

1) **Event title:** Breaking Silence: The Ethics of Writing Inherited Trauma across Genres

2) **Event description:** Investigating inherited and historical trauma can provide abundant material, but mining the past requires ethical acuity. How might we research and write responsibly when the record is fragmented or erased? How do we care for our loved ones and ourselves while writing through our truths? How might we mitigate historical harm? How might we avoid causing further harm through appropriation? Multi-genre writers discuss the ethics of breaking silence across creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry.

3) **Event category:** Multiple Genres Craft and Criticism

4) **Event organizer and moderator short biography:**

Sarah Beth Childers is the author of *Shake Terribly the Earth: Stories from an Appalachian Family* and *Prodigals: A Sister's Memoir of Appalachia and Loss*. She teaches creative nonfiction at Oklahoma State University and serves as the nonfiction editor of the *Cimarron Review*.

6) **Event participants and short biographies:**

Chet'la Sebree is the author of *Field Study* and *Mistress*. For her work, she has received fellowships and awards from the Academy of American Poets, Hedgebrook, MacDowell, and Yaddo. She is an assistant professor at George Washington University and faculty in Randolph College's Low-Residency MFA program.

Tyler Mills is the author of a memoir, *The Bomb Cloud*, the poetry books *Hawk Parable* and *Tongue Lyre*, the chapbook *City Scattered*, and a collaborative chapbook, *Low Budget Movie*. She teaches for Sarah Lawrence College's Writing Institute, is a Founding Editor of *The Account*, and lives in Brooklyn.

Ivelisse Rodriguez's debut short story collection, *Love War Stories*, was a 2019 PEN/Faulkner finalist and a 2018 Foreword Reviews INDIES finalist. She is a 2022 Letras Boricuas fellow and a distinguished university professor of creative writing at DePauw University.

Clemonce Heard's poetry collection, *Tragic City*, explores his relationship to Oklahoma and the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Heard has been awarded time and space from the Tulsa Artist Fellowship, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, Sala Diaz, MacDowell, and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation. He is currently working on his second collection of poetry and a collection of essays.

IN-PERSON EVENTS, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR EVENT: Welcome to Breaking Silence: The Ethics of Writing Inherited Trauma across Genres. 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, me, Sarah Beth Childers, 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 MODERATOR REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Introduce and identify all speakers in the order in which they are sitting.

Sarah Beth's opening remarks:

- My relevant project: *Prodigals: A Sister's Memoir of Appalachia and Loss*, published by University of Georgia Press in 2023.
- Major ethical concerns:
 - Writing about someone who has died by suicide.
 - Writing about my brother's disability, especially since I cannot now ask him about it.
 - Writing about family.
 - Writing about Appalachia.
 - Writing about fundamentalist Christianity.

PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS

Chet'la Sebree:

- My relevant project: *Mistress*
- Ethical concerns
 - The potential violence of persona poetry in the voice of Sally Hemings, particularly to her living descendants
 - The tension between historical accuracy and literary imagination
 - The gaps in the archive
 - The nature of sexual violence and sexual relationships within the context of slavery in the United States

Tyler Mills:

- My relevant project: *The Bomb Cloud* (a hybrid memoir published by Unbound Edition Press in 2024).
- My ethical concerns:
 - Writing about a family story a family member's life when the family member wanted to keep this part of their life a secret
 - Writing about an atrocious historical event and its violent aftermath without adding to the violence of this history or sensationalizing it
 - Writing about a place where I've lived but where I'm not from (New Mexico)
 - Writing about classified information still inaccessible to the public, and by and large to me, without stating untruths or making claims that can't be backed by fact
 - Writing about white patriarchal violence while tying individual experiences to larger historical narratives

Ivelisse Rodriguez:

- My relevant project: *Bomba*, novel-in-progress
- Major Ethical Concerns:

- Writing about a history with limited historical information in my dominant reading language.
- Balancing writing fiction with the truth. How much can I deviate from the truth? How much can I bend history to fit the needs of my narrative?
- How can I transcend narratives of victimization?
- How do I deal with cultural failings in the past without shaming the culture?
- How can I understand the national identity of Puerto Ricans in the late 1800s when it differs from the way it is represented now?

Clemonce Heard:

- My relevant project: *Tragic City*
- Major Ethical Concerns:
 - Writing about a place to which I am not native.
 - Writing about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, and how it continues to impact people to which I no longer have a physical connection.
 - Creating art that builds upon a sensitive history.
 - Writing through the personae of survivors of the Massacre who have since passed away.
 - Accepting an award of time and space to write about a city that does not value its own artists to the same or greater extent.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS

1) What were the first ethical concerns you faced as you began your project, and how did you give yourself permission to start writing?

- Response by Clem: A feeling of regardless of it being Black History, it wasn't mine to write. A friend and native Tulsan first telling me no. I found I was living on one of the worst battlegrounds of the Massacre, and so became obsessed with the history. Since I couldn't stop researching and writing, I thought I should do my duty to be as sensitive and thoughtful in my craft as I could at that time.
- Response by Sarah Beth: My knowledge that I could never access what my brother experienced with his mental illness and life. Concerns about hurting people in my family by bringing up the trauma again. Concerns about misrepresenting Appalachia. Concerns that I might write in such a way that placed blame in unfruitful, harmful directions. My brother told my sister and me long ago that we could write about him, as long as he never had to see it, and I clung to that and quoted him in my acknowledgements for the book.
- Response by Ivelisse: My first ethical concern was trying to figure out the historical past without a lot of documents in my dominant language and in general. Ultimately, I decided that regardless of historical truths, I am writing fiction, and if I can't find the answers to my queries, most readers won't either, so I need to craft a world that is not necessarily the truth but a fictional world that stands up to scrutiny as a fictional world.
- Response by Chet'la: My first concern was that I'd double down on harm already done to Hemings through the existing historical archive.
- Response by Tyler: At first, I was concerned both about writing about a family member's life when that family member had wanted to keep it a secret (and felt like it was his military duty to do so) and also about writing about an atrocity in a way that wouldn't cause further harm.

2) Did research help you mitigate any ethical concerns, and what ethical dilemmas came to light during your research process?

- Response by Chet'la: The research helped tremendously, as I wanted to honor her through the work by making her more than a footnote in Jefferson's history. To do this, I wanted to build out the world in which she lived, and I couldn't do that without the research. Additionally, through the research, I realized that I was writing about Hemings as a way of understanding my own contemporary Black womanhood (which transformed the project).
- Response by Tyler: As I researched the topic of the atomic bombings and nuclear history in New Mexico—where I moved in the middle of the project for a job—I felt like my understanding of the nature of classified documents grew. I kept finding myself walking into walls, in terms of my research, and it was frustrating, but I learned to study the shape of the walls (or what wasn't there). When I realized that my grandfather's involvement is still classified, I felt that it was important to detail how his life connects with other kinds of barriers to accessing this violence. What stories are allowed to become historical narratives? What stories are obscured, and why? However, even as I continued my research, I wanted to be careful with the information I was starting to understand. It was important to me that I don't state anything I can't prove. So I ended up weaving quotes into passages to stitch the shape of what was/could have been.

3) How did the craft, style, or form of your project help you work through your ethical concerns?

- Response by _Clem_: Poetic license was necessary, though I was also weary of it becoming a cop out.
- Response by Sarah Beth: Writing lyric essays, rather than a book in chapters, and using research (Branwell Brontë, the Prodigal Son, etc) as metaphor allowed me to take different angles on the material and allowed me to dig deep while also omitting information that I was concerned might be especially harmful. And avoiding a straight narrative gave me the opportunity to omit parts of my brother's life I'd have to speculate about in a way that would have been helpful to no one and bad for the work.
- Response by Ivelisse: In writing fiction, I have come to understand that my allegiance is to the story I am telling, not the truth. The truth gets in the way of the story I am trying to tell. The truth becomes this limiting force that I can't step outside of, and this negatively affects my fiction.
- Response by Tyler: Folding together travel narratives that upend assumptions of travel was one way to get at the hidden histories of a place like Los Alamos. I also incorporated my handwritten research in visual works that told a story through the senses and also invite a reader/viewer to re-encounter an atomic cloud abstractly, to look and reflect without the horror of the full representation.

4) What historical traumas intersect with, affect, or form the basis of your work? How did you navigate these traumas in your research and writing process, and what steps did you take in an effort to avoid causing further harm?

- Response by Sarah Beth: I had to deal with the ways Appalachia has been so deeply stereotyped and misrepresented, as well as the historical poverty and isolation and other characteristics that have helped feed those stereotypes and continue the common resistance to, and lack of access to, care for physical and mental health in the region.
- Response by Ivelisse: The historical trauma my novel contends with is colonization. I navigated this trauma by thinking about how I can re-see it. For example, the antidote to colonization is de-colonization. But since that is not the historical truth for Puerto Rico, where my novel takes place, then I only have a hopeless ending. However, I started to think about how people push against colonization. Puerto Ricans, for example, have a

strong cultural identity, the diaspora engages in transnationalist practices, and the dominant language in Puerto Rico is still Spanish. In other words, one way Puerto Ricans rebuke colonization is by having a strong national identity that is divorced from a mainstream American identity.

- Response by Tyler: I didn't imagine perspectives/view points that weren't my own. I folded research into the text so that the white patriarchal violence could be clear without me sensationalizing it.

5) Did your project include any personal traumas? If so, were you able to prioritize caring for yourself and your loved ones while working through this difficult material? Please explain.

- Response by Clem: It did. I didn't prioritize. I'll say more at the event.
- Response by Sarah Beth: I found writing about my brother's funeral particularly difficult. I managed to complete that work with the aid of a writing residency, but immersing myself in that material for a month put my mental health into a fragile space. To protect my family and myself, I fictionalized all identifying information on some minor characters who behave in questionable ways.
- Response by Tyler: I think that the act of writing helped me through some personal traumas (being stalked and harassed in a new place, witnessing a murder victim, dealing with grief). Being as clear about the stakes of these things as I could in the writing (I hope) felt cathartic. When writing about family, to an extent, I ran some things by my mother, but in the end, I told myself this is my story about the research process, and I've told it in a personal way and the best way I could (I hope).

6) In what ways did fragmentation of the historical record affect your project, and how did you seek to research and write ethically when information is unknowable?

- Response by Sarah Beth: in my case it was more of a personal record, with all the gaps in information you find after a person has died and you can no longer talk to them. I created my "lost photographs" essays in the book as a way to talk to those gaps. I also made guesses, like what my brother was wearing when he died, since I didn't see his body and found myself unable to ask my mother about it, and I made it clear why that was my guess and the fact that this was a guess and not the "truth."
- Response by Ivelisse: The historical record is very limited, especially in English. The way I dealt with this is by conferring with scholars in the field and analyzing the available texts. For example, from reading the historical information, it seems that "Puerto Rican" meant something different in the 1800s than it does now. I asked some scholars about this. I also had to analyze some of the historical actions that take place to see who is included and excluded from the national identity.
- Response from Chet'la: Sally Hemings has no voice recorded in the archive. While that stalled my writing for many years, it also created space for my literary imagination. That said, it also created great anxiety about speaking for a woman who is voiceless in her own history. It was complicated; however, it actually led me further into the historical landscape. I conducted experiential research in order to further embody some of her lived experiences including trying on replicas of corsets, living in Charlottesville for a year, listening to oral histories of descendants of those enslaved at Monticello, and looking at artifacts from enslaved quarters.
- Response by Tyler: I think I mentioned this in answer to another question (but talk about the exact moment I realized that it wasn't that I was a "bad researcher"; I was dealing with materials that are still to this day classified). I tried to reveal the shadows in what we know by talking about what isn't there / what can't be found. (Talk about finally receiving a letter from the National Archives and what it revealed, if there's time.)

7) How do you know when you've "gotten it right" and how has the idea of *rightness* evolved from the start of your project until now?

- Response by Chet'la: I felt like I had finally "gotten it right" when I had a clear sense of why I was writing this particular project. While working on one poem, in which Hemings speaks to a contemporary speaker, I decided to name the contemporary speaker; I gave her my name. In that moment, I realized I wasn't writing about only about Hemings but about a long history of Black women's experiences in the United States. After that, five years of research felt like it clicked into place, and I was able to write more clearly in the persona poems.
- Response by Tyler: I hope I've gotten it right! I find myself uneasy about claiming this, but all I can say is I did my very best.

8) What is some of the feedback you've encountered that went against your project and how did you take that feedback into account and at the same time continue to create?

- Response by Sarah Beth: My sister is my most important reader, and sometimes she remembered events differently than me. Sometimes I changed the material completely to fit with her advice, and sometimes I didn't.
- Response by Tyler: People have claimed that my grandfather made up the whole thing, and I wrote about dealing with this and also with the reason I believe him (plus the info I'd later find out).

9) Who were some of the creative guides that made a path for your project and how does their guidance hold up to the ever-evolving ethics of creating?

- Response by Chet'la: Natasha Trethewey continues to be a model. She writes about both history and family in careful ways in which I always feel aware of what's at stake and how she as a writer is implicated in the conversation.
- Response by Sarah Beth: Paisley Rekdal's *Intimate: An American Family Photo Album* for honest, empathetic writing about family, Esme Weijun Wang's *The Collected Schizophrenias* for writing with nuance and solid research about mental illness, *A Bestiary* by Lily K. Hoang for interrogating the self while writing about grief.
- Response by Tyler: Kerry Arsenault's *Mill Town*, Maud Newton's *Ancestor Trouble*, Nora Krug's *Belonging*, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* are influential texts. So is Lynn Melnick's *I've Had to Think up a Way to Survive* (formally).

10) What [unsolicited] advice or text would you give someone who desires to write about inherited and historical trauma?

- Response by Sarah Beth: I've found *Family Trouble: Memoirists on the Hazards and Rewards of Revealing Family*, Joy Castro's edited collection of essays about memoir ethics, to be extremely helpful, and particularly the essay "Writing the Black Family Home" by Faith Adiele.
- Response by Ivelisse: I would ask what that person is doing differently. If we are going to continue to revisit historical traumas, then it should be purposeful, and we should be doing something new.
- Response by Chet'la: Know why **you** are doing the work that you are doing. You might not know this until you've done the research or started to write, but you should absolutely know before you start to publish work on the topic.
- Response by Tyler: What is at stake for you in writing about this (other than curiosity)? How is your personal life entangled with and affected by the subject, but also how are you looking outward so that your work encompasses a broader picture?

Q&A SESSION

In-person events: at the end of the event, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.