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# Denne Michele

Denne Michele Norris (she/her) is a Black Trans woman who grew up in Cleveland, OH. She is a reader, writer, lapsed violist, educator, and former figure skater who currently lives in Harlem, New York City. I personally know her from listening to hours and hours of *Food4Thot*, a podcast gadfast in which “a multiracial mix of queer writers talk about sex, relationships, race, identity, what we like to read, and who we like to read.” This podcast was created by Denne, along with Fran Tirado, Tommy Pico, and Jo Osmundson, to create a scholarly space where folks could discuss “queer theory, identity politics, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, but also Mariah Carey’s Vine account, nail polish, and our absolutely filthiest hook-up stories.” This is one of my go-to podcasts!

Denne is also a former Fiction Editor for both *Apogee Journal* and *The Rumpus*. She recently became the first Black and openly trans woman to be Editor-in-Chief of *Electric Literature*. Her chapbook, *Awst Collection—Dennis Norris II*, was named one of the best books of 2018 by *Powell's*. She is a 2019 Peter Taylor Fellow at The Kenyon Review Fiction Workshop, and her writing has been supported by MacDowell, Tin House, VCCA, and the Kimbilio Center for African American Fiction.

Denne’s writing appears in *McSweeney's*, *American Short Fiction*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *The Undefeated*, *ZORA*, and elsewhere. Her short story *Last Rites* appears in *Everyday People: The Color of Life*, an anthology recently published by Atria Books in 2018, and her story *Daddy's Boy* appears in the new anthology *Forward: 21st Century Flash Fiction*. Her fiction has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and her story *Where Every Boy is Known and Loved* was a finalist for the 2018 Best Small Fictions Prize.

You can follow Denne on insta and twitter @TheDenneMichele. She also has a website:  
<https://www.DenneMichele.com/>

READING INTO EVERYTHING.



CONVERSATIONS

# How Literary Gatekeepers Can Advocate For Black Trans Women

Deesha Philyaw and EL's Editor-in-chief discuss empowering our community to elevate trans voices



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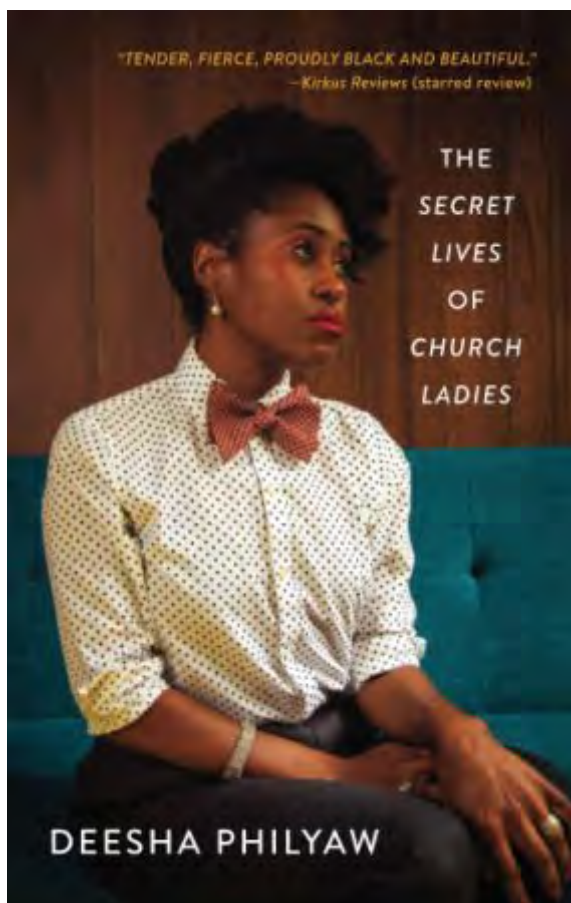
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numerous awards and a place among the finalists for the 2020 National Book Award. Every award holds a unique meaning for Philyaw, but when she learned of her recognition by the Hurston/Wright Foundation, she felt a special wholeness.



“It felt so full circle,” she said. “I attended the Hurston/Wright Summer Writers Week in 2007. And it was transformational. I felt so much validation as a writer. I saw that as a turning point in my career.” Philyaw has

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Not long after Philyaw learned of her own nomination, Hurston/Wright released the names of the honorees of three special awards, all of which would be given to more seasoned writers for their overall body of work. This includes the North Star award, and its controversial honoree: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

For many years Adichie has been heralded as the face of contemporary Nigerian literature, a worthy successor to Chinua Achebe—though shrinking the contributions of Nigerian writers to merely these two does a disservice to the larger scope of African literature. In recent years, Adichie—much of whose fame is built on her staunch feminist values and progressive stances—has come under fire for a statement she made in a televised interview she did for Britain's Channel 4 news: "When people talk about 'Are trans women women?' my feeling is that trans women are trans women." What her critics (myself among them) bristle at is the unspoken implication that trans women are not, and can never be, simply women.

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(TERF), including JK Rowling, Adichie publicly stood with them and has since decried the advent of



“cancel culture.” In a self-published essay titled “It Is Obscene: A True Reflection in Three Parts,” Adichie failed to confront her own history of transphobic rhetoric. Instead she shifted the focus to two former (unnamed) students of hers, believed to be the Nigerian writer and queer activist OluTimehin Adegbeye, and Akwaeke Emezi, who is non-binary and most recently the author of *Dear Senthuran*. Both writers have been critical of Adichie in recent years. In the essay, Adichie chastised them, claiming they publicly branded her as transphobic. Then she condemned cancel culture, writing, “I have spoken to

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in the choice. Her immediate reaction, however, was not to bemoan either Adichie or The Hurston/Wright Foundation. It was, instead, to consider the needs of Black trans women and writers. She quickly withdrew her name from contention for the Debut Fiction Award and, along with Kiese Laymon, donated \$5,000 to Roots. Wounds. Words: a literary arts organization offering visionary programming for BIPOC writers at all intersections of identity with a particular emphasis on queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming writers.

I spoke to Philyaw about the commitment to do no harm that comes with a public platform, the complicated conversation around trans identity in the Black community, and the cognitive dissonance I often feel as a Black woman of the trans experience in the publishing industry.



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**Denne Michele Norris:** Tell me about the moment when you learned who would be the honoree for the North Star Award.

**Deesha Philyaw:** I gave a heavy Negro sigh. I was sad. It was hurtful, not to me directly, but to people in my life. There are people in my life, whom I love, who are trans—you included. There's so much debate about trans people. And, you know, there are debates about Black people, too, and those debates degrade our humanity. I've always pushed back on that as a Black person, and so I read these debates about transness the same way. They're painful to watch, and it's hard to know what to do because pushing back feels like you're part of the debate and making it more valid, but silence doesn't feel right either.



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That should be our first thought. Good intentions that cause inadvertent harm are still harmful. I almost felt like no matter what I did, it was inadequate because the nature of the problem is bigger than one person. This is about how our communities show up, or don't show up, for Black trans people. In this case, I'm talking about the Black literary community. And so as a member of that community, I had to figure out how to take this moment and make it bigger than just the moment, just me, just that particular award and that recipient. I wanted to encourage other people to take this as an opportunity to think about what trans people need from us—cisgender folks who want to support the community. That's what I hope people take away from this. What do trans women need from us? Are we doing enough? What can we do collectively, and individually?

**DMN:** I don't think we can escape the fact that certain aspects of this conversation are specific to the Black

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words. It's all tied up in language. As a child, the language we had in the south for trans folks was dehumanizing. The irony is that so much of what I've learned has come from my own children. My kids have been really formative in helping me understand transness. Kids that they've been friends with since kindergarten are transitioning. I remember several years ago when we were chatting about one of my daughter's friends who had transitioned in middle school. And I innocently—because, like white women, the rest of us want to claim innocence, too—asked about what I now know is their deadname. I wanted to remember it. When I tell you how my daughter lit me up! She said, “That is their deadname. You don't need to remember it.” And I had to sit with that, and further educate myself. And I think when it comes to our community, sometimes there's this idea of “I'm the adult here.” But I'm fortunate that my children, who I love more than anything, know more than I do. I'm happy about that because I don't want them to be ignorant, I want them to be wiser. We see children using the

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we're doing, and to try and be better.

**DMN:** Right! That's exactly right! And you know, the first time Adichie emphatically stated that trans women are trans women, I was sort of willing to look past it because she seemed so progressive otherwise. I thought "she's on her journey and she'll get there in a year or two." But what you're saying has really calcified for me over the last few years as TERF rhetoric seems to have grown—and not just in regards to her, but in some ways about our larger industry. Many among us are more invested in protecting our image, our wealth, our success, the perception of us as leaders, than we are in striving not to do material harm and to make amends when we have harmed. And I regret this about the publishing industry because we pride ourselves on being thought leaders. We pride ourselves on being forward thinking, and working in an industry where new ideas flourish and we get to push the cultural conversation forward. This is how we talk about the publishing industry, how we position it in our

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It is obscene. And for me, as a trans woman in publishing, it begs the question of what, really, is my place in this industry? Where is my glass ceiling? Because it has to exist, somewhere, if this is where we are as an industry.

**DP:** It's another form of gatekeeping, but in this situation, the stakes are even higher. When I think about the virulence of the antagonism suffered by the two writers in that letter, it's shocking. I watched how people, in the name of supporting Adichie, attacked those two writers. And this is about power, right? I can't imagine having that kind of power, that kind of influence, and seeing people with far less

**“If you remove the nonsense about cancel culture from the conversation, what are we left with? Power, gatekeeping, inequity, injustice.”**

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nonsense about cancel culture from the conversation, what are we left with? Power, gatekeeping, inequity, injustice. We're left with these things, and these are hard things to grapple with. It's so much easier to reduce the conversation to cancel culture. And my hope is that more people will start to interrogate themselves: What can I do? What more can I do? And *Roots. Wounds. Words.* is one organization we can support, but there are so many others. I came into this situation focused on what I can do, and I've come away from it realizing that I'm not doing enough. And so I'm constantly asking myself what else I need to do.

**DMN:** Black trans women are often talked about as being the most vulnerable people in our society, systematically speaking. And in many ways, this is true. People kill us gleefully on a near daily basis. And the comfort that people feel with perpetuating violence against us is a direct result of rhetoric that devalues our lives. Every vulnerable, marginalized group deals with this, and yet

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you two are doing is a part of this process. You both recognize your power and influence, and you're turning that into action. It's not difficult to read the letter Adichie wrote this summer, and then look at the violence in the Twitter mentions of the two writers that she tried to implicate. No one is talking about how that is also a result of her recognizing the power she has in this industry and willingly using it for harm.

**DP:** Exactly. So what did you use your power for? Toni Morrison said the whole point of having power is to empower someone else. So when we take a certain action, we have to consider who is empowered by it. So my hope is that the statement I put out empowers people to take a look at themselves, and really think through what actions they can take to support trans women of color. I hope more Black trans women will write, submit, and build literary careers. I hope individual trans women felt supported. Sometimes when I hear certain statements

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**“The story that Adichie is peddling—that trans women aren’t real women—isn’t new.”**

asked, even over the course of this conversation, what do Black trans women need? I think one of the biggest needs is simply volume. We should be the loudest voice in the room telling our stories, and naming and identifying ourselves as who

we are. So what you’re helping with is growing opportunities for us to rewrite our own narrative. The story that Adichie is peddling—that trans women aren’t real women—isn’t new. But in elevating Black trans writers, you and Kiese are bringing our voices into the conversation. And it’s so rare that we have the opportunity to take our narrative into our own hands and shout it from the rooftops with real volume, real elevation. That’s a huge part of the work lies ahead.

**DP:** I think the key is making sure that trans people are



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been supported by MacDowell, Tin House, VCCA, and the Kimbilio Center for African American Fiction, and appears in *McSweeney's*, *American Short Fiction*, and *ZORA*. She co-hosts the critically acclaimed podcast *Food 4 Thot*, and is hard at work on her debut novel. She is Black Trans writer living in New York City. Follow her on Twitter and IG @thedennemichele

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