

# “How are we in the world”: Teaching, Writing and Radical Generosity

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## Exchanges

In the *Exchanges*, we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. In this section, we invite our readers to offer their own thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaboration with university-based partners in particular and on engaged scholarship in general.

In this issue, we are reminded as engaged scholars, who are called on to expand and intensify their connections with community, to show more care to those on the fringes of communities, be they communities of students we mentor; rural communities where we collaborate in joint action; or communities of scholars in which we debate our practices (Hoffman, 2021; Mirvis et al., 2021). One value being perceived as lost among our contemporary society, is that of generosity, and its intense cousin, radical generosity, which purports to make benevolence to all regardless of identity, with no expectation of return, one's ways of life (Kashani, 2019).

In the following exchange, Lynn Caldwell (member of the Engaged Scholar Journal Advisory Board, professor of theological ethics at St. Andrew's College and sessional lecturer in Educational Foundations, Women's and Gender Studies, at the University of Saskatchewan), and Carrienne Leung, Assistant Professor in creative writing, at the University of Guelph and writer of fiction, discuss radical generosity in the context of teaching in the Fine Arts. They remind us of how as engaged scholars, we carefully nurture generosity of thought, relations, and sharing in our work. They take that ethic one step further to show how radical generosity in the classroom rewards us with a well-informed society, and community of educators, activists, and change-makers.

## “How are we in the World”: Teaching, Writing and Radical Generosity

**Lynn:** Thanks for joining me for this, which seems like a weirdly formal thing to say. The intention is for us to talk about engaged scholarship and your work as an engaged scholar. I had a hard time thinking about how to frame this as a conversation beyond that as the purpose of it. As I said to you, the point is to have a conversation about critical work; for us to talk about your work as a writer and a teacher and a scholar, an educator; it's to think about writing and teaching and educating, and about the kinds of spaces that we create. It's the stuff that you and I talk about all the time, and we do talk about it, I think, as work.



*Lynn Caldwell*

So, this is just a bit of a preamble, to name what the invitation is for the conversation. I was thinking about how these conversations we have about teaching and about writing, or when we think about something like engaged scholarship, have a kind of urgency to them, right? I get this idea of these things as an important conversation. And I think about how to frame something around what's important about it, or urgent about it, without overstating or kind of exceptionalizing it.

I want to talk to you about that task itself: How *do* we characterize what these conversations are about? What is such a conversation about in a journal that is for engaged scholarship that connects universities, and classrooms, and communities, and all kinds of projects, together? That's the invitation, it's us having a conversation; but it's also sharing our exchange and your thoughts on this work, and on your work, with readers of the journal, with people who are engaged *with* conversations about engaged scholarship.

I'll ask you to introduce yourself too, but I first want to say that for me this is a conversation we've been having pieces of, off and on. It's a conversation we have as friends, and friends who are grad school friends, so that does characterize the connection we have and the conversations we have. But I also come to this as a reader of your fiction writing, so I am very conscious of that as part of what inspired me to want to talk to you for this piece. It's because I know you as a friend, I know you as a colleague, I know your work; and, I also have that kind of relationship as a reader of your writing, as someone who knows you as a writer of fiction.

How would you introduce yourself, for this conversation?

**Carriane:** I'm not sure. First of all, thanks so much, Lynn, for inviting me to a formal conversation of what we usually do informally anyway. Yes, we met in the context of our grad studies, which already gave us a framework because we were thinking along the same lines, reading the same books, and thinking along the same lines of theory, and critique. But something that I really value about our relationship is that this notion of "engaged scholarship" can't even quite capture the ways in which you and I relate to each other, and the world, and our lives. For me, it's such a broad thing to think of this idea of engaged scholarship.



*Carriane Leung*

I think sometimes it's something strange for people to think of me doing my PhD work in Sociology and Equity Studies, and then turning to fiction. Whereas, for me, it's part of that same notion of being engaged, whether we call that scholarship, or creative work, or just life work. I appreciate the ways in which you and I have allowed each other space to just meander, and sometimes be able to break free of those containers. This is also

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really why I felt I turned to fiction writing; I felt I was too contained within the academic writing and research that we were trained to do. I could talk more about that later, as to what were the things that contained. It's not that I didn't see worth in that work, and I still very much do, in what we think of as conventional scholarship. But I needed more. I needed a different kind of meaning making, and maybe even a different audience to engage with.

I don't know if that's an introduction, but that's the best way I can think about what it is I do.

**Lynn:** I am nodding. There's a lot I want to talk about. So, here is a question because you do describe turning to fiction as a different way of writing and engaging different readers, and about the kinds of freedoms that come in that, as a kind of work:

When you do think of yourself as a writer, is being a fiction writer a prominent description? I guess I am still on this as part of introducing yourself, situating yourself. There's something important about you choosing and becoming a writer of fiction, and about being a fiction writer. And I know you are also a teacher of creative writing. A question I have around that is really what the primary way would be for you to identify yourself, as a writer. Is it fiction writing? Is it creative writing? Or is it just, writer?

**Carrienne:** I guess creative writing, if I'm pushed to have to actually say something. I think, for now it's creative writing, as a writer. I don't feel like I do much scholarly writing anymore, though I'm not opposed to it. It may happen again. But right now, I would say creative writing and not just fiction but also creative non-fiction, like the personal essay. I have been teaching creative writing as well, which is also a whole other thing from having taught Sociology, and Gender studies, which I have also taught. I've turned from that over the last few years to teaching creative writing. I think it's an interesting kind of space that I'm in that I can kind of straddle both worlds. And again, just like having finished my Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology degree, and then turned to fiction writing, it's pretty seamless for me. I see way more similarities than differences, and I see it as a real advantage that I'm able to have the breadth of these disciplines to play in.

**Lynn:** And do you find that with your students? When I say your students, I mean in all the kinds of spaces where you've been teaching or engaging with people around teaching and learning, or studying, writing. Do you find, or think, that students live, or find, that kind of seamlessness? When you think about the people that you've connected with as students, who are learning writing, or are learning *about* these connections between what we might think of as "social sciences" or that realm of scholarly writing, and creative writing... do they come with that same sense of connection between these kinds of spaces of writing and thinking?

**Carriane:** Some do. Teaching in the Master of Fine Arts (MFA), certainly there is some grounding of what writing means in terms of a “call and response” practice. If you’re in a formal writing program, such as where I am at Guelph, there’s certainly a framework for this connection. Here, there’s a plenary called “Writer in the World.” So that notion of “you in the world, and creating from some place”, is very much part of their training, and their thinking.

Maybe not so much for the undergrads. I think there are all kinds of romantic notions of what a writer is, still, and that’s very much “set apart” from the world. And some ways, academics as well. There’s a notion of the ivory tower, that there are these walls between the world, and us. I try very hard in my teaching, to remove those kinds of constructs. I teach that it’s a kind of labour, of knowledge making and meaning making. And in both teaching social sciences, and teaching writing, I try to bring an ethics. In both practices, as a researcher and as a writer, there is an emphasis on attention. How do you attend the world? And what does that mean? What does that attention mean for us if we are writing the world? What is our agency in the critique of the world, as well as the making the world anew, through the writing? I think those are things that I aspire to bring in whatever it is I teach.

I’ve never done a writing degree. I haven’t even taken a writing course in a university. I don’t actually *know* what it that looks like for other classes, what kinds of conventions. I have some sense, and I read conventional and traditional kinds of pedagogy of creative writing, but I feel like I’m at a nice crossroads, where I am seeing more scholarship that’s interrogating the ways in which creative writing has been taught. It’s very much in line with the critiques of how sociology, and anthropology, and all the “ologies” are taught. It’s a conversation that I can certainly engage with, and participate in, and think through, and I’m really interested in what all that means.

My first course teaching at Guelph in the MFA was a course called “Writing Decolonial Fiction,” and in doing that, there was no way I could avoid theory; and I would never want to. So, I assigned Walter Mignolo first, reading from his work on decolonial aesthetics<sup>1</sup>, and I think that was a surprise for some of the students who weren’t used to this heavy-duty theory, but they were patient. We worked through it, and I think that opened a lot of spaces to then engage with what that could possibly mean. And I think that’s just foundational to all writing. Whether you want to call something, and capture it, as decolonial fiction, or anything. I feel a particular responsibility.

In writing, there’s this kind of hierarchy with what’s called literary fiction seen as more like higher brow culture. And then there’s the genre fictions, which can be speculative fiction, fantasy fiction, sci fi, romance... and it’s not a kind of hierarchy that I want to reproduce. It’s that question of, how are we in the world, and how are our stories created by that attention. and what we choose to attend to. And anyway, I’m not sure that answers the question, but that’s the lines of what I think about.

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<sup>1</sup> The assigned work referred to here was an interview with Walter Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2014). Decolonial options and artistic/aesthetic entanglements: An interview with Walter Mignolo. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3 (1), 196-212.

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**Lynn:** Yeah, and it leads me to thinking about the question again in a different way, or about what it is that I'm even asking. I do have this curiosity. It has to do with writing, and with teaching, about how we find each other.

So, it's a question about how students come into a classroom or a program or a workshop. What is their expectation, understanding, of what you're going to find with the people you study, or in what you're reading, or with a teacher. I think about this as you were describing teaching the course on decolonial fiction and about some students having a sense of surprise about content, but also, I guess I'm speaking from my experience, too, from my own wondering and challenges around teaching. There's always that question of how do we figure out what the task is, the teaching task, and who the students are in any given moment.

There are these conventions around what a university is, or what writing is, what studying is, or what disciplines are, and yet of course they've been always precarious. They've always been fragile. They've been problematic. And there are, at the same time, long histories of writers and activists and scholars and students who have ruptured those constraints, all the time. So, we come into this work, this teaching, this writing with those conventions, those constraints, those disciplines still around, but they've also always already been troubled or remapped. It's a curiosity I have, and it's something that I worry about in my own teaching, not wanting to replicate the constraints.

**Carrienne:** I open every class with this idea of radical generosity. I state *my* intentions very, very clearly. I don't have, right here, the main things that I say; but most generally it's that I understand these spaces are not neutral. I understand that some of us come to these spaces where you know traditionally, intergenerationally, there has been violence. I understand that we do not share stories, that stories are not universal, that you may feel like something someone writes, you will respond very negatively to. And I ask for patience, understanding that new meanings and new stories cannot come if we are not there to receive them with the respect that they need. I say that we, those who are gathered here, have never been together in a space before, and so this is a space made anew, and that my hopes are that every time we come together, we are creating new world, new work.

The thing about creative writing classes is the backbone, *the* kind of spine of the courses, is Workshop. And Workshop has a sense of convention that came from what the first school in the US that did creative writing created. The Iowa School has this very well-crafted set of practices that is Workshop. And those ways have really harmed a lot of people who have historically been marginalized from writing and from having voice. So, I actually have something to work against. And a lot of the students, especially my undergrad students, don't have any history of that, so it's easy. I can clear the space completely and say, we're going to create what you need, in order to feel like you can develop work.

For some though... in an MFA course I was teaching, there was a student who really resisted removing what traditionally has been a "gag" rule, where the writer whose pieces are getting workshopped does not get to speak; that's the Iowa School model, and that's

what I've seen replicated again and again. And I also ask that no value judgments be put. You can ask questions of the text. You can talk about observations, but you're not there to say, "I love this because...." or, "this resonated....," or all those kinds of loaded words. It's hard; it's really hard to do, and it's a practice we have to work really conscientiously towards. And I've had a student who really resisted that, and who just wanted to be told what was wrong, and had this idea of it having to be painful. Because a big part of that, tradition, was pain. That's working against a lot of things that I feel I need to very consciously attend to and try and facilitate, because that's just the way we are in the world. We harm each other. It's competitive; we don't care about process. We just want the outcome, and so I have it built in, in teaching writing, a way to be always resisting that kind of thing. It's in some ways easier for me because on everyday kind of level, I have to work actively against it, you know.

**Lynn:** I don't know a lot about the Workshop, or Iowa Workshop model, other than in the "listening in" kind of way. But what that makes me think about is that it's probably crafted as something that's intended to be liberatory and facilitative, of a kind of engagement. What am I trying to say? It's something to do with how you described your introduction of radical generosity, and what your intention is, and how you facilitate that, and really explicitly opt out of this "gag" rule for writers in workshops, or from students responding with value judgements. What I'm getting is that in different kinds of interventions that come in fields like education, or writing, or cultural studies or social theory—we do have all these practices that have been intended to disrupt hierarchies of knowledge and practices, and to bring people together, but those themselves can then create these conventions that are constraining. And that's something I hear about in the work that that you do, is that it that brings people together into the space we've never created before. It's work that draws on some practices that have facilitated those kinds of spaces, but also kind of troubles them as well.

So, my question in that, or my wondering, is about that intent that you're naming in radical generosity, and also in your draw towards fiction and creative writing. I am thinking about how the possibilities that this teaching can produce, and the intent in any given piece of writing you're doing, or any class that you're doing, are not things you can ever fully, accomplish. Like you have to do that practice all the time, and I don't know, but I think that being in these kinds of practices, like writing fiction, creative writing, and in these places of the university or of studying, means being in places full of histories of possibility and of liberation. But places where it's been done through that generating of pain. We have to also be critiquing those practices in the critical pedagogies too. I'm interested in whatever you have to say about this.

**Carriane:** Why can't *care* be part of really good scholarship? We have students who come to these spaces, and the university is only a worthwhile space because it's well resourced. These spaces could happen anywhere, but it's just that universities are where we place the value

in currency. We know what the neoliberal university is; we know it comes at a crossroads when more and more students who are marginalized historically from these spaces are gaining entry, right? So, the push to transform things from the classroom level and beyond is part of that same project.

The Workshop worked because those people who were in the workshops were a homogeneous group of white men. And so the ways in which the practice, the structures, and the people are shifting in these spaces need to be taken seriously. Because you let people in under the name and the banner of inclusion, or diversity, or whatever language, and don't expect things to then transform? And I think it's part of the whole package.

I feel really lucky to be hired on as a faculty member, in creative writing, at Guelph. But my PhD was in Sociology and Equity Studies, and in my department, in English and Theater Studies, there's not a lot of folks of color. So, I'm always conscious of that, and the spaces that I'll be in, and what I need to negotiate, with still my clear purpose of what it is I'm doing there, you know. We're just breaking things apart. Because I just don't think good work can come, unless we break the shit apart. In the crudest kind of metaphor I could use.

I do think that, yes, absolutely, the critique of the neoliberal university needs to be there now, more than ever; that energy is well spent. But I also would make myself completely despairing if I were to only think of the university as one space. I remember what Rinaldo Walcott<sup>2</sup> said in his class once. He said, you know, we're always saying that the university discounts the community, whoever we're thinking the community is. But we're in a classroom. We're all community, and we all have places in other communities, right?

So, I think of that world as way more porous than just the notion of the university as this one place, this place that reproduces all this harm.

I got a message, from a former student at OCAD years and years ago, just recently on Instagram. They're a designer, and they were in my course on, I think, consumer behavior (yeah, which I just kind of spun into a critique of late capitalism). And they were saying that that course was like their pivot to a whole new way of thinking about design and their work. And they're doing these *incredible* projects now.

I can never know. I don't pretend to know what I have control or influence over. The most we can do is like break shit apart, open these spaces up for students to be able to imagine something different, that they acquire some tools in terms of how to think about it, and then go on. I see that maybe more directly, because I'm teaching writing now. I see the work they produce; and it's brilliant way beyond what I would have been able to hope for or imagine for myself, in my role in their education, their formal education.

That might be a cop out of an answer, but more and more I feel like for my own mental wellness, and for the task that's ahead of me, I need to keep thinking about those things and to calibrate my energy towards them, and to know that I'm deeply implicated, because

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<sup>2</sup> Carrienne worked with Rinaldo Walcott as the supervisor for her doctoral work in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at OISE/UT.

I'm getting paycheck from an institution that is very much bought into things that I try to undo. But that's the complexity of our lives right now.

**Lynn:** I think, any answer about what happens in an exchange in a classroom, or between a teacher and a student, or between intentions and what people receive, is that it offers something, and we all have to place ourselves in relation to that, as teachers, as the public, or as readers or as writers.

**Carriane:** Yeah, I walk into a classroom. I know what I look like. I'm a middle-aged East Asian woman, and I know that a lot of students never have even had that happen. The negotiation is on so many levels of what limitations and possibilities could happen in that space. And in the course of twelve weeks a lot has to happen that can be worked into a learning objective, or some metric; and some things that can't. I think that we have to be keenly aware of that in the kind of practices that we have as teachers.

And, the good thing is I actually like teaching. I enjoy it. I really like the challenges of it. I really like people coming together and making spaces and creating. That was even so when I was teaching in social sciences. I really want to think about being co-creators of knowledge. That's just really important to me, or else it'd be really boring just to be there, dispensing whatever it is you know. It's not really that much.

**Lynn:** Boring does something; I think a lot about how we say what things do, like teaching. What does teaching do, and what does it do in ways that you don't take the measure of through the metrics of objectives only. When you describe starting with stating something like the meaning of radical generosity, and by framing things as "we don't, share the same stories," that just *does* something. I think that it's an obvious thing; it's in some ways stating an obvious. But it's an obvious that we don't often state in our every day.

**Carriane:** Some of the most powerful moments I've had in classrooms with students is stating the most obvious. Because we don't do that enough. We're operating on assumptions and erasures that are very troubling and shape our realities of how we experience things. I think that that is really, really important: to just say it, honestly.

It's going to require some risk and vulnerability, because also in opening with radical generosity, I'm calling them *in* to responsibility for themselves and each other. I'm *not* saying "you're a student, and I'm an instructor, and you paid this much money for this course, so you can just sit back now and play your role." What I am proposing, and offering, is another way of being in this space with each other.

**Lynn:** I think we can wrap up soon but is there anything else you wanted to say in terms of what this kind of conversation is about or about teaching or writing? Or we can just end on the note of radical generosity, as a place to land.

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**Carrienne:** It's all about relationship, right? It always just comes back to relationship, and I don't think anything good can happen without relationship. I think maybe that's part of what I'm trying to think about; it's how do I not perpetuate my own isolation and alienation from others, or whatever we call the world. I'm wanting to do things differently. I'm not saying that I haven't been doing that all along, but I think I'm being able to articulate it more into language, what is important to me and what I really hope to bring. And also, I'm not saying this always works. This is really, fricking messy, and often uncomfortable. But that's also part of that process: is there a way we can get through to somewhere else with that discomfort? I don't know. I think that's all I've got. It's hard to be generous in a time that's very ungenerous, and it's very hard to be radical about that generosity.

### About the Authors

**Lynn Caldwell** has been a member of the *Engaged Scholar* Journal Advisory Board since 2018, is professor of theological ethics with St. Andrew's College, an affiliated college of the University of Saskatchewan, and serves as Academic Dean of the Saskatoon Theological Union. Lynn is co-editor with Carrienne Leung and Darryl Leroux of *Critical Inquiries: A Reader in Studies of Canada* (Fernwood, 2013). She holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, from OISE/UT in Toronto. Born in Meadow Lake, with family origins in Northern Ireland, Lilac, and England, Lynn has lived most of her life in Treaty 6 and the homelands of the Métis. Email: [lynn.caldwell@saskatoonthologicalunion.ca](mailto:lynn.caldwell@saskatoonthologicalunion.ca)

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