Event Title: Embracing Our Writer Identities: Women of Color Speak Candidly about the Journey

Friday, February 9, 2024
Scheduled Time: 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. CT
Scheduled Room: Room 2502B, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 2

Event Description:
Our literary landscape tends to overlook and dismiss the experiences women of color encounter as they build writing lives. This reality can impact how some women of color see their writer selves. In this panel, women of color in various stages and places in their writing careers will discuss their journeys embracing their identity as writers. Panelists will consider questions of age, belonging, community, opportunities, the influence of non-writing backgrounds, and more.

Type of Event: Artistic and Professional Development

Event Organizer and Moderator
Patrice Gopo: Patrice Gopo writes stories steeped in themes of place, belonging, and home. She is the author of two essay collections: AUTUMN SONG and ALL THE COLORS WE WILL SEE. Her debut picture book, ALL THE PLACES WE CALL HOME, is based on one of her essays. Please visit patricegopo.com to learn more.

Event Participants
Ramona M. Payne: Ramona M. Payne leads WRITE.PAUSE.REFLECT, an expressive writing workshop, and is working on an essay collection. Her work has been published in
anthologies and magazines. She draws on her diverse background—corporate, education, and the arts—in her writing. Visit ramonapayne.com to learn more.

Lillie Pardo: Lillie Pardo is a Los Angeles-based elementary school teacher and writer. She writes non-fiction picture book biographies of Filipino Americans who have made significant contributions to society. She believes that all children deserve to see themselves and their diverse stories represented on the pages of books.

Angie Chatman: A Chicago native, Angie Chatman is a Pushcart Prize nominated writer and storyteller. Her work has appeared in Taint, Taint, Taint Magazine, Pangyrus, The Rumpus, Hippocampus Magazine, Blood Orange Review, and elsewhere. She has told on The Moth Radio Hour. Angie holds an MFA from Queens University, and lives in Boston.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:

Welcome to Embracing Our Writer Identities: Women of Color Speak Candidly about the Journey. A few reminders before we begin:
• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me 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.

**Patrice introduces and identifies all speakers in the order in which they are sitting.**

**Patrice intros herself and this session:**

Good morning, everyone! Welcome to *Embracing Our Writer Identities*. Thank you so much for being here today. Perhaps you’re here today because you recognize how our literary landscape often overlooks or dismisses the experiences women of color encounter as they build writing lives. Maybe you’ve felt first hand how this reality can impact how women of color may see the writer aspect of who they are. Maybe you’re longing for conversation that reminds you that you are not alone. Today, I’m thrilled that this wonderful panel will discuss their journeys embracing their identity as writers. We’ll consider questions of belonging, community, opportunities, the influence of non-writing backgrounds, and more.

I’m Patrice Gopo, and I’ll be moderating today’s discussion with this fabulous panel. I’m the author of two essay collections: *All the Colors We Will See* and *Autumn Song: Essays on Absence*. My debut picture book, *All the Places We Call Home*, is based on one of my essays. After working for a few years as a chemical engineer and then working in the nonprofit sector, I started writing nearly 15 years ago. It’s certainly been an interesting journey of embracing my writer identity, and I’m looking forward to this conversation. But first, we have a short writing activity . . . And then the panel will introduce themselves
Short Writing Activity

Panel Introduction (Patrice):

We have such a wonderful panel with us today. I wonder if you could each please begin by introducing yourself and briefly sharing some of your journey embracing your writer identity as a woman writer of color?

Participant Initial Remarks:

Ramona M. Payne:

I grew up in Cincinnati but have worked on both coasts and spent some time in the south for graduate school. I write primarily nonfiction, essays, and memoir, but have also written for magazines and some online work.

I have always felt that I was a writer but when I was younger I felt more like a writer-in-waiting, as in waiting for the right time, topic, or opportunity. My earlier career was more corporate, largely because I paid more attention to the part of me that was strong in science and math, even earning an MBA because I was not as familiar with the MFA track. However, I finally started going to workshops and conferences (Zora Neale Hurston Writers Conference was my first), getting to know writers, worked with one who encouraged me to keep writing, and finally studied writing through a program at University of Chicago Graham School. Having that Hurston workshop be my first significant experience definitely helped me embrace my identity as a woman writer.
of color. The women there were brilliant, supportive, and many of the women I met that summer have gone on to do important work as writers.

**Lillie Pardo:**

I was born here in Kansas City and grew up just over the state line in Kansas. I did not grow up in a diverse neighborhood, or attend school with kids from many different cultural backgrounds. My two brothers and I were the only Asians at our elementary school. But my parents, who were immigrants from the Philippines, made sure I knew about Filipino culture. I was aware growing up as an Asian American during that time (the 70s and 80s), that I rarely saw myself represented in the media—magazines, television, movies, books, or the newspaper, and this bothered me. I attended the University of Kansas, where I majored in Journalism and Spanish. As I kept writing stories in my Journalism classes, I never really took into account my own identity as a person of color. When I moved to Los Angeles as a young adult in the 1990s, I became more aware of other cultures, and started becoming interested in learning more about my own Filipino heritage and history. After becoming an elementary school teacher, I realized the lack of children’s books about Filipino Americans and the Filipino American experience when I started teaching 18 years ago. In the past several years, more diverse kids books have been published, especially about Asian Americans, and it makes me happy that picture books reflecting Filipino culture and Filipino Americans are now available. I hope to add to those books when my nonfiction stories about Filipino American heroes eventually get published. I think it’s really important that all kids feel seen and that stories about the Filipino American experience become more mainstream.
Angie Chatman:

I grew up in the 1960’s and 70’s when major cultural shifts were taking place in this country. My uncle was serving in Vietnam, the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and those riots, Black power and the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s liberation and Sandra Day O’Connor on the Supreme Court. Through all of that turmoil, the message was clear - if the world wasn’t going to provide opportunities then “we” would make them do so. First thing on the agenda - integrate white spaces. My parents sent me to private school on the opposite end of the city with the goal that I would go to a top tier, name brand, predominantly white university, then law, medical, or business school. Although my mother had won a statewide award for her poetry, the Arts were not an option. How can you support yourself if you’re an artist?

After years of high paying but soul sucking jobs, I told my children they could be whatever they wanted to be. I knew I needed to model that behavior. I went back to school for my MFA and have been feeding my soul ever since.

Moderator Questions:

1) What do you think it means to embrace our writer identities?
2) When did you feel that you could fully accept your role as a writer, what event or activity made it real for you?
3) As a woman of color, what struggles have you encountered embracing your writer identity? And what encouragements have you found?
4) It’s often noted how writers write alone, but we also can be part of a robust writing community? Have you found places of belonging within the writing community?

5) Let’s think about the term “opportunities.” What comes to mind when I mention that term in the context of us embracing our writer identities?

6) Given the number of rejections inherent in our field, what do you do to validate yourself, your work, and your artistic endeavors?

7) Any thoughts about the influence of non-writing backgrounds on this journey?

8) What do you know now that you wish you’d known when you first started your writing journey?

Audience Q&A + Large Group Dialogue:

While I know there are many additional questions I could ask, right now I’d love for us to consider questions and comments from the audience. Let’s dialogue together about the reality of women of color embracing our writer identities. If you could please speak your question or comment loudly, and I will repeat it–or summarize your comment–so that the entire room can hear. Thank you!!

Patrice’s Closing Comment:

We’ve covered a lot here in our short time together. What final thoughts, suggestions, or encouragement do you have for women of color as they embrace their writer identities? And please also share where people can go to find out more about you and your work.
Participant Final Remarks:

Ramona M. Payne:
Here are some steps that have been beneficial for me, ones I continue to use: build and create community-this is important for having a group that can support you and each other in this journey, whether that is through improving craft, sharing ideas, leads, resources. Encourage one another but give useful feedback, delivered with respect, when it is needed. Attend conferences, workshops, or residencies, particularly if you see diverse backgrounds reflected in the attendees and facilitators. Most of us in this room are familiar enough with going where we may not be welcome or represented, so don’t feel bad or hesitant about pursuing entry in those spaces that enthusiastically welcome you in. On social you can find me on Instagram as writepauserefect or my website, www.ramonapayne.com.

Lillie Pardo: Belonging to writing organizations has been helpful to me in my growth as a writer. That’s how I met Patrice! I’m also a member of a couple of critique groups, so that helps with being connected to other writers and not feeling alone. I’m on Instagram @lilliepardo, and FB at Lillie Pardo.

Angie Chatman:
I’m always looking to expand my network and build community. Please follow me on social media X, formerly known as Twitter, Facebook, IG my handle is @angiecwriter. My website is www.angiecwriter.com

Patrice’s Final Remarks
Thank you so much, everyone, for being here today and taking part in this important and necessary discussion. Thank you to the panelists for the wealth of words that remind us we are not alone on this journey. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and generosity of sharing. And finally thank you again to all of you for supporting this discussion by being here. We wish you all well as you navigate the rest of the conference. If you’d like to learn more about me and my work, please visit www.patricegopo.com.

RESOURCES:

Galleyway “spotlights opportunities for writers who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.” They also host writing accountability sessions and more! http://galleyway.com/about

VONA holds writing workshops for writers of color. VONA “honors its writers' unique histories, traditions and aesthetics and provides a protected mentoring space for learning and fellowship.” https://www.vonavoices.org/

The Hurston/Wright Foundation’s hope is to create, “an accessible approach to providing quality support to Black writers who are at various levels of their writing journey towards publication.” In addition, they also offer summer workshops. https://www.hurstonwright.org/
The Kimbilio Center for Black Fiction is a community of writers and scholars committed to developing, empowering, and sustaining fiction writers from the African diaspora and their stories. Projects include readings, presentations at professional conferences, networking, book prizes and the annual Fellows retreat for members of the community in July in Taos, New Mexico. For more information go to their website www.kimbiliofiction.com

We Need Diverse Books “is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.” https://diversebooks.org/

Patrice keeps a list of writing resources on her website, including information about applying for grants & residencies (at the very end): https://www.patricegopo.com/writing-resources