won’t you celebrate with me: BIPOC Women on Crafting the Personal Narrative

Thursday, February 8, 2024, 10:35 - 11:50 am, Room 2215A

How do we tell the stories of our lives? Five contributors from the award-winning anthology, *Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World*, edited by Darien Hsu Gee and Carla Crujido (Woodhall Press), will discuss how personal narratives offer powerful testimonies as women of color owning their place in the world. The conversation will include discussions of identity, memory, otherness, ancestral heritage, place, and writing craft. Discussion and Q&A at the end.

Darien Hsu Gee is the author of five novels published in 11 countries. Her collection of essays, *Allegiance*, won a Bronze IPPY award, and her craft book on *Writing the Hawai‘i Memoir* won the Hawai‘i Book Publishers award. Darien is a Poetry Society of America Chapbook fellow for her poetry chapbook, *Other Small Histories*.

Karina L. Agbisit is a Latina writer and editor. Her writing has been published by the COVID storytelling project from Oregon Health Equity Alliance, Woodhall Press, Cleis Press, Haunted Waters Press, *Ruminate Magazine*, and Oregon Humanities. She holds an MFA in creative writing and an MA in book publishing from Portland State University. She is working on a memoir.

Anastacia-Reneé (she/they) is a writer, educator, interdisciplinary artist, TEDx speaker and podcaster. Reneé is the author of *(v.)* (Black Ocean), *Forget It* (Black Radish), *Side Notes from the Archivist* and *Here in the (Middle) of Nowhere*, forthcoming from Amistad (an imprint of HarperCollins) March 2024.
CMarie Fuhrman is the author of *Camped Beneath the Dam: Poems* and coeditor of *Native Voices* and *Cascadia*. CMarie is the director of Elk River Writers Workshop and faculty in the graduate program in creative writing at Western Colorado University.

Preeti Parikh is an Indian-origin poet and essayist based in Ohio. A Kundiman Fellow, Preeti is the recipient of a 2023 Sustainable Arts Foundation grant award and has received support for her work from Millay Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, and the AWP Writer to Writer program.

**OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**Darien Hsu Gee**

Good morning, and welcome to “won’t you celebrate with me: BIPOC Women on Crafting the Personal Narrative.” I’m Darien Hsu Gee, and I’ll be your moderator today. I am the editor, along with Carla Crujido, of the anthology *Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World*, which takes its name from Lucille Clifton’s poem, “won’t you celebrate with me,” used with permission from Copper Canyon Press.

I’m joined today by four of our contributing authors, Karina Agbisit, Anastacia-Reneé, CMarie Fuhrman, and Preeti Parikh. Also joining us is a member of our editorial team who has been with us from the beginning, Amy Bower, who helped us organize today’s panel.

Before we get started, here are a couple of administrative notes. In addition to this panel, we have a second panel this afternoon with four more authors from the anthology. It will be in this same room at 1:45 pm. It’s called “Snap, Crackle, Prose: Telling Our Stories in 300 Words or Less,” and will be about diving into the world of micro prose, which is the form used to tell our stories in this book. As a teacher of this short form, I’ve found it to be a powerful way to access the personal narrative, especially for stories that may be fraught or hard to give voice to.

The inspiration behind today’s panel centers around two central questions: how do we tell the stories of our lives as women of color, and how can we offer testimony as we make our way through this world?
Each of the writers in front of you has grappled with a sense of identity and belonging in their work, of how their cultural and/or ethnic heritage may have impacted their navigation or perception of self. It is not unusual to find ourselves existing in multiple worlds or leading multiple lives. As writers, we get to examine these histories and try to make sense of them. I’d love for each of these writers to share their story, perhaps by offering a brief overview of the kind of personal narratives they write or share in the literary and creative landscape.

**PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS**

*Karina L. Agbisit*

My writing explores the intersections between past and present. When writing about my own life, I look for the ways in which the past, not only my own past but the past of my family, communities, and places I have lived, shapes my present-day, ongoing narrative. I’ve been working on a memoir exploring how the ideas of safety and security are shaped by identity and the far-reaching fingers of past experiences in my life and beyond. For years, my work danced around these ideas through fiction, but by the time I completed my MFA, I realized that before I can play in the world of fiction, I need to tell the true stories that are the fuel for why I write about what I write.

*Anastacia-Reneé*

My work is never the same or all one subject. However, I try deeply to write about the personal, the political, the spiritual, the communal and to freely channel the voices of traditionally silenced people as well as muted ancestors. I am invested in excavating and interrogating where words spring from in our bodies and how that manifests in formatting the writing in poems and essays.

*CMarie Fuhrman*

In my storytelling, I hope to explore and express the nuances of my identity as a mixed-race Native woman, shedding light on the complex ways the overculture perceives our bodies. My intention is to create narratives that serve as windows, offering readers a glimpse into a world they may not be familiar with, inviting them to witness and reflect from a respectful distance. I aim to foster understanding
without imposing judgments, allowing space for readers to navigate their emotions freely. Through my words, I aspire to build bridges of empathy, prompting introspection and dialogue, so that individuals may engage with the narrative on their terms, without the burden of feeling ‘wrong.’

**Preeti Parikh**

As an immigrant, my writing lingers in diverse lands and languages, and I am invested in honoring this multiplicity of origin and experience. Among my key inheritances are an unsettlement of place and identity, a lived experience of emotional violence, and a consciousness that bristles against colonial history and patriarchy. Women’s stories engage me, as does inquiry into work—the work of art, the work of science, the work of motherhood, domesticity, and family. I write about the boundaries of the self, about (re)framing fractured interiority. My poetry and prose chronicle lives across shifting homelands and wrangle with dissociation and (dis)placement as the speakers move through fraught collectives, investigating questions of the body, identity, and the aftermath of trauma.

**MODERATOR QUESTIONS**

1. What are the stories that you feel don’t get told when it comes to women of color and personal narrative. How do you feel this has changed or is changing?
2. What are the stories you wanted to read growing up? What stories do you feel you needed to know about, but didn’t have access to?
3. Who gave you permission to tell your story?
4. How did you find your voice?
5. How do you handle the challenge of telling your story when people around you—family, peers, community—say you can’t tell those stories, or might deny that your recollection of a story conflicts with their narrative of the same event?
6. How do you balance factual truth and emotional truth when writing personal narrative?

**CLOSE: Reading of Lucille Clifton’s “won’t you celebrate with me”**

**Q&A**
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Read Darien: *Other Small Histories* (Poetry Society of America, 2020), *Allegiance* (Hali’a Aloha, 2020)
- Read Preeti: “The [ ] of Cloth” and “Corpus | Divine,” *The Cincinnati Review*, vol 20.2, Fall 2023
- Read Karina: “Heavy and Hiking,” *Oregon Humanities*, 2020

CONTRIBUTOR CONTACT

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LEARN MORE

You might enjoy the panel, “Snap, Crackle, Prose: Telling Our Stories in 300 Words or Less,” taking place on Thursday, February 8, from 1:45-3:00 pm in room 2215A (same day, same room!) with four additional authors from the anthology.

GET THE ANTHOLOGY

The anthology, *Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays in the World*, includes extensive back matter with a section on “How to Write Micro” and writing prompts, along with recommended reading, author reflections on their work, a teaching guide, and over 50 discussion questions. Signed copies are for sale at the Woodhall Press booth.
Manifesto for the Dreamland
by Preeti Parikh

Henceforth, I decree:

- No wife, daughter, sister, or mother shall be the sole burden-bearer of virtue, the crown jewel of the family’s honor. When I say burden, I mean the burden: the burden of being pure, being decorous, and the burden of always, always being good.

- Woman shall no more cart the load of honor on her head like some lissome belle carrying an earthen pot, brimming over with the water she filled from the river of her mother’s womb and then walked back, balancing it along the dusty roads of her life’s village; safeguarding in that fragile vessel, water that quenches her daughters’ thirsts, water that one day will wash and purify her body, swathed in white, as it lays dead on a mud floor awaiting the soul’s heavenly departure.

- From here on out, a girl’s modesty is not a prize awarded to the most eligible suitor, not a treasure saved up and then donated in kanyadaan. Woman’s purity was never tempered by the flames of a Jauhar or Sati; she did not come out of it cleansed, pure, forged like a perfect horseshoe.

- Set free woman’s love from the ivory towers of selflessness and sacrifice; release her kindling from the timid fragrances of incense; let the flame of her engulf the world in its wake.

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From the author: “This essay began as an impulse to render the female body within patriarchal spaces. I found myself rebelling against the ideas of ‘purity’ and ‘chasteness’ that seem closely linked to ‘female honor’ in my homeland’s cultural and historical imagination.”

Driving Soundtrack
by Karina L. Agbisit

Sitting in my new-to-me car at the DMV for my driving test at the age of twenty-three, my hands grip the steering wheel, and I fight to steady the pace of my anxious breathing. With the car turned on but waiting in park, I turn the radio dial toward the lower-numbered channels, desperate for the music I know will calm me down.

As the ranchera music plays out through the speakers of my first car, my heart slows, and my breathing begins to return to normal. As the trumpets blare and the singer belts out his grito, I am reminded of the road trips my family would make from our small rural town into the city, the car speeding past the fields of onions and potatoes and lettuce my family labored in for generations. My father insisted on playing the music on road trips, even though he barely spoke Spanish and the rest of us spoke even less. It would not be until I was nearly an adult that I made it a point to learn the language of my father’s family.

The driving test proctor knocks on the passenger door. I hurry to turn the music down, not out of shame or fear, but because I already know music is frowned on during the test. At least I still have my Ricky Martin concert tee on to comfort me during the next thirty minutes of controlled panic.

In the years to come, the music that I never appreciated as a child, the music reserved only for road trips and BBQs with extended family, will be the soundtrack of my driving, my entertainment in standstill traffic, and my comfort in dangerous driving conditions. It will always be the root reminding me of home.

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From the author: “Living in a big city, it can be difficult to connect with other Latinx people and engage with this community. Spanish-language music is an important way for me to stay connected to my family lineage and the Latinx community. No matter where I go, I know I have this music to provide me with a sense of home.”