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Normalizing Creative Writing Scholarship in the Classroom

[Editor's Note: "Normalizing Creative Writing Scholarship in the Classroom" is a reprint of a three-installment *Assay* project by Micah McCrary, who researched inclusive creative writing pedagogies in U.S. colleges & universities. Click [here for the first installment.](#)]

We're Going to Need More than Erasure

It has been several years now since *Assay* posted Marissa Landrigan's "[Teach This, Not That](#)" (maybe from Dora Malech's [Kenyon Review post](#) of the same name?) wherein Landrigan realizes her syllabi haven't been as diverse as she may have once thought. Landrigan incorporates Yvette DeChavez's idea that [we should "decolonize" our syllabi](#)—a call to pedagogical action about the kinds of texts instructors choose to include (and exclude) based on histories and patterns of institutional knowledge. But, in following *only* the suggestions of those like Landrigan and DeChavez, the act of syllabus revision risks becoming instructors' own kind of politically- or pedagogically-justified version of exclusion, as they begin effacing the work of one author by replacing it with another's.

While including traditionally marginalized authors is a necessary discussion in creative writing (CW) pedagogy, it doesn't feel like a *foundational* concern at this point. Currently in the throes of dissertation-writing, I've often considered issues of inclusion in CW curricula, leading me to develop and teach a course (aiding my research) using Janelle Adsit's "[The writer and meta-knowledge about writing: threshold](#)

[concepts in creative writing](#)” (developed further as a chapter in her book [Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Curriculum](#)) as its foundation. This research has led me to believe that if CW instructors are willing to revise syllabi based on certain authors being deemed over-taught or problematic (Landrigan is careful to note there are plenty of white, male, cisgendered authors she’ll “miss dearly”) then this call to action must execute itself without a narrow focus. In other words, this call has potential for wide-reaching reform, which can work toward the benefit of CW programs and curricula holding inclusion and diversity in high regard.

It’s not that a call for erasure is solely narrow. But merely *replacing* authors may be shortsighted in that it could fail to note that part of the problem is a subcultural insistence on propelling notions of what it means to be an author living the “writer’s life” (often already attached to markers of gender, race, [and income](#)) and how often this affects the opinions of student-authors early in their academic/creative careers. (Especially those who’ve chosen to embark on CW specifically by way of Academia.) It’s crucial that instructors look to broader notions of culture throughout creative writing, especially following the direction of writers and researchers like Adsit, like [Claudia Rankine](#), like [Katharine Haake](#), like [Cristina Kirklighter](#), and *Assay*’s own [Emma Howes & Christian Smith](#) or [Bernice M. Olivas](#), who all pose for instructors the questions they must ask about how to encounter a diversity of texts in their classrooms toward benefitting a diversity of students. Pedagogical joy can be found not just in revision/reform that creates room for voices hardly found in syllabi, but this can also be achieved by way of avoiding the *privileging* of craft.

Adsit writes that any “analysis of craft must be grounded in an understanding of the varying orientations of readerships” (Adsit 310) while noting that “[d]iverse audiences come to their texts with diverse needs” (310). Numerous CW courses and programs talk about the “writer’s craft” in ways that connect to what’s also inherently problematized, in the English studies subfield of composition studies, as expressivism—writing, we’ve come to know over time and through detailed scholarship, operates not just

within but beyond expression, however, recognized as also being socially mediated. This conversation is a chance to focus on representation, admitting that authors who are skilled and lucky enough to become published also create an imprint on the scene of U.S. literatures and cultures.

I stopped to think about this a few weeks ago, when running into a professor and his toddler son in our department's hallway: "Look, that's Micah!" he said to his son. "That's the future of American literature over there!" And while I took this in as a very kind, gestural joke it also got me thinking about the fact that numerous student-authors *will* become "the future of American literature"—with this being the case, CW instructors must do a better job in their classrooms of considering the image of these literatures as they become (re)presented not just to eager students, but also to readerships beyond U.S. borders who gain impressions of U.S. cultures through reading.

One route I propose in trying to achieve more widespread cultural engagement is by aiming for a broad, comprehensive, and conceptual move toward not just the creative writing that instructors have students write and read in classrooms, but also the ways we instructors talk to student-authors about their own composing choices. This matter regards their reading *and* their writing, which can be informed by discussing (for example) authors who [take trips to \(an\) African country/ies then reflect on those trips](#), or those [discussing considerations of writing about an "other."](#) These reflections, when examined, may lead toward a more prominent research agenda for CW programs and curricula, [beyond just the critical introductions](#) informing master's/MFA and doctoral projects.

The readings I've discussed with my own student-authors, as magically influenced by Adsit's work as well as Stephanie Vanderslice's *Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education: Programs and Practices that Work* (both of which have remained foundational to my current research) have allowed us to discuss authors from Gloria Anzaldúa and James Baldwin and Alice Walker, to [Jenny Bouilly](#), to [Kristen Harmon](#), to [Porochista Khakpour](#), to [Leslie Marmon Silko](#), all of whom discuss aspects of representation that help widen the discussion of authorial practices and lives. We also discuss [representations of authors in](#)

[Hollywood films](#) and what it means for an author to [“find their own voice.”](#) Other readings specifically discuss issues of language diversity (e.g., [Christina Tang-Bernas’s “\’in-lish\”](#)) or resources from composition studies like Vershawn Ashanti Young’s [“Should Writer’s Use They Own English?”](#) We also look into publishing practices and their effects on literary representation via [Arifa Akbar](#) and [Roxane Gay](#), examining the ways they influence how and what students read—which in turn influences how and what student-authors write.

We need greater openness towards a more foundational, fundamental overhaul of how (especially new) student-authors become exposed to the world of professional creative writing. While I don’t currently teach at a university where introductory creative writing courses are cross-genre, I think one way to go about this might be in examining these issues specifically within the multigenre CW course as an access point towards discussing identity, access, privilege, and representation in CW. Alternately, curricula may be designed to be split by genre (my current course design is titled Critical Concepts in Creative Writing: Nonfiction) so that the course may be treated as an introductory survey in critical readings on creative writing (which, for nonfiction, are taken from journals including *Assay*, [TEXT](#), [New Writing](#), and [The Essay Review](#)) and their literary counterparts, examining the present issues through lenses specific to the genres that are part of an instructor’s specialization. In teaching these texts, and in having these conversations with my own student-authors, I’ve been able to watch them develop a healthy conception of how creative writing may work both culturally and professionally—examining not just how it works inside and outside the college/university, but in communities directly informing (or impacted by) student-authors’ writing projects.

These are the discussions I *want* to have with student-authors. I want to talk about authors’ choices not just being influenced by their style/voice but by their overall positionalities—and I also want to discuss how these choices can be refereed not just by what authors are willing to express but what, in some circumstances, [they are or aren’t permitted to express](#).

In all, this call-to-action looks a bit like CW more often and deliberately incorporating other fields like [cultural studies](#) or [critical race studies](#) into its curricula, the way these fields have already been incorporated into English/literary studies. Especially for those of us in literary nonfiction, who constantly engage with texts about others' lives in addition to writing about our own, I call for a kind of *mélange* at all levels of CW throughout the Academy to work toward more transdisciplinarity so that perhaps the CW course I can become most comfortable teaching in the future may feel, in some ways, like an introduction to the field rather than merely its techniques. Where, instead of *scene* or *POV* we discuss with student-authors issues of privilege while acknowledging the diversity of bodies [behind creative writing](#), making other aspects nuanced layers above new foundations.

I want instructors to be willing to stick their hands in the mud a little more, to eventually build something that has not only become well-constructed but well thought-out, created through diligent conversation and research (a term I've come to understand creative writers may fear) so that our curricula are not designed in silos, but instead as part of a world that's easily recognized as transnational. Where, after all, our ability to *listen* to someone 5,000 miles away can be as easily expected as our willingness to send them a DM or an e-mail from the same distance.

Toward Transdisciplinary Social Justice

It has become important to note that teacher-practitioners worldwide are creating space for inclusivity research in creative writing (CW) specifically through creative writing studies (CWS) as a discipline. This serves as a kind of testament to those who believe this research needs to be done, as well as to those who take the research seriously. It also makes room for those who allow CW researchers an opportunity to voice concerns through writing and publishing about their teaching experiences with student-authors from varied backgrounds. What happens, I wonder, when these teacher-practitioners infuse CW scholarship with their classrooms? What might result from using it as a means toward a deliberately inclusive agenda?

The *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* (JCWS) calls for a special section in its journal, for instance, with Tonya Hegamin introducing the section through [“Diversity and Inclusion: A Manifesto and Interview”](#) (Issue 1.1) justifying room for articles and essays pertinent to issues of inclusivity, adjacent to the other articles published in *JCWS*. Hegamin mentions, for instance, that the journal’s section focuses on widening the conversation around inclusion in CW “to a multiplicity of voices not only for the marginalized choir, but for anyone who teaches or participates in Creative Writing Studies and recognizes the inevitable sea change” (Hegamin 1). This “sea change” seemingly points not only toward greater room for a “marginalized choir” but also for the progressive interests of those working in creative writing studies. That is, those at *JCWS* seem to recognize the significance not just of issues around marginalization but also how those issues might be allayed through a greater willingness to engage with research and scholarship. Such a special section aims to exemplify how this may transfer to CW classrooms and programs, however if CWS scholarship can move toward awareness—in particular focused on inclusivity—it creates potential to discuss in CW classrooms aspects of writing not just pertaining to content (for example) in workshopped pieces but also those issues of language, “craft,” or cultural authenticity, all of which could become entwined through transcultural curricular initiatives.

This requires broader conversation than just the “Diversity & Inclusion” section of *JCWS* so that teacher-practitioners may discern how more prevalent CWS scholarship (whether on the part of faculty or on the part of student-authors) might facilitate the presence of more ubiquitous conversations *like* those in *JCWS*. This would perhaps not look like “special sections” in every CWS journal around, but could still expand the breadth of how issues of inclusion are discussed through CW’s academic endeavors.

I deliberately introduce resources from journals like *JCWS*, *TEXT*, *Assay*, *New Writing*, and *The Essay Review* in my classroom not just to include CWS scholarship in the classroom, but because the breadth of writing subjects in these journals displays an availability of varied and unexpected discourses that provide reading and writing opportunities stretching beyond craft or genre, and into transcultural

study that might enhance both. Bringing into my classroom readings like Emma Howes's and Christian Smith's "[“You Have to Listen Very Hard”: Contemplative Reading, *Lectio Divina*, and Social Justice in the Classroom,](#)" for example, or Bernice M. Olivas's "[“Politics of Identity in the Essay Tradition”](#)" (both from *Assay*) have helped frame conversations with student-authors about what's occurring pedagogically, insisting that we think transculturally in classrooms about how to pay greater attention to authors from outside our normal purview/routine reading by way of the course's design.

I establish from the onset that there'll be a sharp focus not just on global readings in nonfiction, but that we'll also practice discussing these readings so student-authors don't reach mid-semester and be suddenly taken aback by a text featuring a way of life they aren't prepared to talk about, or a perspective they're unsure about how to engage with outside of disagreement. It feels helpful to frame future discussions about cultures, languages, and identities with scholarship so that student-authors not only have expectations set out in front of them, but they can also refer to this scholarship when reaching a point where the class discusses the social violence appearing in a(n) (student-)author's writing, in ways that ideally help prepare us to cross such a bridge.

Work like Howes's & Smith's helps show how two instructors work through/attempt to enact antiracist pedagogy in their nonfiction classroom, for instance, particularly through reading James Baldwin's [“*The Fire Next Time*”](#) and Ta-Nehisi Coates's [“*Between the World and Me*”](#). In laying out how Howes & Smith coach student-authors to engage in techniques like [Richard E. Miller's “slow reading”](#) and [Krista Radcliffe's “rhetorical listening,”](#) student-authors become able to see how the texts they interact with shouldn't be so easily dismissed—that is, they don't merely brush off the claims certain authors make, eliminating reactions like “that happened 30 years ago, and we've made a lot of progress since then.”

As Howes & Smith note, this isn't just a matter of enacting antiracist curricula but also a matter of re-tooling readings. They've discovered a transparent exigence in their classroom for these readings, noting that

[t]he need to rethink not only our curriculum, but our pedagogical approach to race and social justice more broadly, was incredibly clear. In order to move towards an anti-racist classroom space, we not only had to strive to broaden the voices and perspectives available to our students, but to consider ways to move students through the experiences these voices represented. We remained committed to the use of non-fiction texts as the basis for these goals, but had to more deeply consider the pathways we encouraged our students to explore. (Howes & Smith 3)

They were able to work with student-authors on ways transdisciplinary action could help more effectively shine a light onto the realizations they hoped student-authors would have while engaging texts like Baldwin's and Coates'. In doing so they emphasize that these moves are borrowed from other areas besides English studies/CW, noting that

[w]hile the difficulties of teaching critical and thoughtful engagement in writing classes are central for anyone teaching the subject and addressed throughout the history of composition scholarship, the ethical dimensions are heightened when working with nonfiction texts that address matters of race and justice. This is perhaps even more urgent as recent political and cultural events have proven that we are in a social landscape that demands a clearer understanding of the ways in which we—as a classroom, as a nation, as a world—are unified. (5)

This helps create an exigency more specific to 21st-century concerns, aligning student-authors with conversations taking place in and outside the classroom concurrently. Asking student-authors to focus on a given “social landscape” as this one helps cohere their reading and writing ambitions, as well as foster their abilities as attentive authors to develop.

Providing graduate student instructors (GSIs) in CW an essay like “You Have to Listen Very Hard” could help them not just develop ideas about how to engage in instructional practices like “slow reading,” but also get them to consider how their own student-authors might react to texts focused on racialization in their classrooms. This isn't just helpful for GSIs, either; it helps undergraduate CW student-authors who

might find themselves reacting to racially centered texts the way Howes's & Smith's students did. It benefits them to encounter texts that may shine a kind of mirror onto their responsivity, and the affirmation that they're not unique in their reactions to certain texts helps reestablish for student-authors that certain issues (in this case, racialized privilege) can be affectively difficult, while encouraging student-authors to expand their reading interests so that they can not only become better informed, but also become better thinkers in their practice of responding to texts.

For an author like Bernice M. Olivas ("Politics of Identity in the Essay Tradition") bridging identity studies (what she terms, through citing [compositionist Adam Banks](#), to be a "shared creation story between 'gender and women studies, indigenous studies, Latina, Latino studies, Asian, Asian American studies, and Africana studies'" (Banks, qtd. in Olivas 2) into her own writing classroom communities alongside composition studies may help teacher-practitioners lead student-authors toward what, for some, may be seen by some as a lofty goal: Alleviating fear. In the vein of Mary Rose O'Reilly who, in [The Peaceable Classroom \(1993\)](#) asks the question, "[i]s it possible to teach English so that people stop hating each other?" Olivas also asks, "Is it possible to teach writing so that people stop fearing each other?" (Olivas 3). For Olivas, delving into identity studies is possibly a way to do so in CW. A helpful clarification is Olivas's "extended course description" for her course, in which students in the course

[. . .] will explore the essay as a rhetorical tool for social justice. This class is for advanced undergraduate writers and ethnic studies students who wish to study and practice the essay form as a means to speak back to the social conditions that affect peoples of marginalized identity. This class focuses on the complex border-spaces between privilege and marginalization in order to claim space for a more just and sustainable future. This class will use a process of inquiry to better understand the relationship between the essay and exigency.

Much has been written, studied, and debated about the “essay.” Both creative nonfiction writers and academic scholars alike claim the form. At the same time, because [it] is so versatile, the essay is often taken up [by] writers who defy categorization. Many of these writers are also members of marginalized identities. Their writing focuses on their relationship to the mainstream community, institutions, and governing bodies. They use their lived experience of racism, sexism, gender bigotry, and ableism to push back against the power dynamics that create the conditions in which social bias thrives. These dynamics are often the sources of exigency—the drive and force behind the writing. These essayists inquire, define, contest, and disrupt the world we live in. From this perspective, the essay acts a tool of resistance to the status quo. (6)

Olivas’s description provides a way to use the essay as a CW subgenre to enact an inclusivity initiative, by focusing on authors’ “lived experience of racism, sexism, gender bigotry, and ableism,” etc., as an engine of “resistance to the status quo,” while being a way of showing student-authors how inequities manifest in the lives of those they read in class.

Beyond description, Olivas focuses on student-authors in her classroom learning two things: (1) “How to read from a place of believing rather than a place of criticism in order to better empathize with voices that may challenge our worldviews” and (2), a writing process

that inquires into our relationships with ourselves and with others who are not like us and the power that helps define those roles. We will write about our relationship to our communities, institutions, and governing bodies. We attempt to locate exigency in our own relationships to power, our communities, our institutions, and our governing bodies. (8)

This connects to a kind of transdisciplinary action—though Olivas doesn’t say so explicitly, her first goal seems to rely a bit on compositionist [Peter Elbow’s “believing game,”](#) which aims to encourage readers to give texts the benefit of the doubt rather than merely dive into criticism. To avoid, in essence, covering only what’s “wrong” with an author’s worldview/vantage point, and instead attempt sincerely to develop

positions of understanding. Olivas uses this “believing” approach to help student-authors “understand what it means to begin by believing the writer—even when it’s hard” (18) and, citing [Robin DiAngelo’s “White Fragility,”](#) “even when ‘racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves’” (DiAngelo 54, qtd. in Olivas 18).

One way Olivas executes these aims in her course is by shifting authority through asking student-authors to lead discussions, which she notes “allows for the opportunity to create new knowledge” in that “things come up in discussion [she] can’t always anticipate or know” (10). Olivas also uses inquiry over analysis as a mode of learning in the class community, noting that since “human identity is so complex and varied, inquiring into contextualized identity offers nearly limitless points of entry into writing practices that encourage writers to think about larger social issues” (12).

Finally, Olivas addresses the problematized position of academized creative writing, a space in which student-authors don’t typically

talk about gender, race, or class issues in a writing workshop, unless a writer writes about them from the perspective of the marginalized—and when that happens it’s terribly common for the writer to be forced to prove the authenticity of the character. “Why does race matter in this story?” is a common enough question. The reason that question emerges is because in the absence of a marginalized body we can pretend that the space is free of issues of marginalization. (14)

A benefit of trying to enact a pedagogy like this through a course like Olivas’s is that there’s already much writing *about* identity in the essay itself. It’s a form easily lending itself to personalized reflection, and this can get student-authors to consider identities, processes, and textual creation simultaneously, which I imagine as a helpful iteration for student-authors of an introductory course in literary nonfiction. Or, possibly, even as a WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) course in which student-authors in CW alongside those from other majors can all receive “writing intensive” credit from such a course since it involves rhetorical practices as its basis, engaging in “close reading” practices atop cultural study.

One way I've thought in my own courses about how to encourage and even require transcultural attention/research for student-authors is by offering projects encouraging them to combine research, scholarship, experience, and reading. In terms of this first project option, however—likely a literary essay with a researched focus for the benefit of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, or another outwardly-focused subject—I've noticed most student-authors will stick with what they're most comfortable with, likely options involving border patrol or an environmental disaster. Or perhaps language/dialect, because these options allow student-authors to attempt establishing a degree of objectivity in their researched writing rather than, for example, having to seat themselves within “sticky” sociopolitical movements. I think this is a way student-authors have attempted to “play it safe”; but even for the student-authors doing so, they find themselves being asked to create a perspective they didn't have before by combining their writing with a subject/focus that must be investigated. The fact that investigation is a required component of the project makes it so they can't rely only on their frame of reference, providing them a way to engage in attentive practices within literary creation.

A second option involves literary translation, providing student-authors a sense of translation and nonfiction's intersection through commentary on the translation itself. This is done through some preliminary study in [postcolonial translation](#), wherein student-authors consider ways “consciously ethical” (as some have termed it) translation can be enacted. Through this, they think about ways their translation choices run the risk of acting colonially (e.g., through acts of erasure) and it feels detrimental to a successful translation project to engage in transcultural scholarship to do so.

I share with student-authors the fact that I've published translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's work, and that my Rilke translations, requiring some historical and biographical study, give me a bit of an easy job in (A) choosing to translate from a romance language and (B) in choosing to translate an author whose privileges aren't as complicated as one who'd written, for instance, in Haitian Creole, Brazilian Portuguese,

or Guatemalan Spanish. Those scenarios would require more in-depth effort on my part than choosing to translate the work of someone who never had to make their language choices political.

Translation is one way I've attempted in my CW classroom to get student-authors to move toward not just faith in another author (perhaps a way of applying the "believing game" to literary translation) but also reach beyond their own lives, a way of allowing transcultural knowledge creation to take place in the CW classroom. On one hand it's a way for student-authors to bridge cultural gaps; on the other, it allows them to bridge gaps in their own knowledge by assuring they work as far away as possible from only "writing what they know."

Literary translation work also allows for what becomes enacted as "border pedagogy" in classrooms like [Trisha Brady's](#), who "focuses on the need for valuing linguistic diversity at institutions of American higher education" (Brady 1). In "Negotiating Linguistic Borderlands, Valuing Linguistic Diversity, and Incorporating Border Pedagogy in a College Composition Classroom," Brady enacts Henry Giroux's notion of "border pedagogy," to value "the perspectives of students along with the knowledge they already possess by acknowledging the fact that students traverse and negotiate geographic, cultural, and linguistic borders in their everyday lives while allowing them to draw on those experiences" (7). As translators, student-authors become encouraged to realize a border pedagogy fostering the "knowledge they already possess" while mediating "linguistic borders in their everyday lives," whether fluent in their source languages or not. Finally, as with the exercises used in Brady's classroom, translation "reveals that monolingual education policies deprive students of diverse linguistic resources that border pedagogy encourages them to celebrate and access" (15), opening them to the possibilities of knowledge creation through the lens of language.

Something to consider may be in how teacher-practitioners can take this even further, to create more curricula like Howes's & Smith's, Olivas's, or Brady's, which not only work cross-curricularly for student-authors in *and* outside of CW, but also work for student-authors within CW who are accustomed

to workshop environments where issues of identity are rarely if ever addressed. I'd like to consider ways to not *just* devise syllabi addressing identity, but also encourage projects and assignments asking student-authors to learn and remain critical throughout the process of creation.

Navigating a Pendulum

One question might be: Which *kinds* of projects and assignments can teacher-practitioners encourage (undergraduate) student-authors to compose for them to both practice nonfiction and remain critical throughout their creation processes? I can offer some assignments I've attempted using, as well as a potential "rationale" for this work to help highlight what it may do in terms of (1) normalizing scholarship in the nonfiction classroom, and (2) getting student-authors to *process* creative writing (CW) scholarship in ways allowing for broader thought around their CW endeavors, habits, and practices.

One possibility involves a "publication write-up." Though my nonfiction student-authors aren't required to submit work for review/publication, they're asked to attempt familiarizing themselves with publication options/the publication process. I often direct them, for instance, toward [Newpages' calls for submissions](#) as well as *Entropy's* [Where to Submit](#) page—both of which offer student-authors not just current calls for submissions but also opportunities to browse what the publications calling for submissions express about their values, requirements, aesthetics, etc. As a class community, we can hold conversations about these calls through the lens of the [VIDA count](#)—or, perhaps for a future semester, Richard Jean So's and Gus Wezerek's December 2020 op-ed "[Just How White is the Book Industry?](#)"

So and Wezerek have done the work of situating publication decisions within the context of both systemic and anti-Black racism—highlighting how, for instance, during the surge of [#PublishingPaidMe](#) posts throughout social media, both Black and white U.S. authors disclosed how much they'd been paid by publishers for their work in contrast with one another. So and Wezerek crucially note that of "the 7,124 books for which we identified the author's race, 95 percent were written by white people" (So & Wezerek

n. pag.). This offers an opportunity for the class community to discuss not just publishing from the “Big Five” (Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) but also publishing within independent and small press, literary journal, etc. environments, and the ways that, similar to what VIDA has helped highlight about gender equity and publishing, So’s & Wezerek’s conversation can begin shedding light onto racial equity for student-authors interested in publishing. In doing so, student-authors can also begin making decisions about their comfort with a targeted publication—that is, perhaps they’ll end up wishing to submit to a certain publication because they believe they’ll be *valued* by the publication and can in turn value the publication itself. This is especially good for student-authors debuting their work and, for those who do want to publish, enter an environment often characterized by a pendulum swung between rejection and acceptance.

I’ve provided student-authors Daniel José Older’s “Diversity is Not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing” (from Travis Kurowski’s, Wayne Miller’s, and Kevin Prufer’s anthology *Literary Publishing in the Twenty-First Century*, 2016) to offer direction toward their own targeted publications. Older recounts the experience of getting feedback from a publishing industry professional who had dismissed an instance of racism Older had written about. As part of this industry professional’s dismissal, they also claimed Older’s experience was perhaps an outdated scenario. Older moves into describing a gap between perceptions on the part of (mostly white) publishing industry professionals and the scenarios, situations, experiences, characters, etc. written about by nonwhite authors, and the existing gap that results in what has been commented on often regarding overall disparities within publishing. This further results in nonwhite authors not being published because of industry professionals who see these authors’ frames of experience as “unrelatable”—that is, not being salable to their target audiences, many of whom are also likely white. Older writes, “I want to take a moment to recognize a more unspoken consequence of having a mostly white industry dictate mostly white standards to a mostly white author-base: the stories that won’t get told” (Older 155). This comments on a gap existing between white authors who are often published

and nonwhite authors who are not based on “industry standards,” and how this results in an overall lack of representation on the part of nonwhite authors and their stories, their promotion, and their perspectives.

Older also notes that “[w]riting and, more so, publishing are always negotiations between what you want to say, what you can say, and what society will allow you to say” (155). This feels key especially for nonwhite student-authors, who attempt to gauge available means of getting their work out there. Older recounts once working with a student-author who’d looked for an agent, and who mentioned that none of the agents the student-author found shared the same racial background. This is a scenario that may arise for many student-authors at the initial publishing stage—not just in searching for agents with whom they share a background, but also in a search for those in positions to make decisions based on what publishers (journals, magazines, etc.) claim they’re seeking. This can help student-authors consider the “negotiations” they do make in aligning their work with target publications, recognizing that though their work may meet the criteria for submission, the work may still not be “in line” with much of what else appears throughout the publication’s history.

Older finally notes there “are so many paths to success, so many meanings of the concept, and race and power complicate the equation infinitely. It’s not enough for writers of color to learn craft, we need to navigate the impossible waters of an unwelcoming industry” (162). I agree, and this is also part of why “Diversity is Not Enough” is a text for student-authors to read. They must know, whether nonwhite or white, that Older’s statement that it’s “not enough for writers of color to learn craft” holds much weight—it’s not enough for student-authors of *any* background to only learn craft, however for nonwhite student-authors the challenge ahead is a bit double-barreled. In one way, their working through craft helps them focus on improving their work. In another, they must focus on what Older calls “navigating,” discerning how to reach through to industry professionals who may not believe their work is “relatable” enough for publication.

What can happen in a racially diverse classroom is bringing to the fore various conversations about

publishing at-large, rather than only holding conversations about “craft” or publication conventions. We can talk with student-authors about composing cover letters, about how to locate a publication’s masthead, etc., but none of this is particularly helpful for nonwhite student-authors navigating a landscape detailed with the contexts of what they should expect. It is, frankly, not enough to teach them how to submit their work, when we can also teach them to note when a given publication mostly contains authors whose positionalities don’t align with theirs.

Older concludes that “[w]e can love a thing and still critique it. In fact, that’s the only way to really love a thing” (163). If we maintain hope as a dimension of publishing conversations with student-authors, we can help them continue to love their goals of becoming industry professionals. We can help them continue to write, and improve, and submit, and become published, and check all the boxes they’ve created since entering their beginning CW courses. Perhaps real love can and will come from their knowing the industry not by way of *How-Tos*, but regarding the industry’s own invitations. This can prepare them simultaneously to love and to critique publishing. It can prepare them to love their own work even more once they know, after some informed decision-making, where the work can truly find a home.

One other assignment asks student-authors to consider using nonfiction scholarship more deeply in CW classrooms through direct responses to questions. These questions (addressed in about three pages per essay and adapted from a model for fiction appearing in [Janelle Adsit’s *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing*](#), 2019) give undergraduate student-authors an opportunity to reconsider what they’ve studied throughout the term, engaging with the material in a reflective manner while examining the rhetorical and aesthetic choices of authors featured throughout course texts. Specific to the Fall 2020 semester, questions included:

1. How might 21st-century technologies (YouTube, podcasts, interactive websites, etc.) affect the production and consumption of creative nonfiction for culturally diverse audiences?
2. In which ways might creative nonfiction operate specifically as a method of political action?

3. If authors are formed by the communities from which they come, how might they then compose creative nonfiction for diverse readerships?

For the first question, this past semester some student-authors took the opportunity to discuss what might be referred to as “multimodal nonfiction,” and the ways nonfiction operating in multiple modes (e.g., audio, visual, alphanumeric text) holds potential to exercise helpful ways of communicating content by accessible means. One student-author focused on the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words,” using this to discuss how a relationship between new media and nonfiction can potentially communicate with broad audiences on a spectrum—audiences who have an opportunity to interact with visual communication in ways they may not be able to interact with other forms based on disability, language resources/background, etc. Though student-authors didn’t always consider *multimodal composition* specifically, this was something on my mind when it came to composing for diverse audiences and toward accessibility—which shouldn’t only be relegated to the realm of composition but remains just as relevant for nonfiction.

For the second question, numerous student-authors this semester somehow gravitated toward Shoah/Holocaust literature. They wrote about Anne Frank and Primo Levi, and the ways these authors’ autobiographical nonfiction helps highlight issues of ethnoreligious injustice that encourages us, as audience members, to better consider experiences we may not be aware of without such literature existing. One student-author also wrote about Marjane Satrapi’s work (also centered on ethnoreligious issues) altogether opening doors for future student-authors to consider how (especially autobiographical) nonfiction might intersect with border stories, with discussions of #AllBlackLivesMatter, with discussing healthcare inequities, etc.—not just “hot topics” of our current moment, but aspects to be carried into how we understand our societies and how we converse with one another about who becomes affected by certain politics, and how they become affected.

For the third question, student-authors took the opportunity to write about recognizing their own

positionality and biases by way of nonfiction authorship. White students were especially able to discuss the communities from which they came before entering college/university and recognized shifts in their perceptions because of being in a higher education environment. They recognized themselves as white writers, as straight writers, as cis writers, etc., and doing so seemed to allow them to comment on perceptual shifts within their respective communities—allowed them to comment on how they transitioned from communities which they may no longer be a part of, and how this recognition entered the nonfiction they both read and composed. In a way, they began to recognize intersections: of race, class, sexual orientation, religion, etc., and how the worldviews attached to these intersections could shed light not just on relationships between potential bias and nonfiction, but relationships between nonfiction and global/community attentiveness in general. That is, they maintained an awareness of the communities their nonfiction might be communicated/distributed to, and how these communities could practice articulating their own perceptions.

In responding, student-authors chose one or two texts from the course (my Fall 2020 class utilized the anthology *How Dare We! Write: A Multicultural Creative Writing Discourse*, 2017) to help exemplify/illustrate their responses, allowing them to also consider how they worked toward examining an issue highlighted in (a) text(s) that could help demonstrate the possibilities of nonfiction. Not quite like [a craft essay](#) so much as a brief exercise in fusing social experience with nonfiction scholarship, these responses allowed student-authors to do the kind of work [Bernice M. Olivas mentions](#), by studying nonfiction “as a means to speak back to the social conditions that affect peoples of marginalized identity” (Olivas 6) or examining authors’ “lived experience of racism, sexism, gender bigotry, and ableism to push back against the power dynamics that create the conditions in which social bias thrives” (6). This became an overall issue of how to narrow student-authors’ ideas within a focused environment, helping them pursue aspects of social bias through the ways they also came to understand nonfiction (hopefully better than they had before).

Looking Ahead

I've done this all at the introductory level for a variety of student-authors from a variety of writing backgrounds. I've witnessed the light bulbs go off above their heads as they've seen just what nonfiction can do—as they've seen the diversity inherent in nonfiction itself. As a next step, teacher-practitioners can take more opportunity to see what this looks like beyond introductory courses, especially in those courses wherein student-authors may be deliberately asked to produce scholarship rather than merely be assigned scholarship as readings (or, as in my case, as part of a final exam). This could lead teacher-practitioners into territory where student-authors are encouraged to do even more thinking about how nonfiction communicates the complicated nature of minoritized/marginalized lived experiences. In essence, student-authors become able to highlight more of nonfiction's focus on culture, identity, (in)justice, etc., through further highlighting professional authors' craft choices as they intersect with the same authors' positionality.

By getting nonfiction student-authors better versed in dialoguing about the hurdles of not just nonwhite lived experiences—but also how these experiences get written in the first place—student-authors' considerations of these experiences can blossom in spheres both written and experienced. That is, their understanding can grow toward not just greater attentiveness to the diversity of authors assigned in their courses, but toward their nonfiction peers, as well. With this, they find their footing not just as student-authors but also as student scholars, better prepared than ever to lead conversations around nonfiction's relationship to the many and varied perspectives uncovered in class, and ready to connect the perspectives of their peers with the testimonies they find on the page.

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