of interest and practice. For institutional parameters not allowing for such a (re)naming, or even for instructors who simply wouldn’t be interested in doing so, it’s nonetheless crucial to consider notions of introducing student-authors to the field, discipline, and “writing world” in ways that more comprehensively allow them to explore the social, material,

and rhetorical aspects of their writing, rather than just the traditional genre conventions student-authors are often told to manifest as practicing writers. Even those students who are taking the intro CW class as an elective, or who are not otherwise invested in CW as a degree or career path, can benefit from the examination of self-privilege and explicit study of existing power structures in CW, both of which are readily transferrable to other fields and disciplines.

These considerations don't just echo concepts introduced by scholars like Janelle Adsit, Tim Mayers, Elizabeth Wardle, and Doug Downs, but also those from authors like Beth Nguyen and Aisha Sabatini Sloan, who've forwardly expressed the discomfort inherent in their own (traditional) institutional CW experiences—namely, the negative experiences they themselves have had as marginalized and/or minoritized student-authors. While these concerns are in no way new to CWS, one of the most difficult and pervasive problems remains the disconnect between those CW instructors who are aware of these issues and striving toward more inclusive classroom spaces, and the programs, departments, and institutions that were not built with an increasingly globalized milieu and diverse student population in mind. Thus, we encourage those scholars who have opportunities to implement structural changes at their institutions, and perhaps influence others in similar positions of power.

In the age of the coronavirus, there is already a shift taking place at many colleges and universities across the country, fueled both by CDC safety recommendations and budget cuts. While the courses we describe, and our recommendations, are based on face-to-face instructional experiences, much of what we've described here can also be transferred and adapted to suit online classroom spaces. Many pedagogical innovations are taking place during this COVID era, and we suggest that revisions to introductory CW curricula might be among those innovations. This is a time when nonwhite and white instructors alike engage in dialogue about how aspects of equity—digital, institutional, social—offer opportunities for such conversations to be focused on the deliverability of online modes of instruction/conversation, whether occurring in an asynchronous online space like Blackboard or a synchronous one like Zoom.

For all CW instructors, now is an ideal time to reflect on our pedagogical practices. Whether such practices be framed as “radical,” “revolutionary,” or “critical,” the conversations found in creative writing pedagogy and meta-discourse are necessary components to creating classroom environments that privilege inclusion of overlooked cultures, identities, and traditions in CW today.

## WORKS CITED

- Adsit, Janelle, editor. *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft*. Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury, 2019.
- . *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Curriculum*. Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury, 2017.
- . "The Writer and Meta-Knowledge about Writing: Threshold Concepts in Creative Writing." *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, vol. 14, no. 3, 31 Mar. 2017, pp. 304-15, doi:10.1080/14790726.2017.1299764.
- Borich, Barrie Jean. "The Craft of Writing Queer." *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft*, edited by Janelle Adsit. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 134-37.
- Chavez, Felicia Rose. *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How To Decolonize the Creative Writing Classroom*. Haymarket Books, 2021.
- Craigo, Karen. "A Case for Workshop Alternatives." *Whale Road Review: A Journal of Poetry & Short Prose*, no. 2, 2016, [www.whaleroadreview.com/a-case-for-workshop-alternatives](http://www.whaleroadreview.com/a-case-for-workshop-alternatives).
- Díaz, Junot. "MFA vs. POC." 30 Aug. 2014, [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc).
- Downs, Doug, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Reimagining the Nature of FYC: Trends in Writing-about-Writing Pedagogies." *Exploring Composition Studies: Sites, Issues, Perspectives*, edited by Kelly Ritter and Paul Kei Matsuda, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 2012, pp. 123-44. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgjsj.11>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2021.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford UP, 1973.
- Haake, Katharine. *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2000.
- Huber, Sonya. "The Three Words That Almost Ruined Me As a Writer: 'Show, Don't Tell.'" *Literary Hub*, 27 Sept. 2019, <https://lithub.com/the-three-words-that-almost-ruined-me-as-a-writer-show-dont-tell>.
- IRB 20-E-36. "ENG 3630 Workshop Model Surveys 2." Ohio University, Spring 2020.
- Mayers, Tim. "Notes Toward an Inventive, Process-Oriented Pedagogy for Introductory Multigenre Creative Writing Courses." *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*. Bloomsbury, 2018.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Mura, David. "White Writing Teachers (or David Foster Wallace vs. James Baldwin)." *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/jcws/vol1/iss1/7>.
- Murray, Sabina, and Ocean Vuong. "How Can We Make the MFA Workshop More Hospitable to Writers of Color?" *Literary Hub*, 4 Apr. 2019, <https://lithub.com/how-can-we-make-the-mfa-workshop-more-hospitable-to-writers-of-color>.

- Myers, D.G. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. The University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Nguyen, Beth. "Unsilencing the Writing Workshop." *Literary Hub*, 15 Apr. 2019, <http://lithub.com/unsilencing-the-writing-workshop>.
- Quan Lee, Sherry, editor. *How Dare We! Write: A Multicultural Creative Writing Discourse*. Modern History Press, 2017.
- Sabatini Sloan, Aisha. "The Dangerous Lure of Writing for White Readers in an MFA." *Literary Hub*, 28 Nov. 2017, <https://lithub.com/the-dangerous-lure-of-writing-for-white-readers-in-an-mfa>.
- Salesses, Matthew. "'Pure Craft' is a Lie." *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft*, edited by Janelle Adsit. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 2-12.
- Thanh Nguyen, Viet. "Viet Thanh Nguyen Reveals How Writers' Workshops Can Be Hostile." *The New York Times*, 26 Apr. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/review/viet-thanh-nguyen-writers-workshops](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/review/viet-thanh-nguyen-writers-workshops).
- Watkins, Claire Vaye. "On Pandering." *Tin House*, 2015, <http://tinhouse.com/on-pandering/>.