Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Creative Writing Workshops at Community Colleges

Final Outline

Event Title: Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Creative Writing Workshops at Community Colleges

Event Description: How do panelists center voices of students from underrepresented groups, and teach published work from underrepresented groups. Panelists will share best practices and discuss the mechanics of leading anti-racist discussions within the academy. Discuss the tensions between art for art’s sake and art that’s socially conscious. What are the challenges? What are the rewards? What do panelists consider when creating the course?

Event Category: Pedagogy

Event Organizer and Moderator

Shinelle L. Espaillat: Shinelle L. Espaillat completed an M.A. in Fiction at Temple University. She is a 2023-2024 Baldwin for the Arts Fellow and a 2022 Kimbilio Fellow. Her stories have been nominated for both Pushcart and Best of the Net Prizes. She teaches at Westchester County Community College in NY. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in midnight & indigo, Pleiades Magazine, Torch Literary Arts, Tahoma Literary Review, Two Hawks Quarterly, Minerva Rising, The Westchester Review, Ghost Parachute, Cleaver Magazine and Midway Journal, as well as in the collections How Higher Education Feels: Commentaries on Poems That Illuminate Emotions in Learning and Teaching and Shale: Extreme Fiction for Extreme Times. She is represented by Annie Bomke of Annie Bomke Literary Agency.
Event Participants

Rashaun Allen: Rashaun J. Allen is an Assistant Professor of English at Westchester Community College, who was also the first Fulbright scholar in SUNY Stony Brook’s MFA in Creative Writing & Literature program history. A Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Vermont Studio Center, and Arts, Letters, and Numbers residency recipient whose three independently published poetry collections became Amazon Kindle Best Sellers in African American Poetry. A Bookends Fellow Alum who was also a Finalist for the 2021 Zone 3 Press Creative Nonfiction Award and longlisted for the 2020 Dzanc Diverse Voice Prize.

Keith O’Neill: Keith O’Neill is Professor of English at SUNY-Dutchess, where he teaches creative writing and composition. His work has appeared in McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, Andromeda Spaceways Magazine, Bewildering Tales, and the Tales to Terrify podcast. He has an MA in English from Binghamton University and a PhD in American literature from The University of Georgia.

Gail Upchurch: Gail Upchurch is a writer of young adult and adult fiction. She is a 2022 Kimbilio Fellow, winner of the 2022 Taint Taint Taint Magazine James Baldwin Award, a finalist for the 2022 Pen Parentis Fellowship, a 2021 Tin House YA Scholar, a 2021 Community of Writers Scholar, a finalist for the 2021 Crystal Wilkinson Creative Writing Prize, and winner of the 2021 Tupelo Quarterly Prose Open Prize. Besides this, her short story “The Cottage” has been nominated for a 2024 O. Henry Prize. She holds a Ph.D. in English from
Binghamton University’s program for writers, an MFA in creative writing with an emphasis in fiction from Chicago State University, and a BA in English from Howard University. Gail has recent short stories published or forthcoming in *The Missouri Review, Obsidian: Journal & Ideas in the African Diaspora, Tupelo Quarterly, Taint Taint Taint Magazine, Torch Literary Arts, and Sequestrum* and is currently at work on a young adult novel and a linked short story collection. When she’s not making up stories, she is a professor at Prince George’s Community College in Largo, Maryland, an assistant nonfiction editor at Tupelo Press, and the chapter lead for the Maryland Chapter of Women Who Submit.

**Moderator Opening Remarks:**
Thank you all for being here, for still being excited to talk about pedagogy, and for combatting conference burn-out to join us so late on this last day of AWP. I must let you know that, unfortunately, Brenda DeMartini Squires was unable to join us today.

Many of us are fighting against the commodification of higher education, with the rebranding of “students” as “clients” and the adoption of pathways intended to guide students away from the Humanities and into particular career trends. Those who teach at community colleges (and perhaps those who serve at four-year institutions as well) experience lip-service calls to action on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, even as funding and resources for DEI action dissipates. It is, we believe, increasingly important to establish anti-racist workshop spaces in our Creative Writing Classrooms, which can stand out as bastions of critical engagement and honing of craft, if we can work to uplift and uphold voices that the world outside the classroom seeks to oppress and constrain. We hope that this panel will
both offer concrete suggestions and continue a conversation on how to achieve that goal. I am grateful to Rashaun Allen, Keith O’Neill and Gail Upchurch for agreeing to share their brilliance, and invite them to share their own opening remarks.

**Participant Initial Remarks:**
**Rashaun Allen:** *I’ve been here before. The first day in my MFA class—my 8th in about my 6th semester to be exact. Where I scan around the room with hope. I hope there is another person of color. I hope there is a black author on the syllabus. I hope the program has changed from too white to more diverse. But my hope is quickly shaped by my reality—it’s just me.* Those are my opening lines of a sincere letter written to the SUNY Stony Brook MFA in Creative Writing & Literature faculty in my final year of grad school. It wasn’t a diversity statement but a statement on my reality. I hope through this workshop we all leave here with more tools to support students with anti-racist pedagogy and additional ways to aide in creating space for beneficial DEI work in the classroom, department, and institution level.

**Brenda DeMartini Squires:**
**Gail Upchurch:** I’ve taught introductory creative writing courses at both community colleges and four–year universities, and the common thread amongst my experiences has been the way my students of color seem to be harnessed in their writing relative to their white counterparts. With few exceptions, my students of color are reluctant to fully embrace the potential range of their storytelling. Given this is a panel that asks us to think about ways forward for burgeoning writers of color and anti-racist pedagogy, I wonder how we can best inspire a new generation of writers whose work is informed by racial aggressions and residual
Trump era politics? How can we encourage students to take up space in workshops, both in their writing but also in the feedback they offer to their peers?

Keith O’Neill:

Moderator Questions

- What steps do you take to try to create an anti-racist classroom space?
- What books or authors do you include as part of your Anti-Racist Pedagogy?
- How do you factor your own culture/heritage/ethnicity into building anti-racist workshops?
- What elements of the traditional workshop format do you think still function in an anti-racist workshop space?
- Can you talk about your experiences in teaching creative writing at a community college? Have you found students to be receptive/resistant to the anti-racist workshop strategies? Do you see any differences in the quality of student writing in anti-racist spaces?
- How has being intentional about crafting anti-racist workshops impacted your own writing?