

Conversation Pieces
Volume 8

Writing the Other[®]

A Practical Approach

by

Nisi Shawl & Cynthia Ward





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For my mother, who knows more about writing
than I can get her to admit to.

–Nisi

To Joe

–Cynthia

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Writing the Other[®]
Bridging Cultural Differences
for Successful Fiction

by Nisi Shawl & Cynthia Ward

Why Us

First and foremost, because we are writers. We've had to face the problem of representing characters of diverse backgrounds ourselves. Together, we've accumulated over twenty years of professional writing experience.

Nisi Shawl's stories have been published in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*; on the cutting-edge fiction websites of *Strange Horizons*, *Lenox Avenue*, and *Aeon*; in the acclaimed anthologies *Mojo: Conjure Stories* and *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*; and in the award-winning, ground-breaking Dark Matter anthology series. She contributed the "Voodoo" entry to *The Encyclopedia of Themes in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. And she's a board member for the Clarion West Writers Workshop and a founding member of the Carl Brandon Society, which focuses on the presence of people of color in the field of speculative fiction.

Cynthia Ward has been publishing fiction professionally since 1990. She has sold almost forty science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories to markets ranging from *Asimov's* to *Bending the Landscape: Horror to Garden of the Perverse: Twisted Fairy Tales for Adults*. She is completing her first novel, *The Killing Moon*. For almost ten years, she has contributed the monthly "Market Maven" market-news column to *Speculations: The Magazine for Writers Who Want to Be Read*. She has written over 300 freelance reviews for Amazon.com, *Amazing Stories*, *Locus Online*, *SF Weekly*, *fps: The Magazine of Animation*, and other magazines and webzines.

Nisi and Cynthia have taught the workshop *Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction* for several years.

The Dominant Paradigm

When writing the other, you will depart from the dominant paradigm. For now, let's just loosely define the "dominant paradigm" as what the majority of people in our society would call normal. (We'll explore this construct further later, when we discuss a literary concept called "the unmarked state.") Of course, no one is truly normal. Acknowledging the ways in which we deviate from so-called normalcy is an important step in learning to write the other.

Nisi's differences from the dominant paradigm are:

I'm a woman.

I'm African-American.

I practice Ifa, a little-known religion.

I weigh more than currently deemed healthy.

I have made love with other women.

I'm a reader.

As a child, I was singled out for using "big words."

I suffer from fibromyalgia, a physical disability.

My disability is mostly invisible.

Cynthia's differences from the dominant paradigm are:

I'm a woman.

I'm short.

I'm an atheist.

I'm a military brat.

My politics are liberal.

I've lived overseas.

I'm a Maine Yankee...

and yet I'm not a real Mainer...

and I'm half-French in WASP-y Maine.

I have chronic neck pain.

My hearing and vision are subpar.

I also am a reader and a user of big words.

1

Why This Guide?

An incident that took place while Nisi and Cynthia were students at the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 1992 gave rise to the original impetus for this guide, the class of the same name, and the original essays that also appear within these covers. One of our classmates opined that it was a mistake to write about people of different ethnicities: you might get it wrong. Horribly, offensively wrong. Better not to even try.

This seemed to Nisi to be taking the easy way out.

Nisi's essay "Beautiful Strangers: Transracial Writing for the Sincere," which originally appeared in the writing how-to magazine *Speculations*, addressed writing about characters with racial and ethnic differences. But as Nisi soon realized, similar problems arise when we face the difficulty of creating characters whose gender, sexual preference, age, and so on, differ significantly from our own. So our *Writing the Other* class extended and expanded on the techniques the essay outlined.

Writing the Other graduates have consistently improved the plausibility of their divergent characters. They've tried, and they've succeeded.

You, too, can learn how to think and write about characters who aren't like you.

We wrote this guide to help.

We will show you what works (and what doesn't) when writing about characters of races, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, religions, nationalities, and other traits and features different from your own. We'll demonstrate the common mistakes and pitfalls of writing about differences and show you how to avoid them.

ROAARS:

Race/Orientation/Ability/Age/Religion/Sex

Of course, as we said earlier, everyone differs in one way or another from the dominant paradigm. However, our culture emphasizes certain kinds of differences. It tells us that these differences are the most important ones, the ones that truly divide us.

For these categorizations, we've invented the term "ROAARS." It's an acronym. ROAARS stands for Race/(sexual) Orientation/Age/Ability/Religion/Sex. ROAARS differences are highlighted by majority culture.

You may notice that one profound difference has been left out of this acronym: class. This was a deliberate omission. As we've said, the focus here is on those differences that are generally presumed to be important. While class is arguably as important as race in terms of categorization, and is certainly more scientifically quantifiable, on this continent it's not a difference majority culture recognizes as significant.

Format

The text in this guide's first section is accompanied by writing exercises. You can practice these exercises as frequently or infrequently as you wish, but we advise you to do all the exercises at least once. Because they were designed as part of the *Writing the Other* class, some of the exercises work best when done with a partner or in a group. However, you are not expected to show anyone the results of your exercises or to incorporate the direct results of doing these exercises into your work.

These exercises are not tests, and you cannot fail them.

We've also included suggested times for completing each exercise. Though you're not on a tight schedule

such as that students attending live *Writing the Other* classes must contend with, we encourage you to try writing to the ticking of a timer. Try it at least once—taking a moment before you start to clear your mind of distractions, of course. We’ve found for ourselves that the pressure of producing under these circumstances can force you to switch off your internal editor and just get going!

2

Reptile Brain Function and the Liberal Dread of the Racist Label

If you’re a white liberal, one of your great fears—possibly your greatest—is that of discovering you are a racist.

Sometimes, despite our sincere beliefs and our best efforts, we find ourselves thinking a thought that is racist or sexist or otherwise bigoted.

Sometimes, out of ignorance or thoughtlessness—with no intention of doing so—we find ourselves saying something racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise categorically offensive.

Cynthia used to believe that if she made a racist comment or had a racist thought she *was* a racist. She assumed it was like being struck by lightning. You weren’t a racist before, but now you were—for all time. Now and forever. End of story. The ultimate shame, with no chance of change.

Of course, that’s not true.

Cynthia will never know everything. She will continue to make the occasional ignorant or thoughtless comment with an unfortunate racial, sexual, or otherwise bigoted implication.

Cynthia will always have racist, sexist, and otherwise bigoted thoughts.

This is because she, like all humans, will always have a reptile brain.

A Walk in Whiteville

Several years ago, Cynthia relocated from the San Francisco Bay Area to a Seattle suburb that was 99.9% white. The place was quite a shock after San Jose.

Several years after moving to this monotone suburb, she ordered a takeout dinner. With forty minutes' wait separating her from that jalapeño pizza, Cynthia decided to go for a walk in the massive apartment complex next door. As she hiked up and down the ridge, she saw several Hispanic men. With each Hispanic man—dark-skinned, working-class, speaking Spanish rather than English—she grew more nervous. More afraid.

“What’s wrong with me?” she thought. “I was in San Jose all last week, and the sight of Hispanics didn’t bother me. I was in entire Hispanic *neighborhoods*, and it didn’t bother me—oh! I get it now. I’m not in California. I’m in Washington.”

The Reptile Brain

The “reptile brain” is the oldest part of the mammal brain. The reptile brain is home to your survival instinct. Whether you’re awake or asleep, the reptile brain monitors your surroundings for threats. The reptile brain is small and stupid, but it’s brilliant at *pattern recognition*. If you see a large, vaguely cat-like shape, your reptile brain screams, “Run away!” or prepares for a fight. This is what is commonly called the “fight-or-flight response” to a perceived threat. The reptile brain also triggers your fight-or-flight response if it sees a

change in an established pattern—if, for example, it sees working-class Hispanic gentlemen in a primarily white-collar, white-race area.

Though ancient and primitive, the reptile brain can learn. In fact, it's a great learner. But it has no critical judgment. It remembers bad information as well as good.

If societal messages tell us that dark skin means a person is dangerous or that homeless people are child molesters, our reptile brain remembers this appalling nonsense. It can't do otherwise.

When the reptile brain thinks the time is appropriate, it feeds the appalling nonsense to our conscious mind, as when Cynthia's reptile brain reacted to a news-bite about homosexual-relationship longevity by telling her forebrain, "Gays never stay together." Sometimes the reptile brain sends its observations at the worst possible moment—as in the case of the man who told a female writer friend, "*People* like me, but women don't."

The reptile brain will *always* remember the racist, sexist, homophobic, and other bigoted information it learns, even when our conscious minds know the information is false. (Cynthia's forebrain reacted to her reptile-brain observation, "Gays never stay together," by remembering first that the longest-term peer relationship she knew of was lesbian, and then by thinking, "*I'm* divorced. Who am I to complain?")

You're not a bigot because your reptile brain is working properly.

And you want the reptile brain to *keep* doing its job, if you want to stay alive.

It's Okay

The forebrain processes innumerable microsecond decisions so that we can conduct multi-person conversations, calculate trigonometry, steer our wheelchair, walk upright, or get our Kia out of the way of the speeding SUV driving the wrong direction in our lane. Naturally, the forebrain looks for patterns, because patterns allow routine thinking. Habitual thinking frees our forebrain to dodge that careening SUV without having to consciously stop and remember how to steer, shift, brake, and accelerate. Routinization allows the forebrain to collaborate with our reptile brain to keep us alive.

However, since routinized thinking permits shortcuts, it allows your conscious mind to be lazy. When the forebrain is lazy, its analytical skills shut down. So, when the reptile brain sends prejudiced, erroneous information to a lazy forebrain, the lazy forebrain agrees with the reptile brain's assertion that, for example, all Muslims are terrorists.

Of course, it's possible for the forebrain to agree with prejudiced, erroneous information out of honest ignorance. In later sections we'll point out ways to overcome this problem.

Racism is not a permanent state. Sexism is not a permanent state. Neither is any other prejudice, phobia, or bigoted attitude.

To think something unpleasant, or to say or publish something thoughtless or uninformed, does not make you now and forever a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, or a garden-variety bigot.

Writing is *considered* speech. It gives you the opportunity to rewrite and revise. It gives you the opportunity to override the reptile brain and the lazy forebrain:

Your reptile brain and lazy forebrain.

And *other people's* reptile brains and lazy forebrains.

When Cynthia creates secondary characters with her creative mind without the engagement of her critical mind, such characters usually turn out to be white. During the rewrite, she develops her secondary characters so that they are not all straight, middle-class, unreligious white adults remarkably similar to herself. The rewrite changes these characters enormously. It's a never-ending process—but never-ending in the same sense that catching and fixing our spelling and grammar errors is never-ending. Though catching our unconsidered thoughts about ROAARS traits is more difficult, the problems created by such unconsidered thoughts are definitely fixable.

Making a racist or other mistake about a marked-ROAARS characteristic is not permanent. It's not soul-staining. It's not death.

It's okay to make mistakes.

And remember, even if you achieved perfection in your every marked-ROAARS character, somebody would still complain about what you did. Reasonable people will reasonably disagree. That's just a fact of life.

Cynthia's remarks on the dread of being a racist were written from her white, liberal perspective. Obviously, however, racial prejudice is not just a question of white-versus-nonwhite. As a black woman, Nisi is capable of making erroneous race-based assumptions also. These assumptions can be about whites, about other blacks, or about members of yet other races; and though they don't have the weight of white privilege and institutionalized racism behind them, they can have harmful effects.

And of course there are other forms of bigotry she's susceptible to. Difference is not monolithic. Differing

from the dominant paradigm in one aspect of ROAARS doesn't make you an expert on those who differ from it in another.

3

The Unmarked State

We mentioned the unmarked state earlier, when talking about the differences each of us have from the dominant paradigm. This particular term, “the unmarked state,” is drawn from literary criticism. It denotes the state of possessing only those characteristics that are literally not remarkable. A character in the unmarked state has a certain transparency; he (and we use the pronoun advisedly) allows readers to read the action of the story without coloring it with his particularity.

Take the example of an author narrating the story of someone who accidentally falls into a river, manages to struggle across it, and climbs out on the other side alive. To tell this story in its “purest” form, the author must employ a protagonist in the unmarked state. Otherwise, she is telling the story not of “*someone*” who falls into a river and crosses it, but of “a pregnant woman” who falls into a river and crosses it, or of “an elderly paraplegic” who falls into a river and crosses it, or of “a Filipino” who falls into a river and crosses it, and so on and so forth. Each of these departures from the unmarked state allows readers to inflect the story with their own judgments, their own experiences and unfounded beliefs concerning people marked by whichever characteristics the author specifies.

And these characteristics must be mentioned to be present in the mind of the reader. They must be remarked upon. The unmarked state, by contrast, is the default setting for any character not otherwise described.

Take a moment to consider the unmarked state as it exists in our current literary landscape. What are its primary characteristics? How do they differ from the typical or average characteristics of citizens of this country? This culture? This world?

Discussing the unmarked state with *Writing the Other* students, Nisi and Cynthia have encountered some surprising answers to these questions, as well as answers that come as no surprise at all. Commonly, the unmarked state is revealed as white, male, heterosexual, single, young, and physically able. Other characteristics people have noted include possessing a mid-level income, childless, and human.

If you yourself are in most points congruent with the literary convention of the unmarked state—if, for example, you're white and straight—your path through life will be smoothed in ways you can't even see.

After all, you don't notice the abuse you *don't* experience.

If you're a white adult in the United States, you can walk down the street holding hands with a white adult of the opposite sex, and your display of affection will not provoke passersby to insult you or assault you. And you know this. Whether or not you're familiar with the phrases, you are enjoying “white privilege” and “straight privilege.”

However, if you're a white man walking down the street hand-in-hand with a black woman, you know it's possible some passersby will make insulting racial re-

marks to you and your wife, lover, or friend; it's even possible someone may physically assault you. You're no longer protected by white privilege, and you know this, even if you've never heard the term.

If you're a white man walking down the street hand-in-hand with a white man, you are again at potential risk of verbal or physical assault; you're no longer protected by "straight privilege," and you know it.

Cynthia remembers a white man complaining to her that one of his Silicon Valley coworkers "got his job because he's black."

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Cynthia the temporary worker, who couldn't tell a good engineer from a bad engineer, but had noticed that the minority hires were distinctly few at their corporate employer's big campus. She couldn't help wondering: Did the white engineer get his job because he was white?

Whites are so accustomed to enjoying white privilege they don't notice they have it. Despite her exchange with the white engineer, Cynthia never thought to ask herself if she got her job because *she's* white. Heterosexuals are also accustomed to enjoying "heterosexual privilege" and don't notice they have it. Cynthia knows this because she keenly remembers every time she's been discriminated against for being straight. If she adds these incidents to the times she's been discriminated against for being white or American, she can count them on one hand. If she weren't privileged as a white, heterosexual American, she'd have more incidents to remember. Many, many more.

Failure to notice our privileges is the cause of a lot of friction. How many times have you heard, read, or participated in an exchange like this:

“I’m white, but I’m not a racist. I’d never take advantage of my race.”

“You can’t *help* but take advantage of your race.”

“But I don’t!”

If you’re white, you do. But it’s easy to miss, perhaps even impossible to see.

Driving While White: A Cautionary Tale

For a year in the 1980s, Cynthia and her then-husband lived in Mountain View, a Bay Area city with large white, black, Asian, and Hispanic populations and a nearly full spectrum of socioeconomic classes. Cynthia and her husband lived just across the city-line from Los Altos, a white, affluent neighborhood.

The 280 freeway linked the Bay Area peninsula cities to San Francisco and San Jose. The 280 was on the far side of Los Altos, so Cynthia and her husband, like many Mountain View residents, drove through Los Altos to get to it. Cynthia and her husband also drove through Los Altos every weekday to get to work. They quickly noticed a pattern.

Most people they saw driving in Los Altos were white. However, most of the drivers pulled over by Los Altos police were people of color. In the year she lived next door to Los Altos, Cynthia saw only two white drivers pulled over by Los Altos cops (one was being ticketed in a school zone; the other was a beautiful, young white woman). At this time, she hadn’t heard the terms “white privilege,” or “DWB” (Driving While Black). She didn’t need to know these terms to know she wasn’t likely to be stopped by cops in Los Altos, because she was white.

Whites who rarely drove through Los Altos could not see that they were benefiting from white privilege. Such

drivers might have protested, with genuine sincerity, that they didn't take advantage of their race. Even so, they benefited from white privilege. A benefit received unknowingly is no less a benefit for being unnoticed.

In contemporary mainstream fiction, straight white characters rarely notice that they enjoy the benefits of their unmarked state. This is reasonable, in the right fictional contexts.

However, when characters distinctly not in the unmarked state *don't* notice an instance of privilege where they would reasonably notice it, this strikes a false note.

Wouldn't it be strange to read a novel set in the pre-Civil War American South and discover that none of the black slave characters ever noticed that their white owners were free and they weren't?

Imagine how strange it would be if black readers failed to notice that a novel had only one black character, who existed only to nobly suffer—or even die—so that the white hero might live. And yet, this description fits numerous novels and movies.

Minority readers notice. And so do some “majority” readers.

To keep this kind of mistake out of your work, use observation and research to learn who has privilege and who doesn't, and when. In 2003, homosexual couples could not legally get married anywhere in Canada or the United States. As of this writing in 2005, gay couples and lesbian couples can legally marry in Canada and provisionally marry in Massachusetts.

You need to know who has privilege and who doesn't, regardless of whether your characters are modern American blacks and whites, or ancient Roman citizens and

slaves and barbarians, or different socio-economic classes of Alpha Centaurian gas-bag intelligences.

And remember that people change from marked to unmarked states, and vice-versa. People marry, divorce, become widowed. They're hired and fired. They discover they're gay or lesbian. They move to other neighborhoods, cities, countries. They change religions. They can change their sex with gender reassignment surgery. They can lose the use of their legs in a car accident. They can discover they belong to a different race than they thought. (Actress Carol Channing learned late in life that she is African-American.)

People, and by extension fictional representations of people, aren't always aware of how they differ from the dominant paradigm. Varying situations can raise their awareness. For instance, women are not always conscious of their sexuality. If a woman is walking past a group of construction workers or strolling along Fraternity Row, a wolf-whistle may suddenly remind her that she's a woman.

For some women, the act of walking past a construction site or fraternity house will make her aware of her sex even when no construction worker or fraternity member notices her existence.



Exercise 1

Pick a celebrity.

The celebrity can be an actor/actress, singer, designer, director, musician, talk-show host, politician, producer, or political pundit of any sex, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or political persuasion. Choose

a celebrity you know something about. A famous but meaningless name will not help you in this exercise. Otherwise, it doesn't matter whom you choose. There is no right or wrong choice.

Now, pretend you are your chosen celebrity, politician, or pundit. As this person, write a description of a person of a really different ROAARS.

This exercise should be timed. It should last four minutes.

Don't sit and think about the exercise. Set your clock or egg timer, then immediately start the exercise. This exercise is "hothouse forcing": it's designed for writing, not thinking—designed for *action*.

There will be plenty of time to think about your exercise *after* you've completed it.

All done? Now, looking at what you've written, consider the following questions:

Was one of the characters you used closer to the unmarked state than the other? Which one—the celebrity whose viewpoint you wrote from, or the person described? In which respects did they resemble the unmarked state? In which ways did they differ from it?

How did what you wrote differ from your personal view of the character described?

Did you find yourself clinging to useful clichés? Abandoning them?

Remember, we're interested in the process here. These exercises are about writing, not about producing a manuscript. After you've reflected on what you've experienced, it will be time to move on and learn more.