

Pedagogies for Social Justice

Cheyenne Holborough

Transcribed by www.premiertyping.com, alison.mcpherson@premiertyping.com

Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

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Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Cheyenne Holborough, a third year student of Creative Writing & English Literature at Westminster. Cheyenne also plays a role in the Pedagogies for Social Justice Steering Group as well as a co-creator of the project's glossary. In this interview, we discuss creative writing as a tool for activism, the School of Humanity's new Writing Festival, her role as an EDI rep, and how we might begin to de-colonise English Lit and Creative Writing.

Hi Cheyenne, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. I've been looking forward to finally getting you on here. How are you doing?

Thank you for having me. I'm doing good, thank you.

Amazing. So, I like to start off the episodes with guests telling us a little bit about themselves, in their own words. So, first things first, where are you from?

Born in East London, raised in East London. I have family from the Caribbean, St Vincent, and [...] Antigua as well.

What do you study at Westminster?

Creative Writing with English Literature, and I take Japanese as an elective.

So, correct me if I'm wrong, but Creative Writing is kind of like an umbrella term to cover like writing poetry, screenwriting, playwriting, and of course like the study and analysis of creative texts, but what is your favourite like writing style?

I think...I don't think I have one, that's for sure. I think I like – poetry, I recently started liking. I used to hate it because the way they used to teach it in school was so analytical, but like the way they teach it here, they teach you how to enjoy it. Also, I really like playwriting as well. I wrote a play recently as well, which was really cool to do, and get it...a bit of it performed, so that was cool. But yeah, I think poetry and playwriting are probably my favourites.

Okay. So, it kind of like changes as well, shifts a little bit?

Yeah. I feel like it depends on what I'm studying or what I'm reading.

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Okay. You've said that your work tends to focus on kind of like centring under-represented narratives and stories to ensure that they are kind of seen, heard and felt, and I know that is kind of like a common impulse in a lot of writers of colour, but what was the kind of book or who was the writer that kind of pushed you to get into writing for people from the margins, or, you know, was it something else?

I think it was... I mean, I have read a couple of authors – like one author that's really stuck with me is Nick Stone. I read her book called 'Dear Martin' and that was about this young boy in America, who [got] with like crazy police brutality and all the like, what it was like for him at high school, and I think the way she portrayed that kind of kickstarted it for me, but also just throughout my academic life, being under-represented with creative texts, all the time, and if we were represented, then it was creative text about black pain or from the perspective of some old, white person who was dead talking about black people in some sort of odd way. So, yeah, those are the kind of things that kind of kickstarted me wanting more [representation] within creative media.

No, I definitely hear you on that. Do you find it's more challenging to kind of articulate like racial topics and anti-racist politics in a script for a screenplay in comparison to maybe writing about them like in a novel?

No. Actually, I find novels harder to articulate. I think it depends on the writer though. It's just because playwriting comes a lot more naturally to me because I can see everything happening in my head. Novel-writing, because you have to add a lot more description, I think...I feel like...well, if I write it anyway, I feel like the meaning I'm trying to portray will get lost underneath all those words, so I feel like playwriting is a better medium for me anyway.

Okay. It's funny because I was thinking about this episode and I was thinking like, coming from the Social Sciences, I think the difference between our writing isn't even necessarily like what we write about but it's more kind of like how we write about them, and I think writers, like you have no choice but to be engaged with society, just like being a sociologist or psychologist or anthropologist, and I think where things begin to kind of like differ is how we communicate those ideas and concerns. I might write about, you know, the impact of lockdown on Afro-Caribbean women in the UK, and then you might write like a screenplay about a single Afro-Caribbean woman living alone through the first lockdown and kind of what she experienced, you know? So, both kind of explore like the same thing, but I think, for you, like you really have that agency to kind of go beyond the facts and statistics and theories and create like a character and plots and use that to kind of deeply address like really pressing issues, and I think, you know, that's such a like special thing, and I know it definitely requires a lot of skill. So, my question is: when you're put in a position where you're writing about a highly kind of contested topic, do you feel it's necessary for you to look at academic literature outside of your discipline, or do you kind of take what you know, use that as a foundation, and then like let your creative writing kind of add to it?

I think – and we're taught this on the course as well – that we should always write what we know. So, basically, they encourage us to research things, and if, say, the topic I do want to write about or the topic that we're suggested to write about is a bit controversial, be careful where you step, and that's where the research is really important because, sometimes, if you don't do that research and you just write what you know, or what you think you know, then you'll be in a bit of hot water. So, I think research, not only within the course but also outside it, is always really important just to avoid offending anyone really.

Yeah, absolutely. And I've touched upon, you know, creative writing is a tool for political thought and radical expression and I think, you know, it's been that way for centuries, but, you know, the narratives that black writers specifically have offered and continue to offer play such a significant role in like shifting perspectives on sexuality, race, culture, politics, and, with that being said, I do feel like it's

important to kind of talk about how this rich and like diverse body of literature that empowers us often comes from...it comes at the expense of people who have to like re-live and re-tell their trauma or articulate the kind of collective pain that is experienced by the communities they come from, and, you know, I can only speak for myself, but I remember, when I had the opportunity to write like an autobiographical piece for a module in third year, like I touched upon kind of personal topics, like multiraciality in my upbringing and things like that, and like I do remember finding certain parts difficult to articulate in a way that wasn't seen like kind of doom and gloom, and I remember just feeling a little bit kind of overwhelmed. And, you know, I can only imagine how you've probably felt this way more times than I have, but how do you kind of manage to find a balance when you come to write about sensitive topics or personal kind of experiences, like how are you able to write without letting what you write about like consume you – or is that what you're supposed to do, I don't know?!

I feel like, for me, I don't know about other writers, I feel – actually, no, I feel this applies for a lot of writers. Writing is kind of like a form of escapism. So, you can talk about those feelings in your writing and it just feels like you're just letting it out. It's kind of like therapy. It's like somewhere...it's almost as if you have someone to talk to – the page is the person to talk to, and you can write down everything and the page won't judge you for it. It's just you and the words. So, it's like...it's really freeing. I think the problem lies when – I've never had to perform one of my poems, for example, and I'm kind of glad for it because [laughing]...because I like... Like, for example, one of the poems I did for last semester for one of my portfolios talked about how, in secondary school, there was the whole light-skin versus dark-skin thing, and I didn't... I was lucky enough to not really be engaged with that and not really – I just thought I'm black and that's it. But then it got to the point where people were going, "Oh, you're light-skin", blah-blah-blah, and I was thinking, "Well, what does that mean? What does that mean?" It got to the point where I was like...people were saying I'm too black for the white kids, too white for the black kids, and so I wrote the poem about that. It felt really freeing, but then, when it came down to submitting, I was like, oh gosh, I am sending this to someone who has no idea what this feels like [laughing] – this is really strange! But if...I think the best thing for me is not...just don't think about it, send it off, and, luckily, I had a really nice teacher for that course so she was really understanding and everything, so that definitely helps too.

No, I can definitely relate, for sure. You said that you were recently a part of the new Writing Festival in the School of Humanities and you had a play called 'Work in Progress'. Could you tell us a little bit about that and like the creative process of just like bringing that together?

So, 'Work in Progress' is about two teens in sixth form college. One is called Estelle and one is called Tray, and they're both suffering from mental health issues – not the same ones, [they're suffering from a different one to each other]. Estelle has a tough family upbringing where her mum is really hard on her about her education and wanting her to succeed. Tray, on the other hand, his mum is really supportive of him, but he's too afraid to confide in her. I think [I just cried] because one day I was...I was actually sitting at home, and, em, I had just started being an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion representative, and I was thinking about...like listening to people's feedback and stuff and thinking that, because there's not that many black people on the course, we don't really get our voices heard, even in feedback. So, I kind of thought, oh, what's another way I could help us be heard, and then, for some reason, just had like...these images of the set of the play pop into my head, and I kind of ran with it from there.

And just going back to what you were talking about, about being an EDI rep, how did you actually come into that role?

They sent out an announcement through our emails, on Blackboard, and that's how I came across it, but then, em, not everyone had heard about it, for some reason – I was one of the few people. But yeah, the course head sent it, and I sent emails to the person running it, and then, yeah, just went from there.

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And what do you enjoy most about doing that?

I think it's...if...it's really cool to be able to actually make an active change and hear people's opinions, take it to the uni, and then actually be able to go, hey, something's happened and some things have actually changed in the uni. But I think it can be frustrating when...em...because some of the university services need to be updated, some things can take a long time, so it can be frustrating for people, but...I mean, it can't all be easy sailing, so yeah...!

Do you feel like EDI reps are kind of valued amongst like other student reps or do you feel like there's a bit of like a hierarchy there?

Em, I kind of do feel that way because... I don't know...I don't know how [others feel]. It just feels like a box that needs to be ticked at times. It just feels like...our issues don't feel as important to the University as say the course reps' ones, because I feel like the course rep issues get solved a lot faster in comparison to EDI issues. So, if that could change, that would be great, but yeah, so far, it just feels like another box to be ticked.

So, in terms of like responses from faculty, do you feel like there's like a willingness to kind of address the issues but there's just not that action or is it actual like reluctance?

Yeah, em...I feel... Like the people running it, obviously, you can tell they really want change to happen, but they always seem to be getting so much pushback, and I don't...like the EDI reps don't actually get fully in contact with the people who the staff are contacting, so I have no idea if it's like, em, they're unwilling or if there's really just like some sort of process they need to go through – so I'm really not sure.

I'm now wanting to kind of dedicate a bit of time to talking about creative writing in relation to higher education. As like, you know, most disciplines, Creative Writing and English Lit curricula in general don't always kind of reflect the diversity in people and perspectives that we see in society, and, more often than not, like they continue to kind of perpetuate whiteness and colonialism, and I feel like, you know, you can offer a lot of insight into this. So, to begin with, are there any things you've noticed in your curriculum specifically that have kind of colonial undertones or reinforce whiteness?

Em, well, just the texts we study alone – it's always to do with old, white people who are long dead now and about their experiences, and if we do get black books, then it's from pain or from like... I think, the first year, we studied a book about this woman who saw black people for the first time or something, and she just described them in terrible ways, and there was no trigger warning on it either - which we talked about in EDI so now we have trigger warnings on the course. But it's stuff like that where...where they don't seem to realise us reading these texts can be really harmful. And even one of the plays we studied in first year, I told my teacher I couldn't finish the play because it was just...it was just too much to take in, and you kind of felt like I was being judged for it a little bit, but there's nothing I can really do because I don't really want to experience those feelings again, and I shouldn't have to at all. So, em, yeah, those are just some of the ways, anyway...

So, do you find it kind of...? So, obviously, having a particular reading list is obviously challenging, but do you find it challenging to actually have conversations about race and anti-race politics with other students and kind of like your lecturers as well?

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Yeah, because... Like you can just feel the room go quiet as soon as it's mentioned, like the tension is thick, and you...you start off, you can start off confident, and then like you're walking around the room and you're like, "Oh gosh, I don't feel like I should be talking about this," and your voice just goes quiet and it's just...it's really irritating because, behind closed doors, em, students will be really proactive about talking about it, but, for some reason, when it comes up in the classroom, nobody wants to talk about it, and, em, it's quite frustrating. But I spoke with another fellow student about it and she just said we should just start speaking, no matter what they say – and that's what she did. I was afraid the first year. Not anymore, thankfully [laughing]. I think it is difficult to speak about it, but like people just have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable if we want anything to change at all.

Absolutely. So, I guess you kind of spoke about this a little bit previously, but do you find it challenging to even write about topics, knowing that the lecturer that's probably going to be reading and grading you isn't a person of colour? Because I have honestly experienced that...

Yeah, I have. I feel like I will change my writing style based on the teacher. So, if I know the teacher gets what...is going to get what I'm writing, then I can write with no limits, but if it's a teacher where, em... Like, for example, in second year this year, one of my teachers described Native Americans as Indians, [...], and like that was within the first week, and I was like, okay, I will have to limit my speech because, no, that is not okay. So, when I submitted my assignment to him, it was meant to be kind of, em, it was meant to be an all-inclusive piece, but I had to limit that because I knew he probably wasn't going to get half of what I wanted to say. So, it can be frustrating [laughing]!

No, absolutely. And I feel like even just...as a student, like you also just feel like this is a time for me to kind of just write freely and then just being kind of...you know, just have...just think freely! And I feel like having to put those limits on yourself, like, yeah, can definitely be...

Especially in Creative Writing when we're meant to have like no limits whatsoever, so...

Yeah, exactly, yeah. You may not have the answer to this, which is totally fine, but how can kind of your lecturers help situations like the ones that we've talked about? What would make you feel more comfortable in your course?

Em...eh...I feel like having teachers like the one I had for poetry, em, I think that really helps. I spoke about this on EDI. Her techniques are good because, not only does she just teach about...teach us the topics that we need to learn but she also talks about...she also opens discussions about equality and inclusion, so like she's...she's also educating people on that front because we don't really get that education otherwise, or the people who need that education don't get it in uni. So, I feel like if more lecturers and teachers opened up discussions like that, in a way that didn't make things awkward, because she's able to include everybody in the conversation, it makes things way less awkward – I feel like that would help things along really, yeah.

Do you feel like you would appreciate your lecturers also kind of engaging in...you know, just educating themselves on certain topics a bit more so that they're able to kind of deliver it in a way that...like is [respectful/respectable]?

Em, yeah, it would be helpful, and, actually, as part of the EDI group, the teachers will be getting workshops, at least in the Humanities Department anyway, on equality, diversity and inclusion, so courses should be different next year. And I think they're also required to send in feedback forms on how inclusive their course is, so there's that.

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Okay, wow. So, was that something that the kind of...you were working in partnership with your lecturers or...?

Yeah.

Okay, that's amazing. That's really good news. What piece of advice would you kind of give to future students thinking of pursuing a degree in Creative Writing?

I'd say, first off, throw away all the creative literature, knowledge, about...like that's Eurocentric, just throw it all away, and when you get there, if they don't have an inclusive reading list, demand it. Ask why they don't have it because, otherwise, we'll get nowhere. And if they can't [give] a valid explanation as to why, then they need to have something because it's just not okay not to have anything. So, I'd suggest like giving them...suggesting authors and constantly bringing up various topics in class to kind of really push for inclusion within the classroom, and it's like we shouldn't have to do it, but, unfortunately, if we don't do it, no one else is going to do it so...

Yeah. Thank you for that. Are you working on anything else that you'd like to share or any ideas that you are planning on bringing to fruition?

Em, other than my play, which I'm hoping will be done by the beginning of next year, hopefully [laughing], I'm the Black History Steering Group so I've actually written a view about a documentary that was on Channel 4. I think it came out for Black History Month last year, I think. It's called 'Hair Power: Me and My Afro', and I did a review on it. It was a really good documentary, very enlightening. I kind of wish it was longer, it was that good. But yeah, that review should be coming up within maybe the next week or so, I'm not sure, but yeah, [and there are some different] reviews and stuff on their website.

And, unfortunately, we are coming to the end of this episode, but as a question I do like to end on, what is something you'd like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

I definitely would like to see...more people of colour within the staff members because...I just...I feel like that would really help things as well. I feel like we wouldn't have to even work as much as we do if we had more people of colour in departments, department staff. So, that, I'd like to see.

Mm, absolutely, I agree – thank you for that. It's honestly been such a pleasure to have you on this episode. We've had some really fruitful conversation, and you've also made some really important suggestions that I believe people can start working towards, and I look forward to seeing your play and hopefully seeing it come to life.

Thank you! Yeah, look out for it!

Yes, absolutely. And hopefully we can even see more black staff members in the next 10 years – hopefully a lot sooner though!

Yeah!

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But thank you so much, Cheyenne.

Thank you for having me, it's been great!

To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj

[End of Recording]