

The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom, by Felicia Rose Chavez. Haymarket Books, 2021. 216 pp.

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Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may ... choose to turn around. . . . But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.

—Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* And Other Conversations About Race, 91

We've been doing it wrong—workshopping in our writing courses, I mean. Or if we're being honest with ourselves, we've been doing all of it wrong: reading lists, in-class discussions, homework. Our current practices are a disservice to every one of our students, but especially our students of color. We've tried, of course, but our collective attempts at inclusivity and culturally responsive pedagogy pale in comparison to the complete overhaul Felicia Rose Chavez, emboldened by experience, has implemented into her classroom.

See, Chavez is angry—and rightfully so. All her life, she's been judged, criticized, controlled. And when she finally found her voice, it came out roaring. It came roaring at a white-washed literary canon; at white professors looking for her input as the token person of color in the room; at institutions treating her and other brown-skinned people like the Others; at offering scholarships not on merit, but on the promise of satisfying racial quotas; at classroom procedures catering to white students and shutting her—her culture, her history, her voice—out. Now, she's using her voice to effect real change, building on ideas previously presented by anti-racist composition scholars like Iris D. Ruiz and Asao B. Inoue. In this book, Chavez expertly blends hard-hitting anecdotes with simple suggestions for improvement, making *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* a valuable resource for anyone looking to strive toward more equitable practice.

Before I begin, I should admit that at times, I questioned whether almost two hundred pages were truly necessary to communicate the simple steps

Chavez recommends. And while it's true that the exposition tends to drift nonlinearly, the text ultimately benefits from Chavez's snarky, emboldened tone and reflective storytelling because they both remind us that this project isn't just theory. It's real people affected in real ways. At times, it feels like we're peeking into Chavez's freewrites embedded in the pages of this book. It's certainly possible. After all, at the heart of her methodology is a trust in oneself, a reliance on instinct, a willingness to write first and edit later. Perhaps that's why her words are so powerful. Perhaps she edited for clarity but refused to edit her truth.

Early on, Chavez traces her educational experience at various institutions. As a student, Chavez writes that she tried to create change but was ultimately shut down by the people around her who were comfortable with the status quo. These were the individuals who confronted her about the frequency of her requests for inclusive reading lists, told her to stop mentioning race so often in her essays, and removed her as a volunteer reader for the campus's literary journal because of her open concerns about bias among its staff. In the end, Chavez's willingness to share these stories with her readers boosts her ethos as someone who's been through the system and who would have benefitted from the types of changes she presents in the coming chapters.

Before she launches into the specifics, Chavez takes a moment in the introduction to clarify the differences between traditional and anti-racist workshop models. Echoing Inoue's idea that "academic discourse...privileges middle class white students," she explains that the traditional workshop model involves white workshop leaders, a white-centered literary canon, and the "right" way to write, measured with rubrics against white standards (8). Students in these classrooms provide textual interpretations that the instructor measures against the "right" answer. Here, instructors assume their students' background knowledge. During a traditional workshop in this sort of classroom, student writers must sit silently and listen to their classmates rip their work apart, criticizing their word choices and unrelated tangents that remind someone of something else. They can't speak up to defend their work because, well, rules are rules, right?

Comparatively, the anti-racist model, or "aggressive activism," in Chavez's perspective, pits instructors as allies to and recruiters of writers of color (14). This model encourages leaders to pull texts from contemporary writers and create a living anthology that accepts contributions from students. Here, students define academic vocabulary without interference from the instructor. And when it comes time to workshop the writer, importantly, is not silenced. In fact, the whole goal of the workshop is for the participants to carry out a dialogue with each writer. It becomes a two-sided conversation guided by your questions. It's a radical change. And it's an equitable one.

Next, Chavez directly confronts the problems in the current model of workshoping in an enlightening way, beginning with concepts that many of us may have never considered: from the use of the word *literary*, which has essentially become synonymous with *white*, to the master-slave dichotomy that is embedded in reading famous white authors' texts and working to replicate them. Essentially, all the rules we're probably used to need to go.

In the remaining chapters, Chavez shares her experience by detailing how she lays the groundwork for an anti-racist classroom that also takes into account inclusive approaches to student engagement, reading practices, and writing expectations. Particularly effective is her focus on emotional enrichment for writers, which she refers to as *mothering*. Using classroom stories to which many readers can certainly relate, Chavez juxtaposes her approach against the traditional, product-based mentality that says students need to struggle, be torn down, and then built back up. Masculine. Tough. Not at all like the humanist approach Chavez prefers—one that celebrates individuals, their experiences, their attempts, and their growth en route to the sort of social reconstruction Ruiz calls for in her work.

Equally effective is the impetus Chavez shares for revising the literary canon, which, as she explains, perpetuates white supremacy. With sentiments similar to Ruiz's emphasis on "incorporating lost histories in writing curricula," Chavez offers simple solutions, such as presenting a digital anthology of contemporary, marginalized writers—people of color, people with disabilities, and gender-nonconforming individuals (12). Students can contribute to it, too; not only do students get to hear from marginalized voices, but also power and authority are distributed among the class. It's responsive. Relevant. Nothing at all like the prescribed list of homogenous writers most workshops favor.

Chavez also takes a unique approach to classroom language. Specifically, she refuses to stand at the head of the room and lecture on prescribed definitions of craft-related vocabulary such as *voice* or *exposition*. Instead, she encourages students to collaborate and create their own definitions, terms and conditions that they use during workshops. Student-led discourse isn't necessarily new, but Chavez's approach highlights the importance of avoiding assumptions about our students' background knowledge. Essentially, her approach ensures that no one is left behind.

Near the end of the book, Chavez returns to her storytelling expertise to share how she came upon *The Liz Lerman Critical Response Process*, a method that Chavez credits as foundational to her work. Lerman's approach, originally intended for dancers, has four steps: participants offering "statements of meaning," artists asking questions, respondents posing "neutral questions," and participants offering "permissioned opinions" (137-38). When applied to writing, these steps upend the traditional model. During her student-led

workshops, no one is silenced, participants avoid “it’s good” or “I didn’t get it” statements, and writers have control.

Some readers may wonder how Chavez could possibly assess students within the model she proposes. Disagreeing with Inoue’s claim that writing assessment is more important than pedagogy, she offers “discovery-based assessment,” centered on growth and change rather than rubrics and benchmarks (Chavez 169; Inoue 9). The process involves reflection in the form of freewriting and daily check-ins about goals and feedback. Under this form of assessment, students harness and observe their own growth, which tells them much more than a number on a grading scale ever could.

Overall, Chavez does a remarkable job explaining what it’s like to be a person of color in a college-level writing course today. She uses history and anecdotes to illustrate a perspective that’s surely foreign to many white professors and students sharing space at institutions across the country. While some may argue that these stories deviate from the step-by-step process we as educators must consider implementing, the pieces are all here, and as Chavez recommends, we can take portions, or implement all of her process, from top to bottom. It’s up to us. What’s not an option is to do nothing at all. As Chavez says, “To do nothing is to stand still and submit to white supremacy. Take action” (150).

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Works Cited

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