

**EVENT TITLE: Writing Our Whole Selves: Mixed Writers Challenge the Narrow Literary Landscape**

**EVENT DESCRIPTION:** In a society that favors the unambiguous over the complex, how do mixed authors of color write the truth of ourselves? Do we depict the ambiguity of our backgrounds or default to the recognizable and marketable? Do we reframe the issue by writing non-human characters? How do we embrace our in-betweenness and how do we influence structural change to reflect the nuances of the mixed experience? Five writers discuss how their work fits in the literary landscape now and in a more inclusive future.

**EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres Craft and Criticism**

**EVENT ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR:**

**Donna Miscolta:** Donna Miscolta is the author of three books of fiction. *Living Color: Angie Rubio Stories* (2020) is her latest. Her work reflects her Filipino and Mexican heritage. Recent essays appear in *Poetry Northwest* and *The Museum of Americana*. She recently retired as a project manager in local government.

**EVENT PARTICIPANTS:**

**Talia Lakshmi Kolluri:** Talia Lakshmi Kolluri is a mixed South Asian American writer living in California's Central Valley. Her short fiction has been published in *The Minnesota Review*, *Ecotone*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *The Common*. Her debut collection is forthcoming from Tin House Books in Fall 2022.

**Aliah Lavonne Tigh:** Aliah Lavonne Tigh is the author of *Weren't We Natural Swimmers*, a forthcoming 2022 Chapbook with Tram Editions. Her poems have appeared in *Guernica*, *The Texas Review*, *Matter Monthly*, *The Rupture*, and others. She writes and works in Houston, Texas.

**Jeni McFarland:** Jeni holds an M.F.A. in Fiction from the University of Houston and is a 2016 Kimbilio Fellow. Her debut novel, *The House of Deep Water*, is out now.

**Dawn Pichon Barron:** Dawn Pichon Barron lives and works at the south end of the Salish Sea. She is the Director of the Native Pathways Program at the Evergreen State College and Creative Writing, Indigenous Studies faculty. Her chapbook, *Escape Girl Blues*, is out in the world.

## HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Welcome to Writing Our Whole Selves: Mixed Writers Challenge the Narrow Literary Landscape
- Reminders
  - Written text is available for those who need it
  - Keep spaces marked for wheelchairs clear of barriers
  - Treat service animals as working animals (no petting)
  - Refrain from wearing scented products
  - Be aware that some attendees have invisible disabilities

## MODERATOR OPENING REMARKS

**Reason for the panel** – Do mixed writers create characters that, like them, are of multiple heritages, or does that add a layer of complexity to the characters and to the narrative that agents, editors, and readers would rather avoid? Are mixed writers themselves reluctant to write those characters? How does a writer bring her mixed experience to the page? These are among the questions that we on this panel have grappled with in creating our fiction and hope to increase our understanding of through this discussion. Given that our individual experiences are distinct and that a shared experience of being mixed does not imply a one-size-fits-all perspective, we expect that a better understanding of the issues, and possibly an approach to resolution of some, will be elastic and broad.

**Structure of the discussion** – In the panel description we posed the question, *How do mixed authors of color write the truth of themselves?* Each of the panelists will offer brief opening remarks about who they are and how that is or isn't reflected in their writing. Following this, I as moderator will pose a series of questions to the panelists that will explore the place in the literary landscape of the mixed writer. There will be time at the end for questions from the audience.

## PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS

**Donna Miscolta** – I'm Donna Miscolta. I'm of Filipino and Mexican heritage and I write about characters who are either Mexican American or Filipino American. Writing about a Filipino Mexican American character is something I have not done for a variety of reasons. One is that ten years ago when I was trying to sell my first novel about a Filipino American family, the responses my agent was getting from editors was that the marketing folks didn't know how to sell such a book, which I

assumed to mean they didn't know who would be interested in a book about a Filipino American family. It made me wonder: if they thought the audience for a Filipino American story was difficult to find, how much harder would they consider a story about a Filipino Mexican American family even if their heritage was not the foremost concern of the story.

**Talia Lakshmi Kolluri:** I'm Talia Lakshmi Kolluri, and I'm of South Asian (Telugu) descent on my paternal side, and of Slovak and English descent on my maternal side. I write fiction from the perspective of animals. This allows me to write about climate change, conservation, and the natural world, all topics that are very important to me, and also allows me to explore more personal themes of family, identity, belonging, and home.

**Aliah Lavonne Tigh:** I'm Aliah Lavonne Tigh, and I am a writer interested in studies of connection. Susan Sontag writes that pornography is a narrative gesture that invents and distances its object. As an East Texan, I read this, and I think of oil. I read this as a person with Iranian and mixed German/Swiss/Irish heritage, and I think of how commodity relies on a devastating process of separation and extraction—the separation shining in our rivers and creeks here, the smell of the refinery fires, and how it punches into our lungs. When I re-hear “a narrative gesture that invents and distances its object,” I think of our bodies seen by what defines us in the eyes of people who imagine us, but do not hold us. It is my intention to answer the harm of commodification with wholeness, fullness, and relationship. In poems, I want to create a study of connection—the political, cultural, familial, and economic weaving together with the ecological reality.

**Jeni McFarland:** I'm Jeni McFarland, and my ancestors hailed mostly from Nigeria and Scotland. I grew up in a very small, very conservative farm village in Michigan; I am also a survivor of childhood sexual assault. I write about all these traumas: classism, racism, sexism, and how they can work in conjunction to shape the ways in which we can relate to the world.

**Dawn Pichon Barron:** Halito, Que pasa, and Hiya! I am Dawn Pichon Barron, a tríflecta of Native (Choctaw), Indigenous Mexican (Chihuahua), and Scots (McDaniel clan)-Irish (Mayo County), Western Euro ancestors. My writing explores themes of identity, loss, reclamation, and speaking truth to power. I love to write about “dark” and gritty topics, finding the spark of humanity and hope

within the tragic and unspeakable. There is a lyric in the song, “Crazy Mary”: *that what you fear the most will meet you half way*, and this is my mantra, with a twist, when I create a story, craft a poem, consider topics for a creative essay; fear is a way of life for a mixed-blood woman, and it is through writing that I find my power to meet the fear straight on.

## **MODERATOR QUESTIONS**

The panel will address as many of these questions as time allows.

1. Who are we writing for? Who do we see as our audience? What are the obstacles in finding our audiences?
2. Where do we fit? How does the ambiguity or in-betweenness of ourselves affect expectations of us by editors, agents, and readers?
3. Do we see our work in conversation with other works?
4. We’ve all mentioned identity as a theme in our work. Is there pressure (either internal or external) to make identity a central theme, and have our thoughts changed on that topic over time?
5. Are there literary traditions from our various heritages that are an influence on our work or that we have discovered during the process of writing?
6. How does code-switching come into play in our work?
7. How do we use both reading and writing to engage with the multiple facets of our heritage?
8. How do we influence structural change? Are the “diverse books” campaigns effective?
9. Where do we want to see our forthcoming works positioned in the literary landscape?

## **Q&A Session**