

Interview with Felicia Rose Chavez, author of *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*

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FULL TEXT

We interview Felicia Rose Chavez about her most recent book: *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*. In the interview, we talk about what an anti-racist workshop can look like at various grade levels. Dr. Chavez discussed her own experience as a teacher of writing and described her desire to examine her own teaching inheritance. She discusses how to use an anti-racist framework to create a lesson plan and a syllabus and helps teachers think about the language they use to communicate what they are trying to achieve in classrooms with students. Enjoy! You can watch the video or read the transcript of the interview below. *I hoped for this particular book to be relevant for writers, for you know people of color who have endured and a traumatic educational journey as well to feel validated, and for educators across the spectrum to be able to pick up and see themselves, maybe some practices that they're doing that they're excited about seeing reflected in a text and some practices and areas that they have to grow.* – Felicia Rose Chavez

Charlotte: Alright hello, and welcome I'm Charlotte one of the editors our blog writers to care and I'm here today with Felicia author of this wonderful book, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*. So welcome, Felicia and congratulations on the book! It came out earlier this year. Is that right? In January?

Felicia: In January. Yeah top of the year.

Charlotte: So besides really enjoying the book myself and I've been hearing quite a bit of buzz about it in various circles so excited to hear a little bit more about it. And so I will start by just letting you kind of introduce yourself, so would you mind just saying a little more about who you are and how you came to this work.

Felicia: Sure, and so I am a writer and a dedicated educator. I started my teaching career in a non traditional teaching space kind of the nonprofit sector in the community driven sector with high school students, transitioned into work with on high school students in the more traditional classroom, and then went on to teach in undergraduate classrooms and I came to this particular work out of a desire to examine my own teaching inheritance. I found that throughout this pretty traumatic educational journey that I had as a young woman of color, I pushed back a lot against what was happening in the classroom or I questioned it internally and didn't know how to release my discomfort. It took me many, many years to interrogate what it was that I was dissatisfied within the classroom, and then to ask myself the really hard question of like, 'Are you replicating those same traditions in your own teaching?' when suddenly I had a classroom of my own. I really had to think deeply about the inheritance that I had gained from my previous instructors. It took many years and some tough reconciliations but was able to articulate for myself what I wanted to change so that I didn't replicate the same harm that I had experienced as a student and so that's how I came to to write the *Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*. I shared just a quick iteration, or very early iteration of the first chapter, on at a conference and sobbed from the release of it from the release of everything that I was holding inside. And educators were so responsive both people of color and white allies saying, Let's make a better way together, and so I sat down and I, I wrote the book proposal and I

targeted toward Haymarket Books my favorite publisher and I, here we are.

Charlotte: Okay yeah That was one thing I was thinking about, as I was reading the book that I really appreciated all the for you told kind of about your own experiences, you know as a student in these spaces, and I also think about how hard it is to kind of come to terms with that and to find a better way. Because it is, like you said, rather easy to kind of get sucked into just doing you know teaching the way we were taught and kind of replicating those really harmful and oppressive structures that are all around us.

Felicia: Yeah, we're overwhelmed as educators. We're busy people. There's a lot to do on a day to day basis and not a lot of time. You're constantly pivoting to need after need. Much less your home life and the gaping need that exists there, and so we often rely on that as a crutch. We're hitting the ground running you graduate from your program and you're in the classroom or sometimes you're still training and you're in the classroom, and so of course, of course, it takes a good amount of time and self-reflection to really think about why we're doing why we're making the moves we're making, why we're making the choices we make on a day-to-day basis. And then to pivot and risk and try something new. That's also scary. And what if it doesn't work and who's there to support us during that process. And so it was almost like this book is me reaching a hand out and saying, 'I'm trying something new for me.' You know, I acknowledge all of the beautiful, beautiful mentors who came before me—so many very strong incredible black women, who I nod to in the book, who inspired me to do this work, but I'm here and alive. And I'm like, 'Let's try it.' I need someone to reach out to me to and hold my hand and say, 'I'm going to try it too.' It's more an invitation to dialogue, as opposed to a structure that I'm putting out there, this rigid structure for people to take on in its entirety. Instead, they're just ideas and I kind of humbly present them and say what ideas do you have what swap let's have a conversation.

Charlotte: I love that. A book as an invitation and not just a handbook or manual or a checklist. That's also a problem. Sometimes we're looking for the easy answers as teachers, but those are not often what works. We need that harder conversation, that reflection, and that dialogue.

Felicia: Sure. When it comes to this anti-racist work and the everyday action that we need to put into it, every community is different. You know, and my great joy with this book is being able to meet across the age spectrum. You know, to be able to talk just as candidly with a third-grade teacher as I am with the Director of an MFA program and say, 'Well here's a set of tools, right? What, what does your Community need? What do your teachers need? What do your students need? Who are they, right? What do you want this to be? What's your vision?' So we're constantly creating, adapting the model to the people. And that's exactly the way it should be as like a an effort to humanize education.

Charlotte: And so maybe we'll back up just a little bit then. Could you tell us just a little bit, for those people who have not picked it up yet, kind of tell us what is this basically about? And what do you mean—if you can shrink that down into you know a little bit of time—what do you mean when we talk about an anti-racist or decolonized writing curriculum? What does that mean to you?

Felicia: Those are intimidating words, right? As of late they've gathered buzz and so we're becoming more and more accustomed to hearing them, but I do know that when I throw it terms like anti-racism and white supremacy, I think the shock on everyone's faces like—I'm just a teacher in a classroom. You know, I don't want to claim that! But I think that we all have played a role in a legacy of racism, whether it's institutionalized racism through the institution of our school systems on individual racism and internalized racism which I myself have experienced. So we do have a responsibility to just sit in this particular moment, when we seem to be more open to the conversation and reflect on, you know, our practice as teachers. I hoped for this particular book to be relevant for writers, for you know people of color who have endured and a traumatic educational journey as well to feel validated, and for educators across the spectrum to be able to pick up and see themselves, maybe some practices that they're doing that they're excited about seeing reflected in a text and some practices and areas that they have to grow.

But the book is set up in a way that if you did want to examine your practice from start to finish in the in the length of the school year. There's an introduction about the concepts and then it leads into the very earliest stages of

recruitment of students, creating a lesson plan and a syllabus and kind of thinking about the language that we use to communicate what it is we're trying to achieve in our classrooms. And it goes on every step thereafter. How to retain students, practices on a day-to-day basis with reading and writing exercises, and culminates in a variation on assessment strategies and how we can really deeply rethink assessment. So start to finish, as I said, it's that invitation to attempt something different, and a toolkit, a variety of options to just try out.

Charlotte: Yeah, I really like that, and I know, as I was reading, I was really appreciating how, you gave great examples I feel like, but also sort of did make us really think about sort of the practices—like have already kind of talked about—it's just sort of like the air we breathe. That's kind of how white supremacy works, right? It's so embedded in the ways we were taught, the ways we think about writing, the texts we pick up and read, on a day-to-day basis. I really appreciated that you kind of made us sit with those and rethink how else could those go and what else could those look like.

Felicia: I think the conversation to date has been on how do we be more inclusive, right? And we've done some of that work and it's really exciting. Suddenly we see some more diversified reading lists and that's a step, right? But I hope to deepen the conversation a bit, as so many writers are doing right now, in terms of thinking about instead of how to include, you know, people of color, how do we dissenter whiteness. So it's sort of coming at it from a different angle and then beyond you know decentering whiteness, and I mean whiteness as the neutral the universal, you know, the seemingly objective standard, right? It's sneaky that way. So, for example, if we look at our canonical authors, when we normalize the fact that are great minds are white authors right that's problematic, that's centering whiteness. And so when we decenter whiteness we're taking on a different approach. But pairing that with the anti-racist action of decentering our authority. And authority, I believe, is rooted in manipulation and control and ego—and that all stems from the same center of white supremacy. And so, when we decenter our authority as educators, we invite students in, and we invite them and all of their knowledge sources that they bring with them into the classroom their own legacy of literacy into the classroom. And we celebrate what they already know, and what they're already doing well. And we pair that with writing mentors, so that we can encourage them and reassure them that they have value, as is.

Charlotte: Such a more appreciative way to approach that students, but also empowering them because we want them to be able to do this work without us sitting next to them. I always feel like the more agency we handover to students the better anyway, but also opens up this whole space for dialogue and making it something different.

Felicia: Absolutely, and if you want, I can read a quick excerpt. Okay, this kind of summarizes the approach. It's the end of the introduction.

Felicia [reading from text:] At heart *The Anti-racist Writing Workshop* imparts of 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 our 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...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.'

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 trust, respect, 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.

Charlotte: That's so beautiful. That power of listening. Right, well one other thing I wanted to make sure I talked

about with you, and so I know this is sort of, in my reading anyway, sort of aimed towards people who are working at a university level higher level. But like you've already mentioned too, you came from, like you've taught in high schools, you're having conversations you know third grade teachers—you're looking for this conversation to move across spectrums. So thinking about the people, readers of ours, who might not be in higher ed writing classrooms—so parents or classroom teachers—what are some of the reasons that you would suggest that they look at this book too? And I would recommend it too! What are some other sort of takeaways or maybe some frames that they might need to take into to reading this to kind of pick up on what is most important for them in those settings? That's kind of a big question.

Felicia: Yeah. I think that when we invite our young people in, no matter if they're children or adult students, right?—when we invite the other into the conversation we encourage them to be active participants in their own learning. And there are alternative ways that we've begun to implement that in the classroom and that's really exciting work. To look at it explicitly as anti-racist action is a new lens that I think that we should all welcome and experiment with in order to support all of our students, you know? To be community members in a plural society, right? Also, to support and scaffold and love our students of color as well. I think that the more we can direct them inward to check in with themselves and to listen to themselves in terms of both how they're doing today right?—and you know COVID and quarantine has kind of pushed us to care deeply on a daily basis, about how are you doing today I need to connect with you to make sure you're fine, right? Can we can retain that? Can we continue with that tradition of connection, right? And asking our students to assess and to center themselves, but also to center themselves in terms of their own intuition. And their choice-making, right? Can they trust their gut, so to speak, moving forward? Can they claim the identity of writer? Can they claim having a real voice within their classroom and being a leader of themselves, right? And I don't think that there's any age where that's not important to practice to nurture in a student. And, and so the earlier, the better. I can only imagine what it would be like in my own undergraduate classroom to have students who have practiced this approach, since they were kindergarteners. My goodness, it would transform our experience; we wouldn't have to start at zero every time. So I'm a big believer in in the transformation that that we can see by just by just lending a bit of our power to our students.

Charlotte: Yeah, I absolutely agree. You know, whether they're six or they're 26, they still have things to bring. They have their own interests and their own voice and can make something new. We don't have to map it out for them to give them a formula. They should be partners in our writing classrooms for sure. But I know, as I was reading, sometimes, like some of the language, of course, like about recruitment or retainment—like in a K-12 classroom they're kind of a captive audience whether they want to be there, or not, but that doesn't mean they're always there with us. I know that was something I was thinking about. Even though they're probably not going to drop my class as a sixth grader or whatever. If you still want to keep them in that community and keep them invested in that community. I know those were some things that I was thinking about. I would hate for that language to trip up any teachers who are working with younger kids. I really do think those same ideas are so powerful at any age.

Felicia: Yeah, I mean I'm a creative nonfiction writer, so in order for me to approach this book, I truly had to do it from a place of sincerity. I had many people pitching me different ideas will, can you tailor it, you know, can you sprinkle in some things about. you know, like add a few chapters about teaching remotely considering the turn that we took right. And I hadn't yet taught remotely, so I was like, 'No I absolutely cannot do that' because that's not coming from the place of sincerity, right? So I did write from my true lived experience. But that doesn't mean that it's not applicable beyond that. It would make me very sad, and it does make me very sad when I'm sharing this resource with other educators and even if they're in like English lit comp in the university they're like, 'Yeah but that's just for creative writers.' No, no it's so much more than that! I can see through it and when other people see through the confines of like the container, right? When they can see through that and take the tools out of that container, it excites me. Because that's what we ask our students to do, right? We give them something kind of confined, and we asked them to draw out so much more. So as educators it's just a little bit more effort to do that work and to think about how we can apply it both to ourselves and to our practice, no matter what our discipline.

So I'm currently planning on an ongoing session with community colleges in California, working with STEM faculty. You know, you wouldn't approach the book and think, 'Oh yeah, this absolutely applies to my engineering students, right?' We're wishing, we're working to push that so that we can prove that there are strategies to implement across across disciplines and across each spectrums. It just takes I the desire to do so.

Charlotte: That's very exciting. One thing I'm thinking about is how powerful it would be to not just decolonize creative writing. As someone who writes academic writing for my job now, we can move towards that space to another, you know? And how do we open that up as well? There's just so many possibilities. It's really exciting.

Felicia: Yeah, I mean it's all storytelling; it's how expansive we get with what that term means, right? So the stories we tell ourselves throughout our lives about us and our own histories, right? And the stories that we tell within a creative writing classroom, the stories that we tell in academia, the moves that we make in an effort to be persuasive and intelligent and writing with integrity, right? And the stories that we that we need in the sciences, in order to relay our findings and convince people that we've made a true discovery, right? It all necessitates story, and so it's again it's just reframing the approach.

Charlotte: Right, well, I, like the last thing, last question, I had: so, we're always interested, as writing teachers, to think about how our own writing process impacts our teaching. So what was this what was writing this book like for you? What are things you learned about writing or about yourself as a writer, in writing this book, that you're taking into your teaching or teaching philosophy?

Felicia: It was hard to write this book! It was hard on so many levels, right? Because I had to grapple with a lot of, you know—my goal for each chapter I'll just say, is to mirror a memoir section. And so I look backward, and I say this is my experience as a student in whatever context. It spans from like elementary school to graduate school. And then I pivot, and I say here's something that I do in response to that lived experience, right? Here's what I do in my classroom. And my hope is that there's a magic link that I tried to build between the two. So both the nonfiction in terms of grappling emotionally with not only, you know, making that lived experience into art and confronting it in that way, but also the fear of how other people would respond. It really dominated that two years of writing. It was like a daily fear that I experienced. And then it's also really hard work to name exactly what it is that you do in the classroom. You know, sometimes like making it up as I go like this is the name of this move that I make and then later to find as I'm doing research. Oh, my goodness, this is an actual thing that people have been doing for a long time. I'm just an ignorant, you know creative writer, like haven't been trained in teaching. Like so many of us haven't been trained in on like substantial pedagogical approaches to writing and reading. We just kind of assume amongst ourselves that, if you do it, you know how to teach it because teaching is a good gig, so let's—you know what I mean? Like it's an unfortunate, to say the least, and so I think that we all need these tools to really think through what it is that we're doing. But yeah, that was that was tough work for me, but also a real gift, in that I learned so much about pedagogy and the approach that I would like to take. I think most beneficial for me in terms of this has been less impactful on my writing process because I honestly, like ever since the book came out, I haven't had much time—the book and the baby were simultaneous. I haven't had a lot of time to write new things, since then. I've written a lot email like one handed while holding a child! But I think it's been that the exchange with educators has been incredibly rich for me. So to have people say, 'Yes, and.' Right? This is really exciting work, *and* have you considered this? This is what I do in my classroom. Oh, I cannot tell you how inspiring that is each and every time that I have that sort of exchange. And so I'm learning so much and it's really beautiful. I never would have had access to these people had I not taken the risk of putting this book out.

Charlotte: Is there anything else that you'd like to share or highlight? Or, I know you have a website and things, so if people have other questions or you've mentioned that you're doing some workshops and stuff. Is there a place where people can find out more information or contact you?

Felicia: Absolutely, so my website is www.antiracist.workshop.com. And I list a variety of facilitation that I do on that website, but more importantly, under the resources section, there is an appendix that I didn't include in the book. It was supposed to be printed in the book, and I resisted that because the second you print something it's dated, but it's also very controlling to present a list of works by writers of Color that I deemed, you know, essential

reading. My goal with the appendix was to convince us all that writers have existed past Baldwin—as amazing as James Baldwin is, right? There are others, and they're living today and it's very exciting. And so it's a celebration of writers of Color across genres, so I think by now there's 100 writers plus per category, and it's a living document so you're welcome to add a resource to the document, or if you're a writer of Color who's like, 'Why am I not on this list? I'm awesome,' put yourself on that list, right? It's growing every day. So I point people to that resource, because I think it could become something really, really cool and I have plans to make it bigger and better and so just keep your eye on it.

Charlotte: All right, well. Thank you so much for being so generous with your time and insights today. I know it's been a real pleasure to get to talk to you and learn more about the book. Like I said, I really enjoyed reading and have already started sharing it with my preservice teachers in my writing methods courses, so your ideas are getting out there in lots of ways. And they've also really been enjoying it and how its pushing them to think in new ways and echo some of the other ideas we've been trying to start thinking about in class too. I will let you go um but I really do appreciate all of this. And hopefully everyone who's watching will go out and get your book today.

Felicia: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure, and thank you.

DETAILS

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