

Voice Matters: Critical Theoretical Approaches to the Creative Writing Workshop

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Abstract

This essay looks at the creative writing workshop through a critical theoretical lens and considers the impacts of silence on writers of colour and women writers. Traditionally, the creative writing workshop uses the gag-rule in which writers do not participate in the critiquing process but remain silent. This is a problematic practice for writers who already experience social invisibility. Critical race theory and feminist theory are two ways to consider the implications of silence on marginalized writers in the workshop and how this compromises voice. These theories disrupt the traditional workshop's structure through criticism of practice, and gives space for alternative pedagogies that promote voice and artistic agency for writers in the margins.

Key words: critical theory, critical race theory, feminist theory, creative writing workshop, creative writing pedagogy, silence

Introduction

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo movements instigated cultural upheavals through the sharing of testimonies. This move from silence to story by marginalized voices influenced institutions to reexamine policy for systems of racism, sexism, and implicit bias. The creative writing workshop deserves similar scrutiny, particularly with its practice of the gag-rule where the writer must sit in silence while the cohort discusses their work. For writers who are already silenced by society, this creates a pedagogical and artistic concern. This essay looks at the creative writing workshop through a critical theoretical lens and considers the impacts of silence on writers of colour and women writers. Critical race theory and feminist theory are two ways to consider the implications of silence on marginalized writers in the workshop and how problematic this invisibility is. These theories disrupt the traditional workshop through criticism of practice, which gives space for alternative pedagogies that promote voice and artistic agency for writers in the margins.

Voice and Story

We construct a sense of ourselves through storytelling (Bruner, 1991, p. 21). This narrative tradition stretches back to the Bronze Age with cave petroglyphs (Ranta et al., 2019, p. 499), to the oral tradition of Homer (Edwards, 2003, p. 65), to epistolary fiction (Bray, 2003, p. 4) and even in the modern narrativity of social media (Makela, 2019, p. 22). We use storytelling to process life experiences in order to figure out the nature of who we are and what our reality is.

This is why writing is particularly vulnerable—we share our ontological values, knowingly or unknowingly, through the writer-reader transaction. Jerome Bruner (2004) said that this “mimesis” in which “art imitates life and life imitates art” occurs because “we become the autobiographical narratives we tell about ourselves” (p. 692). Fiction is never completely false, and nonfiction is never completely true. Both tell versions of the truth because truth is subjective, biased, and myopic. Reflecting on ontological awareness, Jean-Paul Sartre (1964) said that “a man is a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it” (p. 39). This explains why writing can be so personal as it reflects the fluidity and changeability of our ontological perceptions.

Not only do we learn about our worldviews through storytelling, but we also use that information to create knowledge about how the world works. Galit Caduri (2013) said that for inquiries to be “epistemically worthy”, we need to “learn from good stories, stories that have aesthetic quality” such as “verisimilitude and enjoyment” (p. 42). We come to know ourselves through story, and ones that resonate. This is why Michelle Obama’s 2018 memoir *Becoming* has sold 10 million copies (Merry, 2019, para. 1); her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House as a woman of colour resonated with her readership. Even Penguin Random House’s chief executive, Markus Dohle, said, “I’m not aware, in my personal experience with Penguin Random House, that we ever sold 10 million units of a memoir” (Merry, 2019, para. 2). Stories that resonate construct knowledge about who we are because we can see ourselves in someone else’s story.

William Pinar (2016) wrote, “cultural myths are intertwined with personal myths. Our personal stories occur in cultural stories and that knowledge is built through storytelling and mythmaking” (p. 184). Creative writing draws on mythological structures, folk tales, oral storytelling, and the lived experience of others to inform their narratives, particularly in creative non-fiction, a major genre of the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program. This epistemological approach to storytelling shows that stories are not independent of one another but “intertwined” (Pinar, 2016, p. 184) to create meaning. In the example of Obama’s *Becoming*, she becomes the “compelling mythos” in which “we see ourselves” (St. Felix, 2019, para. 10), and to take that perception and use it to construct knowledge creates a reflexive loop, especially when that construction occurs through writing.

The Creative Writing Workshop

In 1936, the University of Iowa created the Iowa Writers’ Workshop which has become the gold standard (Meacham, 2009, p. 66) in creative writing education. Almost 100 years later, most Master of Fine Arts programs in creative writing, both on campus and online, build their programming on the Iowa model (Gray, 1999, p. 17; Donnelly, 2009, p. 50, 31; Delaney, 2007, para.2). In 1965, the University of British Columbia (UBC) became the first creative writing department in a Canadian university and is now considered Canada’s most prestigious creative writing graduate program. It too is built on the Iowa model.

The Iowa model refers to a graduate program for creative writing where students submit a section of their larger work to a cohort of fellow writing students for critique. The cohort

discusses the work and its pros and cons (Gray, 1999, p. 17), while the writer remains silent. This is what Kearns (2009) calls “the gag rule” (p. 792). The writer in question is not allowed to participate, interject, or clear up misconceptions (Nguyen, B., 2019, para. 13). Here the “workshop decenters the voice of the author” (Salesses, 2015, para. 1) because “even though it’s a democratic process, the cohort remains central” (Warner, 2015, para. 13). The inability to contribute to the discussion of their own work creates a passive learning experience for the writer.

In the beginning, the purpose of the gag rule was to teach students objectivity toward their art and how to develop thick skins in anticipation of the cruel world of publishing (McGurl, 2009, p. 174). In those days, the cohort featured white, affluent writers, and the founder, Paul Engle, ran a strict program that tried to harden its students through humiliation and damaging criticism (Dowling, 2019, p. 2). Yet, the implications of the gag rule’s restriction of participation extend beyond an exercise in creative distancing. Cognizance of ontological and epistemological positionings and how unique they are to the individual uncovers how the creative writing workshop does not prioritize the “plurivocal, multiple positionings that the teller unfolds through their narrative” (Brown, 2017, p. 219). Rather, it upholds a univocal conclusion discussed through critique that seems to override the writer-in-question’s positionings. Not only is the use of silence problematic for disenfranchised writers, “inappropriate criticism has the potential to silence student voices further, particularly students who already find themselves on the margins” (Warner, 2015, para. 22). Conversely, an inverted structure where the writer directs the conversation from a platform of agency helps to not only protect those positionings, but to

continue constructing knowledge and awareness through a curated, dialogic writer-centered workshop.

This is not the reality for marginalized writers who may feel their “position is precarious” (Salesses, 2014, para. 11) and that “speaking up has real negative consequences” (para. 10). Critiques are given so much prescriptive power that they can drown out voice, the right to tell one’s story, as well as harm a writer’s ontological and epistemological underpinnings of their artistic expression, and their sense of themselves as artists. For writers in the margins, critiques can act like a dominant voice.

Critical theory “seeks to emancipate the disempowered” (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 51). While feminist research and critical race theory both work to subvert oppressive power dynamics, they also have distinct theoretical paths with different implications on learning. These two branches of critical theory operate as independent, well-defined paradigms, each boasting a long history of theoretical discourse and research while remaining relevant to contemporary culture. Writer Viet Nguyen (2017, para. 1) said the workshop can be a hostile place for women and people of colour. Let’s look at the theoretical implications of this in the creative writing context.

Feminist Theory and Creative Writing

Feminist theory focuses on the power imbalance between the sexes, sexual objectification, the male gaze, problematic assumptions of sexuality, equality, empowerment and disempowerment,

autonomy, performativity, sexualized depictions in art, and other locations of inequality. An example of feminist concern in creative writing are genres that compartmentalize women's creativity as "romance", "women's writing", or "chicklit" which reflects sexism in the publishing industry (Harzewski, 2011, p. 14; Flood, 2014, para. 12). Then there's the gag rule, a disempowering practice for women writers. Creative writing, while a fine arts program, is also professional in scope that prepares writers for an industry that favours male artists. Jacob Took (2018) wrote that "women have to be better than their male counterparts to get the same recognition. They work harder and longer...and it has become increasingly clear that men can get by on mediocrity, while their female counterparts are held to impossible standards" (para. 11). When Swiss critic Martin Ebel commented on writer Sally Rooney's "sensual lips" instead of her smash debut novel, *Normal People*, it reinforces what writer Elia Shafak said that "a male novelist is primarily a novelist. But a woman novelist is primarily a woman" (Lewis, 2019, para. 2). When women writers are reviewed, there is the risk that they are not taken seriously. Eve Kraicer and Andrew Piper (2019) conducted a text analysis on the representation of female authors and female characters in contemporary fiction and discovered "a ratio of 2:1" or "the golden mean of patriarchy: two men for every woman" (p. 3). Their research also showed "the real impact on the way we think about the potential of girls and women" (Kraicer & Piper qtd. in Dowson, 2019, para. 8), which certainly trickles down to the creative writing classroom. JK Rowling of Harry Potter fame, arguably one of the most successful female writers of all time, chose a non-gendered name and a male protagonist, "at her publisher's request" (Rowling, 2020, para. 13) in order for the book to appeal to male audiences. Emerging women writers in

workshops deal with issues like aliases, marketability, and using male protagonists while male writers do not have to alter their creative work. The gag rule then reinforces this invisibility.

When #MeToo exploded in 2016, issues with silencing came to the forefront. This unleashed a number of articles about sexism in the book industry (Flood, 2014; Lewis, 2019; Thom, 2017; Took, 2018), machismo in the workshop (Corrigan, 2018; Doherty, 2015) and the costs of using the workshop to come forward about sexual assault (Carmon & Schonbek, 2019; Traister, 2019). However, it is important to recognize feminist theory's blind spot. bell hooks (2000) writes that "white women who dominate feminist discourse and articulate feminist theory have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the impact of class, of their status within a racist, sexist state" (p. 4). For instance, actress Alyssa Milano was credited (Sayej, 2017, para. 4) with kickstarting the #MeToo movement with her tweet: "if you have been sexually harassed or assaulted reply 'me too' to this tweet" (Milano, 2017). However, it was Tarana Burke, an African American activist, who coined the term ten years prior (Garcia, 2017, para.5). In *Hood Feminism*, Mikki Kendall (2020) explores similar issues of appropriation in the feminist movement (p. 2) and discusses the urgency of acknowledging intersectionality (pp. 85-97) as a feminist space.

Critical Race Theory and Creative Writing

Critical race theory (CRT) looks at power structures designed to oppress based on race and ethnicity. It offers “researchers a race-conscious approach to understanding educational inequality and structural racism to find solutions that lead to greater justice” (Price, 2020, para. 1). Postcolonial theory, while important especially for writers new to Canada and notably for Indigenous writers, locates itself in the “post”, whereas critical race theory evaluates racialized practices that are happening now, especially with resurgences of colonialism. CRT also plays an important role in highlighting three major issues with creative content: cultural appropriation, racialization of characters, and silencing the writer of colour.

Rosalie Kearns (2009) discussed the workshop as a colonial space with the “distinctly raced practice” (p. 794) of the gag rule and a “curriculum that assumes a student firmly located in the Euro-American cultural tradition” (p. 800). Key issues in CRT include otherness, white privilege, tokenism, microaggressions, and institutionalized racism. Edward Said (1978) coined the phrase “orientalism” to denote a fetishizing of the exotic: “it is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). This leads to hypervisibility (El-Haj, 2008, p. 178; Carter, 2008, p. 231)—racial spotlighting that calls on a writer to become a native informant thereby causing physical and psychological discomfort that limits student engagement in the learning process (Carter, 2008, p. 234). Asking the writer to act as a native informant demands that writers of colour testify as cultural authorities and write only about or for cultural communities to which they belong (Naga & McGill, 2018, p. 78).

Caucasian writer Lionel Shriver spoke as the keynote speaker at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016 wearing a sombrero and said how she hopes “cultural appropriation is a passing fad” because writers are supposed to “try on other people’s hats” (Tolentino, 2016, para. 1). When Gord Downie, lead singer of The Tragically Hip wrote a book about residential schools from the perspective of an Indigenous child, a member of the Treaty # 6 Mathias Colomb Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba, Clayton Thomas-Muller (2017), said: “Indigenous people do not need white people to interpret our stories. Let us speak for ourselves about our collective resilience, instead of allies taking up space meant for our own front-line voices” (para. 20). This call for authenticity in storytelling is further exemplified in the first-person testimonies shared through the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) as well as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry (MMIWG). These accounts underscore the cultural value and critical importance of writing with an authentic voice.

It wasn’t until the 1970s when the first writers of colour joined the Iowa program: Sandra Cisneros of Mexican descent, Joy Harjo of Muscogee Nation, Rita Dove, the first black woman, and Black playwright Thomas Pawley (Dowling, 2019, p. 188). Cisneros felt that the “subtle power” of racism while at Iowa left her with “a sense of inadequacy in her ethnicity” (p. 200). Following Kearns’ article in 2009, numerous voices emerged describing experiences with the workshop for writers in the margins. For instance, Junot Diaz’ 2014 article “MFA vs POC” described the “unbearable whiteness of the workshop” (para. 14). Matthew Salesses explained the implications of that imbalance in that “a straight white cis man who leaves the workshop disempowered in terms of his fiction writing usually finds the rest of his life more than willing to

empower him again. Someone with fewer privileges leaves a disempowering workshop and faces more of the same” (Salesses, 2015, para. 4). The need for sensitivity towards writers of colour is essential because “minoritized writers are subject to systemic discrimination and underrepresentation” (Naga & McGill, 2018, p. 70) in the literary community.

Recommendations

Critical race theory and feminist theory both spotlight locations of power, and in the workshop this tension exists between the critique and the silenced writer. So how can creative writing reflect contemporary culture in its approach to learning and move toward inclusivity, visibility, presence, artistic agency and questioning the gag rule?

Disruptive and innovative pedagogies that move beyond the Iowa Model are a starting place. For instance, give the writer more agency (Naga & McGill, 2018, p. 83), consider alternate methods for online creative writing like rhizomatic learning, and “unsilence” the workshop so that writers become the navigators of their own work (B. Nguyen, 2019, para. 14). As well, Canadian programs can integrate recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to disrupt pedagogies like “education for reconciliation” and build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect (TRC).

Creative writing can also move towards inclusivity through disruptive creativity. In the book, *CanLit in Ruins*, McGregor, Rak, and Wunker (2018) asked “why are so many minoritized authors represented within CanLit only when they tell stories of oppression and

marginalization?” (p. 18). Unsilencing the workshop is a first step toward disrupting creativity to cultivate stories from the margins that tell a diversity of narratives.

Concluding Reflections

The urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement and the rising voices of #MeToo underscore the need for a safe, inclusive writing workshop where writers can move from silence to being fully in charge of their storytelling and creative expression. Alternative and disruptive pedagogies offer contemporary writing students, and in particular, those who are socially marginalized, the opportunity of a relevant and inclusive learning experience that promotes visibility, artistic agency, and voice.

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