EVENT TITLE: In Praise of Legacy: Writers of Color and the Challenge of the Canon

Event Description: The word “canon” in literary studies was intended to refer to humanity’s greatest writings — those which all "educated" people should know. Thanks to the work of critics and scholars of color, however, we are now able to recognize the exclusions, the silences, and the gaps that exist in the traditional concept of the canon. The four poets/professors on this panel will read poems and discuss how to explore, expand, and explode the literary canon in one's work and in the classroom.

EVENT CATEGORY: Pedagogy

Event Organizer & Moderator

Michael Mercurio: Michael Mercurio lives and writes in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. He serves as the Director of Community Engagement for the nonprofit Faraday Publishing Company, working to center the voices and perspectives of the global majority through panels, readings, and workshops.

Event Participants

Enzo Silon Surin: Enzo Silon Surin is a Haitian-born award-winning poet, educator, publisher, librettist and social advocate. He is the author of four collections of poetry, including his most recent book, American Scapegoat, and the 21st Annual Massachusetts Book Award Winner, When My Body Was A Clinched Fist.

Nathan McClain: Nathan McClain is the author of Previously Owned (2022) and Scale (2017), both from Four Way Books. He is a graduate from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson and a Cave Canem fellow. He currently teaches at Hampshire College and serves as poetry editor for the Massachusetts Review.
**Kenzie Allen:** Kenzie Allen is a Haudenosaunee poet and multimodal artist. She is the author of Cloud Missives (Tin House 2024). The recipient of a 92Y Discovery Prize and a James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets, she teaches at York University in Toronto, and she is a descendant of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin.

**Rita Banerjee:** Rita Banerjee is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing and Director of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson. She is author of *Echo in Four Beats*, *CREDO*, and *A Night with Kali*. She received a VAC '22 Creation Grant and her work appears in *Poets & Writers, VPR, The Rumpus, VIDA*, and *LARB*.

**Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**

Good morning! Thank you for joining us bright and early for *In Praise of Legacy: Writers of Color and the Challenge of the Canon*. Before we begin, please allow me to conduct a little housekeeping:

For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, Michael Mercurio, 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.
This panel has come together because each member has written about, taught about, and thought about what constitutes the canon in 2024, prompted in some cases by students questioning whether we need a canon, given both the potential for—and reality of—exclusions and omissions.

Before I turn things over to our panelists for some initial remarks, I want to reflect on where the concept of “canon” comes from, which I hope will offer some insight into the how and the why of its influence. The term itself is a borrowing from Latin, which in turn borrowed it from the Greek word for “rule,” and it first shows up in Old English in the writings of the Venerable Bede prior to the Battle of Hastings. It was understood to refer to the ecclesiastical laws that governed the Church. By roughly 1300, we see it used to refer to the ecclesiastically approved collection of books that constituted the “official” Bible. Over the next 629 years it gains the additional meaning of “a collection of important works,” with the OED attesting the first recorded usage in this sense being in American Literature (vol. 1). In other words, it was named as such less than 100 years ago, though we all recognize that the effects of literary gatekeeping far predate the name it wears to seem respectable. After all, the further we look back in history - and I’m not just talking about capital-H history here, but also about the anthologies compiled as pedagogical aids throughout the formalization of higher education, particularly in America - we can see that the overwhelming majority of the writers included as canonical are white and male, and this selection tells a story in itself, one that presents a real challenge both for and to people of color in the linked roles of writer and reader, teacher and student.

Each of our panelists fulfills the double role of poet and professor, and as we get started they will each read a poem of their choosing and offer some initial remarks after I introduce them. We will then turn to the topic at hand.

[Mercurio introduces panelists]
Participant Initial Remarks:

Enzo Silon Surin:
[Will consist of the reading of a poem and brief remarks]

Nathan McClain:
[Will consist of the reading of a poem and brief remarks]

Kenzie Allen:
[Will consist of the reading of a poem and brief remarks]

Rita Banerjee:
[Will consist of the reading of a poem and brief remarks]

Moderator Questions:
1. How did each of you become aware of the existence of the canon? Do you remember what your reaction was to recognizing it?
2. Are there aspects of the canon (or a canon) that have shaped your own writing and your own teaching?
3. Much of the contemporary discourse about the canon concerns what has been left out of it through the years; has the canon gotten anything right? Is there a way the canon might be useful as a kind of roadmap (recognizing that, as Alfred Korzybski said, “The map is not the territory.”)?
4. If the canon can be considered an orienting schema of sorts, how do you approach sharing it with your students? Do you find it challenging or helpful (or both) in this environment where context has been flattened due to the (false) promise of the Internet making all knowledge available at all times to everyone?
Further Resources:

- *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Classroom* - Felicia Rose Chavez
- “Platforming Writers of Color: A Twenty-First Century Reading List” ed. Felicia Rose Chavez
- *Craft in the Real World* - Matthew Salesses
- *Letters to a Writer of Color* ed. Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro
- *Appropriate: A Provocation* - Paisley Rekdal
- *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* - ed. Marc Shell and Werner Sollers
- *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* - Werner Sollers
- *Why We Need Post-Activism Today* - Bayo Akomolafe