EVENT TITLE:
Who Gets to Tell Our Stories: Analyzing Power and Ethics of Storytelling

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Responding to the controversy over American Dirt, author Jennine Cummins claimed she wanted "to humanize 'the faceless brown mass' of Mexican migrants coming to the U.S." Literary critics defended her despite community outcry that it wasn't her story to tell. This panel asks: Who gets to tell whose stories? The goal of the conversation is to develop an on-site ethics of authorship that considers the agency of racialized and gendered subjects within the field of storytelling.

EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR
Marcos Damian León: Marcos Damián León is a former high school teacher and writer from the Salinas Valley. He holds an MFA from The University of California, Riverside, and is pursuing a Ph.D. at Texas Tech University. His work has appeared in The LA Review of Books, The Taco Bell Quarterly, 8 Poems, The Monterey County Weekly, and others.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS
Ashia Ajani: Ashia Ajani is a Black queer environmental storyteller and educator hailing from Denver, CO (unceded territory of the Cheyenne, Ute, Arapahoe and Comanche peoples). They have been published in Frontier Poetry, World Literature Today, Them.us and Sierra Magazine, among others.

Prisca Dorcas Mojíca Rodríguez: Born in Managua, Nicaragua but calls Nashville, Tennessee home. She got her Masters of Divinity from Vanderbilt University. The bulk of her work is around making accessible, through storytelling, the theories and heavy material that is oftentimes only taught in racist/classist institutions.

Alán Pelaez Lopez: Alan Pelaez Lopez is a multi-genre writer whose work investigates migration, Blackness, and the imagination. Their debut poetry collection, "Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien" (The Operating System, 2020), was a finalist for the 2020 International Latino Book Award.

Raquel Reichard: Raquel is an Orlando-based award-winning storyteller with an editorial objective to engage, educate and empower. As a journalist, she centers her reporting on body politics and Latinx culture. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from UCF and a master's degree in Latinx media studies from NYU.

HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Welcome to “Who Gets to Tell Our Stories: Analyzing Power and Ethics of Storytelling.”
A few reminders before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (identify moderator), know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
• Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
• Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

OPENING REMARKS

Thank y’all for joining us. This is most of our panel’s first time at AWP and this topic means a whole lot to us, so I appreciate that y’all want to join us for this discussion. Now, I know that the event description name drops a specific novel, but our discussion isn’t about any one book—our goal is to discuss a systemic pattern of authors who claim to, and are paid to, speak for the “voiceless.”

I won’t speak for the other writers on this panel, but I come from a community where I wasn’t expected to graduate high school, let alone earn an MFA and become a writer. A major news publication wrote about my home and called it “California’s Youth Murder Capital.” The public narrative then sees the Salinas Valley as filled with gang violence, poverty, and death. Now I have the challenge of convincing agents and publishers that I can write a story like my literary Salinas Abuelo John Steinbeck where I focus on people living and finding joy.

Through storytelling and public narrative, a place as beautiful as Salinas can become synonymous with violence. As a result, people demand stories that align with what they imagine as representative. At its heart, storytelling should be an honest look at the complexities of the human experience, and it should challenge public narratives that present any community as entirely good or bad. This panel interrogates how stories are demanded, for what purposes, and for which imaginations.

Each panelist is a writer in a different field who writes on their experiences and fights for people to be able to reclaim and tell their own stories: Prisca Dorca Mojíca Rodriguez, Alán Palaez Lopez, Raquel Richards, and Ashia Ajani. To get started, could you each introduce yourself and briefly speak on your work and experience in creating spaces for storytelling.

PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS
Ashia Ajani:

Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez:

1. First-generation college student and graduate student.
2. A lot of what I learned in my master's program was otherwise inaccessible to me:
    a. I started to strategize ways to bring this information back home without speaking down to folks without access
    b. Access is about privilege
    c. Utilizing Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," I decided to speak to my communities in ways that would build them up and not tear them down.
3. Storytelling methodology
    a. Storytelling is my ancestral inheritance.
    b. Storytelling is elevated chisme that serves as warnings, preservation of our history, and lessons to be learned.
4. Storytelling is my ethical praxis of liberation, where storytelling:
    a. Bridges gaps between those of us who have access and those of us without access
    b. For colonized people by colonized people
    c. Prioritizes grassroots people as worthy of leading their own liberations
    d. Ensures that there is accountability, instead of the "de eso no se habla" narrative we are often told to accept

Alán Pelaez Lopez:

- I'll be speaking about the history of reading and writing as a tool of oppression exercised on Black and Indigenous peoples in the United States during the antebellum era.
    - Teaching enslaved peoples (kidnapped Africans and American Indians) was illegal in plantations. Slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth's narratives teach us that literary production is both a method of nationalism and in very rare cases, abolition. Nations organize people through narrativity. In Douglass' narrative, Douglass explains that he was taught letters and numbers but the slaveholder punished his wife for teaching a young Douglass words. In this moment, the enslaved literate Black subject is seen as a threat because they can write oppositional narratives to the ones drafted by nationalistic, white supremacist legal codes.
    - American Indians were assigned U.S. citizenship in 1924 and prior to that, they were subjugated to the category of "wards of the state." To be a ward means to be watched over by a guardian. The United States was the legal guardian to ALL Indigenous subjects. Therefore, Indigenous writing was surveilled, disciplined and punished. Yankton Dakota writer, Zitkalá-Šá names the use of the pen and paper as the white man's "civilizing machine." Having been deceived and lied to by school recruiters, Zitkalá-Šá was forced to attend an American Indian

Boarding school where she was taught to read and write and become a proper and domesticized woman. The writer later published essays, poetry, and short stories that depict writing as a tool of settler-conquest and often re-wrote national anthems and lullabies to depict the terrors of nations.

    - As a migrant writer, I, too, know that writing is political. Migrant writers are expected to provide the literary canon a pathos of tragedy & triumph. This is called aesthetics. In my academic work, I write about the ways in which the top literature presses are funded by corporations who contract with ICE. These presses are home to canonized, award-winning migrant writers who, to some extent, provide similar narratives that are careful in how they critique and do not critique the government. I also think about Iowa's Writer's Program, and the CIA's involvement in shaping what "good poetry" is. In many cases, migrant writers who are experimental, hyper-political, and refuse narratives of meritocracy do not make it into any literary canons.
- Nations are organized around stories as are the legal, social, and political conditions of racialized and politically targeted communities. To put it briefly, the issue that this conversation frontloads is now new, it is responding to a larger history of state-sanctioned erasure and narrative gatekeeping. People are not voiceless, the state suppresses certain voices and selects which are allowed to rise.

Raquel Reichard:

MODERATOR QUESTIONS

1. **The question that often arises in these kinds of conversations, and that we see writers saying in response to this kind of backlash, is: Should writers not write about the injustice that they see in the world?**
2. **A lot of what developed from our group conversations about this topic was on creating an "ethics of storytelling". What does that mean to you?**
3. **Each of you writes perspectives that are not often seen in the world: How do you handle representing those perspectives without making yourself into a spokesperson for your community?**
4. **To end: What can we do to support writers from communities who don't usually get to tell their own stories?**

AUDIENCE Q&A

At the end of the event, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session.