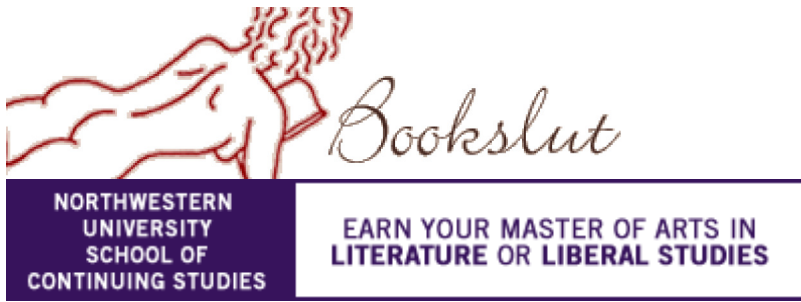


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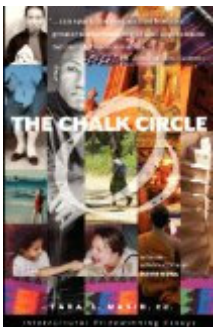
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#### The Chalk Circle: Intercultural Prizewinning Essays edited by Tara L. Masih



As much as I enjoy collections populated by multiple contributors, I have yet to finish a multi-writer title in which every chapter from cover to cover is of memorable quality. That said, [The Chalk Circle: Intercultural Prizewinning Essays](#), edited by Tara L. Masih, featuring twenty pieces by nineteen writers, offers a resonating moment in almost every essay that will surely give readers pause, from lives not lived, to inherited evil, to homeland misfits, to "eating a little shit."

Masih's collection originated from the intercultural essay contest she founded and curates, hosted by the Soul-Making Keats Literary Awards, an outreach program of the National League of American Pen Women. "Intercultural," a term Masih discovered in 2006, as she explains in her foreword, moved beyond "[t]he buzzword at the time... multicultural": "*Multi*, to me, means many and separate. *Inter* begs to be more inclusive." "Intercultural" allowed Masih to consider writers of *all* backgrounds, regardless of ethnicity. In her excitement over receiving the submissions, she realized, "It wasn't enough to read them myself and give an award. They needed to be sent out in the world and read by many and various populations."

All essays here "won a prize or honorable mention," but Masih doesn't rank them. "All carry equal weight," she insists. According to the contest website, Bonnie J. Morris won the 2011 First Prize for "Devour the Darling Plagues," reprinted here as "Israel: Devouring the Darling Plagues," about a year in Israel during which pleasurable meals were "respites from warfare and violence." Masih groups the essays into seven sections that "... are meant to give further weight to each essay when juxtaposed with its companion(s)."

Irony aside, perhaps the strongest entry is the single non-contest essay, the three-part introduction by poet and performance artist David Mura. With fluid clarity, he moves from the personal -- his own third-generation Japanese American heritage and his Japanese-WASP-Jewish son's relationship with his Somali Muslim American girlfriend captured in a heart-searing poem -- to the editorial -- why the collection is "particularly timely and necessary"-- to the political -- "a snapshot of America today... a country of unprecedented ethnic and racial diversity."

Among the chosen twenty, standouts are many, but by personal happenstance (as I happen to be in Utah for a week), none quite as obviously as "A Dash of Pepper in the Snow," in which writing professor Samuel Autman recalls his 1990s tenure as "the first black reporter ever hired at the *Tribune*" in Salt Lake City. Racism was hardly discreet: a mother locked out of her vehicle on a cold night asks Autman for help assuming that he "know[s] how to break into cars," a university employee mistakes him as maintenance staff during an event he's been sent to cover, and a psychic compliments him for being "such an educated colored." Autman quickly learns firsthand that "Utah's racially insensitive culture" can't be separated from Mormonism: "racism [is] not only embedded in its philosophy but its sacred texts," as a missionary alludes to him as a "demon" in his own home. And yet Autman finds he "couldn't stay away" after leaving in 1996. One lasting lesson is clear: "In Utah I learned how to bond with people despite differences in religion and background."

A different sort of culture clash happens in the work of Shanti Elke Bannwart, a septuagenarian German survivor of World War II living in New Mexico, the only writer with two essays in the anthology. In "Reflecting on Demons and Angels," she recalls war's end as a six-year-old witnessing the parade of defeated German soldiers, followed by victorious Americans, precociously questioning which side was right, which was wrong. In "Tightrope Across the Abyss," Bannwart introduces readers to her neighbor, Bettina Göring, the grandniece of infamous Nazi Hermann Göring. Bannwart details his heinous crimes, "[i]n case you are too young to recognize his name." Both Göring and her brother independently chose sterilization because neither "want[ed] to give birth to more monsters." Bannwart wryly notes, "New Mexico is about as far away as one can flee to separate from one's German roots and cultures, but not far enough." Bannwart finds a sense of her own redemption as she chronicles Göring's relationship with Holocaust survivor and Australian artist Ruth Rich.

Citizens leaving homelands -- some returning, some not -- is a theme woven through numerous sections. In "Fragments: Finding Center," Sarah Stoner recalls her jarringly unfamiliar homecoming to her birth country -- America -- after eighteen years of living in Uganda, Morocco, Belgium, and Thailand. Filmmaker Toshi Washizu writes of his return to his native Japan in "Winter Seagull," sharing the wrenching death of a Japanese compatriot with his family. In "High Tech in Gabarone," M. Garrett Bauman transmits his father-in-law's expat experiences in Botswana, which proves to be an "Eden for [father-in-law] Ed, who was a wandering misfit in the United States."

Faraway culinary indulgences are especially noteworthy in the penultimate section, "The Other," with essays that ask readers to put aside possible aversions. As Katrina Grigg-Saito writes, "Disgust separates self from other." In her "Assailing Otherness," peripatetic Grigg-Saito -- descended from a Japanese samurai and a Southern Baptist preacher with "whispers of black and Cherokee" -- travels to "cozy up with otherness," especially by sharing food: "Places are best soaked in through the tongue, sent stomach-ward, digested and incorporated into the body." During a trip to Laos, she gets an impromptu lesson in making the national dish, *laap*. Without a shared language, Grigg-Saito comprehends that the prime ingredient is "a bag of shit" (of the water buffalo-variety), which she's willing to ingest "because my alarm of prejudice is louder and more unbearable than my alarm of disgust." (Later she learns from a Laotian refugee family friend that it's called *piah*, and it's bile, not shit.) In eating, Grigg-Saito connects with her host's home and family, pronouncing her experience "delicious, [like] swallowing a gulp of Laos... [ready to] dive in again."

Mura opens his introduction with the "simplified gloss on who I am" that he's often compelled to provide to strangers. The undeniable strength of Masih's collection is moving beyond that "simplified gloss," to surprise, challenge, and most importantly -- regardless of the occasional unevenness between essays -- to encourage dialogue. Just in case you need

help getting started, Masih provides a detailed toolkit at book's end, including discussion questions for each essay, as well as "Intercultural Connections" that invite links between chapters. "All voices need to be heard in order to find understanding," Masih reminds, "they [take] the reader down many different paths, both current and historic, both global and personal."

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