Snap, Crackle, Prose: Telling Our Stories in 300 Words or Less

Thursday, February 8, 2024, 1:45 - 3:00 pm, Room 2215A

Defying the notion that brevity diminishes impact, this panel celebrates the art of concise writing. Writing micro is an opportunity to cut to the chase, to distill what is most essential into a few carefully considered words, to center a single experience or thought. Defined as 300 words or less, micro essays / narratives / memoirs linger long after you’ve read them. Panelists will discuss how they’ve used micro in their work and the publication options for micro. Discussion and Q&A at the end.

Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

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.

Samantha Chagollan centers much of her work around her mixed Mexican and American heritage. Her bachelor’s degree in literature comes from Cal Poly Humboldt, and her creative nonfiction work has appeared in Yellow Arrow Journal, Alebrijes Review, Latin@ Literatures, Lavender Bones, and the anthology Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World.

Kalehua Kim is a Native Hawaiian poet living in the Seattle area. Currently pursuing an MFA through the Rainier Writing Workshop, she is a 2023 winner of
the James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry Northwest, Denver Quarterly*, and *‘Ōiwi, A Native Hawaiian Journal*.

**Devi S. Laskar** is a poet, novelist, photographer, former newspaper reporter and lifelong TarHeel. She is the author of the award-winning novel *The Atlas of Reds and Blues* and *Circa*. She holds an MFA from Columbia University and has finished her third novel.

**Shaina A. Nez** is Táchii’nii born for Áshįįhí. She serves Diné College as a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and English. She is a doctoral candidate in Justice Studies at the School of Social Transformation and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University.

**OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**Darien Hsu Gee**

Good afternoon, and welcome to “Snap, Crackle, and Prose: Telling Our Stories in 300 Words or Less.” I’m Darien Hsu Gee, and I’ll be your moderator today.

Before we get started, here are a couple of administrative notes. In addition to this panel, there was a panel this morning, “won’t you celebrate with me: BIPOC Women on Crafting the Personal Narrative,” which discussed writing personal narratives and micro essays in 300 words or less. For those interested in creative nonfiction and memoir, that event outline is available on the AWP website if you’d like to see what we covered there, in addition to our panel today.

The inspiration behind today’s panel is about diving into the world of micro prose, which I define as 300 words or less, and how it helps us tell our stories with precision and power. I’ve been teaching this short form for the past few years, almost exclusively for the past two years, through Hugo House, UCLA Extension, and Writer-ish.com, my teaching platform. I’ve written two award-winning books, *Allegiance*, a collection of micro memoirs that won a bronze IPPY award in the essays category, and *Other Small Histories*, a prose poetry chapbook that won the Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship Award. Both contain work of 300 words or less.
In 2020, I had the honor of editing, along with Carla Crujido, an anthology called *Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World*, published by Woodhall Press, which won the silver IPPY award last year. All of the micro essays are 300 words or less, and I’m joined today by four of those contributing authors: Samantha Chagollan, Kalehua Kim, Devi Laskar, and Shaina Nez. Also joining us is an editorial team member who has been with us from the beginning, Amy Bower.

Each of these writers writes in multiple genres, has written prose both short and long, and is here today to speak on the joys of writing small and how it fits into their portfolio of creative work. In particular, we’re going to look at what makes micro prose so powerful, at how distilling a story into its most essential truths can amplify rather than diminish what we are trying to say. These writers have their own experience with the form, as well as their tips and suggestions for how to get started. Let’s start with how you encountered micro and writing small, and how it’s impacted your work.

**PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS**

**Samantha Chagollan**

Micro prose is my favorite form to work in! I am an inpatient writer (and person?) who gets easily distracted, so this form was made for me. The first writing contest I ever entered was a 100-word essay about the Olympics, when I was 11 years old. I won the grand prize, and I think I’ve loved short forms ever since! But I rediscovered micro prose in a class with Darien, when she challenged us to stick to 10-minute writing sessions and showed us how powerful the form can be. Since then I’ve been exploring all kinds of short forms, from prose poetry to slightly longer flash pieces of creative nonfiction, and have used these shorter forms to piece together a first draft of my longer-form memoir, which I hope to start submitting for publication soon.

**Kalehua Kim**

I primarily write poetry, so micro feels like a sweet spot where I can work more narratively while holding a tightly concentrated theme. This form offers a focus and concision yet the gaps that might sometimes exist in poetry are easily filled. The container of micro encourages structure, which I find helpful in generating
work. I can take small pieces of a theme or topic and build upon it with each 300-word installation. It’s less intimidating than writing a short story, yet it has enough space for a detailed, developed story arc. I appreciate the form’s accessibility.

Devi S. Laskar
I will talk about the power of deadlines and constraints. It has been my experience as a poet and a newspaper reporter covering crime and government that it is important not to overthink your work. It is also important not to give yourself an infinite amount of time and the curse, “Write about anything! Take all the time you need.” I have found timed writing sessions and accountability has forced me to learn to focus and create award-winning work in a short amount of time. I will be speaking about the tips and tricks I employ.

Shaina A. Nez
I’ve been writing a lot lately about social justice in its many forms and specifically Indigenous justice. With micro, I’m able to reimagine the possibilities in 300 words, positioning ourselves to thrive rather than just survive! When viewing my pieces in the NWW anthology, I’m honoring brevity and space, observation and growth, the unashamed and Diné forever. Our writing should be intentional, constantly inviting the reader into our home and worldview. The moment we center our connections and needs, offering a perspective through our lens, the more representation becomes a priority in the literary landscape.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS
1. How do you decide whether a piece will be long or short? Do you know before you begin writing, or do you make the decision during revision?
2. How do you decide what to keep and what to discard? How do you know when it’s done?
3. How do you title your micro pieces?
4. How has community and accountability helped you write micro? Do you have any suggestions for how writers can incorporate micro writing practices into group work?
5. How has writing micro influenced how you approach other forms of writing and/or made you a better writer?
6. Is there a short or micro piece that you read that influenced you? Are there any authors you would recommend?

Q&A

CLOSE
CONTRIBUTOR SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Read Samantha**: “End Credits,” EMBLAZON (Yellow Arrow Journal, 2023); “Dark Ink,” *Latin@ Literatures*, 2023
- **Read Darien**: *Other Small Histories* (Poetry Society of America, 2020), *Allegiance* (Hali’a Aloha, 2020)
- **Read Devi**: *Circa*, Mariner Books, 2022

CONTRIBUTOR CONTACT

- **Connect with Samantha**: samanthachagollan.com / @samchagollan on IG/X/Bluesky
- **Connect with Darien**: dariengee.com and writer-ish.com (micro prose workshops)
- **Connect with Kalehua**: kalehuakim.com
- **Connect with Devi**: devislaskar.com
- **Connect with Shaina**: nezshaina90.wixsite.com/shaina-a--nez, IG: @na_na_shai, FB: [https://www.facebook.com/DCBFACreativeWriting](https://www.facebook.com/DCBFACreativeWriting), LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/shaina-nez, and X: @just_us_writer

LEARN MORE

You might enjoy the panel, “won’t you celebrate with me: BIPOC Women on Crafting the Personal Narrative,” taking place on Thursday, February 8, from 10:35 - 11:40 am in room 2215A (same day, same room!) with four more authors who crafted micro essays of 300 words or less.

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.
She sewed the family together. Three-piece suits and flamenco dancing dresses and *Wizard of Oz* costumes, all without patterns. She could copy any garment just by looking at the seams of something similar.

Her opinions were plentiful and loudly expressed, on everything from the plotlines of her favorite telenovelas to the new sin vergüenza girlfriend your son brought home.

She refused to speak the language of this place. When her boys were younger and learning to speak English in their American elementary school, she tried to learn too. But they laughed at her mispronunciations and her thick accent.

She never spoke English again.

I didn’t speak Spanish as a child, but on our Sunday visits I could understand what she was trying to say. She would cluck her tongue disapprovingly at the TV, or raise her eyebrows dramatically at the waiter when he splashed water on her napkin.

She didn’t need to say much to be understood. Her words could be sharp, like the blades of her shears or the needles in her pincushion.

She and my father shared a vernacular. He could coax her to laugh, even when she was seething mad. When she asked questions she already knew the answers to, or slung insults around like confetti, he would call her out on it.

A thimble can protect the tender tips of fingers, but there is no shield from words that slice or prick.

She held on to her mother tongue, with pride. Whether her words stung or soothed, the clothes she made always fit us perfectly. Made with love for those in her bloodline.

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From the author: “This is about my grandmother, Aurora Zazueta Chagollan, matriarch and proud Mexicana whose many talents weren’t often lauded but deserved admiration. When I was young I was puzzled by her refusal to speak English, because it meant she couldn’t communicate with any of her grandchildren. We are all half-white, and none of us spoke Spanish. I now have a better appreciation of her insistence, and her pride.”

I am not an island exchanged
for a few drops of turquoise the size
of a woman’s tears.
     I am not your subject,
you are not my king. I refuse
to be the object of your fears
in your blue rectangle
world, a universe that holds a white bird
at its center. As for cautionary tale
for your ivory tower friends:
     I’m here
to stay, I’m more than dark myth.
I’m a legend,
a subcontinent no longer
hidden. You cannot measure me in inches
or with a color-coded key.
     I’m scarred
sun, I bleed every evening as I set.
But I rise every morning no matter what.

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**From the author:** “I wrote ‘Girl as Map’ as part of a micropoetry series
sponsored by Kaya Press and 18millionrising.org to combat the Muslim Ban in the
Trump administration.”

From *Nonwhite And Woman: 131 Micro Essays On Being In The World* (Woodhall
Press). Reprinted with permission.