

INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing the Creative Classroom

A Legacy of Dominance and Control

In graduate school at the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Workshop, I was what you might call a difficult student. I own that. Black hoody, black boots, black coat, slumped in down at the classroom desk. Alert and vocal and pissed off. Alienated and isolated and deeply lonely. And cold! I remember icicles daggering the air, a cold so bad my toilet water froze.

"How quaint," many said about Iowa City. Liberal, walkable, cheap; a real writer's paradise. But I got long stares at the co-op grocery that said "You don't belong here." I was a brown-skinned Chicana, conspicuous in my white picket rental. And when I'd complain about the Iowans who asked me to see them to a fitting room, to refill their water, to point them to a restroom—"I don't work here!" I'd repeat through gritted teeth—my family would tell me to hold my tongue and focus on the writing. I was, after all, lucky to be in the workshop.

Thus the implicit imperative for people of color in MFA programs: to write, but not to exercise voice. Because if we spoke up (if we spoke up!) the Great and Terrible Oz would reveal itself as a sickly white monolith, leaching on tradition in an effort to sustain its self-important power. Still, we were the chosen few, lucky to be there. We were not about to mess it up by complaining, except maybe to one another behind locked doors.

Silencing writers is central to the traditional writing workshop model. Harkening back to 1936, when the University of Iowa instituted the first degree-granting creative writing program in the country, the traditional model mandates that participants read a classmate's manuscript independently, in advance of workshop. Participants proceed to mark up the manuscript, then type a critical response to the writer in letter format. When participants reconvene in workshop, they air their opinions amongst themselves for as long as an hour while the writer takes notes. Per the pedagogical rite of passage, the writer is forbidden to speak. This silencing, particularly of writers of color, is especially destructive in institutions that routinely disregard the lived experiences of people who are not white.

This matrix of silence is so profound it enlists writers of color to eradicate ourselves. Even now, as I type this, my heart tells me "No, you can't say that, you might derail your teaching career, shrink your literary network, hurt their feelings, sound ungrateful, blow things out of proportion." Even though I am the commander of my own experience, my heart tells me to choose subservience out of fear that my narrative might ricochet off of institutionalized white

power and smack me upside the head. That's how racism works, right? It's systematic oppression that breeds behavioral norms.

Because when the flowering trees bloomed pink, Iowa City was charming. I'd buy eggrolls and coffee at the farmers market and then spend hours perusing secondhand stores, my fingertips a dusty black, snatching anything colorful to make my house a home. I had friends, a select few brilliant women who dragged me on walks when I'd rather brood, who fed me vegetables when I'd rather binge, who discussed global politics when I lacked perspective. I had earnest students who were unafraid of risk and a champion thesis advisor who reserved me a seat at her family's dinner table. But this book is not about individuals. It's not even about Iowa. Before the University of Iowa, I went to the University of New Mexico, and before that DePaul University and Wellesley College, each of which replicated an identical workshop model.

No, this book is about institutions. More specifically, institutional racism—the system of advantage based on race.

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 memorialized in hefty anthologies, the required texts of study. And when I speak of dominance and control, I'm really talking about silence. I'm not just referring to the traditional workshop ritual of silencing the author when critiquing their work (“building tough skin,” they call it, to better prepare for the “real world,” as though writers of color live anywhere else, as though our skin is not leathered to the touch), but a profound, ubiquitous silence: the nearly complete omission of writers of color in person and print. It is as though we do not exist.

Junot Díaz puts it well: “I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color—that did not, in other words, include me.”¹ Here I quote the concrete and systematic issues addressed in Díaz's groundbreaking *New Yorker* article, while acknowledging his toxic legacy of abuse against women. No doubt Sandra Cisneros puts it better: “I hated it.”² Díaz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, Cisneros a MacArthur Fellow; the resentment felt by writers of color is not due to lack of talent—that we can't hang with the big boys—but rather due to the endemic oppression within literary arts programs. This was true when I was a financially independent, first-generation undergraduate student. This was true when I was a graduate fellowship student, and it's true now that I am a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at a private liberal arts college.

It's like writing programs are stuck in 1936, encased in shatterproof glass, museum relics safeguarding whiteness as the essence of literary integrity. In 2018, I was one of the only people of color in my English Department, and that made me feel physically, emotionally, and intellectually at risk for harm. Compound race, gender, and stature (“I thought you were a student!” colleagues would often comment) with my working-class background, and presto: instant and incessant anxiety, catapulting me back in time to when I was a graduate student.

Anxiety when the editor of the literary journal asks me to step down as a volunteer reader because I express concern that her all-white staff might result in aesthetic bias.

Anxiety when a white female professor uses a black pen to cross out references to ethnicity in my personal essay, noting in the margins, “You don’t need to make it a race thing.”

Anxiety when a white male professor, former Teacher of the Year, keeps me after class to discuss my repeated requests for a more inclusive reading list. He sits inappropriately close, sarcastically mocking how unfair it is, how unfair that I’m not represented in the syllabus. He yells so loud that a concerned colleague knocks on the classroom door (at least that’s what she tells me later; between his yelling and my crying, neither of us hear her).

Anxiety when a white male professor, whom I intend to claim as mentor, begins class with a vote. “One of the faculty members”—I’ll later learn that it’s the administrative assistant rather than one of the seven white nonfiction professors—“insists that we hire a person of color for the Visiting Writers Series. Would you prefer that we bring in a person of color, or a quality writer, someone who’s doing really exciting things?”

He suggests that we go around the room, one by one, and voice our vote aloud. I’m the only person of color present, planted at the tail end of the circle, and so I witness twelve or so of my white peers—esteemed journalists and rhetoric instructors alike—play into the false binary: “No, no people of color! We want quality writers only.” My whole body shakes like I’m cold, but I’m not cold, I’m hot. “My face must be so red,” I remember thinking. “Can’t they see my face?” But, of course, they don’t see me. That’s the point.

That’s the motherfucking point.

When it’s my turn to vote, I stand up (shaking, hot, my legs disobedient anchors) and exit the room. I don’t say a word. I save it for when the garage door shuts behind me at home.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I sometimes ask myself. It was on me to speak for a whole people, and in that moment, I choked. To speak up was to enact my powerlessness, isolating me from my classmates who would go on to befriend one another, marry one another, hire one another later in their careers. To speak up was to square off with my professor, the white person in power, the very man who had attracted me to Iowa, whose favor I courted. The implications, the outcomes of moments like these, can last a lifetime.

Days later, this professor will invite me out for coffee. I’ll recount my discomfort in defense of my early exit. “I hardly think I said it like that,” he’ll reply, rolling his eyes, and an instant trifecta of thoughts will dash the line: one, that I’m just another overexcited brown person, embarrassing myself with wild stories because “come on, it wasn’t that bad, can’t you just let it go?”; two, that it always comes down to words for us writers, there’s power there and we know it; and three, that he’s just another calculating white person, attempting to manipulate my narrative to better reflect on him.

One after another, my professors will reach out in attempt to manage “the situation” (the situation being me, of course, and not insatiable white supremacy). I’ll endure each awkward exchange—cryptic, self-serving e-mails and hallway chats—and then tick that professor off

of my list of potential mentors. In class, my peers are starry-eyed, but I'll have X-ray glasses that expose my professors' bias. Whenever we interact, I'll feel anxious and resentful and vulnerable and regretful, too, that I can't just be cool. I didn't know it then, but I would eventually tick, tick, tick out of options and have to venture outside of the English Department, to Studio Art and Education, in order to secure mentorship.

Oh, to drop out of school, that Everlasting Gobstopper of a fantasy I lodged in my mouth day and night for three years of graduate study. But loyal to my family's wishes, I held my tongue. Or at least the Chicana version of holding my tongue, which was to make a big fuss trying to change the workshop from within. All I had to do was expose the privileged, white, male identity Iowa assumed as universal, right?

Together with a trusted friend from my cohort, I formed a student diversity committee. I served as the elected student liaison to faculty. I petitioned for the "emergency hire" of a professor of color. And I cofounded "Toward a New Canon," an elective class that featured contemporary writers of color.

I channeled my anger into action, and still a white peer called me "militant," another white peer called me "radical," another white peer suggested, over coffee, that I "toe the line until graduation," because "everyone's already stressed out enough."

Here I thought I was a step closer to belonging, if not at the co-op grocery then at least within my own cohort. But no. The backlash was just as hostile as the censorship. Even white allies warned me to "tone it down," fearful that my activism was annihilating my professional network; I was losing the game of graduate school. "Move on," they said, but I wouldn't. And I couldn't. Move where? I wanted to ask. I live in this skin.

I comforted myself with a make-believe Fellowship Girl, how years from now she could exist on the page, maybe write about home—her culture, her birthplace, her body—without suffering the white-splaining workshop critique. Or maybe she could live in her imagination, without pressure to personify her ethnicity. This and more, but only if I succeeded in effecting change.

Around year two, I noticed that my classmates' heads were full of manuscripts, but I was gummed up in diversity's gear-work. My double consciousness had triggered a double burden; between diversity committee meetings, faculty meetings, class meetings, and the inevitable bouts of pissed-off crying, when was I supposed to write? My professors expected me to accommodate their ignorance, explaining racism as though it were an objective subject, separate from themselves. Their impatience and defensiveness got to be too much. "I'm not supposed to be educating you!" I wanted to scream. "I'm supposed to focus on writing."

Over time, even writing proved problematic, for what was I supposed to write about? Certainly not me. To willingly exacerbate the paternalism of my professors and peers by writing memoir, that was just foolish. The genre was, by default, white. My cultural, intellectual, historical, and political consciousness baffled others at best; at worst my writing made them feel left out or guilty or indignant.

I had to be real with myself. All this work, and nothing had changed. Nothing was ever going to change, because the powers that be didn't want change.

Eating pizza in bed started to look a whole lot better than effecting change. I bought a Snuggie. My critical essays were illogical, muddled, my workshop feedback to peers was limp praise, handwritten in the half hour before deadline. Most of all I dreaded my own workshops. Bowing silently while my professor and peers—the ones who wanted quality writers only, the ones who wanted me to toe the line—schooled me in how to write like them. “Use our words,” they seemed to say, and “with time and hard work, you, too, can have voice.”

I hated it, but I did it, because I was more than just a writer. I was a teacher. I knew that a better workshop model existed because I had conducted one in my own high school creative writing classrooms back in Chicago. My anti-racist approach decentered whiteness and redistributed power equitably among participants and instructors.³ While I didn't have a graduate cohort to which I belonged and felt safe, at least I could create it for my undergraduate students in Iowa. With adjustments for individual specialization, institutional culture, and legislative standardization, I discovered that the anti-racist workshop model is applicable across the higher education spectrum, from high school to college to graduate school. Everyone benefits from an inclusive approach.

The anti-racist workshop is a study in love. It advances humility and empathy over control and domination, freeing educators to:

- » Deconstruct bias to achieve a cultural shift in perspective.
- » Design democratic learning spaces for creative concentration.
- » Recruit, nourish, and fortify students of color to best empower them to exercise voice.
- » Embolden every student to self-advocate as a responsible citizen in a globalized community.

At Iowa I earned an MFA in writing, but it was actually the art of creating healthy, sustainable, and empowering communities in my undergraduate classrooms that I learned over those three years.

At first, I was nervous to institute the alternative, anti-racist workshop model I'd tested in Chicago because my Iowa students were all white. “Would they care?” I wondered. It turns out they did care, so much so that they nominated me for a teaching award. “She encouraged a present-ness in each of us, not only as classmates, but also as human beings, as fellow artists,” wrote one student in his nomination letter. Another young woman wrote, “The writing we were introduced to was exciting and playful, new and edgy, with work by people of color and the LGBTQ community, which you never find in English class. It was truly ‘hands-on’ education, thinking critically about what we read and saw from contemporary artists.” I won the award, but more so, I won the confidence to formalize my workshop into a replicable model, one that I've honed in large and small groups across the country. *The Anti-*

Racist Writing Workshop is the culmination of thirteen years of progressive educational practice, a synthesis of my most successful teaching strategies.

The Traditional Model vs. the Anti-Racist Model at a Glance

Let’s break down how the anti-racist workshop model consciously works against traditions of dominance in the creative classroom:

<p>The traditional model honors predominately white workshop leaders renowned for their high-caliber publications and degree accreditation.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model honors workshop leaders who’ve earned distinction as innovative and effective allies to writers of color, ranking superior teaching over publication credits or master’s awards.</p>
<p>The traditional model bestows a select few scholarships to exceptional writers of color, ensuring a placeholder for “diversity” in otherwise all-white writing classrooms.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model actively recruits people of color to participate in writing workshops regardless of whether they identify as creative, reiterating that their experiences are crucial to our collective narrative.</p>
<p>The traditional model affirms the authority of white literary “masters” through a strict study of canonical texts, imparting an implicit rubric for the “right” way to write.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model surveys a living archive of scanned print material and multimedia art by a range of writers including people of color, differently abled writers, and people who are LGBTQIA2+. These texts are sourced by students and instructors over the course of the term, acknowledging that craft, form, and content are multidimensional and malleable.</p>
<p>The traditional model traps text on the page, asking workshop participants to impose their individual interpretations of the story’s meaning.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model pairs an assigned text with a conversation with the author, contextualizing their stories within a specific lived experience, making meaning relevant and real.</p>
<p>The traditional model assumes that workshop participants share an identical knowledge of craft, and wields academic vocabulary as a badge of authority.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model confirms craft as an abstract concept; participants collectively define the workshop vocabulary.</p>
<p>The traditional model silences the author during workshop while participants compete over what’s “right” and “wrong” with the text.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model empowers the author to moderate their own workshop while participants rally in service of the author’s vision.</p>
<p>The traditional model exalts the workshop leader as the dominant opinion; they write on the author’s text with the expectation that the author will revise comment by comment.</p>	<p>The anti-racist model distinguishes the workshop leader as artistic ally; they engage in one-on-one conferences with the author before and after workshop, dialoguing about how to best achieve the author’s vision.</p>

If we are to evolve the traditional workshop model into an enlightened, democratic counterculture, then we must concede the obvious: that writers of color exist. No more of this obsolete white supremacist aesthetic! It is time to admit that writing is a political, historical,

and ideological act steeped in identity politics. It's an essential act, an urgent act, an act that has cultivated critical mass since the traditional writing workshop model was first developed.

It's time to take stock. Eight decades, we've clung to this model, and where are we now? In her *Rumpus* article "Where Things Stand," Roxane Gay calculates that as of 2012, full-time professors were nearly 90 percent white. The publishing industry was nearly 90 percent white. And the books reviewed in the *New York Times* were written by nearly 90 percent white authors.⁴ That's dominance. That's control. That's the silencing of nonwhite authors.

The gaping need for creative revolution is real. It's time to demand better not just for writers of color in our own separate art collectives but for everyone, everywhere. Organizations like VONA, Macando, CantoMundo, Cave Canem, Watering Hole, Lambda Literary, Kundiman, and the Asian American Writers' Workshop are indispensable to our collective arts culture, fortifying and revitalizing the psyches of countless writers of color across the country. It is because of the essential work of torchbearers like Sandra Cisneros that I am emboldened to propose that all writers deserve a safe space for creative concentration and exposure to the literary traditions of writers of color. Consider every one of us deprived. Were we to stop worshiping whiteness as default and adjust the parallax to include racialized bodies, we'd reveal whole continents of complexity to enrich our literary integrity.

The time for change is now. We can't wait it out in hopes of a better tomorrow, because today's creative writing cohort hires tomorrow's teachers, edits tomorrow's magazines, produces tomorrow's plays, and acquires tomorrow's manuscripts. Their investigative journalism can incite tomorrow's impeachment; their stump speech can secure tomorrow's seat in public office. What may read as a crisis in creative writing is at heart a crisis in American culture: without voice, participatory democracy fails.

To claim a public voice is to summon our collective power, belly-deep and then bitter in our throats, a willful insistence that we matter—and we do matter, especially now, in the twenty-first-century United States of America, with a president who hates us, an economy that exploits us, a police force that murders us, a culture that embezzles from us only to elicit our shame, our silence; we write to drown out the silence.

So let's get writing. But not on their terms. On ours.

How to Use This Book

The blueprint's all laid out for you, here. Each chapter of this book walks step-by-step through the fundamentals of protecting and platforming writers of color, offering replicable reading, writing, workshop, critique, and assessment strategies. Apply the lot or pick and choose, individualizing a model that best serves your vision:

Chapter 1: Preparing for Change

We begin by tackling student recruitment. Too often writers of color conclude that workshops are hazardous because they're not represented among the faculty, they're not represented in the syllabus, and they're not represented within the class cohort. [Chapter 1](#) offers an appraisal of our workshop marketing materials and syllabi in a targeted effort to enlist more writers of color.

Chapter 2: Fostering Engagement, Mindfulness, and Generosity

[Chapter 2](#) guarantees our writers of color remain enrolled, pairing creative writing exercises with personalized check-ins and freewriting exercises to unmask the psychological, emotional, and cultural barriers to creative expression. Participants name their fears and then write past them, promoting a collective sense of power.

Chapter 3: Instituting Reading and Writing Rituals

We then transition into how to read creative writing, not as an inert receptacle for our opinions but as an instrument of authorial choice. [Chapter 3](#) launches a multi-step reading ritual, beginning first with workshop participants' own words—handwritten, raw, and messy—read aloud to the group. By prioritizing workshop participants' writing over model canonical texts, we celebrate students' own words, spoken aloud in their unique and powerful voices, versus an artificial imitation of white literary “masters.”

Chapter 4: Completing the Canon

Gradually, we transition into reading contemporary writers from a living archive that features people of color, women, queer, differently abled, and gender-nonconforming artists. The final step is for participants to engage in educated exchanges with one or more published authors, contextualizing a text within a specific lived experience. Workshop participants see themselves reflected in these professionals, empowering them to claim the identity of author.

Chapter 5: Owning the Language of Craft

[Chapter 5](#) demands that all workshop participants have equal access to the language of craft. The traditional workshop model is rife with assumed knowledge, lobbing vocabulary such as voice, imagery, characterization, and arrangement in discussion as though it were common know-how. When we make these abstract ideas concrete, we empower participants to proactively define a lexicon of craft elements with which to discuss one another's work.

Chapter 6: Teaching Writers to Workshop

Next, we learn how to workshop, an intricate skill that traditional leaders habitually undervalue. Participants read their texts aloud and moderate their own feedback sessions. This artist-centered model, inspired by Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, trains

participants in how to check their egos, exercise kinship, and read in service of the author's agenda.

Chapter 7: Conferencing as Critique

Chapter 7 advises us to put the red pen in the writer's hand. Instead of scribbling on participants' work, prescribing alternate grammar, phrasing, or narrative strategies that align with our personal aesthetic preferences, consider verbal critique. Guided pre- and post-workshop conferences in which the writer marks on their own work allows us to dialogue with participants instead of dominate over them.

Chapter 8: Promoting Camaraderie and Collective Power

We round out the book with assessment strategies, squashing labels of "good" or "bad" in an effort to move beyond hierarchy. Chapter 8 evaluates participants' real learning beyond a rote implementation of the workshop leader's critique or placement in a competitive showcase of the "best" writing, opting instead for individual, process-based assessment. Rather than outward, workshop participants go inward with perspective and intention to gauge their personal progress.

Appendix 1: Platforming Writers of Color: A Twenty-First-Century Reference Guide

The book culminates with a twenty-first-century reference guide of contemporary writers of color and progressive publishing platforms to help dispel the myth of scarcity that there simply are not enough quality writers of color out there.

Appendix 2: Platforming Writers of Color: A Twenty-First-Century Reference Guide

For further reference, Appendix 2 provides sample lesson plans for educators who seek out the logistics of an anti-racist workshop agenda in action.

It's time we shift toward evolution. As opposed to an exercise in ego, the anti-racist workshop model teaches engagement, mindfulness, and generosity. No talking over, no talking down to, no muzzling writers of color.

Everything you need to decolonize your creative classroom, to ratify the future of education, is within your grasp. Instead of trapping yourself eighty years in the past, project eighty years into the future: What do you want tomorrow's creative writing workshop to look like?

The Future of Creative Writing

Let's not get it twisted: this anti-racist writing pedagogy is aggressive activism. It's immediate, tangible action that disrupts the legacy of white supremacy by changing

organizational structures, policies, practices, and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.

Folks whom you respect and trust might say this model sounds excessive. That it disserves writers of color by coddling them. That it's soft, feminine, or naive. That it unfairly advantages "inferior" writers of color over their white peers. That it's a symptom of affirmative action, a bunch of ethnic studies propaganda, typical of our spoiled, spineless, politically correct generation. That it's reverse racism, or—astonishingly!—that it's redundant, because "racism no longer exists."

The bewilderment, the resistance, the hostility may be all too familiar. Just nod and carry on: you hear them; but our young people of color deserve priority.

My own students occasionally express opposition to the antiracist workshop model. They'll request a one-on-one conference, only to complain that their peers are "too nice." They want instead for their classmates to "be real," to "be harsh," to "tear the work apart" because they can "take it."

These students, in my experience, are always privileged white males. Every single time.

And while my sampling pool might be skewed (I teach at a prestigious private college in Colorado), I believe there's something to learn from the pushback of white male students. They want to compete in workshop. Or, more accurately, they want to win workshop. Without acknowledging, of course, that the game is rigged, that they won at the get-go, regardless of their writing ability. This colosseum mentality of brutality and bloodshed is a farce, one that blinds them to the advantage of collaborative creation.

In conference, I suggest that the students focus less on the workshop critique they receive and more on the prompts they provide. Did they ask pointed questions to elicit specific, insightful feedback, or were they passive, vague, sacrificial storytellers awaiting the knife? "Is it any good?" these white male students tend to ask, well accustomed to instantaneous response (their lawyer grandfather, their novelist father, their editor mother, their uncle's old golfing buddy, admissions director to dream school). Confident in their place in the world, their effortless access to attentive ears, they balk at politeness as though it were backward: "I don't want to be spoken to that way; I want callousness, the 'Truth.'"

Unlike their peers of color, their lives do not depend on civility and cooperation. "Can't we all just speak our minds?" is the unknowable privilege of white people. It's a clever invitation, a sly smile, a loaded gun. Because say the "wrong" thing—and I have, when enforcing my course policies regarding attendance, participation, or deadlines—and BOOM, their fathers fire patronizing e-mails about what their sons deserve. Not what they've earned, but what they deserve. And just like that, the game of being "real," of "taking it," is over.

With time, these white male students acquiesce to the anti-racist model—the transformation is truly rewarding—but as is the trend with apple barrels, there's usually one who remains disgruntled. Just this past fall, I remember a writer of color who cried during check-in (a daily ritual to begin workshop, referenced in [chapter 2](#)). She said that she had a "rough night," to which a white male student responded with a theatrical sigh. After class, in

my office, he complained that it's "annoying" to sit through check-in, because what could have possibly happened between yesterday and today?

What, indeed.

As an undergraduate English major at DePaul University, I crisscrossed the city of Chicago, tutoring wealthy white children in their pristine homes. It was a well-paying, massive exercise in self-effacement, one I've rarely spoken about out of shame, for the reality of "private writing tutor" so drastically contrasted the line on my résumé. White fathers sometimes fingered my hair or grazed my breast before handing me my paycheck; white mothers often expressed exasperation when I refused to cook or clean. "I'll pay extra!" they'd relent, misreading my rejection as barter. I was the brown nonperson, hired help, deferring my own college coursework in order to write their children's five-paragraph essays.

All this to afford my tuition, rent, utilities, toiletries, groceries, clothes, bus fare, plane fare, and also stamps, to mail whatever money was left over to my parents, both of whom collected disability. It wasn't always so—my parents kicked off careers in the service industry while they were in middle school—but during the course of my undergraduate study, my dad suffered physical pain, my mom emotional.

I strategically timed that daily phone call home to Albuquerque until after my homework was done.

A conversation with my mom, especially, could derail me for hours, the late-night agony of should I stay in school, or go back home where I'm needed?

A good Chicana should be by her mother's side. I didn't need some fancy school to teach me that.

On the phone, my parents and I never spoke of my own pain: the impossible divide between my classmates and I, that racial and socioeconomic gulf I internalized each time I arrived on campus. Friendless, I'd trail behind groups of orange-skinned girls in North Face fleece. They'd turn left, toward the dorms (warm meals served up on trays, care packages from mom, late-night roommate confessionals), and I'd turn right, toward the train and then the bus, back to my too-cold studio apartment. I was so goddamn lonely, frozen in my thrift-store jacket, exhausted from teaching other people's children, guilty at my own greedy desire for education, and spitfire angry that nothing ever came easy.

So yeah, a lot can happen between one day and the next. If a professor had just once taken time out of class to ask me how I was doing, I, too, might have cried. I, too, might have said, "I had a rough night."

If we're aiming for Truth, young men, then here it is: I'm at peace with the occasional white workshop participant's discomfort, because it's evidence that the anti-racist model is working. For the first time in their artistic careers, white writers must listen—to multidimensional storytelling, to marginalized narratives, to the anxieties and aspirations of their peers—without a single appeal for their opinion. Listening is the first and most important step for maintaining a storytelling tradition, and as such, we must practice it daily.

Writers of color are accustomed to this practice, burdened with ears so elastic we're capable of hearing multiple, simultaneous subtexts in every exchange.

At heart, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* imparts a pedagogy of deep listening. We invest in one another as complex individuals. We confront the voices in our heads that tell us our stories are unimportant. We honor the sidelined narratives of people of color, women, queer, differently abled, and gender-nonconforming artists. We listen to one another's writing, read aloud in workshop, ever conscious of our body language. We ask questions with the intent to understand instead of retort. We read for craft over content, regardless of our subjectivity. And we adhere to the author's agenda during feedback sessions. It requires self-discipline to be sure, but cultivating listening in the creative classroom makes us better writers. We're more present in our lives, better able to articulate what it is to be human. The resulting work rings with vitality.

I'm offering a new approach for a new millennium; it's okay if a few students and colleagues are slow to catch up. Because that young woman who cried during check-in is evidence that the model is working, evidence of her vulnerability and trust, her internal mutiny against the cultural imperative of safety in self-effacement. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "We cannot fight old power in old power terms only. The way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting."⁵

The anti-racist model is working. I've witnessed it, again and again. Workshop participants thank me for making writing relevant and personal; for allowing for freedom of thought; for establishing mutual respect, trust, and agency; for curating a safe, welcoming environment; for hosting a creative community; for tailoring the workshop to who they are as people; for doing their stories justice; for reframing the objective from a product to a state of mind; for inspiring them to look at everything differently, now.

"Felicia feels like the future of education," wrote a young woman in my most recent round of course evaluations. How profoundly I want to honor that sentiment. If only I could time travel, first backward to that young woman in the black hood, black boots, black coat, slumped in down at the classroom desk—I'd hold her hand, reassure her that she matters, I matter—and then we'd bolt, full-force forward to where we belong, to the future of creative writing, where multicultural consciousness holds weight and substance, where our brown bodies are emboldened to "speak, poet."

What will it look like, sound like? The choice is ours.