OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh Allen & Ben Gallagher

**Poems for a Revolution: Democracy in chaos poetry workshop**

**Workshop description:**

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities these poems about revolution can offer us, especially the day before an important US election, as we read contemporary poets exploring the nuances of demanding system change, and think about what they offer us as both students and educators. (NB: This workshop took place on November 2, 2020 - the night before the US presidential election.)

The purpose of this workshop is to share contemporary poetry and the experience of writing poetry in community, and to ultimately think about the possibilities for contemporary poetry in our lives and classrooms as educators. We aim to consider not only the content but also the sonic and structural choices poets make, as a way to consider the possibilities that a creative writing practice has to offer us as writers and educators.

We are grateful to be a part of a community that values engagement with writing and reading.

**Workshop outline:**

*(5 minutes)*

**Welcome participants & introductions / check-ins**

Names, pronouns, a word or two to describe how each person is feeling today

*(5 minutes)*

**Share the purpose of this workshop**: **To engage in reading/ writing about revolution/ desiring revolution and change**

* Demands for change in the larger structures that govern our lives (nationally and globally) also have impacts on the structures of school we find ourselves within. When we contemplate the creative possibilities surrounding revolution, what does that mean for us as educators?
* What happens when we write about subjects that are not typically found within the poetry classroom (ie: politics, giving in to the chaos around us instead of trying to control it, to name it or put words to it instead)? How do we make links between our external world and our sense of self, from a creative perspective?
* At an online poetry reading of di Prima’s *Letters* on Nov. 1 (at *Red May TV* on YouTube), a poet emphasized that no matter how good the poem is it has limits, if we step outside the poem, we can enter into limitlessness – the work exists elsewhere, not just on the page. What are the boundaries and possibilities within a poem?

*(10-15 minutes)*

**Participants volunteer to read through all of the poems at least once (Quaker style):**

*(40-45 minutes)*

**Participants write**

* Using the prompts offered, participants mute their mics and write.
* Participants are encouraged to consider: What else do you see happening with language and imagery and topic in these poems? Feel free to include other things you notice in these poems or anything else that inspires you at present!
* ***Write for 45 minutes***
* After writing:
  + Everyone is called back and invited (to voluntarily) share what they wrote or a section of what they wrote...

**Diane di Prima’s Revolutionary Letter #75: Rant**

<http://home.insightbb.com/~gardner.j/rant.html>

*Prompts*:

* Make a list of things that cannot happen without imagination
* Include a reference to a celestial body (sun, moon, etc.)
* Repeat a phrase three times as an incantation (can involve minor variations in the phrase, or exact repetition)
* Include a garden of some kind

**Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters*** **(Letters #1, #2, #14, #33, #63)**

<https://illwilleditions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/diane-di-prima-revolutionary-letters.pdf>

*Prompts*:

* What would you offer to ransom yourself? (letter 1)
* Include a piece of your clothing in the poem (letter 2)
* Include a phrase in all caps for emphasis (letter 4)
* Contemplate the progress of time -- what does a non-linear view of history offer the poem? Link a distant past and a far future moment (letter 33)
* Comment on your relationship to stars/ the cosmos through science and through your own dreaming (letter 63)
* What is the voice of the cosmos to you/ what does it communicate? (letter 63)

**Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”**

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gilscottheron/therevolutionwillnotbetelevised.html>

*Prompts*:

* Explore what keeps you at home and what inspires you to be out in the world/ on the streets
* Include a list of contemporary cultural heroes
* Include a list of what you’ve recently experienced through your senses (what you’ve seen, heard, felt, smelt, tasted)
* Include some products/ advertising promises (eg: “Coke, solving bad breath” etc)
* Include a list of nouns linked by colour (eg: “white tornado, white lightning, or white people”)

**CAConrad’s “Diving into the Premonition”**

(This poem is on their Instagram account @caconrad88, posted July 2, 2020)

*Prompts*:

* Include a witch and/ or an alien
* Make a reference to a documentary you’ve watched
* Include a place inappropriate for children where you were once brought (or where you’ve seen children and thought they were too young/ innocent to be present)
* Include a sound pair (smile/smell)

*(5 minutes)*

**Ideas for exit conversation**. **Participants invited to discuss and reflect on the experience:**

* What did you notice as you read and wrote? Were you surprised by anything in particular?
* Benefits / uses of a workshop like this?
* Do you think you will incorporate any of these poems, themes of the poems, or this method of writing together in a virtual room in your own teaching? In what specific ways? If you would use these texts, you’d use them in conjunction with what other texts/ ideas/ questions?
* Are your students writing creatively together in virtual spaces? What does that look and feel like?

***Other poems that could be used for reading/ writing activities centered around this theme****:*

*Amiri Baraka:* [*http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf*](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf)

*June Jordan:* [*https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48762/poem-about-my-rights*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48762/poem-about-my-rights)

*Wendy Trevino:* [*https://www.firstofthemonth.org/revolutionary-letter/*](https://www.firstofthemonth.org/revolutionary-letter/)

*Juliana Spahr:* [*https://poets.org/poem/excerpts-will-there-be-singing*](https://poets.org/poem/excerpts-will-there-be-singing)

*James Baldwin:* [*https://poets.org/poem/untitled-5*](https://poets.org/poem/untitled-5)

*Joy Harjo:* [*https://poets.org/poem/how-write-poem-time-war*](https://poets.org/poem/how-write-poem-time-war)

*Ada Limon:* [*https://poets.org/poem/instructions-not-giving*](https://poets.org/poem/instructions-not-giving)