We Are Who We’ve Been Waiting For: Writers Of Color Talk Peer Mentorship

**Introduction (5 mins):** Moderator (Maya Marshall) introduces panel, the order of the discussion, and reads the biographies of the panelists. They are as follows:

**Claire Jimenez** is a fiction writer who received her MFA from Vanderbilt University, and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. She is the author of the debut collection, *Staten Island Stories*, which was published in December 2019.

**Donika Kelly** is the author of the chapbook *Aviary* and the full-length collection *Bestiary*, winner of the 2015 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and long listed for the National Book Award. She is an Assistant Professor at Baruch College.

**Natasha Oladokun** is a Cave Canem fellow, poet, and essayist. Her work has appeared in *American Poetry Review, Harvard Review Online, Kenyon Review Online, Pleiades*, and elsewhere. She holds the inaugural First Wave Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she currently teaches.

**Maya Marshall** is co-founder of underbellymag, a magazine focused on the art and magic of poetry revision. She holds fellowships from MacDowell, Callaloo, and Cave Canem. She is an editor for *PANK*, the author of *Secondhand* (Dancing Girl Press, 2016), and is a manuscript editor at Haymarket Books.

**Destiny Birdsong** is a poet, essayist, and fiction writer whose work has appeared in *Adroit Journal, The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature, storySouth*, and other publications. A Cave Canem and Callaloo alum, she has received fellowships from The MacDowell Colony and elsewhere. She is author of the forthcoming debut poetry collection, *Negotiations*, which will be published in Fall 2020.

**Panelist Commentary (35 mins~7 minutes each):** Each panelist will discuss the impact of peer mentorship on their writing and careers. Some general topics include:

1. How our current political landscape endangers women writers of color and what we can learn about the power and importance of historical peer mentorships.
2. How the length of time between the MFA and a debut book might necessitate peer mentor relationships.
3. How the structures and politics of MFA programs necessitate peer mentorships, particularly among graduate students in the same programs.
4. The benefits of having peer mentors who are co-generational, and who, as such, are making innovative choices in their work/professional careers, but are also (at times) more in-tune with contemporary literature/practices than mentors from different generations.
5. The peer mentorships that exist between the panelists, and how the panelists have benefitted from them.

**Roundtable Questions (20 minutes):**

1. In what ways do you think peer mentorship among women writers of color can inform and challenge traditional notions of artistic mentorship?
2. How do competition and limited opportunities potentially threaten such peer mentorship? How can/do we navigate those difficulties?

3. Was/Is there a particular moment when you were grateful for having a peer mentor versus a different kind? Was there ever a moment when the opposite was true? Why or why not?

4. How do you pay forward to other writers the community support you’ve received via peer mentorship?

5. How can MFA programs better foster these kinds of lateral relationships (as opposed to exclusively vertical ones)? How can such fostering improve the success of MFA students and graduates (particularly students of color)?

**Audience Q&A (15 minutes):** Audience will be invited to offer commentary/ask questions of any of our panelists.