

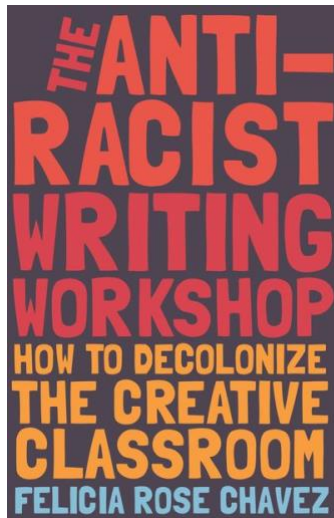
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Review of *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*

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Overview

I have been a poet for most of my life. I have read my work at round tables in college workshops, on stages during poetry readings, and before small gatherings in libraries. My own life as a poet deeply informed my work as a high school writing teacher, making me turn to workshop again and again in response to the troubling privileging of five paragraph essays and the words theme, argumentation, and test.

In her book, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, Chavez (2021) engaged me first as a writer. Part memoir of an artist, part nuts-and-bolts manual, part sociopolitical commentary-- Chavez pulled me in with her stories, made me draw a sharp breath at the beauty and the brutal truth of her words, had me shaking my head or smiling at her nuanced discussion of the political and economic landscape of education, and made me trust her when she called herself out. Chavez plants us in her world: a world of white supremacy and white privilege, a world in which authors of color do not make it onto the pages of required reading, and a world in which authors of color do not command the writing workshop table. Chavez's book offers a new model—to replace the old lumbering beast bent on silence.

Then Chavez engaged me as a teacher. While her focus is on redefining creative writing workshop spaces in post-secondary contexts, the power of the antiracist writing workshop is that it radically challenges the pedagogical and assessment paradigms of secondary ELA classrooms as well as postsecondary contexts. Chavez dovetails the hard work of writing and the hard work of creating antiracist communities. This blended purpose adds a critical lens oriented towards equity and justice which is absent from the ELA models of writing workshop that are advanced in foundational texts

like Kittle's (2008) *Write beside them*. In doing so, Chavez offers a new model for writing in educational spaces that blends theory, history, and the concrete details needed to engage in this sort of transformation.

Her book centers on three transformational concepts: the process of writers as artists; the quest for voice and authenticity in resistance to patriarchal, white conceptions of literary merit; and the careful, intentional creation of anti-racist writing communities.

Writers as Authors

Chavez is relentless in her rejection of the high stakes, traditional writing workshop in which final pieces are brutally subjected to criticism as the writer sits in silence. Instead, Chavez crystalizes her experiences in studio arts by reclaiming the process of writing from the stasis of finalized perfection. In her model, writing goes beyond the silent solitude of screens. Writing requires experimentation, tinkering, playing, and speaking. Chavez draws upon Peter Elbow's use of freewriting, of moving the hand across the page without stopping, of silencing the editor's voice as the page fills.

She calls for the separation of writing phases—teach students to write, then revise, then edit. Give them the tools to make their own choices when editing. Help them control the process and the emotion embedded in that process. Elicit and give feedback that is divorced from ego and bias. While I understand the danger of creative paralysis if writers do not separate getting words on the page from editing those words, I also see writing as recursive and iterative by nature. We write, tinker, write more, scratch out, return, tinker, write, strip, erase, write, polish, and even perhaps burn. Chavez's separation of writing into phases may not attend to a less linear conception of writing. But her main

argument, which positions writers as artists, is not at odds with the iterative and recursive nature of writing. Additionally, she highlights that artists must feed themselves in order to create. Chavez gives tips for inspiring writers as artists-- like a weekend assignment which entails an art gallery visit, an hour-long walk, a documentary, and drawing as a way to feed inspiration. They must also approach their work as a process and a sacred daily ritual—not a high stakes product. Chavez highlights the paradigm shift of focusing on a messy artistic process, whereby “to resuscitate their practice, participants must break free from their heads and reengage with their bodies as creative instruments” (p. 76).

The Quest for Voice

In the anti-racist workshop, the core of the writer’s work is to find voice and thus authenticity. That authenticity is an act of resistance to the sanctioned voice in the traditions of western literature. This resistance becomes critical consciousness. Chavez requires teachers of writing to turn away from the traditional imitation of mentor texts, so students may explore their own voices. The assumption of voice is the refusal to imitate white authors, to locate the writer’s identity in their own lived experience and talent, instead of mimicry. This critical consciousness is the power of immersing in language and crafting that language in resistance, in rebellion, in a breaking of rules that is antithetical to the stasis of technical perfection or filling pages with the voices of others.

As a reader, Chavez prompted me to consider this act of critical consciousness: what do we read—and by reading affirm—and how do we construct knowledge in classrooms? Chavez’s discussion of the canon echoes so much work happening right now in secondary ELA classrooms that attempts to resist corporate neoliberal packages. But while teachers

might do this as a means of reclaiming their own agency, Chavez calls on us to take the risk of curating classroom anthologies and making curricular decisions for the purposes of refusing to erase the voices of people of color. Chavez traces the evolution of her own conception of completing the canon. This evolution started with moving away from anthologies, which erroneously define what counts as literature in Western Civilization. These anthologies are great big tomes filled with the writing of white men and a few women. This movement entailed curating binder-clipped, Xeroxed collections of diverse voices throughout literature. In her recent work completing the canon, she co-constructs digital collections with her students. These digital collections focus on living artists who give voice to the marginalized.

Chavez also focuses on the collaborative building of shared knowledge. The writing workshop leader, ELA teacher, or first year composition instructor loosens the authoritative grip on their power over definitions and interpretations to allow for the organic co-creation of knowledge. What does that look like? An example of building shared knowledge is asking writers to articulate their own understanding of voice and then using their writing to trace what that looks like on the page. The work of shared knowledge entails exploring what crafting language means to writers of different races, genders, sexualities, and ethnicities.

Chavez’s focus on teaching craft attends mainly to narrative writing. But my teacher mind envisions how powerful it would be to approach craft techniques as fluid and traversing the boundaries of genres. I want to feel the joy of watching writers wield craft as a tool for awakening revelations in themselves and their audiences as opposed to a straitjacket of rules and regulations. My teacher mind wants to invite writers to consider the constraints, affordances, and sometimes blurry

boundaries of genres. What does building an extended metaphor look like when working in lyric poetry, prose poetry, and flash nonfiction? Playing with a craft technique across two (and a half?) genres—poetry and prose as well as the blurry in-between of prose poetry-- helps writers develop control of structure and space on the page. Additionally, instead of highly controlled and formulaic research and informational writing, Chavez's workshop model could help students experiment with writing research and informational texts that actually resemble the writing we find in the world, which fuses craft moves from genres together-- like Adichie's (2015) *We should all be feminists*.

Anti-Racist Writing Communities

Chavez's workshop model centers on the careful, intentional creation of anti-racist writing communities. Members of these communities share a commitment to writing, goodness, and creative power. This commitment is enacted by fostering engagement via deep listening, nurture, and mindfulness. Chavez has a number of tips for supporting students in the act of listening. Some tips are concrete: advice that helps workshop leaders in facilitating an awareness of body language during workshop time or daily check ins to begin workshop sessions. Other tips speak to the need for writers to engage in frequent self-care, so they can commit to the hard emotional work of living in a writing community. This work that Chavez calls for is work that requires extreme vulnerability. From that vulnerability and commitment comes community.

In response to traditional workshop communities that center on white, supremacist cultural knowledge as the accepted standard, the anti-racist writing workshop uses food, language, and

collaborative engagement to build conceptions of creative culture from the ground up. This work builds writing communities that honor, support, and subvert the institutionalized white, patriarchal power structure that is deeply embedded into our daily experiences.

One snag does linger in my mind as I consider the feasibility of transferring the anti-racist workshop model beyond the walls of post-secondary creative writing classrooms. Chavez's model relies on the concept of choice. The brutal vulnerability, the relentless pursuit of voice, and the risk taking of experimental craft and pedagogy are possible because each student chooses to take the class. English classes in high school are not choices; they are requirements. First year composition classes are not much more. Is it possible to require so much of young writers if they are not willing? That remains to be seen.

In conclusion, when I first heard the title, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, I was intrigued, but also a little afraid. Reading Chavez meant facing my own complicity in a system of white supremacy. Would I leave the reading of this book shaken and annihilated, unable to face my own career as an educator? Or would I leave the reading of this book feeling the urgent need to engage in equity work, but with no real plan for how to achieve that work? Trust that Chavez will give you a path. The anti-racist writing workshop model does not require that we annihilate ourselves and start again as educators: it requires that we revise the traditions of writing workshop in ELA classrooms or first year composition or creative writing classrooms. When we worry about what that revision looks like, Chavez gives us a detailed blueprint and encourages us to adapt this plan to our own context.

References

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Kittle, P. (2008). *Write beside them*. Heinemann.