



The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop

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Review of

Chavez, Felicia Rose. *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop : How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021

In an anecdote in Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, she shares the moment when a student pointed out her inconsistent comments on two identical passages in drafts of his writing and she had the inspiration to prompt him to take on the role of teacher. "What would you say?" (171). This sort of Copernican shift in pedagogical practice reflects a central idea of the book: empowering students by listening to them and fostering their voices. But the anecdote also illustrates the power of her approach: drawing on memoiristic reflections on her own experiences as a student and educator to pair the emotional with the intellectual, the passionate with the academic.

This is the crux of her revisions, I think: that the anti-racist writing workshop is foundationally what she calls "a study in love." The book asks us teachers of creative writing to recognize the value of our students' experiences, of the canons and craft knowledge and culture they already bring; asks us to metaphorically step out of the workshop circle (as Chavez describes doing in her literal classroom) and listen more than we speak; asks us to "put down the red pen," and to rethink the purpose of the creative writing classroom and the workshop process at its center from an empathic, compassionate position. The book then takes us through a step-by-step program for the construction of a creative writing classroom that is more inclusive and that better recognizes the humanity of all student writers.

True to its title, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* names the problems in emphatic terms: "When I speak of the traditional writing workshop model, I speak of an institution of dominance and control upheld by supposedly venerable workshop leaders (primarily white), majority white workshop participants, and canonical white authors." Later, she exhorts the reader to risk a better way and concludes, "To do nothing is to stand still and submit to white supremacy. Take action."

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Throughout the book, the exigency of change and the tools for that change are interwoven, such that the roles of silencing and control in the traditional model are spotlighted and then swiftly replaced. Chavez maps her own classroom practices, from daily check-ins to having students frequently read their work aloud, to an attendance policy that holds students accountable and underscores that she takes them seriously, to student-led one-on-one conferences, but all moving toward a recognition of the value and voice of the students, instilling confidence, a sense of belonging and ownership, and a meaningful, supportive community that champions each other's work and comes to know and trust one another.

As I noted above, Chavez illustrates the why of these changes by incorporating personal writing, drawing on the power and immediacy of essayistic explorations of her own experiences—in workshops, with professors, when accepted to college—to situate the need for reforming the workshop and to humanize the issues she's covering pedagogically. But this also makes the book all that much more engaging and resonant: the blend of the personal and pedagogical makes this moving, while (again) also serving as an argument for change and a means to accomplish it, in Chavez's own voice.

Her graduate school experiences—and others'—illustrate failures by faculty and peers, some of which seem to come from positions of privilege that assume everyone is coming from an identical background; some are simply shitty. But the persistence of issues of representation in the creative writing classroom also stem from stasis, what Chavez terms “inheritance.” Reading lists are received, the workshop format we employ as faculty may often mirror the one we experienced as students. I think it's important to acknowledge that I am a white (straight, cis, male) professor, which shapes my position in relation to these ideas and this discussion. Chavez addresses this, writing “In the anti-racist model, white faculty share the burden of intentional cultural self-education so as to actively support every student.” Designing our classes like those we took, teaching texts to our tastes, centering ourselves as solitary experts guiding novice writers: these all perpetuate the problems, however much we might intend to be more inclusive. Chavez quotes the late bell hooks, “It is so crucial that ‘whiteness’ be studied, understood, discussed” and that multiculturalism be centered even if the workshop remains predominantly white. The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop includes sample lessons and a link to an evolving list of works by writers of color in an effort to “complete the canon” and reject the claim that there is a scarcity of good writing by BIPOC writers to reform course readings.

Some of the tools she advocates using are not necessarily new, but are adapted. For example, she uses Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process but has each class shape it to their community. I have already taken on her ideas about having students ask questions (including of published writing and writers) rather than pose answers and having students (re)define craft terms and then use that community vocabulary during their workshop.

The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop serves as a powerful and personal call to action, a thoughtful and well researched turn toward a more humanistic and empathic mode of teaching creative writing, and a body of resources for any teacher of writing to draw from. At the end, she asks “Lend me your hope?” and hope might be hard to come by. I believe it is Margot Livesey who encouraged us to “embrace the optimism of revision.” Chavez, in her proposed revision of the traditional model of the creative writing workshop, presents the optimistic opportunity for future writing students of color to have an experience unlike her own.