

# MFA X POC X ROA

By Elisabeth Booze, Hollins MFA '16

The [conversation](#) around race, institutionalized racism, and Creative Writing MFA programs is happening all over the country. This resource is an attempt to jumpstart this conversation in the Hollins community, support the experience of people of color (PoC) in the Hollins MFA program, and direct the Hollins MFA community to helpful resources around this topic. Keep in mind, this is one alum's take on the issue, and is not intended to speak for the thoughts of the entire program.



## I'M NOT FROM ROANOKE. WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM THIS CITY AS A POC?

The city is breathtaking, quiet, and cheap (I can't emphasize enough what an impact this low cost of living can have on quality of life when you're a broke MFA student!). The city has great restaurants, a burgeoning arts scene, a handful of great coffee shops, and stunning views.

As in any city, however, racism rears its head here in small and large ways. While I won't go into a full indictment of the city, I know I have a different relationship with Roanoke than my white peers do, and I'd be remiss not to mention that here.

## I'M A NON-POC WHO HAS DECIDED ON HOLLINS FOR MY CW MFA. ANY TIPS FOR ME RE: INCLUSIVITY AND AWARENESS?

Realize that the problems and solutions around inclusivity in MFA programs are as much (if not more) yours as they are students of color, even if students of color live with and feel these problems more everyday. Be willing to take part in the conversation and own its solutions. Check your biases in workshop, read up on the resources below. We're all in a continual process of becoming more aware of what equality needs to look like, and it's okay to own this growth.



## WHERE IS THIS CONVERSATION HAPPENING ALREADY? WHAT ARE RESOURCES I CAN ACCESS TO BUILD MY BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AROUND THIS TOPIC?

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are some good places to start:

- [MFA vs. POC](#) by Junot Diaz
- [Challenging the Whiteness of MFA Programs](#) by Kristine Sloan at the University of Wyoming
- [Open Letter: A Dialogue on Race and Poetry](#) by Claudia Rankine
- This UMass Amherst student's [open letter](#) to her MFA program
- [Black Study, Black Struggle](#) by Robin Kelley (be sure to read the response pieces linked on this page as well!)
- [White Debt](#) by Eula Biss
- [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) by Peggy McIntosh

## I'M A POC WHO HAS DECIDED ON HOLLINS FOR MY CW MFA. HOW CAN I MAKE THE MOST OF THE PROGRAM?

I can only offer tips based on what has worked for me:

- Sign up to introduce visiting writers of color. This provides a great opportunity for one-on-one time with these writers!
- Supplement your MFA with writing workshops through organizations such as Kimbilio, Callaloo, Cave Canem, VoNa, CantoMundo, Kundiman.
- Tap into already-existing clubs and affinity groups at the university.
- Look into elective course offerings beyond what people in the MFA program may trend towards. Sociology, Cultural Lit courses, etc. Reach out to profs who teach these courses; they're often willing to make a graduate course listing and accommodate your needs.
- Get connected outside of Hollins. For me, volunteer work has given me my much-needed Roanoke family. I know others have found churches, running groups, etc. to branch out and build a larger-than-Hollins Roanoke life. This has been *crucial* for my quality of life in what has been a somewhat isolating season.