

**Event Title:** All the Whiles: Writing While Parenting While Black

**Event Description:** If writing is an act of solitude, requiring either “money and a room of [one’s] own” or the fluidity of movement and travel that Paule Marshall describes in *Triangular Road*, then how do writers create amidst an act that often requests a subsuming of time, body and often identity, especially as historically marginalized people, especially now? Panelists examine means of creation that navigate the minefields of parenting from the space of Other.

**Event Organizer and Moderator:**

Gail Upchurch writes young adult/adult fiction and holds a Ph.D. in creative writing from Binghamton University. A 2021 Tin House YA Scholar, Gail is an English professor at Prince George’s Community College and has been published in *The Missouri Review*, *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. She is also represented by Lucy Irvine of Peters Fraser and Dunlop Literary Agency.

**Panelists:**

Shinelle L. Espaillat teaches at Dutchess Community College in NY. Her work has appeared in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*,

Minerva Rising, The Westchester Review, Ghost Parachute, Cleaver Magazine and Midway Journal. She is represented by Annie Bomke of Annie Bomke Literary Agency.

Cole Lavalais's work can be found in the Chicago Tribune, Obsidian, Apogee, Warpland, Tidal Basin Review, Aquarius Press, and others. She has taught writing for over fourteen years and is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing and English at Chicago State University.

Claudine Thomas is a recent graduate from Arcadia University's MFA Creative Writing program. She works at Moore College of Art and Design as an arts administrator, writing and assessing arts curriculum. She writes young adult and middle grade fiction.

### **Opening Remarks:**

Shinelle Espailat:

I've been a writer for almost as long as I've been black, and never had difficulty merging those two identities, though, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, my first stories featured mostly young, blond people doing young, blond things. At first, the motherhood identity knocked my writer identity off-kilter. I could not fathom a world in which I could focus on creating anything other than a bubble of protection for my round, brown son, or for my pale, premature daughter. It took work, careful, consistent,

ongoing work, and the camaraderie of other black writer-parents, committed both to craft and to balancing the motherload/motherlode, to re-establish my sense of self as a writer. It is and will always be worth it.

Cole Lavalais:

The idea of being a black mother and being a black writer have always been intertwined for me. As a young writer the two roles seemed diametrically opposed, but as I've grown older, my challenges as a black woman, mother, and writer have morphed into something different, so has my way of thinking about the path I am currently on.

Claudine Thomas:

I've been writing since I was nine years old. It originated in the form of journaling--the classic young girl's Dear Diary, but quickly evolved into rich, imaginative stories featuring characters of all shapes and sizes. Writing for me provided a sense of control and power in a world where I felt I had very little. Having the ability to craft my own heroes and villains and stick them in situations of my own making created a fantastical escape. A famous Toni Morrison quote I read in high school states, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." This is something that has stayed with me many years

later and helps to feed my desire and sense of urgency to write. However, as a mother of four children, working full time, my sense of control and power are once again in battle with my reality. How do I find the time and energy to write, to world-build, to generate characters on an imaginative journey when I have dirty dishes in the sink and a child begging me to straighten her hair before picture day, so it doesn't look "too kinky"? I find that although the answer to this question may not exist, the opportunity to acknowledge and address the struggle is best alleviated by those who get it--fellow creatives who must write, no matter what. The support and fellowship among writers are things I have cherished in my creative journey, and one that I hope can continue to expand on as we acknowledge and validate all the variables we carry into that creative journey--writing while parenting while being Black.

Gail Upchurch: Shinelle brought up the idea of this panel as we brainstormed possible panel topics last spring. This panel is born out of our need to talk about writing with other parents who dare to create stories while also balancing the overlapping identities that inform their work and challenge it. The following are questions that have interested me as I try to forge a writing career while raising three school-aged children, maintain relationships, and balance a full teaching load. Selfishly, I want to have a conversation that offers me practical ways to think about my divided life, and, dare I say, also hope.

**Moderator Questions:**

- 1) Discuss your creative writing journeys, before children and after children? What did you value most about your writing process before becoming a parent? What do you value most now and why?
- 2) Let's talk about productivity and guilt. Do you ever feel guilty about striking the "right" balance between the responsibilities of being a parent and the responsibilities you have to your work (the writing) and your career? How is this guilt complicated by the many overlapping identity categories with which you identify, namely race and gender? How do you find ways forward? Is balance ever attainable? How is this guilt complicated when/if your career isn't in alignment with your work (the writing)?
- 3) Do you all ever feel as if you're behind your writing peers?  
  
Residencies, workshops, and retreats are great places to move projects forward and forge relationships that will serve your work long term. However, what happens if you don't have access to these kinds of opportunities due to family logistics? Or have you ever felt

like you've missed opportunities and/or have had to postpone your writing goals? Has this led to colleague envy/jealousy?

- 4) Can you talk about others' gendered and racialized expectations as they relate to your work and your job? Do you ever have to feel that there is an expectation to go above and beyond the efforts of your colleagues as a black woman? What about the weight of cultural expectations/assumptions about the value of writing and the financial realities of pursuing a writing career? Do you sometimes feel like you need to ask for permission of others? Of yourself?
- 5) What is your current writing practice? To what extent do your children help fuel this practice and/or enrich your writing?