EVENT OUTLINE

Event description: 5 writers of different genres, race or ethnicity here expand the debate sparked by Junot Diaz’s “MFA vs POC” & continued by other writers of color including Viet Nguyen, Mathew Salesses and David Mura. Since American creative writing programs are 74% white, what are the pros and cons in pursuing an MFA for aspiring writers of color? Can a PhD in writing and/or the Arts help or hinder their path? What pedagogical alternatives exist for minority writers serious about their artistic development?

Statement of Merit: Many AWP panels on the pedagogy of creative writing have served a generic audience, however relatively few have addressed—exclusively via women of color—specific ways in which higher education in creative writing &/or the Arts can impact for better and for worse the minority writer across race, ethnicity, nationality or sexual orientation. This panel attempts to fill the gap and contribute to diversity and inclusivity within ways in which creative writing is taught in the American academy.

Structure: An hour for 4-5 questions and 20 mins of QnA with audience

Brief intro by moderator on why this panel/conversation is needed?
This panel started with the debate sparked by Junot Diaz’s “MFA vs PoC” and continued by several writers of color including David Mura, Bich Beth Nguyen, Viet Nguyen, and Gish Jen. But now MFA is no longer a terminal degree. Many univs offering PhD in creative writing, so we have here panelists who have either and MFA in CW or a PhD in the Arts or both.

Self-introduction by each speaker: to connect panel topic with their personal stories as writers and their current work.

Questions:
1+2: While the landscape is changing, most of us have an MFA program when it was predominantly white, and even today, the faculty ratio for *core* (not, visiting) faculty maybe highly revealing of the status quo in most MFA programs. Can you talk of some of the pros and cons – known and lesser known-- of getting an MFA as a WoC in the current landscape?

Raina Leon: I should start with the fact that I knew early on that I wanted to pursue a MFA, but long before I ever applied to a MFA program, I completed a MA in Teaching, then started my PhD process in Education, finished the PhD, started a MA in Educational Leadership, and the same time I started applying for MFA programs also was on the job market and obtained a position as a tenure-track professor of Education. While I was accepted to a few programs, the scholarships were never enough and ultimately having a job beat out having more debt, which I may carry until I die.

I rarely quit anything and so I completed the MA in Educational Leadership while working at Saint Mary's College of California. Even working full time as a professor, I knew that I wanted to pursue further study in creative writing. I knew my voice, read deeply, but wanted to be shaken out of my patterns. At the same time, I was based in the Bay Area, nearing
applying for tenure, and I could no longer just up and go as I had many times in the past. I only applied to Saint Mary's program, because I knew the faculty and was excited by working with them and my faculty benefit allowed me to take a course per semester for free (though taxed, so not really free). They also accepted two courses from other graduate programs and so I had only 4 courses that I would have to pay for out of pocket over 2 years. What that meant was that I taught full time, for a time lived on campus as a resident director (so second job), AND took classes full time. For my first 6 months in the MFA, I literally never left work; I lived on campus. I taught during the day and had evening classes AND took classes 2-3 times a week, mostly at night but 1 day time class. My second book came out right before I started the program, so I did a book tour, mostly in Ireland with short stops in London and Paris. My third book came out while I was in the program. I also met my husband just before the program started and by the end of the program had bought a house and just gotten married. It was a very intense time.

I say all that as context for my personal life, which was impacted by the microaggressions and plain old aggressions that I also experienced while in the program. I was one of two black women at any time in the poetry program. In my time at SMC as a student, I worked with only one person of color, a visiting professor. My poetry was also misread, misconstrued. If I used Spanish, it was exoticized. When we studied one poetry collection that only used Spanish in the epigraph, one student refused to read the text aloud and pointed to the only other Spanish speaker in the class to read it, though the class had struggled with numerous other languages in the text and interrogated how they helped to frame a collection or poem. I never quite fit in the program as well, partly because I was at a different stage of life. I couldn't just decide to hang out at a bar 20 minutes away when I had just worked for 12 hours and would again the next day. I regularly attended readings as a listener and as a reader. I went to conferences and offered workshops, much of what my peers wanted to do but hadn't imagined yet. And when I was rarely asked for resources as a peer, I would read in the faces of my peers a disconnect to this engagement with literary life as a citizen within it. I lived in this strange space as someone who was a faculty member and a student at the same time, seeing problematic teaching practices or a lack of skill in facilitating difficult conversations while also experiencing the pain of them. I could speak with my professors, though, as a peer, coming from my power as a faculty member and yet because of that power, felt separate from my peers in the program, except for those who themselves had returned to school for a second career or significant lived or educational experience before the MFA.

Still, there are advantages to the MFA: the ability to teach in MFA programs or English composition if you have experience there; the space to try new forms and get feedback through workshop; networking opportunities; the chance to, depending on the university, get funding to start a reading series or journal; the opportunity to edit on an established literary journal; the ability to work with renowned creatives; etc. Disadvantages: it's expensive; the job opportunities are becoming slimmer; you really have to have an eye for how you might want to work towards a career and most MFA programs don't devote significant time to the business of writing; and as a POC writer, you are more likely to suffer on all sides around your identity and your craft. It's important to find affinity groups, mentors, and resources to support you; you will easily feel and be isolated.

→Shubha Venugopal: I went to Bennington’s Low Residency MFA program. It was predominantly white, yes. It irked me that I was mistaken for one of the two other South Asian
women on the premises, even though we looked nothing alike. In one case, an elderly man had listened to the lecture of an Indian woman who was a year ahead of me. After maybe 30 minutes of looking at her, he later saw me and told me he liked my speech. The other woman was 5 or 6 inches taller than me, had features nothing like mine, was a different age and body type from me, was lighter-skinned, and had much shorter hair.

I did the MFA to learn writing skills and to expand my teaching possibilities. I enjoy the pedagogy of creative writing, and so learning skills was invaluable to me. However, we focused mainly on the intricacies of language and sentence structure, and a bit on short story construction, but I never learned anything about how to conceive of a novel, and techniques for writing one. Nor did I learn anything much about the publishing industry. And finally, I didn’t learn any of the unique ways women of color present and invent their worlds, and shift the possibilities of language and genre. It did help me in my career, however, as I have been able to teach creative writing courses in addition to literature, and those courses are a joy for me to teach. While it didn’t provide me with insights on larger aspects of writing, it did have a somewhat purist, or maybe micro-focused, approach that immersed me into words and sentences and how to build them.

The pros would be to get teaching positions, and perhaps even ones that cater to minority students like some of the classes I teach. Thus, any knowledge I’ve gained can be transmitted to my students, many of whom are women of color, who might not have a chance to progress to future writing classes. For me, the pro is also diving into the pedagogy and the details of writing. The cons are that I think sometimes writing in MFA programs can follow particular styles and formats that are more Western in style and conception. For example, Western writing often uses a linear time line—and in this time line, flashbacks are meant to be short and to be used only when necessary so as to not impede the flow of the main story. However, in Eastern conceptions, time can be seen as more cyclical, or wheel-like with its many spokes. Toni Morrison, for example, wrote *Beloved* in a matter that places multiple time lines as happening at the same moment -- past and present occurring together.

I had a story that I worked on for years that didn’t follow the typical linear format, and this caused many issues in how it was read. It took a long time for it to finally be accepted, and it won a prize. I think it’s the story I’ve spent the longest on with the many multiple drafts over the years that I produced. Sometimes, MFA graduates are nudged into the typical timeline because the publishing industry—such as literary journals—is mostly white. And so stories that break out of the mold are often rejected or changed to better fit in. Some journals prefer minimalist, edgy, and stark writing, and that doesn’t fit with the lushness I’ve loved seeing from women writers of color of all backgrounds. As well as genres like magical realism that I can use to play with the ideas of myths and realities I’ve gained from my Indian background.

>Soniah Kamal: Pros really are that you can teach afterwards (though if a PHD is going to become the norm, then that might nudge out the MFA in a hierarchy, and you might need that Pulitzer plus MFA— I recently taught creative writing at Emory, and MFA was good enough for visiting. Of course, learning to write.

Otherwise, I was much older with three kids, youngest 4, and could not hang out for beers afterwards.... My MFA, the Arkansas model, had a hefty academic portion to it i.e. literature and writing twenty-page papers—I often felt I’d much rather have done a workshop model but I guess nothing goes wasted...
\textit{Vanessa Garcia:} Well, for me, I did my MFA and PhD in Miami and then UCI. Miami had made a concerted effort not to be predominantly white, I think. So as to reflect the city it sprouts from. However, I do think that even with MFA and PhD programs that make an effort, there is still a narrative re: "how to write well" that does not reflect cultural differences. Sometimes they try to knock the "magic" out of you... There was one moment in the MFA program where I was encouraging a young woman who was writing very good speculative fiction (during my TA ship) and I was told by a professor that "that was not allowed" and I thought to myself: oh dear, what do you mean "Not allowed..." I didn't fight her because I had bigger fish to fry and I still gave my student an A, but it's an example. The default is a very white read/bred writing style that is accepted and to create beyond that is to push against the grain for good or bad.

3+4. Advantages or potential lures of a PhD – in creative writing or in a related field in the Arts, now that MFA is no longer seen as a terminal degree by many. Especially since universities have started offering a PhD in Creative writing? Disadvantages of a PhD in the Arts/Humanities or ideas to be cautious of before signing up for a commitment of -7 years?

\textit{RL:} I don't know enough about the advantages and disadvantages of the PhD in creative writing. I have a PhD in Education, because I identify as a teacher and as a writer. Those are my callings, my vocations if you will. The PhD was a natural step towards leadership in transformative education and it has helped me to consider how to innovate in both fields distinctly and collaboratively. That said, getting the PhD was fraught, difficult, soul-crushing experience in many ways. There were many times when I thought it better to give up; my community would not let me and held me through the process. Being a classroom teacher when I got my PhD and coming back from my defense to posters signed by my middle and high school students and colleagues? It was one of the highlights of my life.

If I knew then what I know now, I would only have gone to a program that was fully or very close to fully funded. In my PhD, I worked 7 contract jobs at one time, one of them to get tuition remission. I still have debt that I will carry for most likely the rest of my life. That's real. Working and caregiving while in studies, it is possible only in community, I think.

\textit{SV:} I do have a PhD, but mine is in literature. There’s a story I tell to my students about my past. When I was a freshman, I took a fiction class and based on what I produced – in my first time writing – I was not accepted into the program that allowed students to take more creative writing classes. My white instructor had very traditional Western ways of seeing writing, and mine didn’t fit her aesthetic. She suggested I go into literary analysis, since I showed promise in that area. Because I was young, I believed her. I didn’t take any more writing classes, and instead got my PhD in literature. It was only years later, after my daughter was born, that I suddenly acknowledged my truth—that I’d wanted to pursue creative writing from the start. In some departments, professors are restricted to teaching only their specialty. I have been lucky in that I have been allowed to teach both creative writing and literature courses within the Africana Studies department, and I sometimes cross-list with English courses as well.

The disadvantages are that there are many difficulties to a professor’s life—many of which involve overwork and underpay. Women and people of color are often given lower salaries. The work load increases but the salaries barely do, and in expensive places like
California, professors reliant on their sole salaries can barely make ends meet. Also, there is high competition for jobs, and very few available. People often find themselves in non tenure-track positions that have a number of financial and other negatives to them. As women, the whole formula of gaining tenure was built for men decades ago. It does not take a woman’s biological cycle and child-rearing into account, which makes it nearly impossible for some women. How to raise kids, teach a full load, do all the extra work to obtain tenure, and live with a much, much lower pay than others with our years of education and experience. I think one should go into it only if the love for teaching is so strong that the person must follow it.

SK: I don’t have a PhD

VG: For me, the PhD allowed me to keep writing. It really gave me the funding to do so. I wrote in a long search into google, something like "I want to do do a PhD that's creative with a creative dissertation and also do history and journalism" and single fellowship came up. I applied to it and I got it. We still live in a land that is full, brimming with opportunity, no matter what people say. I believe in this and we must take advantage of it.

It was five years for me and it slowed me down and it was much more challenging than I thought it would be. The PhD. BUT, it expanded my brain -- I could feel my brain cells changing and it was worth it in the end, but it's a lot of front loading and feeling like you're living like a poor student for a long while and the fruit doesn't come until much later. But, hey, for me it was worth it in the end.

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5. Not all have the luxury of going to grad school for N number of reasons -- personal/financial situation, academic funding or lack thereof, motherhood and caregiving, other professional commitments. Suggestions for alternatives toward an artistic formation or development *as WoC*, especially those multitasking in their personal and professional lives (motherhood, side-hustles, etc etc).

RL: Favorite writing teachers would be those that I worked with outside of the MFA, many of whom are now deceased (and many very vibrant among us): Rita Dove, Lucille Clifton, Patricia Smith, Mary Stone Hanley, Lenard D. Moore, L. Teresa Church, Gregory Pardlo, Brenda Hillman, Chris Sindt.

SV: I think, for those women of color who cannot pursue degrees for whatever reason, and for whom teaching is not an end goal, there should be more ways to find support for their writing. If I’d had other voices from minority readers who evaluated my writing, I might have gone into creative writing as an undergraduate rather than after being in a tenure-track professor job. Classes in schools as well as colleges could offer classes that draw in minority students, and tell them they have potential in their unique and beautiful voices, as I do with mine. Those students can come together and form their own peer collectives. We should have many peer collectives in our lives that nurture this particular side of our writing, and those should be easy to find and accessible. However, that is not the typical reality. I would love to see it become the reality, however.
SK: Online MFAs seem to be the route though very expensive (and in fact the reason I chose to go to a four year full time MFA instead was because I was awarded a fellowship and was funded the four full years which means I was working, so yes while I didn’t have to “pay,” I ‘paid’. But my job the four years was Assistant Fiction Editor for Five Points and I was at time reading 50 stories plus a week, and I learned SO much!!!! Otherwise there are so many places offering six-eight week online classes such as Catapult, and even locally writers groups offer one day workshops. AWP’s mentor mentee program is phenomenal for one on one guidance.

VG: There are a million and one ways to be a writer. There is no single path. That's the best part. My mentor used to tell me "The writer's life is long" and I didn't get that until later in life. That's a good thing -- we're not dancers, our minds just get stronger and our skills sharper -- the writers life is long and the way to get to where we are going can be a jog or a bike rid or a stroll or a plane ride or a crawl, but if you want to, you get there and the ride is part of it. Sounds cheesy but I believe it.