

Inspire. Disrupt. Decolonize.

Based on [*Congo, seen from the heavens*](#), this 4-week creative writing course is designed to *inspire*, *disrupt* and *decolonize* creative writing spaces. The workshops are made to be inclusive, generative and beneficial for writers at all levels. However, facilitators should keep in mind the needs of their space and adapt the workshops accordingly.

Pedagogy:

Inspire: The activities in the workshops invite and enhance creative expression; encouraging participants to write beyond traditional forms.

Disrupt: Education systems rarely make room for introspection -- this course does the opposite. Participants are invited to center themselves, communities in their writing and deem even what can appear inconsequential as worthy of being written.

Decolonize: This course offers a critical look at various power structures that exist and empowers participants to grow in a method that works best for them. The course recognizes and rejects offshoots of colonialism in learning spaces by creating an open space, without power structure, that uplifts the participants and their needs.

The Book: *Congo, seen from the heavens* is a collection of poems that journeys through not often told history from the Congolese and Black diaspora to deliver its warnings, lament, and hopes. From the perspective of a refugee, this book addresses the complex relationships between home and survival while rooting itself in the reminder that we are [our] “ancestor’s best outcome.”

Cost & Materials: Free, as a labor of love. To support this labor, I ask that you consider buying an individual copy or a class set if you plan to use this workshop [here](#).

Credits: This packet was created by [Cianga](#) who learned their foundational facilitation experience from [Youth Speaks](#) and [Gabriel Cortez](#).

Outline & Resources

The workshops are divided into the following:

1. [Absurd](#)
2. [Portrait](#)
3. [Survival](#)
4. [Powerful](#)

Here is an outline of all important information to note:

1. **Time:** 1hr per session is the suggested time. However the lesson plans are designed in a way that can easily be expanded or contracted.
2. **Notes:** Each week contains background notes for the facilitator. Additionally, my DM's/email is always open for questions of support!
3. **Vibe Check:** Before a workshop, it is imperative to get a sense of the energy in the space, so you as a facilitator can be present with the needs of your participants and determine if any changes to the plan are needed. Whether it is a one word check ins or written down, this is an extremely important step as these workshops can ask participants to access vulnerable places and/or read material that display such vulnerability.
4. **Background:** These are to share with students after discussing the poem, but can be reframed & reworded by each facilitator.
5. **Ghostlines:** A ghostline is a sentence starter designed to help participants begin their writing process. Like a ghost, this line can appear or disappear as you continue writing.
6. **Suggested Modifications:**
 - a. Determine with your participants together as a class whether the brainstorming activities would be best completed individually or on a board.
 - b. Create slides/visuals/handouts so that participants can read the prompts over at their own pace/reference poems talked about.

Week#1: Absurd

Absurd: wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate.

Poem: [Congo, seen from the heavens](#)

[Background:

When I perform the piece, “Congo, seen from the heavens”, I am often asked if we truly tried to send a rat to space and the answer is: yes. This singular, absurd story was more than an attempt to reach the moon -- it was an act of defiance against poverty, odds and even basic laws of nature.

One day, a village of folks decided they were going to reach the moon & they built 6 rockets to try and make it happen, each more elaborate than the last. What a beautiful dream, what a beautiful reality.

This workshop uses the possibilities of the absurd to encourage imaginative learning and break down preconceived notions on what is worthy of being written.]

Check-in (5 min):

1. Vibe Check.
2. Do you believe ghosts are real? Why or why not?

Activity (15 min): News Title.

1. Draw 5 columns with the following titles:
 - a. Animals
 - b. Places
 - c. Activities
 - d. Change
 - e. Random
2. Have the participants fill in as many entries in each table as possible.
 - a. For Change, they should write something they'd like to change in society.
 - b. For Random, they should pick a random word or sentence to put there.
3. Pick one entry from each column and share it with the person next to you.
4. The person has to create a news headline combining all the words they were given.
 - a. Example: Breaking News: Today in **Capitalism**, a **rat** was found **swimming** in **Lake**

Tahoe after listening to **Don't Stop Believing**.

5. Depending on class size/time, 3&4 can be repeated to generate more headlines.

Activity (5 min): Guess True/False

1. participants guess (out loud) whether the following stories are true or false:
 - a. **True:** [Deer crashed through a window at a restaurant](#) (you may generate your own headlines)
 - b. **True:** [A spotless giraffe was found](#)
 - c. **False:** 20ft-long alien spaceship was found in Texas
 - d. **False:** There is now Universal Basic Income. Every family worldwide will get a minimum of \$500 from their respective government.
 - e. **True** [The first Congolese to board a space shuttle was a rat](#) (Troposphere 5)
2. Use the last point to transition into reading the poem. Feel free to familiarize yourself with the story to retell it -- there are videos that can be shown, but they are generally in French.

Read/Discuss (10 min): [Congo, seen from the heavens](#)

1. Discussion Question ideas:
 - a. What are your feelings about the story?
 - b. Why do you think it was so important to the community to reach the moon?

Writing Prompt (20 min):

1. Use one of the news headlines as the start of a poem. Describe the story, what's happening/happened.
2. Challenge: Make the change you wanted to see happen through the story.
3. **Facilitator notes:**
 - a. Decide if the space would benefit from ambient music.
 - b. Encourage students to keep their pen moving & not stopping, even if their writing takes them somewhere else.
 - c. Give them a 5 min & 1 min warning before their time is up.
 - d. Make yourself open & available for any questions.

Share/Check Out (15 min):

1. Share something you wrote today.
 - a. **Sharing notes:**
 - i. Remind participants that it's okay to not share! I personally love the usage of saying "skip" to give students a way to opt out. If everyone is hesitant, you can

read first. You can also encourage participants to share just 1 line or something they were thinking about as they wrote, but remember: encourage and model vulnerability *and* choice.

- ii. Thank all participants equally regardless of if they share or not. If participants pass, you can offer a second go around just to double check if they now feel comfortable after everyone else has shared.
- iii. As participants share, encourage the rest of the room to be present and engage! This can look like snapping or making noises as they read, pointing out their favorite line at the end, asking a question etc.

2. Check Out Question: Do you have any upcoming books/shows/movies you're excited for?
 - a. If they can't think of one, they can name their favorite.

Week #2: Portrait

Poem: [portrait of a black dancer](#)

[Background:

In visual art, portraiture is more than a record of an instance, it is a way of looking at the world. I've taken to writing portraits as a way to observe the world around me. The written portrait, unlike its visual counterpart, is a close cousin of an ode. There must be a reason for every detail written -- something that you must name or choose to leave unnamed.

"Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see..." - Patricia Reilly Giff.

This workshop is on perspectives. The goal is for its participants to revisit what is often overlooked and from there, learn to see the world through the lens of a painter.]

Check in (5 min):

1. Vibe Check.
2. What's your favorite local restaurant?

Activity #1 (10 min):

1. Display [Solid Rock Congregation](#) by Ernie Barnes.
2. Write down what you see in as many details as possible. Example, a pianist playing piano, tiny white socks, etc.

Activity #2 (10 min):

1. Where is your go-to place to rest/chill? Draw it.
2. Challenge: include the details you wrote down from the painting.

Read/discuss (10 min): [portrait of a black dancer](#)

1. Discussion question ideas:
 - a. Do you recognize any dance or media references?
 - b. Why do you think the author wrote this poem?

Writing Prompt:

1. Write a portrait of someone/a place you love. Describe it to someone who's never seen them.
 - a. Ghostlines:
 - i. One thing you have to know about ____ is...
 - ii. ____ says ____
 - iii. ____ looks/sounds/smells/tastes like...
 - iv. People think ____ is ____, but actually...
 - b. Keep in mind [Facilitator notes](#).

Share/Check Out (15 min):

1. Share something you wrote/drew today.
 - a. Keep in mind [sharing notes](#).
2. Check Out Question: If you could take someone with you on a vacation anywhere in the world, who would you take & where?

Week #3: Survival

Poem: [Justification I \(Golden Shovel\)](#)

Golden Shovel: a poetic form in which the last word of each line forms a phrase, typically derived from a poem.

Example: “Nike, just do it”

I got my Nike
It is only just
fresh out the bag. do
I even know where to store it?

[Background:

justification I grapples with the realities of survivor’s guilt for those who survive war. The poem uses the title of Franny Choi’s poem “The World Keeps Ending and the World goes on” as the golden shovel. “The woman” is based on a character in Lembit Beecher’s opera, “Sofia’s forest”.

Note: The longer writing time is made to accommodate the difficulty of this task. All participants may write them at their own pace.]

Check-in (5 min):

- Vibe Check
- What makes someone a hero?
 - qualities/ characteristics/ environment, etc

Activity #1 (10 min):

1. List some of your favorite quotes.
 - These can be from songs, movies, friends, family, your own words, etc.
 - Alternatively, folks can list common phrases they hear. A generative question, depending on the demographic of participants can be, “What is your favorite line from a video game character?”
2. What are some things you *have* to do?
 - Examples: going to school, paying taxes, eating, drinking water, etc.

Share/Discuss (5 min)

Read & Discuss: [justification I](#)

1. Try to guide participants into seeing the golden shovel pattern. Use background to generate discussion points if needed.
2. Explain what a Golden Shovel is.

Writing Activity (20 min):

1. Pick one activity from your list of things you have to do.
2. Pick one quote from your list.
3. Write a golden shovel answering this prompt:
 - a. If you didn't have to do this activity, what would your life be like?
Ghostlines:
 - i. Alternate Universe in which I don't have to
 - ii. Life without
4. If participants are finding the golden shovel portion challenging, they can do a free write instead.
5. Keep in mind [Facilitator notes](#).

Share/Check-out (10 min)

1. Share something you wrote today.
 - a. Keep in mind [sharing notes](#).
2. Check Out Question: If you were stranded on an island for a month, but you could take something with you, what would it be?

Week #4: Powerful

[Background:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

*This quote never sat right with me, from the first time I heard it in *Akeelah and the bee*. While an inspirational movie quote favorite, I’ve never understood what it means to fear your own strength. Fears always make more sense the more negative they are-- monsters, loneliness, death . How could you fear something good?*

Of course it doesn’t help that the it’s origin is [Marianne Williamson](#), so readers should take my reference to this quote not as an endorsement, but a tool in critique.

As I grow as a writer, I come back to this quote often in consideration of the ways I limit myself. It requires a conscious effort to dream beyond what I believe is possible. The possibility that the impossible is possible is so grand it makes me reluctant, fearful even.

In the concluding workshop of this course, participants are asked to face themselves, the realities of their limitations and, most importantly, the possibilities of their power.

Check-in (10 min)

1. Vibe Check
2. What superpower would you *not* want to have? (alternate: what superpower/s seem mid?)

Activity #1 (15 min):

1. What are some *impossible* things you’d want to do? Example, fly to a distant galaxy; pause time; gain the ability to photosynthesize, etc. List them.
2. Share with the class.
3. Pick 3 impossible options you wrote/heard.
4. What do you think it would take to make them possible?
 - a. Example: to fly to a *distant galaxy*, I would need a *spaceship* capable of doing that.

Activity #2:

1. If I told you to meet me on the moon at 2pm tomorrow, why would it not be possible?

2. Write down everything that would stop you from doing that.
 - a. Example: humans can't fly, so I can't meet you there/ it's too close to the sun/ I don't have an astronaut suit.

Read/Discuss (10 min): [powerful, beyond measure](#)

1. Have you ever had to face something you were afraid of?
2. Do you think people can overcome their phobias? Why or why not?

Writing Prompt:

1. Take a limit you listed in Activity #2. Defy it.

Ghostlines:

- a. Alternate universe in which I can...
- b. Today I ____ because I could.
- c. For some _____ is impossible, but for me, it's lightwork...

Share/Check Out (15 min):

1. Share something you wrote today.
2. Who's your favorite superhero/villain?
3. What has your favorite part been about this course? What was challenging?

Exit Notes:

1. Are there any local/national resources you can present to participants to give them a platform to share their work or nurture their growth.
 - a. Submittable is a helpful site to discover calls for work.
 - b. Youth Laureate programs are great as well.
2. This class is designed to equip participants to address issues most urgent to them, so you are encouraged to end the course presenting resources on topics that frequently came up.
3. One of the best ways to support ongoing efforts towards social justice & change is to support grassroots level. [Congo Initiative](#) is one I recommend the most.

Last but not least, if you taught the course and/or found the tools here helpful -- thank you! I would love to know how your experience was so I can keep updating and growing the course.

You can find me on [the socials](#) or email ciangaart@gmail.com.

With all my love & joy,

C.

Poems

Congo, seen from the heavens

for Kavira,

(the first Congolese to board a space shuttle is a rat)

i unfold
saliva teeth

gnaw at their flag's skin
floss with the fat

i swelter
rabies, love

homeland's got no food
yet, i fly

i devour
the sky

from the troposphere,
every human is a rodent

i rat
pray

for my freedom warriors
more bone than muscle

i ascend,
poverty's defiance

already, love,
i split the sun.

justification I (golden shovel):

after Franny Choi & Lembit Beecher

“i had to” laughs the
woman. nervous. “had to.” her world

now a music box. mechanical. like Papa. keeps
rewinding his breath; prefers a ghost to an ending.

no refugee outlives their ghosts. the world is a phoenix and
papa is a relic. fit for *Louvre* and circus in those good pants that kiss the

land. this soil. survived Papa’s apocalypse. makes me chimera. makes the world
owned. makes the woman viral. makes Papa a family of stomachs. while the war goes

on.

portrait of a black dancer

after D'mani Thomas

walks slow. stalks the battlefield
foot's a joke gravity's in on
takes the wind for spin
kind of body any block would miss

say -

*"You ever witness a crowd of people break
into cha cha slide
at a First Friday Block Party"*

sounds like -

this town's more black than rhythm more
moonlit flicker jazz charts fingering stars

say -

*"You ever remember?
how many family members
can't afford to live here anymore?"*

sounds like -

we had the funeral over Instagram Story
we dance shadows on sidewalk oceans
we

last line figured bass brass belly flop
onto a pothole made of 19th & Broadway Lubumbashi blues

fight till the walls remember to scream
fight with all the grace of a human body
on death row laugh all sharp snap teeth

dance like breathing is optional
dance tall chin sky-bound spiral elbows into woah

every block rebirths its boombox chorale

every street lamp spotlights you regal
westlake warrior, you make going home a dance

powerful, beyond measure

i let the spider live
on the ceiling
above my bed
a week. it disappeared.

we all do.
my deepest fear?
to learn my limits

by name.
that spider –
another must have taught it to web.
must have.

i can hardly escape my bed
yet my blood knows:
i am my ancestor's best outcome.
therefore, i am ancestor

to those who must hear:
history doesn't repeat,
but unravels out of itself.

i'm stealing a lullaby
from Leopold
for our bellied joy.

we, resilient and fragile –
grains that were plucked and dried
and kneaded alive again.
beloved, we must call our limits
by name.

then,
defy them