

INKWELL



SOLIDARITY IN FICTION

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I write fiction. Stories sprout and blossom within me, and my spirit needs to write like my body needs to move.

I also have a lot of privilege.

Privilege can feel, well, icky. But you can't just take it off like a pair of wet socks, and you can't give your privilege away to someone who doesn't have it. I understand the impulse—in an effort to amplify the voices of marginalized writers, it's tempting to stop writing altogether, thinking, “My voice isn't needed, wanted, or important.”

I know the publishing industry mirrors the rest of American life: the voices of the überprivileged¹ are the most prominent. But I also know there are those working within the industry to change this, using their privilege, as sci-fi author Tricia Sullivan puts it, “to actively seek out and nurture and promote and read and talk about . . . marginalized writers.”²

Allyship isn't necessarily about self-censoring, and shutting down entirely keeps the burden of work on the shoulders of those who have carried it all along. Long before the word ally was a noun, it was a verb. You have to do something. Just as there's a time to stay silent, listen, and learn, there's also time to speak up. When that time comes, what are you going to say?

WORLD-BUILDING



1 My own term for white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, cisgender, neurotypical, able-bodied men.

2 Tricia Sullivan, “Walking the Walk,” Diversity in YA, accessed July 11, 2016.

knuckles across your eyebrows.

These aren't the ordinary twelve-year-old trolls³ who hacked your account last time and changed your avatar into a purple succubus. These jerks know what they're doing.

First they doxxed⁴ you, then MRAs⁵ started calling you and showing up at soccer practice. On top of that, they deleted your account, wiping away four years of work.

Now you have to start again from scratch.

ripens and cracks open and out tumbles a small green something, alive and breathing and aware—a podling.

>Use your arrow keys to control the podling's movement.

The podling pulses and rolls and tries to grow. "Mmph," it says. It kicks and stretches itself into different shapes.

>Welcome, podling. This is your beginning. You have already started the process of becoming. You will try new forms and expressions, meet other adventurers, and discover new worlds.

A pinprick of light appears in the blackness and grows in a rush, enveloping the podling.

>Where would you like to begin?

Is the world of your story the same world we live in (or pretty darn close to it) and therefore has the same power structures, or are you creating an alternate world? If you choose our world, the power structures of privilege and oppression have already been chosen for you. So keep in mind that if your main character experiences a targetship⁶ that you don't, you need to do your research; your character's experience will be integral to their identity.

If you choose to create an alternate world, you may feel the temptation of utopia. *Why can't we all just get along?* Some call idealism foolish, but writer and educator Walidah Imarisha says the ability to imagine an ideal world is necessary for creating social change in our own:

When organizers imagine a world without poverty, without war, without borders or prisons—that's science fiction. They're moving beyond the boundaries of what is possible or realistic, into the realm of what we are told is impossible. Being able to collectively dream those new worlds means that we can begin to create those new worlds here. We believe that visionary fiction is not utopian; it's realistic and it's hard, because that's the world we live in, but ultimately it's hopeful.⁷

The presence of power structures in fiction is inevitable, because without them, there would be no story. Even if your protagonist isn't trying to topple an oppressive empire, an imbalance of power

3 Troll: a person who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community with the deliberate intent of provoking an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion, often for their own amusement.

4 Doxx: to search for and publish private or identifying information about a particular individual on the Internet, typically with malicious intent.

5 MRAs: Men's Rights Activists, who claim that feminism is against equality and oppresses men.

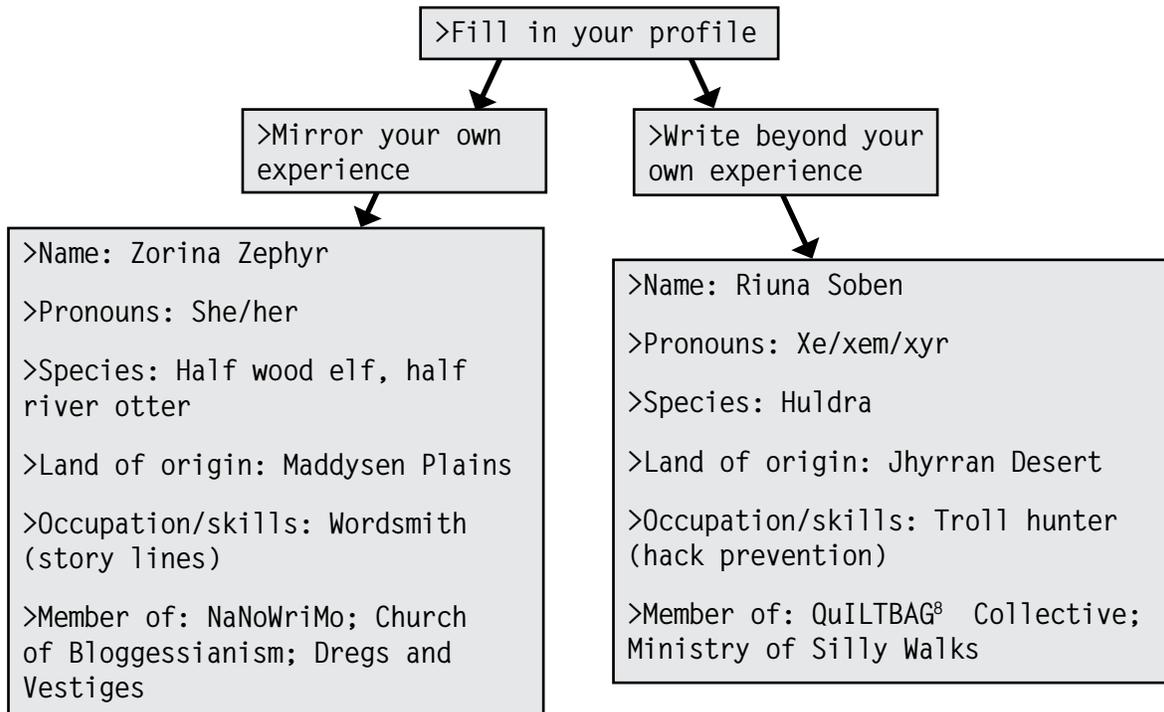
6 Targetship: marginalization or oppression, when people are divided as either agents (receiving advantages or privilege) or targets (receiving liabilities or oppression). [See Leticia Nieto and Margo F. Boyer, "Ask Leticia: Understanding Oppression," *ColorsNW*, March 2016, accessed July 11, 2016.]

7 Walidah Imarisha (interviewed by Kristian Williams), "Demanding the Impossible: Walidah Imarisha Talks About Science Fiction and Social Change," *Bitch Media*, accessed July 11, 2016.

still exists somewhere. Even if all your character wants is something simple like a drink of water or a moment of peace and quiet, someone or something is withholding it. Whether the power structures in the world you create are the same as or different than those of our own world, they move the story along by building tension, conflict, and action.

Imagine all the beautiful utopias you can fill your heart with. But when you begin to write, put them out of reach of your protagonist. The story is in the struggle.

TO WRITE BEYOND YOUR EXPERIENCE OR NOT?



Should you attempt to write characters who experience oppression where you do not? First, examine your own motivation for wanting to do so in the first place—is it to tell a cool story, or to save the world? If you feel yourself wanting to don a superhero cape, try to take a step back and let those in marginalized groups speak for themselves. Speaking for others is not your responsibility. And because you can't do full justice to an experience you haven't lived, you're going to get it wrong.

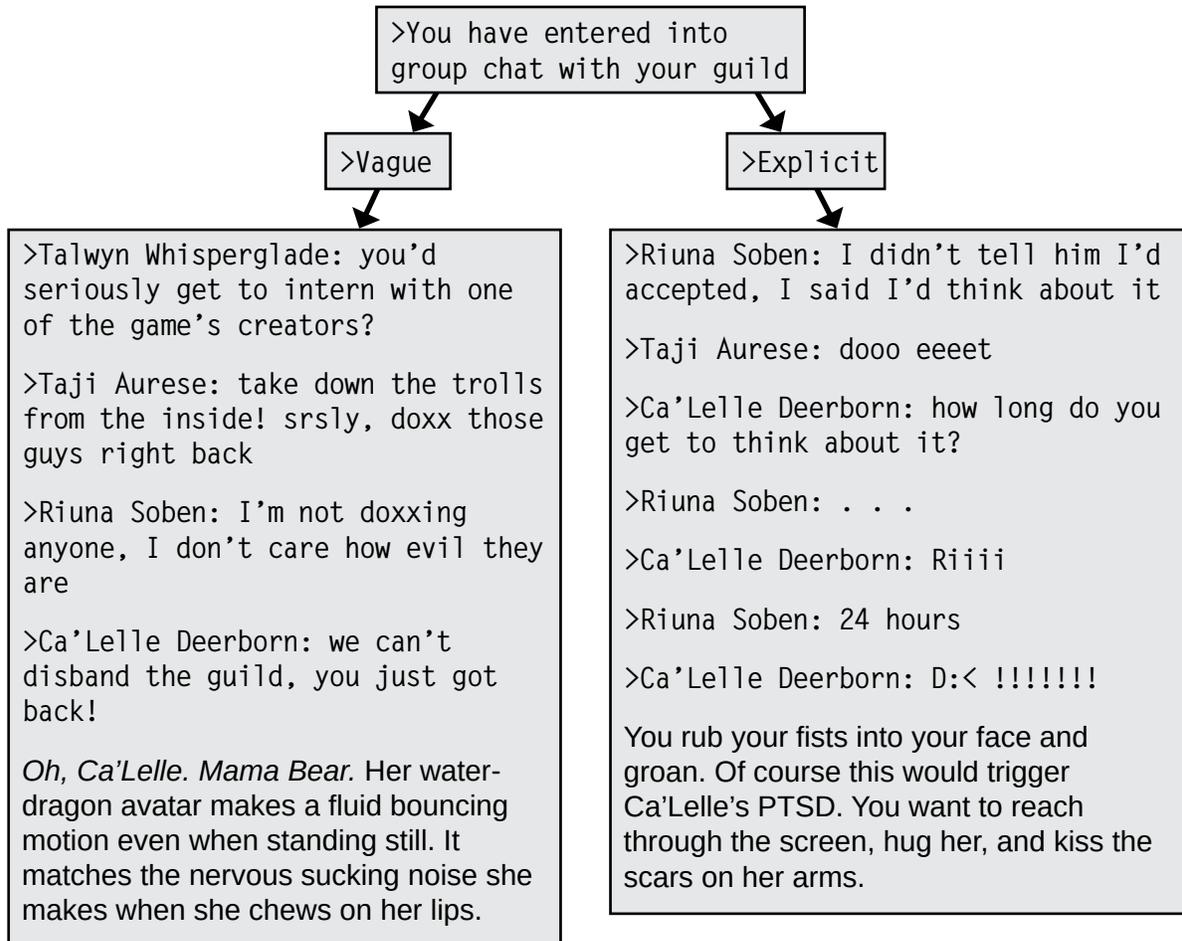
Marginalized groups need allies, not saviors. Malinda Lo, author and co-founder of Diversity in YA, writes: "Allies are important. . . . The sad, disgusting truth is that white men can often get things done, because of their privilege, that non-white men cannot."⁹ Yes, you are going to make mistakes. But if you've done your homework, if your motivation comes from a place of solidarity, and if you know that a cast full of überprivileged characters is grossly unappealing and just plain unrealistic, I think that's a place to start.

8 Alternative acronym for LGBTQIA+.

9 Malinda Lo, "On *Two Boys Kissing*," *Malinda Lo*, accessed July 11, 2016.

The world is an incomprehensibly diverse place, so why wouldn't your fiction try to mirror that? Science fiction and fantasy writer Nisi Shawl suggests that "if they ignore non-dominant cosmologies and traditions and exclude them from their work and their libraries, writers and readers could be said to have contributed to their erasure. How to resolve this conflict? Thoughtfully."¹⁰

VAGUE OR EXPLICIT: TARGETSHIP AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION



Vague character descriptions often look like hinting. This option can be done well, but you should know all that comes with it. This includes the trap of readers' assumptions: people will likely imagine any given character as überprivileged. Writer and editor Carrie Cuinn describes her experience: "I kept getting told that my characters were white men. [Some readers] assumed that everyone else would also see every other character in every story as a white male unless they were specifically said to be someone else."¹¹ For example, you could describe a mercenary goblin-hunter as having a strong jaw, close-cropped dark hair, and carrying a net and a stone knife.

10 Nisi Shawl, "Appropriate Cultural Appropriation," *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, accessed July 11, 2016.

11 Daniel Jose Older. Interview with Carrie Cuinn. "Set Truth on Stun: Reimagining an Anti-Oppressive SF/E," *Strange Horizons*, accessed July 11, 2016.

In reading that description, did you imagine a man? I never specified gender. Even though dark hair can indicate a person of color and a strong jaw can indicate a man, they could just as easily belong to characters of any race or any gender. But readers are likely to imagine a white man with dark hair simply because white and male are considered the default. By not explicitly challenging the assumption that white men are the norm and people of color, women, trans and non-binary people are the exception, we perpetuate a culture that pushes underrepresented people to the margins of both fiction and real life.

Malinda Lo illustrates how another potential drawback is that subtlety may be complicit in negative judgment:

For much too long, speaking openly about homosexuality was verboten because it was considered morally wrong. For me, hinting about someone’s sexual orientation simply smacks of negative judgment . . . even if that’s not what [was] intended.¹²

J.K. Rowling is often lauded for coming out about Dumbledore’s sexuality, but she did so only after the books were published. Only hints of his sexual orientation appeared in the texts. Rowling never explicitly gave young gay readers a chance to see themselves in the fictional mentor.

If you choose to make your characters’ circumstances explicit, it should be noted that there are different ways of doing so. Consider the difference between a female narrator saying, “My girlfriend got off work early, so I was able to bring her to the party after all” and “This was the first time since coming out that I appeared with my girlfriend in public.” In the first sentence, the narrator’s sexuality is mentioned casually, showing that the story is about something else. In the second sentence, her sexuality is part of her identity, so she has been shaped by all the societal influences that come with being gay. This kind of explicitness indicates to your readers that it’s a central part of the narrator’s character and may even affect the plot (more on this later).

A note to white writers from children’s novelist Mitali Perkins: “It’s unanimous: stay away from food metaphors when it comes to describing skin color.”¹³ Many otherwise excellent and well-meaning writers have fallen into this trap out of a desire to have an inclusive cast and show that they, the writer, see the character in a beautiful light. *Coffee. Chocolate. Mocha. Caramel.* Not only is it clichéd, but it contributes to exoticizing and fetishizing people of color.¹⁴

AVOIDING TOKENISM

>Click here to see *Ca’Le1le Deerborn’s* full profile. Each user controls who can see this information.



>Family: Just the one I’ve created for myself. Blood means nothing.

>Favorite things: Parrots and guinea pigs. Bloopers reels. Thunderstorms and hot cocoa.

12 Malinda Lo, “Heteronormativity, Fantasy, and *Bitterblue* – Part 1,” *Malinda Lo*, 2012, accessed July 11, 2016.

13 Mitali Perkins, “Ten Tips On Writing Race in Novels,” Author Mitali Perkins, accessed July 11, 2016.

14 “Writing With Color: Description Guide, Skin Color, Part I: POC & Food Comparisons,” *Writing With Color*, accessed July 11, 2016.

>Pet peeves: White chocolate. Small talk. People talking unnecessarily loud on their cell phones.

>Bad habits: I leave my stuff everywhere and let my dirty dishes get moldy.

>Positive attributes: Loyal to the bone. Puzzle-solver. Dry wit. Encyclopedic knowledge of *Doctor Who*.

>Negative attributes: Insecurity and abandonment issues.

>Beliefs: Detached nihilism.

>Fears: Flying. Bleeding in public. Accidentally swallowing one of those little “DO NOT INGEST” packets in a new bottle of pills.

>Coping mechanisms: Cheap beer and expensive gaming equipment.

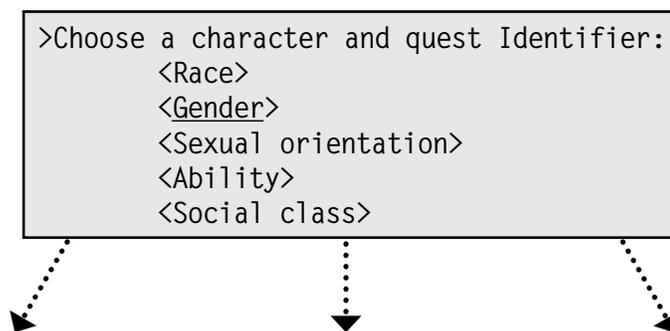
>Wishes, goals, and dreams: Having enough money to travel—Spain, Greece, Costa Rica, Thailand. Anywhere but here.

Tokenism is a shallow effort to include at least one minority figure to give the appearance of fairness and avoid criticism—a watered-down imitation of the real equity we’re striving for. So how do you do better than tacking on targetships left and right, thereby populating your cast with tokens?

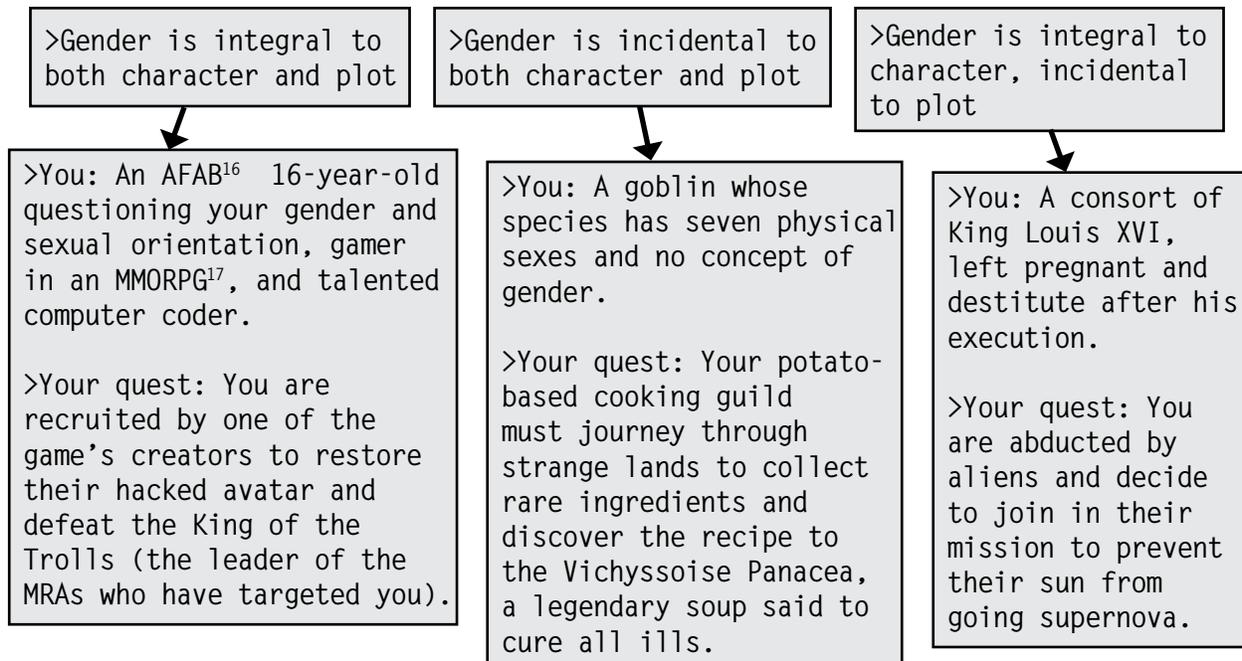
If you don’t have knowledge about a community or experience, beware the images that come to mind most easily: they’ve already been used repeatedly, often thoughtlessly. So do your research on tropes.¹⁵ The gay character who dies tragically, the “Magical Negro,” the disabled character who’s never allowed to be sexual or romantic—it’s all terribly old hat. Tropes limit the potential of unique, complex characters into stereotypes, reducing marginalized groups to predictable characteristics.

Most importantly, see your characters as full human beings (or elves, or dragons, etc.). Know them deeply. The work you put into this won’t necessarily be explicit in the text, especially with secondary characters, but it’ll be in the subtext.

INTEGRAL OR INCIDENTAL: HOW MARGINALIZATION RELATES TO CHARACTER AND PLOT



¹⁵ Trope: Any common literary device (in this case, the attributes or role of a character) used as shorthand for conveying a concept. For more information and examples, visit tvtropes.org.



How much does your character's life circumstance—gender, race, ability, etc.—define their identity? Is it a targetship and therefore integral to their identity, or is it an incidental “happens to be”? Similarly, how much does this circumstance affect the plot of the story?

1. Identifier is integral to both the character and the plot

In this option, your character experiences a certain target identity, and that has some bearing on the plot. Maybe a queer woman of color is fighting against eugenicists who are trying to eradicate “flaws” from humanity. Keep in mind that if you're writing a character who experiences an oppression that you don't, this option might get the most pushback (especially from those who do experience that oppression) along the lines of “This isn't your story to tell.” Navigating this boundary, knowing when to speak up and when to listen, is a continual part of your work as an ally.

2. Identifier is incidental to both the character and the plot

In this option, a character's trait or life circumstance would have no great effect on either their identity or the plot. Malinda Lo argues that this course is unrealistic, that any targetship is integral by its very nature and cannot be incidental:

[P]lenty of readers are seeking books featuring minority characters but aren't about the experience of being a minority, and sometimes those books are identified with the “happens to be” tag. (E.g., “This is about an awesome demon/werewolf hunter who happens to be Asian!”) But I don't believe that . . . race just “happens to be” to anyone. I think it's very deeply ingrained in a person's whole being, and it is in all of my characters.¹⁸

16 Assigned female at birth.

17 Massive multiplayer online role-playing game.

18 Malinda Lo, “The Lesbian Question,” *Malinda Lo*, accessed July 11, 2016.

What Lo says is largely true, but there are exceptions, depending on the character’s social context. For example, the fact that I’m left-handed is not an integral part of my identity. If I wrote a character like me, in a story set in our own world in contemporary times, being left-handed would be incidental to both the character and the plot. But if that same character was raised in a different historical context where the left hand is associated with evil, she might be accused of consorting with the devil. This would make her left-handedness integral to her identity.

I believe the only other way to make this option work is to create an alternate world where a certain targetship that exists in our world does not exist for the character. Lo asserts that “when it comes to fiction set in the real world (as in Earth), I actually think it’s necessary to explain a character’s ethnic and racial background. . . . In a fantasy world where there is no racial distinction, describing race is unnecessary.”¹⁹

The only reason we can notice an incidental circumstance in an alternate world is because it would be a targetship in our own. For example, you could imagine a character with physical characteristics and needs very different from your own—something that in our world would be perceived as a disability, but in her world those differences are accounted for and easily accommodated in the structure of her society.

3. Identifier is integral to the character but incidental to the plot

Maybe that same character from the first option, instead of fighting in a eugenics war, is trying to find a cure for an alien virus. Or maybe the story of the Asian demon/werewolf hunter actually takes place in her village in Cambodia, where being Asian is the norm instead of a targetship like in the United States. Her culture is a crucial part of her identity and will certainly affect the ambiance of the setting, but it might have no bearing on the plot. If done well, the character’s circumstance should not feel “tacked on” like Lo describes.

This route allows the story to be about something other than the character’s target identity. It allows readers who share that identity to see themselves represented with more variety and nuance—that their stories can be like anyone else’s stories, that their targetship isn’t their entire story.

CONCLUSION

I can set out with the best intentions, think critically about my choices and their consequences, and do a ton of research—and *I will still get it wrong*. There’s a lot of conflicting advice out there, because there is no universal authority on, or universal experience of, any marginalized group. It’s impossible to make everyone happy.

But that doesn’t mean you should stop writing altogether or be satisfied with remaining stagnant in your social justice work. Always be cultivating both because there is always more to learn. Carrie Cuinn advises, “If you’re going to write beyond the norm, practice your writing skill. Be a great writer, who’s more than a Voice [on] an issue. Don’t give those who want to discriminate an excuse to dismiss your statements just because your writing was poor.”²⁰

19 Malinda Lo, “Writing About Race in Fantasy Novels,” *Malinda Lo*, accessed July 11, 2016.

20 Daniel Jose Older. Interview with Carrie Cuinn. “Set Truth on Stun: Reimagining an Anti-Oppressive SF/F,” *Strange Horizons*, accessed July 11, 2016.

Granted, the concept of good writing is subjective anyway. We're all making this up as we go along, but here's what I know: telling stories is important. We should keep asking questions and always strive to learn, be, and do more. Yes, it's scary, but try anyway.

Mistakes are inevitable, and that's okay, but we have to be accountable for them. Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." I'm sure in five or ten years, I'll look back on this article and wish I could update it with all I will have learned in the meantime, but it's an accurate snapshot of where my heart's work is in this moment. I don't want to let the fear of not being perfect stop me from being good enough for now. ◇

