"Give 'em Something to Talk About": Love, Generosity, and Wonder in the Portrait of the Artist Workshop

Florence Gonsalves
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
fgonsalves@vt.edu

Matthew Vollmer
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
vollmer@vt.edu

ABSTRACT

This article argues for the employment of an alternative approach to the traditional writing workshop model called "Portrait of the Artist" (POTA). First, we acknowledge the historical and theoretical underpinnings of the dominant Iowa model, and engage with scholars who practice pedagogies that challenge the "gag-rule." Second, we introduce POTA, which dismantles and reimagines the foundations of a traditional creative writing workshop by emphasizing curiosity rather than suspicion, dialogue rather than imposed silence, process over product, and person over piece. The outcomes lead us to conclude that POTA workshops are necessary, especially for marginalized student-writers most harmed by antiquated practices of silencing.

INTRODUCTION

Many a writer has sat in a creative writing workshop, feverishly taking notes while inhabiting the dreaded and mythical "cone of silence" while their teacher leads their peers in a discussion of their work. This imposed silence—inherited from the so-called "traditional," Iowa-style workshop—has been endorsed for nearly a hundred years and seems to have been replicated in writing programs throughout the country. "What does [this] traditional workshop offer?" Matthew Salesses asks in *Craft in the Real World*. "One common refrain is that writers learn most from hearing what they haven't yet realized about their own work. And this is an important aspect of workshop, just not one that is actually best served by silence" (XXI). Salesses is one among many scholars and educators who have challenged the traditional writing workshop model including Liz Lerman and Felicia Rose Chavez, all of whom have introduced concepts and vocabulary crucial to what this paper advances.

"Give 'em Something to Talk About..."   *1*

Lerman's Critical Response Process suggests steps and roles that encourage dialogue and student agency, such as statements of meaning and permissioned feedback, and Chavez's anti-racist writing workshop emphasizes a myriad of practices to honor creative inheritance and encourage artistic allyship. However, such workshop-styles still tend to adhere to the prevailing and dominant model: a student brings a single piece of writing to workshop and receives feedback from peers and the instructor. Chavez provides a comprehensive overview of how this model—one that originated in 1936 with the founding of the Iowa Writers Workshop—became pervasive, and uses the terminology "traditional writing workshop model" (or "TWWM") to designate the dominant Iowa approach. Chavez differentiates her vision for an anti-racist writing workshop, which she emphasizes as "a study in love…[that] advances humility and empathy over control and domination" (7). Similarly, this paper proposes an approach that is rooted in care.

In her 2020 piece "We're All MFA's Now!" Beejay Silcox–a Virginia Tech M.F.A. alum, Australian literary critic, and Artistic Director of Canberra Writers Festival–depicts a common TWWM experience.

> We sat around a table with copies of a classmate's story in front of us and 'workshopped' it. We talked about how it worked and didn't work, as if the author of that story were not awkwardly sitting among us, condemned to silence. On our best days, our conversations were vibrant and warm-hearted. On our worst, they were conduits for personal animus. Mostly, they were a form of pedagogically sanctioned vivisection – taking a work that was barely alive and slicing it up. Taking ideas that were ungainly and edged and rounding them off, making them smoother, safer to handle. (Silcox)

As an international student, Silcox came to the M.F.A from a tradition of rigorous inquiry, where questioning ingrained university and cultural practices was encouraged. She felt alienated during workshop, underrepresented in syllabi across her courses, and unstimulated by what America had to offer the creative writing classroom. During her time at Virginia Tech, Silcox worked with Matthew Vollmer (now Director of the VT MFA program) to conceptualize an alternate graduate workshop experience, one where writers share more than a single story, poem, or essay that "needs work." Silcox and Vollmer considered the merits of having graduate students share other writing and forms of art created by both the artist and other influential creators, thus providing members in the classroom with an opportunity to, for example, read an Australian writer for the first time. Silcox and Vollmer began to imagine a new, more robust and dynamic alternative to the "Let's Treat This Text Like a Sick Patient" model. They wanted vibrancy and life. They wanted dialogue. They wanted to create something where the writer–the artist–could be seen and heard. Where the artist was granted agency. They wanted whatever process they came up with to center on discovery. "How can we meet a work on its own terms, if we haven't even met the person?" Silcox asked. The Portrait of the Artist Workshop was born.

Journal of Creative Writing Studies *2*

In order to honor students of diverse backgrounds, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ+ writers who have been traditionally silenced by antiquated, racist pedagogies that push traditional gag-rule style workshops, creative writing educators have a responsibility to uproot, from its foundation, the creative writing workshop, reimagining the space as an enlightened, democratic counterculture. We argue for a novel workshop approach that emphasizes curiosity rather than suspicion, dialogue rather than imposed silence, process over product, and person over piece, and in so doing cultivates love, curiosity, and artistic allyship, through the investment of one's writerly self and others in the classroom and the greater creative writing community. Silcox and Vollmer decided to call this style of holistic assessment "Portrait of the Artist," not as a gesture towards the famous modernist James Joyce but because of its emphasis on a more complete representation of a writer's artistic vision.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST WORKSHOP

As creative writing instructors we have a duty to students to reinvent the classroom space, and as Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* "The solution is not to 'integrate'...into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure" (74). In a POTA workshop, the writer whose work will be discussed assembles a collection of their own writing, as well as obsessions, personal photographs and literary and artistic influences. This can and often does include: YouTube and Spotify playlists, lists of favorite works of literature, screenshots and beloved memes, video games, PDFs of short stories or essays or poems or novel excerpts, favorite TikToks, visual art, photographs of friends, family, and personal life. This approach dismantles and reimagines the foundations of a traditional workshop by foregrounding curiosity, wonder, camaraderie and care rather than criticism and critique. As such, the basic structure of a POTA workshop has three roles—the artist, responders, and facilitator—and three steps. First, the artist who is "up for workshop" assembles a Google folder with four sub-categories: "My Writing," "Influences," "Visuals," and "Fascinations and Obsessions." The student then fills each sub-folder following the loose guidelines below. Second, the artist creates a "POTA guide" which reflects on the assemblage of their folder, what kinds of feedback the writer wants from their peers (responders), and how they want to conduct class for the third step, the workshop itself. It's important to note that these folders represent suggested categories and that students may modify both the topics and the contents therein.

STEP ONE: FOLDER ASSEMBLY

A. "My Writing"

In this sub-folder, the writer chooses which pieces they want to share with the class. The suggestion is to include one work that they have written that they enjoy re-reading, and a work they have written that they are confused or confounded by, knows isn't working, and/or needs help with. They might also select works of theirs from different genres to show range, early pieces that convey

development or artistic growth, and any published pieces they're pleased with. This is where the more traditional components of a creative writing workshop come into play, as we acknowledge that there is space for and value to critique if it happens on the artist's terms. Though students do have a chance to hear how their work is experienced and interpreted, this isn't the sole means of response. Furthermore, the piece that needs attention or is unfinished isn't discussed in isolation but rather as an entity that is part of a constellation of interrelated work.

B. "Influences"

Here the writer first assembles their literary influences in any way they see fit. One suggestion is to include a published work they admire and wish they had written, as well as a published work that they do not admire (perhaps one that has been, to their dismay, summarily praised). Other ideas to include within this folder are a list of top ten books or standalone stories, essays, poems or other writing the student counts as particularly influential. Students are also encouraged to include influences outside the writing world, including any art, music, architecture, or pop-culture references that have been pivotal in their writing. This step in particular emphasizes writing as a social and process-based activity, one that is enmeshed with all aspects of the human condition. Furthermore, other students as participants benefit from being exposed to a wider range of writers and artists than is possible in a traditional workshop. They are also encouraged throughout the workshop to share the names of artists and writers they think might match the writer's style.

C. "Visuals"

In order to showcase and honor their histories as humans, students may elect to share photos of friends, family, pets, and places where they've lived or visited that they deem memorable or significant. In class, the facilitator may cycle through these pictures and invite the student to talk about the reasons for each image's inclusion in the POTA. The decisions regarding the particular photos chosen by the student result in patterns of meaning that inevitably lead others in the classroom to make inquiries and suggestions regarding the possible topics and concerns the workshopped student might consider exploring in future writing. It also creates an atmosphere of care and love, as the artist is represented not just by a single *piece* of work, but by a collection of artifacts that showcase them as a holistic person composed of complexities and contradictions. This in turn creates an investment in the writerly self, and the writerly selves that populate the classroom community.

D. "Fascinations and Obsessions"

Works of literature comprise only part of the ways in which student writers have been shaped by the particular cultures in which they've been raised; thus, the featured writer in a POTA workshop may decide to include a wide range of additional texts and ephemera to share with others in the

Journal of Creative Writing Studies *4*

class. These materials, meant to honor and emphasize the importance of creative inheritance and the unique knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom may include screenshots, memes, visual art, YouTube videos, musical playlists, home movies, websites, notes, journal entries, juvenilia, lists of favorite films or video games, PDFs, and other cultural artifacts that the artist has identified as influential. Viewers of this sub-folder are encouraged to note any identifiable patterns and preoccupations, as well as any associations or connections they might feel to these particular artifacts. Discussions around this section of the POTA tend to inspire curiosity and wonder. Enthusiasm for particular subjects, ideas, and things tends to be contagious—or, at the very least, leads other students to appreciate the ardor the artist has for the things they've singled out as significant. Students may make specific inquiries regarding connections between the artifacts, ask the artist to talk more about why they love x, y, or z, or share ideas for how the artist might attempt to engage with or narrativize their connections to various subjects.

STEP TWO: POTA GUIDE

POTA workshops also include a guide or introduction to the material that the student has shared with the class, one that foregrounds student agency and expertise. This guide might include directions concerning the manner in which the workshop should proceed, as well as the specific topics or manner of critique, inquiries, or responses upon which the writer wishes to focus. Similar to Lerman's statements of meaning, the POTA guide is an opportunity for the student to consider the most appropriate feedback in this stage of their development. As such, POTA guides tend towards the idiosyncratic. For example: one student who wanted to represent a wide range of his interests and influences, spanning from computer science to indie rock to physics to avant garde literature, crammed his POTA folder with hundreds of pages' worth of PDFs, videos, songs, etc., and acknowledged that he had "overstuffed" his folder, but provided instructions for how to interact with the materials: set a timer for one hour, follow your intuition, and interact with only the materials that attract your attention. No matter how the student approaches constructing their POTAs, or how they instruct other students to interact with the materials, or how they provide directions for the ways in which they would like their workshops to unfold (or not), it's important to note that the entire process is student-focused and student-led. The student being workshopped retains control of what gets shared and on what terms, which is especially important for students from marginalized demographics. As Chavez says, "The anti-racist model empowers the author to moderate their own workshop while participants rally in service of the author's vision…. The anti-racist model distinguishes the workshop leader as artistic ally" (10).

"Give 'em Something to Talk About…"   *5*

STEP THREE: THE WORKSHOP

A. ROLES

There are three roles in a POTA workshop, and which are borrowed from Liz Lerman's terminology during the critical response process: the artist, the responders, and the facilitator. The artist assembles the folder then selects a workshop style[1] that best fits their desired feedback. The responders read through the artist's folder beforehand, and based off of the POTA guide, come prepared to discuss what they noticed–trends, recurring symbols, images, motifs, patterns, and preoccupations–as well as provide any feedback on "My Writing" that the artist has asked for.

B. STUDENT-CHOICE STRUCTURE

During the workshop, the artist will act as an active participant, responding to questions about the four main categories of the POTA. Fellow classmates act as responders, identifying resonances and connections (or lack thereof) between the shared materials, and embarking upon conversations about them—discussions that will absolutely involve, if not feature, the artist being workshopped. In essence, the artist is granted complete creative control over the workshop: they can choose to focus on what they deem important, whether it's to examine the connections between their influences and uploaded writing, or spending more time describing the photos of friends and family that are important to the writer; moreover, they can surrender control, if they wish, placing the weight of decision-making upon the instructor or their classmates, and allowing the whims, passions, and interests of their peers to dictate the shape and direction of the resultant conversation.

C. DIALOGUE, PROCESS, AND MODERATION

1. During workshop, a member of the class—the professor, or another member of the class, if mitigating teacher-student power dynamics seems appropriate—acts as facilitator and records key aspects of the conversation between the artist and responders on a whiteboard, noting observations about identifiable patterns and similarities between texts, artifacts and influences, as well as the artist's own preoccupations, obsessions, and avoidances. The facilitator also documents notable inquiries and perceptions that the artist's POTA folder has raised.

2. Considering the folder as a whole, the facilitator takes note of trends students as responders have noticed in the featured artist's work. POTA workshops may begin with a facilitator asking the artist to describe the experience of assembling their folders or expanding on their POTA guide; once this origin story has been shared, the discussion might pivot by inviting the rest of the class to describe specifics about what they noticed, or to identify main themes and "takeaways."

---

1 It's important to note that it is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate the various permutations of possible workshop styles.

Utilizing the whiteboard helps emphasize connections, themes, repeating images, and "vibes," highlighting unseen connections the student might not be privy to, but that may be apparent to students who are encountering their work with fresh eyes.

3. The documentation of the particular observations made by the workshop may also include the creation of generative prompts and ideas for further writing, as well as reading lists of other writers and makers whose artistic visions might prove challenging or complementary.

4. At the end of the workshop, the facilitator may choose to take photos of the whiteboard(s) and share them with the artist, providing a brief summary of the conversation and an invitation to discuss the results further. In the end, each writer featured in a POTA workshop doesn't just take home a piece that needs to be "fixed" in revision—although they certainly may, if that's the permissioned feedback they chose—but instead leaves the class with a treasury of exciting new possibilities. Rather than culminating mostly in a diagnostic proposition to fix what isn't "working," a POTA workshop ends on a chord of potentialities: lists of artists or influences fellow peers think the artist could learn from, prompts based on which of their obsessions or interests could be fleshed out more, and even suggestions for developing new pieces. One-on-one conferences post-workshop are also highly encouraged between student and professor to discuss the impact of the workshop, as well as the entire POTA process.

POTA WORKSHOP IN PRACTICE: MARY'S EXAMPLE

Each Portrait of the Artist workshop begins a week before the class meets. Let's say that this particular class period—ideally at least 75-minutes in length—is dedicated to workshopping the work and vision of a student named Mary. Mary has chosen to share four folders with the class— "My Writing," "Influences," "Visuals," "Fascinations & Obsessions"—that contain digital representations of her own personal vision and artistic influences and which include (but are not limited to): a song by Lana Del Rey; a clip of *Nightmare on Elm Street*; photos of her boyfriend and her mom; a *Twin Peaks* meme of the Black Lodge and the caption "I WANT TO HOT BOX THIS ROOM"; the poem "Toast" by Leonard Michaels; a still from *The Shining* of a distraught Shelley Duvall gripping a baseball bat; a still from *Rebel without a Cause* featuring James Dean; a photograph of red and green traffic lights in a snowy intersection; "Nighthawks" by Edward Hopper; Lydia Davis's paragraph-long story "Happiest Moment"; a still from *It's a Wonderful Life* bearing the subtitles "What do you want? You–You want the moon?"

Mary decides to spend the entirety of workshop the "normal" way, which is to say, by asking the rest of the class to identify patterns and preoccupations they observed in her POTA folder; to provide brief thoughts and general feedback on the short stories Mary uploaded, as per her POTA guide; to generate potential and individuated writing prompts, and to identify other artists that her

"Give 'em Something to Talk About..."   *7*

work might be in conversation with. Members of the class note that Mary seems drawn to Americana, moons, liminal dreamlike spaces, and snowy Midwestern tableaus that feature cozy houses. As the dialogue unfolds, themes emerge. White space. Quietness. Romance. Violence. Abundance. Decadence. Voyeurism. One student notes that, in Mary's work, characters tend to "do romance wrong, but it's right," and that both the writer and her influences seem to be taking comfort in representations of the bizarre.

> "The images, both in her flash fiction and poetry, seem to be in conversation with the lonely, evocative photographs in her influences folder," one participant notes.

> "It's like, as a reader or watcher, you're invited to dust for fingerprints," another observes.

> "Or like someone's pulling the curtain back," another adds, "and you're allowed to witness something surprising and intimate."

Let's say that Mary thinks all these observations are wonderful to hear, but her main problem–as she sees it–is that she feels like she keeps writing flash fiction but what she really wants to do is write a novel.

No problem. Her peers—and her professor—stimulated by this multimedia cascade of "Things Mary Loves," have ideas.

What if Mary made a list of everything she loved and held dear—ala Ursula K. LeGuin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction?"—and wrote a novel with all of those glorious treasures inside? What if she envisioned her unwritten novel as a kind of Advent Calendar–thus honoring her obsession with windows, with wintertime, and outsiders looking in–and behind each window lived a tiny story, the compilation of which contributed to a larger narrative? What if, instead of avoiding writing about her home state of California, she forced herself to really "go there"? Oh! And had she ever read Otessa Moshfegh's novel *Elieen*? Was she familiar with the work of Gregory Crewdson, who employed film crews to compose surrealistic portraits: a woman floating right-side up in a living room, say, or a lone man in a suburban neighborhood gazing into a beam of light falling from an unknown place in the sky?

At the end of class, Mary regards the whiteboard full of notes the facilitator has taken during the workshop. She's beaming. She expresses gratitude towards her peers for their time, care, and attention. She's pleased because she feels like she's been seen and heard, having held workshop on her own terms. Her voice mattered, as did her vision. Instead of a swarm of contradictory voices in her head surrounding a single piece presumed to require critique to save it, she can now lay claim to an abundance of observations and reflections on her body of work. She leaves with possibilities and a clearer sense of her writerly self.

POTA WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

To reiterate our earlier statement, by dismantling and reimagining the foundations of a traditional workshop along the lines of curiosity rather than suspicion, dialogue rather than silence, process rather than product, and person rather than piece, the POTA workshop: (1) cultivates the student's "writerly self," and honors creative inheritance, and (2) fosters artistic allyship, camaraderie and classroom community through the acknowledgment of, and investment in, the writerly selves of other students.

1. Cultivating the Writerly Self; Honoring Creative Inheritance

The traditional writing workshop model permits students to submit one story. One could argue that this could be interpreted as a type of synecdoche: one piece "speaks" for and/or represents the entirety of the writer's talent and abilities, thus suggesting a kind of disembodiment or disconnect. As Silcox suggested, workshoppers can't meet a piece where it's at if they haven't met the person. Creating a POTA folder, on the other hand, allows peers to view each writer holistically, as the sum of their experiences, work, writing, and influences. No mindful writer would ever argue against the importance of influences in the writing process, so why aren't we centering them more in our discussions during workshop? Why aren't the particular texts and cultural artifacts that have contributed to our own writing and the ways that we "go about in the world" more central to the conversations we have in class? The decentering or, in many cases, total disregard for influences can have a profound effect on the student writer, especially in the cases of students from marginalized demographics, whose literary lineages have historically been underrepresented in the traditional canon. Educators, then, might serve their student communities better by inviting a range of student perspectives and influences in order to create the kind of inclusive space suggested by Chavez: "A twenty-first century anti-racist writing workshop frees participants to exercise their own authentic voices….honors participants' influences, imaginations, and intellectual curiosities. And it affirms that every single one of them arrives at the classroom as experts in their own right, complete with a unique storytelling tradition" (43). When creative influences go unacknowledged, in the traditional writing workshop, entire cultures are at risk of being ignored and erased. As bell hooks claims: "Some [students of color] express the feeling that they are less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply do not assert their subjectivity. They have told me that many professors never showed any interest in hearing their voices. Accepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice: Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (39-40).

Giving students a voice doesn't only mean allowing them to speak in a workshop; it also means providing a space to celebrate, showcase, and document each student's unique expertise,

"Give 'em Something to Talk About..."   *9*

acknowledging that such influences have artistic merit no matter how much they deviate from traditional norms. In a POTA workshop, the evidence of the fruits of a more inclusive workshop is obvious: the multi-modal approach reveals the progress and evolution of the workshop as it unfolds in real-time on the board in the front of the room. It's satisfying to recognize, after class, that something valuable has happened: that the writer has received the gift of being seen and heard, and now has a roadmap for future work, whether it be a list of what they might consider reading, what they might try writing about, or which cultural artifacts they might interact with. The dialogue that follows–since it tends to describe if not more than prescribe–is kinder, more generous and more infused with wonder.

2. Fostering Artistic Allyship, Camaraderie and Classroom Community

In *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks says, "Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy" (39). There's a sense of being on the same team -- artistic allyship -- that is more prominent in a POTA workshop than a TWWM. Each responder is an artist helping another artist find themes, patterns, obsessions and avoidances to enrich the vision each individual has for their own work. When the materials students bring to workshop are not treated as sick patients or bodies whose deaths a coroner seeks to ascertain, and rather works that are connected to/in conversation with a constellation of related and unrelated artifacts, genuine curiosity arises about connecting the dots. When a participant in a conversation is enthusiastic about a painting or a song or a story – much less a whole volume of like materials – enthusiasm tends to be contagious. Even if the other people in the room didn't particularly "like" or "understand" the kind of music/poetry/memes being discussed, they can still recognize and appreciate patterns and preoccupations because they're rooted in a human being who is taking them seriously.

Concerning the importance of process in a creative writing classroom, Salesses says, "A product-based mentality only exacerbates this suffering, due to its emphasis on a polished final outcome… But real writing, the pursuit of authentic voice through process, not product, is a release of control. Your workshop participants can reclaim their creativity, release control, and restore confidence in their work by exercising generosity towards themselves" (63).

CONSIDERATIONS

Let us return to Salesses's point about the merits of a traditional workshop: students benefit from hearing what they might not have otherwise recognized in their own work. While POTA de-emphasizes product, there's still a space for feedback and critique. Ultimately, the way the artist spends their class period is up to them, and indeed portions of POTA workshops do contain more elements of a traditional workshop. Artists might ask responders in their POTA Guide for line

Journal of Creative Writing Studies *10*

edits or margin notes on printed copies or comments via Google drive, etc. Such an approach isn't without its merits; any and everything one writes can likely be "improved" and many artists benefit from having other eyes on their work. The difference between critique in a traditional workshop versus a POTA workshop is that the underlying assumption of the entire space isn't that there is something "wrong" with the writing. Instead, there is an understanding on behalf of the writers in the room that writing is a social act, and there is much to be learned from dialoguing about one's work. The impetus behind critical feedback in a traditional and POTA workshop is a shared one, but the practice is quite different. In a traditional workshop, some writers might choose their best piece in order to "prove" themselves — i.e., mimic the dominant white "literary" writing style. Secondly, as promising or effective as the writing within that particular piece might be, if students are pre-programmed to put on their detective hats and begin searching for clues as to how and why the text could be better, without permission or parameters, the outcome is tainted by the lens through which the work was entered. Also, the constant diagnosing of a work's illnesses can prove exhausting, as it privileges critique over almost any other mode of engagement. However, if the artist is in control of the workshop, and if dialogue is encouraged, there can be real merits to the writer receiving permissioned critique.

It should be noted, however, that POTA workshops still endure the pitfalls prevalent in traditional workshops and predominately white academic spaces. Although beyond the scope of this paper to investigate or expound upon, the potential hazards of these conventional approaches range from cultural competency to responder engagement. Inevitably some students won't arrive fully prepared. Others may not have read carefully or engaged fully with the artist's materials and so discussion may be dominated by those who have. Additional considerations include peer dynamics and the accompanying challenges that students might face when sharing vulnerable work, including feeling pressure to out-do one another or conform and mirror previous POTAs that have been shared. While such concerns are valid, they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

One other area of note is that POTA workshops described in this paper have been conducted at the graduate level. As such, the M.F.A students who partake - and find the workshop beneficial -- are likely already versed in traditional workshop, and thus have a foundation of critique from which to build on and deviate. As intermediate or advanced writers, they also have many more materials to add to their various subfolders, particularly "My Writing," and have likely had experience getting feedback about their writing in some capacity before. To tailor this to an introductory course, where students have less experience and less confidence, and therefore need more scaffolding, simplifying and specifying the folder assembly could be useful. For example, the parameters for "Influences" might be to add only *one* story the beginner writer has read outside of class and liked, but then also require a written response about *why* they like it, utilizing language introduced early on in

"Give 'em Something to Talk About..."   *11*

the semester, rather than assuming that the student already has a vocabulary for authorial choices and/or literary devices. Similarly, many beginning writers might not have much or any of their own writing to source materials, so to fill "My Writing," workshop should take place later on in the semester, after introductory students have had a chance to be exposed to, and write in, various mediums and styles. The guidelines for "My Writing" would also be more specific so that beginner writers have more concrete directions for collecting their materials. For example, "My Writing" might include one short story that the writer creates specifically for the POTA workshop, and also one "Proud Piece" — a short writing assignment from class that they're pleased with, along with a statement about why. Finally, the "student choice" workshop structure might not be as effective for amateur writers who are less familiar with traditional workshops. In this scenario we suggest providing students with specific workshop parameters — Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, for example — so that they might better understand the format of and expectations for responding to their peers. It's highly encouraged to perform mock workshops in class beforehand, so that students have a space to practice the kind of dialogues, responses, and processes they might experience in actual workshops.

CONCLUSION

It's worth repeating that the POTA workshop dismantles and reimagines the foundations of a traditional creative writing workshop by emphasizing curiosity rather than suspicion, dialogue rather than imposed silence, process over product, and person over piece. While traditional workshop assumes the writer has the problems and the readers have the answers, thus narrowing the possibilities for conversation considerably, POTA assumes that both parties must question and converse together, not necessarily to arrive at solutions, but to get at the heart of a writer's artistic vision, and find ways of honoring and enlarging it. The emphasis on process, rather than product, and on enthusiasm rather than critique, front-loads positivity and encouragement, while highlighting the truly social components of writing and reading. It maps relations both material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts), which makes for a rich dialogue that goes beyond "fixing" to wondering. The focus of this workshop style, then, encourages intrigue rather than critique, and its focus remains upon human creators and the conversations that emerge around the raw material presented in POTA folders rather than only evaluating the quality of a finished product: a process that can be crucial and nourishing for the growth of student-writers, especially for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students, and other members of marginalized communities. We hope this paper will serve as a springboard for instructors to "un-gag" their creative writing classrooms, whether academic or otherwise, and to foster spaces where student agency and expertise is acknowledged across cultures, populations, and demographics—and where dialogue, care, curiosity, and camaraderie is not only encouraged but prioritized.

WORKS CITED

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

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress.* New York, Routledge, 2014.

Lerman, Liz. *Critical Response Process.* Website. https://lizlerman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Critical-Response-Process-in-Brief_CRP-one-pager_updated-2020_03_24.pdf. Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.

Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping.* New York, Catapult, 2021.

Silcox, BeeJay. "We're All M.F.A's Now!" *Australian Book Review,* August 2018, No 403.

"Give 'em Something to Talk About..."   *13*