

# To What Do I Belong?: Traversing Differences, Bridging Narratives

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# Foreword

*Christopher Merrill*

To what do I belong? This was the question posed to writers from around the world who gathered in May 2017 in Tangier, Morocco, for a conference in the American Legation—a Moorish-style building that served as a diplomatic outpost for 140 years, the longest tenure in U.S. history. This complex was also America’s first diplomatic property acquired abroad, the gift of Sultan Moulay Suliman in 1821 to celebrate the 1786 Morocco-American Treaty of Friendship, which remains in force today. And it was in the spirit of friendship that alumni of the International Writing Program (IWP) discussed new ways of telling stories to counter the eruption of extremism created in part by the inadequacy of prevailing narratives of belonging and inclusion.

Family, friends, region, tribe, religious denomination, ethnic groups, class, gender, race, work, neighborhood, country, political parties—in our daily lives we navigate between different markers, adjusting our speech patterns and behavior to the demands of each encounter, narrating to ourselves stories about how and why we come to occupy a particular place in the scheme of things. Poets and writers, playwrights and filmmakers, all specialize in translating these private narratives into public discourse. What surfaces in their imagination is designed to reach broad audiences, and their stories can shape the very ways in which societies view themselves. The IWP thus hosted ten writers for discussions on the nature of communities, a writer’s obligations, and the constraints of form, rooted in draft essays distributed to the group before the symposium, along with readings germane to the subject and to the city of Tangier. For we had come to a mythical place in the literary imagination, an ancient port at the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar, which has long served as a meeting point for merchants, diplomats, adventurers, spies, artists, and writers; from the fourteenth-century Moroccan explorer and scholar Ibn Battuta to the twentieth-century American traveler, composer, and fiction writer Paul Bowles, writers in particular have found in this fabled setting inspiration for new works, and so it proved to be for us.

## Foreword

What follow are reworked versions of the essays discussed in *Tangier*, all of which gained immeasurably from the lively back-and-forth that characterized our conversations. Testing one's ideas in the company of a diverse group of gifted writers can be by turns exhilarating and humbling, and I was struck over and over again by the writers' determination to probe and tease out meaning from what at first glance might seem to be an inconsequential phrase but which upon reflection yielded important insights. In the magnetic field of this encounter, everything seemed to hold a charge that might spark a deeper understanding about this fraught moment in history. The light emanating from the works collected here may well guide readers to travel farther than they imagined possible. Think of this as a series of journeys into the heart of what it means to be alive today—a reckoning, if you will, from all corners of the globe, which seems to spin ever faster.

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# The Writer in an Age of Anxiety

*Karim Alrawi*

A response to the question “to what do I belong?” presupposes the possibility of finding a total expression for the many contradictory desires that compel us—the transient attachments of wanting and becoming, and wishing for more—while the push and pull of life makes us feel like ever-mended garments requiring the stitch of a needle.

In quest of an answer, one may suppose memory a suitable starting point. If this is the case, I would admit to many fond memories of my childhood in Alexandria, a city on the Mediterranean. A city Lawrence Durrell called “the city of memory.” One such memory is of the concierge’s young daughter who came regularly to our apartment to help out and babysit. One day, concerned for me as a child suffering from a high fever, she decided on a remedy. She knew a fever could be cured with a teaspoon or two of an infusion of a spell written on paper and soaked in water. Surely, the most efficacious of spells had to be verses from the *Quran*. She drew words, as best she could, from a large book in our living room illuminated in red and green text. With care, she administered the medicine. The spell seemed to work, and the fever broke. Later, it was discovered that the lines copied were not from the *Quran*, for she had never learnt to read, but from *The Thousand and One Nights*. The words I had sipped were not God’s, but those of Shahrazad.

Another early memory is of a sleepover at a friend’s house. We woke to jungle sounds and the beating of drums. We opened the shutters and stepped onto the balcony of wrought-iron railings to see before us the lit screen of an open-air cinema showing a Tarzan movie. We watched in awe as the white man wrestled lions until my friend’s parents arrived to scold us for leaving our beds. But such memories of spells and old movies are not what stir in me a sense of self. What does are the stories my aunt told my sister and me on the weekends she spent with us. These were often tales of children outwitting genies and ogres. She would tell us of her own childhood in a house with a garden of fruit trees on the outskirts of Alexandria and of our grandfather who, as a young man, had migrated to Egypt from

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Marrakesh, a red city at the foothills of green mountains. This sounded to us as fanciful as her folktales. My grandfather died when I was not yet two years old. As unlikely as it may seem, I do have a sense of his presence. Among the vague memories is a recollection of visiting the city zoo with him on a day awash in sunlight.

When I was in my early teens, my family immigrated to England and then to Canada. In England, I completed high school and university, and after graduating, I began writing for stage and radio then television. I returned to Egypt as a journalist and to teach creative writing at the American University in Cairo. Initially, the reengagement with place, people, and language was refreshing. But my revulsion at a regime that stifled life out of the country made it difficult to feel at ease. Aside from teaching, I wrote stage plays in Arabic, was active in the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, and became president of the Egyptian branch of PEN. Eventually, my human rights activism led to arrest and interrogation by the Egyptian State Security. After seven years in Egypt, I accepted a Fulbright scholarship and moved to the United States then back to Canada. Though it would be correct to say I have enjoyed each of the countries I have lived in, it would be true to add that I do not feel I belong to any of them.

A feeling of belonging implies an intimacy with place and therefore might seem to be a function of memory. Yet insofar as such memories are a recurrence of longing and a sense of loss, they approach the state Freud referred to as the uncanny: an anxiety induced by "something long known and once familiar." But the uncanny, in effect a state of disorientation, is in some respects the antonym of belonging. To approach what constitutes belonging requires a search elsewhere than memory of place.

Shortly after my father died, I was given for safe keeping a file of family birth, death, and marriage certificates. It was a decade before I properly attended to them. A decade spent between the Middle East and North America, training journalists and developing media outlets funded by the US and Canadian governments. When I did return to these documents, it was with the intention of researching my family's history. Then I discovered the stories told to me by my aunt about my grandfather, taken in my childhood for fantasy, were true. By visiting the city in Morocco where he was from, I was able to fill in gaps in her accounts and to trace a lineage of names that purports to extend back fifteen hundred years. What intrigued me the most was not the verifiably historical but what can only be an imagined past as recorded in the eight-hundred-year-old Arabic epic known as *The Migration of the Bani Hilal*. This epic, part *Iliad* and part *Odyssey*, tells the story of a tribal migration in the tenth century from the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa. My grandfather's family claims descent from the Bani Jabir, a clan of the Bani Hilal tribal confederation. The epic is almost eight hundred printed pages of poetry and prose and comes in several versions from across the Middle East as well as North and West Africa. Many of the Bani Hilal settled in Morocco. Though the broad sweep of the epic is based on documented events, the characters and their stories can only be fictional.

The poem inspires in me a feeling of being related to a specific narrative comprised of a language resonant with the echoes of other, more ancient languages from a region rich in story. Of course, such stories prove nothing of the details of lives lived. Yet I suspect it is out of such imaginary gossamer, embroidered with fact, that all identities are woven.

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Researching my grandmother's family, the Baroudis, I discovered they were originally Mamluks, slaves from the Caucasus, brought as children to Egypt and trained as soldiers to resist European Crusaders and later Hulagu Khan's Mongol invaders. My grandmother's uncle, Mahmoud Samy al-Baroudi, a poet famous in his day, was exiled in 1882 to Sri Lanka for resisting the British invasion of Egypt. Submerged beneath everything I have mentioned is my attachment to Egypt's pharaonic past sourced directly from the great taproot that is Africa. Though I have read much of what little is available of ancient Egypt's literature, I feel myself kept at arms-length by the impenetrability of a dead language and the unfamiliarity of its script. So it is Baroudi's poetry, the tales of the Bani Hilal, and the stories my aunt told me in my childhood that confirm in me a sense of identity that is more a relationship to narrative and language than to place. In a manner of speaking, you could say that English is maybe where I work, but Arabic is the home I carry with me like a hermit crab its shell.

Harboring such disparate identities makes me conscious of the challenges of diversity in selfhood. It makes me question whether there must be a master plot to identity to which all other plots are subservient. Can the threads be braided, or must they be melded into a single narrative? Can self be anything more than a containment of fragments? Do terms such as identity and belonging retain any meaning beyond an attempt to disguise our mortality and finitude? How much of identity is choice and how much circumstance? I have no adequate answers to these questions but, for the moment, only an urge to probe further.

Though identity is often a near-synonym for belonging, I would suggest there is a difference. One may choose one's identity, whereas belonging often requires a degree of social acceptance that is not always granted. If it is not, you are designated one of a minority and expected to earn your place where place would otherwise be assumed. You are labeled in ways others often would not be. Others may assume a license to speak for you, claiming to give voice to the voiceless, as though you are mute. You lose visibility on your own terms and are granted it only on terms acceptable to others. You become an object perceived within binaries you may feel powerless to reconfigure.

Yet it is at this point of weakness that I believe writers may find strength. For insofar as belonging is a narrative act, it can be, as with every narrative, reconstituted and renarrated. In the process, the point of view can be reorientated, the story's arc altered, and possibilities of outcomes reimaged. Through the mastery of narrative, it is possible to assert presence, and though that may not comprise all of what is meant by belonging, it may be a large part of what any of us can achieve with integrity and good conscience. But even so, I would contend, presence alone is barely a sufficient condition for belonging. To better grasp what belonging can mean in its fullness requires us to widen the circumference of our investigation beyond the personal and the individual and to take a few steps back in time.

In the 1960s, writing on ethnicity, Fredrik Barth summarized the traditional anthropological position as "a race = a culture = a language" and that "a society = a unit which rejects or discriminates against others." It is a model of a world of separate ethnicities, each a community that is "an island unto itself," excluding other islands. By the 1980s, the term "ethnicity" warranted quotation marks, as per Dale F. Eickelman, who wrote, "understanding 'ethnicity' requires an analytic framework which presents the principles of ethnic stereotyping ... and how these notions are maintained in changing historical contexts." Writing on Morocco, he noted that ethnicity is a term for which it was "difficult to find a

specific counterpart in Middle Eastern languages." This absence is significant for it places the colonized (or should that be the 'ethnicized'?) at an intellectual disadvantage: how does one challenge a concept (implying a limiting stereotype of oneself) that does not exist in one's own language and is often loaded with unfamiliar and restrictive assumptions? Even Adam in *The Book of Genesis* knew that to name was to exercise privilege and power over the named.

Lawrence Rosen provides examples of the political uses of ethnicity. He describes how, in an attempt to better control a restive population, French colonial administrators in North Africa sought to cleave a Berber ethnicity from that of Arab and Muslim, often emphasizing imagined differences. In 1930, they issued a Berber Decree as a stage in a far-reaching strategy to treat Arab and Amazigh ("Berber," in colonial parlance) as antagonists, forbidding the Amazigh to learn Arabic and excluding them from the Muslim community of which they were part. A similar strategy of exclusion and exception was adopted toward Moroccan Jews who were provided with separate French-style schools denied to the Amazigh and Arab communities. They too were discouraged from learning Arabic. Thus, as a matter of policy, a hierarchy of ethnic privilege was created by degrees of otherness and exclusion.

René Girard claimed a fundamental role in human development for acts of exclusion leading to scapegoating, human sacrifice, and communal guilt. Similarly, Giorgio Agamben claimed for Western politics and sovereignty a foundation in the exclusion, in Roman law, of *homo sacer*, a person who "may be killed and yet not sacrificed." Unfit for sacrifice, they were outside the law, and their killing was not regarded as murder. Agamben drew a line from *homo sacer* to the concentration camps of the twentieth century and the status of the Jew in Nazi Germany. Denied the right to belong, the Jew was a "life that does not deserve to live."

Underlying the mechanisms proposed by Girard and Agamben is a metaphor of pollution and purification by exclusion and death. What is excluded represents an otherness, and sometimes a radical otherness, termed an abject, that connotes degradation and elicits disgust. By way of example, Julia Kristeva wrote, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life." The abject, situated outside the symbolic order, precedes linguistic and conscious awareness. Masked in terms of hygiene, disease, and danger, the abject represents the fear of loss of meaning, of distinction between subject and object, self and other.

That the abject precedes the symbolic does not preclude it from being integrated into individual and collective consciousness through language. "The corpse, seen without God" is not the same as the corpse seen with God. The perspective of an individual or a society without faith is different from one with faith. An example of a socially and historically conditioned abject is Agamben's Nazi death camp prisoner who "no longer belongs to the world of men ... Mute and absolutely alone, he has passed into another world without memory and without grief" and is called by the other inmates "*der Muselmann*," the Muslim. Another term for him was "*gamel*," which meant rotting. This equivalence further relates the word "Muslim" to the abject: a live decomposing corpse. An equivalence that seems prescient, for in the 1990s when concentration camps were next established in Europe, it was not the Jew as *Muselmann*, but European Muslims who were the abjected victims. The scale of extermination may not have been industrial, as it was previously for Jews and the Romani.

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Nevertheless, in the former Yugoslavia, in the death camps of Omarska, Keraterm, Sušica, Manjača, and Trnopolje, the intention was genocide.

According to Agamben, the concentration camp is “the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living.” If that is the case, the threshold to abjection has been reduced to what Freud called “the narcissism of minor differences,” where any slight disparity can signal a “life that does not deserve to live.”

The world of the camps complements Hannah Arendt’s “paradise of parasites,” those who believe themselves chosen by intrinsic qualities and impersonal forces to dominate the earth. To them, exclusion is strength and lies are truths (alternative facts and post-truths) subservient to the whim of the genius-leader (all else is fake news). Thus language loses meaning to become “an alphabet of murder.” The loss of a world in common means belonging and identity lose specificity for a role in a future of fictions. Through terror, emotion is evacuated and thought “regimented and arithmetized” for a politics, not of persuasion but one organized to exclude and eliminate anything deemed “unfit to live,” everything deemed abject.

Julia Kristeva wrote that hysteria is “an ego that, overtaxed by a ‘bad object,’ turns away from it, cleanses itself of it, and vomits it,” whereas with abjection “revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language ... the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages.” There is “at least a speculative cathexis in the abject ... a seeing ... a cathexis of looking.” Abjection is language (rejected and reconstructed) and image (a seeing and looking) invested with emotional energy (cathexis). Hysteria may not be subject to narration, but abjection can be. And if so, narrative may be a means to counter abjection as savage exclusion.

In a short story collection, Primo Levi recounts—in language that is simple and clear, and in a tone (call it attitude) that eschews self-pity or blame—a history, part memoir and part fiction, of a Jew who lived in fascist Italy and survived Auschwitz. Each story stands alone and is given the name of an element in the periodic table. The volume lacks an overall plot, but taken together the individual narratives contribute to an arc that goes from the inert gas “Argon” and Levi’s grandparents to a coda on “Carbon” and the endless flow of Being renewing itself through transformation. The elements of the periodic table are submerged metaphors for characters and situations with meaning, both secular and transcendent. They evidence how the sciences were for Levi an antidote to fascism, “because they were clear and distinct and verifiable at every step, and not a tissue of lies and emptiness.”

Several of the stories are haunted by the phantom of the abject taking form every now and then, as the bedbugs in grandmother’s linen, the worm-eaten chocolate of childhood, the fetid scent of chemicals, darkness and emptiness, and, of course, the death camp that was Auschwitz. It is with the penultimate story, that of “Vanadium” and the postwar encounter with Dr. Müller, the German who supervised Levi’s laboratory work when the latter was a prisoner at Auschwitz, that the collection arrives, through a transcendence of fear and pity, at catharsis, a purging not of life “unfit to live” but of mendacity and falsehood by “the element of life.”

W. H. Auden writes of the death camps as the limits of representation: “the Poet cannot get into this business without defiling himself and his audience.” To make entertainment of

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genuine horror—that which cannot be described for being “destruction beyond reason”—is an act of bad faith, a distortion of truth, and a corruption of language. A writer’s primary duty is “to defend language. And this is a political duty. Because, if language is corrupted, thought is corrupted.” He goes on to say, “What the poet has to convey is not ‘self-expression,’ but a view of a reality common to all, seen from a unique perspective.” A poet’s task is “praise of being.”

Describing a Mediterranean landscape, he writes:

... when I try to imagine a faultless love  
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur  
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

It is in the interstices between what is seen and what is heard that feeling and meaning take form. Much of what Primo Levi describes as a prisoner in Auschwitz is mundane. But context is everything, and so the underground stream murmurs never far from the surface to cause a tension almost unbearable.

Several episodes in Levi’s memoir of Auschwitz beg the question of what self is, once stripped to bare motive as when, at the end of the war, the camp was abandoned by its guards, leaving the prisoners to scavenge and fight for scraps of bread and potato peels. Is self a shell grown of circumstance around a hollow core requiring anchorage in belonging to some otherness, or is there an essential self, resilient and self-affirming of more than need?

While living in Cairo and working with the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, I was arrested by the Egyptian State Security. In a shuttered room, coerced by three interrogators, verbally abusive and physically threatening, I experienced a splitting of the self. One part of me, projected into a corner of the room, watched the rest of me being interrogated. What was that observing self? I would like to think it the self that bears witness and the self that translates experience into language and crafts it into narrative. A self, if not essential, then at least necessary to create meaning out of incidents and happenings and that gives itself form in narrative and story. A writer’s self that Rainer Maria Rilke called “a house of solitude,” for which he wrote: “may all never-belonging be yours” and “to none belonging wholly.” For such non-belonging is the precondition for the creative solitude—the independence of spirit—that is the ground of a writer’s integrity, and the I by which they bear witness.

In the all too few works he has left us, Primo Levi demonstrated how, in an age of anxiety, a writer’s sense of belonging can be rooted in their experience of abjection and exclusion (possibly what Walter Benjamin meant by a writer’s essential experience), and related to language. In Levi’s case, a language that was positive and clear (uncorrupted), honest (truthful, if you prefer) and personal, yet accessible (common to all), with a uniquely crafted point of view. A language composed into narratives that transcended abjection to a catharsis and a praise of being, a recognition that every life—regardless of identity or origins—is a life deserving to live.

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# The School of Blended Love

*Said El Haji*

One evening, it was almost midnight as my girlfriend and I sat down for a picnic at a green canal in Rotterdam when something occurred. As I look back on this small yet confrontational event, it still fills me with wonder.

Near a willow tree we sat. We drank white wine and had a bite to eat. Tea lights were burning between us. Very idyllic indeed. Suddenly we heard sounds nearby. Two guys were walking by under the willow tree without taking notice of our presence. Maybe they just didn't care. One of the two had a plastic bag, which he started emptying into the canal.

'Feeding ducks?' I asked half-jokingly in order to disguise my interference.

He instantly stopped what he was doing, as if he felt caught. He then turned towards me and said that those animals made such noise all the time. Judging by his accent, I knew he was Moroccan.

'Do you have a light?' his friend asked with a marijuana joint between his fingers.

I offered him a tea light.

'Thanks a lot, mate,' he said.

When they were out of hearing distance, my girlfriend asked what they had been throwing away in the canal.

'Bread. To feed the ducks,' I said.

Tauntingly she reacted: 'Really? Do you go out around midnight to feed the ducks?'

I was annoyed by it. And it made me fearful. Immediately, I realised how she thought of me—or at least I thought I knew. As if I was only being loyal to a group of people, my Moroccan brothers, just because I too am Moroccan. While, in fact, I was an individualist, a

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Taoist, a nihilist, a humanist, a protestant and an agnostic all in one, a detached soul that laughs at everything bending towards groups, gangs, collectives, clans, and formations. Altogether, I was everything except your typical Moroccan. So I stood up. And with a tea light in my hand, I stepped towards the spot where those two guys had been standing. There I encountered not one, or two, or three, but four slices of bread. I felt so victorious in my discovery that I could have easily eaten all that bread.

Pathetically, I started lecturing on the complexity of reality, and how it was unfathomable to the human mind. How all politics, art, and religion were doomed to fail. I went on to accuse the modern world of heartless cynicism. And I rejected every woman and every man who, by making cynical presumptions, destroys beauty and innocence in the world.

Today I know better than that. I dare to say that I have become more realistic. And I dare to say that this is because of my eleven-year relationship with my Dutch beloved. I have come to realise that I'm the bearer of a cultural baggage that is neither Dutch nor western, but different. It was I who despised and denied his own vulnerability, not she.

I will never forget how openly she counteracted. It was during a dinner with friends at a restaurant. A friend and I were having a discussion that I, apparently, really wanted to win. She said I wasn't listening, and that I should listen more instead of constantly repeating my own arguments. Something snapped. I was overwhelmed by a rage that made me want to throw the red wine in my glass in her face. And I almost did. But I didn't understand. Neither did I acknowledge. So I kept it inside me. For at least a year, I brought it up indiscriminately and always felt deeply wronged.

Some years previous, in 2012, five young men scoffed at a young pregnant woman. They called her "the whore of a nigger," then molested her. It happened in clear daylight, in the middle of an Amsterdam street. All of them, the five young men and the pregnant woman, were of Moroccan descent. This was big news for many people. According to some, mainly on the right side of the political spectrum, this was clearly an ethnic issue. They called it the "problem of Moroccan racism." Why? Because the man the pregnant woman was with was black. Others said instead that the cause was not to be found in Moroccan culture but in the streets of the Netherlands.

Now, I don't feel the need to deny the existence of racism, or the insecure masculinity of our modern-day youngsters, but I do believe that there's more. I'm convinced that those five young men were obliged to do what they did, provoked into their act by their public role as guardians of the intensely idealised Moroccan pride and identity. The real tragedy lies in the fact that they themselves hardly know anything about the effect of these codes. Most Dutch-Moroccan boys and men understand nothing about the patriarchal ways they are brought up with. I'm talking about unwritten rules inherent in a male sense of honour and binding loyalty towards ancestral culture and religion.

Afterwards, one of the culprits stated he regretted what he had done and that he couldn't grasp the fact that he had actually done it. "I'm a student at the University of Amsterdam and all I really want is to graduate," he said. It would be too easy to wave aside his statement as the words of a liar who tries to gain sympathy by pretending to be the victim. Personally, I think that he is not only one of the culprits but indeed one of the victims—the victim of a binding, patriarchal culture that, for years, has been undetected in the idealistic

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and liberal multicultural society of the Netherlands, where everyone is equal and cultural differences are thought to be irrelevant.

I have lived long enough in this so-called perfect society. Sometimes I have been overwhelmed by so much grief, loneliness, and longing that I could only cry. I never understood the cause of these emotions. Perhaps I lacked the urgency, the guts, or the will to understand, simply because I wanted to believe that I really was living in a perfect society. But thanks to my first real relationship with a Dutch woman, I gradually came to understand that this society was weak and vulnerable, the much-celebrated Dutch tolerance becoming a cover for bluntness and indifference.

Even though I've lived in the Netherlands since 1982, and even though I've always interacted more with the Dutch than with my fellow Moroccans, it still doesn't mean that me being in a relationship with a Dutch woman is self-evident, just like it isn't self-evident to have children together without being married.

Since childhood, I have been told that I should marry someone from "my own culture," meaning, someone who's Moroccan and Muslim, not a Christian woman, a *taroumith*.

In the eighties, mixed couples were much more of a taboo than they are today. There were spooky stories about Moroccan daughters who had willingly and knowingly loaded down their families with grief and disgrace by running away with a Dutch guy. I heard people say those daughters had absolutely no honour, because they showed no respect to their parents and cultural heritage. Not that there was much talk, by the way: the subject was surrounded by shame. Those girls were considered lost. To me, as a child, the only mixed relationships that were okay were those of illegal Moroccan immigrants who had found a Dutch woman to undertake a marriage of convenience with them.

Honestly, I hated this environment. There was so much shame and control, so much male insecurity and domination, so much fear, hypocrisy, and distrust. I wanted to be free and unprejudiced, open-minded and outspoken. I speak from my own experience when I say that the biggest authority in patriarchal culture is not God, or the king, but the father. That is why I had to confront him one day.

He was an authoritarian man, my father. The Moroccan community of the Dutch town in which we lived bestowed much respect on him. Unlike the majority of his generation of guest workers, he could read and write, and he knew the Qur'an by heart. Many of his ideas were acquired from it. His idea of what obedience means, for instance, comes from the story of Abraham, that grey old man in the Bible who lends his ear to the order to sacrifice his son. Yes, my father thought his children ought to observe the same obedience towards him as the son Ishmaël does towards Abraham. That was his ideal relationship between father and son. People sought his wisdom and advice, because they hoped that through him they would gain holy knowledge.

In that unannounced moment, I confronted him.

It was Ramadan. I was in Amsterdam, and the sun had just gone down. My cell phone rang. It was he, my father, asking where I was. I said I was in Amsterdam. Why wasn't I at home to break the fast, he asked. In less than one second, I decided to do what I had intended to do for so long, but never dared. I wanted to come clean to this huge entity I had looked up to,

and lied to, my whole life. I said: “No, dad, I don’t fast.” Then I waited a second to hear his response. But he hung up. And I got scared, because I felt there was no way back.

And there was no way back indeed. He prohibited my relatives from staying in touch with me. I was excommunicated. Where there is power, there is exclusion.

At the end of Ramadan, my mother invited me to attend the Eid l-Fitr. In a way, we both had slammed the door on each other, my father and I. Now was the time for reconciliation, she said.

That day there was a joyful vibe in the house, but my father and I were dead serious. He ordered me to come back to the path of religion. He would forgive me for everything as soon as I brought myself under the control of Islam. I was wrong to tell him I didn’t fast. That had hurt him a lot, he said. Even though he sounded vulnerable for the very first time, I felt as if I still didn’t exist for him. Why couldn’t he just accept the fact that I wasn’t his Ishmaël? For how could I be open and honest with him without hurting him? How could I make him understand that what we both really needed was not respect but love? Well, I couldn’t— simply because I had never learned to embrace my own vulnerability. So I just kept silent. And that was how our so-called reconciliation ended. I promised myself I would never lie to him again. Should he ever start again about subjugation to his religion, I would confront him with the same painful truth. But we never spoke about it again.

It takes time and effort to overcome patriarchal tendencies. And it takes even more time and effort when these tendencies are conserved in religion. It puts the individual in conflict with a community that’s already busy fighting Islamophobia and political radicals like Geert Wilders. I am excluded not only by my father but also by my Moroccan compatriots, who have no difficulty despising me and my work. Still I find it justifiable to fight the patriarchal power structures that exist in institutionalized religion, e.g. Islam.

Let me tell you another story. It’s about my brother, two years older than me. He and I shared everything, so we also shared the wish to go after Dutch girls. We didn’t want prudish play with Muslim girls who had to stay out of sight because of gossip and other mechanisms of social control. During the weekends, we set off to a party somewhere, half drunk, to compete with each other by chatting up as many girls as possible. Of course, we kept silent about it at home. Deeply hidden in the subconscious of our rebellious mind, there was the undisputed and binding loyalty towards our ancestral culture and religion.

When at the age of nineteen my brother started a serious relationship with a Dutch girl, he visited her parents’ house very often. And he felt very much welcomed by them. Yet she didn’t visit our parents’ house once. She never met them. Why? Because she was not allowed to. Tradition forbids it. Only Muslims are allowed. Still, she never complained about it. Of course, she regretted it. Being unwanted is never enjoyable. But she showed understanding out of love, and because she knew how sensitive these matters are in Moroccan culture.

My brother learned a lot from his relationship. The very first time he visited the residence of his girlfriend’s parents was already a shock to him. When he entered her bedroom, he immediately noticed a poster of the Dalai Lama on the wall. That poster disturbed him. Somewhere at the back of his mind was a voice telling him that there is only one God and that only this one God ought to be idolised. He couldn’t just leave it as if the poster didn’t

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bother him, however, so he told her the poster was a provocation to his culture, and that it had to go. She complied without struggle. And when he saw that, it moved him. At that moment, he realised the true meaning of love.

Years later, when I phoned my mother to ask her if it was okay if I brought my girlfriend to her house so that they could meet each other on the joyful day of Eid ul-Fitr, my mother reacted as if a wasp had stung her. "No!" she cried out. "No means no!" At that time, my father had been deceased for six years, and my girlfriend and I had been living together for a year.

She panicked in the same way my brother had panicked, for she felt challenged by moral shock. To her, my suggestion was like a barbaric invasion. Afraid of losing control, her instinctive response was to put up an invisible wall. It was only through the mediation of my sister, her one and only daughter, who after thirteen years of marriage had divorced a Moroccan man that my mother finally came to accept the idea that it was okay to put aside her loyalty towards traditional ways. She embraced the fact that there was no absolute guarantee for a successful relationship.

It isn't only my relatives who feel morally challenged by changing attitudes around them. The whole of western Europe is in a state of moral shock and confusion. In the last decades, this part of the modern world has become increasingly secular. God and his commandments have almost disappeared. Church buildings are empty, waiting for reuse or demolition. At the same time, Muslim immigrants with a distinctive religious identity have entered the public realm. They want their own food and their own clothes, and some of them are not even in favour of secularism. In this context, people feel that their traditional way of life is threatened: as a result, everything is immediately framed as an attack. The multicultural society is in desperate need of criteria that bring back faith, trust, and moral confidence.

My Dutch beloved and I panic too. There is no place where our moral insecurities collide more than in the car, especially when I drive. She feels extremely uncomfortable when she isn't in control of the vehicle herself, and I find it rather humiliating to serve as an extension of her fearful and controlling mind. Just the idea of it, being controlled by the woman I love, is a frontal clash with my unrelenting desire for autonomy. And even though we promise each other to do things differently every time, we keep failing.

Yet it is through the school of blended love that I have come to believe in the power of love in general. The love that I despised as a young man, in the same way I despised everything that made me vulnerable.

I have also come to believe in a society that is much stronger, more open and diverse. I was there when the first Moroccan boat participated in the Amsterdam Canal Parade. I have seen and experienced its healing force. As a heterosexual, I cruised in solidarity with the LGBT minorities, simply because their individual right to express their sexual preference is protected by the same law as my right to express my agnostic outlook on life. And in being involved, I felt supported by thousands of people on the quayside. They put their thumbs up, threw flowers and dived into the canal in sheer joy. This was heaven, and it was beautiful.

## Epilogue

We're on our way to a new and beautiful place, my beloved and I, and we look forward to being there. She's behind the wheel, so she's in control. And I hold the map. In the back seat, our two children are eating raw vegetables.

Suddenly I panic. 'Turn! We must turn!'

'Are you sure?' she asks.

I look again at the map. Where are we anyway? I don't know. I really don't. But I say: 'Yes, I'm sure. If we keep driving like this, we'll end up nowhere.'

Minutes go by without having a chance to turn. 'We're nowhere already!' I complain.

It's not really that I'm fed up. I'm just pretending, because I don't want to give her the impression that I'm okay with everything she does. Otherwise she'll think she's superior to me, and that's something I can't bear. What is love without mutual respect?

She parks the car on the side of the road and seizes the map from my lap. She looks at it, then looks at me with a face full of contempt and says: 'We don't need to turn, you moron! We're here!' She points at the exact spot on the map to show me.

Once again, I fail miserably. I feel I'm a disgrace to manhood. What to do?

Nothing, actually. Just stay calm. Bear with it. Have a veggie.

But I can't put aside the failure. And somehow I feel heavily wronged. Finally I say: "You're applying double standards, you know. Why is it okay if you make a mistake and not okay if I make one?"

Without looking at me, far too busy restarting and driving the vehicle back on the road, she asks: "What are you talking about?"

I sigh, seemingly weary. "Remember an hour ago when you drove into that village, even though I had clearly said that you shouldn't, and then you didn't know how to get out? Well, I didn't complain, did I? And do you know why I didn't complain? Because everybody makes mistakes, dear."

She's not impressed. She must have sensed the frailty and impotence of my words. "Everybody makes mistakes, but your mistakes are rather typical," she bites.

Just stay calm. Bear with it. Have another veggie.

This time, I shut up and think. I think about the difference between what I've said and what I actually want to say. I want to say that I'm afraid of her dominating me. But the fact that she has no trouble expressing her emotions towards me makes her exactly that. It makes her dominant. When she's fed up, or in a bad mood, she doesn't keep silent about it but throws it all out as if nothing else matters. She has no difficulty blaming me, shouting at me. I find that disrespectful. When I'm fed up or in a bad mood, I'd rather disappear. It's not just a matter of character but of education. The Dutch are notorious for their bluntness.

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So I'm fed up and I keep quiet—more so when other people are around, for instance our children. I feel their gaze burning on my back, especially my son's. His future is at stake because of me. Growing up with a dad humiliated by mum—what effect will that have on the psyche of a high-spirited boy? He will become a wimp. Deprived of his pride and self-esteem, he will lead an invisible life, wearing fake breasts and parading in high heels to copy his mother. Or he will leave bearded up for a caliphate full of radical lads in order to fiercely compensate for whatever he's been missing.

That's why dad has to stand up against mum.

Come on, dad, do something! The moment to set the example for a new generation, shining and bright, is now!

I straighten my back, I stare at a distance like a born leader and ask: "Who wants a veggie?"

# To What Do I Belong?

*Alisa Ganieva*

To what do I belong? I come from Dagestan, a mountainous region in the Caucasus, densely populated by dozens of ethnic minorities, each spilling into a variety of communities, which in turn disperse into a variety of houses, or clans. Belonging to a given clan was crucial for one's self-definition, marital prospects, etc. Even today, my older relatives keep bragging about the superiority of their clan, though the names of those clans have virtually been swept into oblivion, and nobody cares about them.

In the 1930s, my grandfather, along with other Dagestanis, adopted a new Russian-style last name. Passport clerks sliced off the half signaling his father's name (Abdul-Gani) and stuck a Russian ending onto it. Thus he became "Ganiev." They also ripped up his proper name—Hadzhi-Musa—and turned its second half into the Russian patronymic Musaevich, as if his father's name had been Musa.

Belonging to a particular mountain village mattered as well. It could tell almost everything about a person: his likely profession, his goings-on, even his character. But I've been deprived of having a native village: some of my ancestors' nests were burnt down by the imperial Russian army for mutiny (and my forefathers fettered and sent to Siberia); other villages decayed by themselves, as their inhabitants were resettled or voluntarily exchanged the high peaks for the lowlands' urban facilities.

Moreover, the twentieth century was cruel to the people of the Soviet Union. They had to erase their memories and forget their family roots if they didn't fit the dominant ideology. One of my great-grandfathers died in a Siberian concentration camp; another went through total dispossession, was sent to a labor camp, and survived by a mere fluke. My grandfather tried to forget about his origin as a "people's enemy" and struggled to become an earnest Communist, but he too ended up in a Soviet prison, an accidental political victim.

My ancestors must have been ferocious fighters. There were incessant feuds between the

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people in the mountains. Foreign invasions succeeded one another: the Mongolian conqueror Timur, then the Iranian ruler Nader Shah (who was finally defeated near my mother's village); a folk epic describes my great-great-grandfather as a merciless fighter of cruel hand-to-hand combat.

My mother's clan was rather open to the refugees and fugitives from other regions and nations. Thus I have the blood of several local princes from other Caucasus regions, of a Crimean khan who lost the throne to his brother and had to flee his would-be killers, and of some Jews who sought asylum there after being expelled from the Iranian highlands.

My father's kin, by contrast, lived isolated and unmixed for centuries in their stony pockets; that's why half of them retained their blond and blue-eyed appearance.

I remember walking in the mountains with my paternal grandmother right before her death. She was a very strange woman, without any personal attachments and very cold towards her offspring, but absolutely passionate about extinct traditions and the lost property of her clan. She pointed out the patches of the fields that once belonged to her mother and were later nationalized by the Soviet state.

She also recalled her first marriage, which I had never heard of before. It lasted for six days, after which her husband (who was also her first cousin) departed to tend to a herd of state-owned horses. My grandmother was so filled with revulsion at marital intimacy that she instantly ran back to her mother's house and knocked on the door; her family didn't let her in, though, and ordered her to return to where she belonged—with her husband. The situation ended with her mental breakdown in front of the assembly of elders, who were admonishing her to remain a good wife. She snatched a tambourine and broke, weeping, into a sung lament, cursing her sad fate and orphanhood. Impressed, the elders gave in to compassion and released her from the hated marriage bonds. As for her orphanhood, her father had been killed by his own cousin when she was a year-old baby. On a certain important occasion, the two quarreled about which was a more competent Quran reader, and the quarrel ended in tragedy.

It's difficult for me to see myself as belonging to these lost tribal values and the rigid, endemic rules of the mountain communities. They all are dead. But do I belong to my present country, Russia? Not entirely. When I moved to Moscow to study, I was treated as an illegal immigrant, although my documents were in order. Dagestan belonged to Russia, and Dagestanis were Russian citizens, yet they were regarded as outsiders, and potential terrorists. Almost every day I was stopped by Moscow subway security personnel and brought in for questioning.

Once when I was quarreling with one of my Moscow classmates, he suddenly called me "a Chechen," as if that was some brutal curse. And those who overheard it stared at me nearly in horror. In reality, I'm not a Chechen. I'm Avar by origin, but most Russians have no idea about the Avars. There are too many tiny indigenous peoples in the Caucasus to know them all. And do I indeed belong to the Avars? I speak Russian better than my endangered mother tongue, my name is Alice after the Lewis Carroll character, and I chose not to be a Muslim, though my native region is suffering vigorous Islamization.

In fact, step by step I cast aside my identities and came to the conclusion that any belonging

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is divisive. That it makes you position your group against other groups, while I am trying to do the contrary—to cross boundaries. To, from time to time, imagine myself belonging to different alien backgrounds. Apart from some civil and moral principles, nothing keeps me from stepping into somebody else's shoes, from trying on another nation, age, or gender. I love being cosmopolitan. It really creates social empathy, boosts literary inspiration, and gives you a rich feeling that you belong to all of humanity...

But that's what I feel, not what I probably seem to be. In reality, as a writer working on the edge of two very different cultures, I have to contend with powerful external expectations; a definite identity has been forced upon me. This is a universal challenge for writers born into one language and writing in another, having a distinct ethnic background, and living in the environment of an alien metropolis. We are supposed—nay, we are expected—to write in a certain literary tradition and on certain, purely ethnic, topics. We are earmarked by our origin.

Sometimes this can boost a “half-breed” writer's career because the book market likes a clear differentiation of authors and the topics they—predictably—raise. But at other times, this narrows the choice of your creative themes and plots to a single one—like a narrative about, say, an immigrant successfully working his way up in the imperial capital, or about “aborigines” enjoying the benefits of being conquered by the “civilized,” or something similar.

This can be a trap—to play the proffered role of the tamed native, cutely domesticating the dominant language. It took some effort not to be irritated by the condescendingly indulgent praise from critics referring to me as an Avar rather than a Russian author, which would have been more logical. As long as multinational states exist, you can't help being pigeonholed according to your ethnicity, be it in the negative and degrading or the positive and profitable way. Still, a writer can keep writing despite labels or expectations from the public or publishers.

Besides, I'm sure identity is shifting in nature. Mine surely was. I started my life as an Avar girl, from a nation most of the people on earth have never heard of. Then I evolved, first into a Dagestani, then into a Caucasian (I mean a region, not a race), then into a Russian, and now I'm just a person of the world, with a personal fancy for highlands, rare languages, and indigenous cultures. Which grants a much broader perspective on things, and more sense of recognition of something homey in completely strange places. After all, geneticists say we all have common ancestors. This is an idea I really love.

In giving this account of my personal identity, I couldn't help thinking that it's not simple to gain one when one's country or community has none, or rather when its identity is false, or adopted. I was born in USSR, a country that fell apart a quarter of a century ago. It shed its smeared and compromised representation as the “prison of nations,” yearning for a brand-new, young and democratic self. A complete reassessment of the in-valid Soviet values, a transformation of its people, captives of a great social experiment, into citizens—that's what was expected to happen. Expected by millions of Soviet people themselves. But the change loitered and lingered, and it didn't take long for my country to run into its own past and to revert to an old, discarded identity. People's initial hope and craving for complete renovation turned into bitter disillusionment and a nostalgic worship of the lost imperial

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paradise they want to belong to again.

Today, statements about a political and cultural recovery of the Soviet discourse in Russia are banal, even cliché, but unfortunately their banality makes them more real. All its conceptual paraphernalia is back: a mythology of an enemy (Putin's "traitors of the nation" and "fifth column" are all too similar to Stalin's "peoples' enemies"), Russia's "special" (non-European) path, the self-isolation, the suspiciousness (c.f. the recent shutdowns of foreign-funded NGOs as proclaimed spy nests), the reduction of federal rights, and thorough centralization... One part of this process—protectionism and mistrust towards the outside world—seems to have seized even liberal countries such as Britain or the US, but while there it seems to spring from economic and social depression, which can be overcome and absorbed by a strong system of checks and balances, in Russia it's just a giant failure to break with the looming past—stepping twice on the same rake.

Our past is being deloused of the awful memories of repressions, purges, and ubiquitous lies, and rewritten according to the goals of the present political elite. There was no radical farewell to the bad old yesterday, even though we do have a successful example of the Soviet state pulling this off—a complete erasure of historic memory of everything before 1917 (the Soviet Revolution). Instead, the recent past is sacralized. We have a slightly brushed up Soviet anthem, the same youth movements, and even the same Kafkaesque court trials (such as the trial of the director of Ukrainian Literary Library, or the recent arrest of a theater director accused of pocketing money intended for a performance that allegedly was never staged. The absurdity lies in the fact that a performance was in fact happily staged, running several times—but the prosecutors are persuaded neither by video recordings nor by critics' reviews, nor by spectators' testimonies, pretending they are all fake).

So what is so endearing about the Soviet identity? It must be its great-power charge. Public polls show that my countrymen prefer to live in a giant country feared by others rather than in a small, comfortable, harmless state. Stalin is a hero again. He keeps beating other historic Russian figures in polls, and from time to time a bust, a monument, or even a museum to him pops up in some Russian region. Unlike Germans who coped with Hitler, we screwed up de-Stalinization, and the shifty ghosts are bright and back. Other powerful historic figures such as the mediaeval Prince Vladimir the Red Sun —an alter ego of our present leader, whose giant statue appeared near Kremlin last year—are being glorified in movies and official speeches.

Certainly, not everything was bad in the Soviet past. There were many daring scientific projects and victories of modernization, a giant blooming of education among illiterate bonded peasants, and an incredible industrialization of a previously agricultural country ... But instead of developing education and science, we chose to retreat to something ruinous—an absolutization of power.

A strong fist and the expanse of the land are once again more important than the rights of individuals. Rather than gain a new identity, we lapsed into a derelict and rusty feudal guise because a counterfeit and outmoded idea of belonging to a great, endless, powerful state is lulling the masses into symbolic bliss, into finding fulfillment in revanchism after the trauma of the 1990s, even while giving the elites an illusion of control and power. Building a new belonging and identity is risky, and may take some decades. It also means losing power to

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others in an imminent democratic rotation. Instead, it is much simpler to freeze the situation and squeeze out as much booty as possible. The elites don't care what's on the horizon, even though they might be realizing from the past—a past they are vigorously copying—that the system they reanimated will, inevitably and catastrophically, come to an end.

This escape from the future entails that the question “where do we come from?” is more important than “where are we going?” That is why Russian literary prize longlists are swarming with historical novels and family sagas, while the Ministry of Culture is feverishly funding epic films about our (Russian-Soviet) glorious past, comprised of winning and conquering. When a movie based on a cooked-up Soviet story about a heroic battle of twenty-eight Red soldiers against the Nazi army came out, the director of Russia's State Archive doubted the plot's authenticity. As a result, he was immediately fired, and our outraged Minister of Culture claimed that those doubting and besmirching the sacred legend were disgusting lowlife.

Identity, as we know, implies two senses: a positive one (self-creation and self-building) and a negative one (defending and distancing oneself from the Other). It is normal that they coexist in a dialectic relationship, but it is essential that the creative “I” dominate the negative “I.” Russia's identity today is negative, and that is why it is chained to immutable myths and pseudo-memories of the past. A positive identity, on the contrary, would have been transformative, changing, alive. But alas, ruins are taking sway over progress, nostalgia over modernism, longing for imperialism over civil solidarity.

Fake and contradicting identities are also plaguing my native North Caucasus. Its inhabitants share the delusional post-Soviet identity with the rest of Russia. At the least occasion, the officials and local authorities, appointed by Moscow, are quick to laud and eulogize the Russian president, competing in obsequious demonstrations of loyalty to our main state ideology articulated vaguely as “patriotism” and “spiritual ties.” Parades and spectacular patriotic performances are held on a regular basis. Paradoxically, boosting and propagating the main ideology, a resurrection of Soviet imperialism, led to a permanent stance of self-flagellation, such as the glorification and honoring of those nineteenth-century Russian generals who contributed to a bloody conquering of Caucasus—the land of these very officials' ancestors.

Territory, in Russia, remains an all-sufficient symbolic value. In the public's mind, all the freedom and liberty brought by Gorbachev (the most undervalued, the most hated figure in contemporary Russia) were not worth the loss of acres of land, most of which, coincidentally (having turned into independent states) also chose to revert to Soviet and paternalistic models of governance—much safer for the short prospect of their leaders' lives. After us, the deluge.

Also returning is the old Soviet practice of the central State's patronizing guardianship towards the national peripheries: a new life is being given to the Soviet concept of the so-called “friendship among nations.” This entails a restitution of the old sub-identity for, say, the Dagestani people—grateful “younger brothers” of the fair, guiding, big brother, the Russian nation. The ethnic diversity of Russia, always emphasized in the president's speeches, works as a justification for imperialist claims: the herds can't manage themselves and need a caring supreme supervisor. Many of my Moscow acquaintances can never stop

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repeating that Russia is the only empire that never annihilated its conquered indigenes, bringing them instead to civilization and treating them lovingly — one of the things the West, now drowning in its migration crises, should learn from us (instead of trying to make Russia learn from it).

Another identity formation among my compatriots in the Caucasus is politically inverse but still borrowed, and fake. It is the identity of Muslims, and, in the most radical cases, Muslims as suppressed by the lawless and corrupted secular state (Russia), struggling for justice. That identity is not a given, for in the Caucasus Islam has always been superficial, and blended with local rules and beliefs. Only in times of political resistance did it gain its toughness and its thirst for a rigorous adherence to sharia laws and the prophet's Sunnah. That was the case for example during the years of the Caucasian mountaineers' war against tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century, or at the end of the 1990s, with the Middle East emissaries' impact on the initially a-religious Chechen war of independence.

This masquerade is a clear sign of the vast identity void in the national republics, hastily torn from their ancient heritage and not yet adjusted to a rapidly changing modernity. That same void is felt in the larger Russia, locked up in the carapace of an outlived and pernicious recent past.

And this, then, must be the reason I can't belong to anything in particular. The existing models do not work for me at all. Which is why most of my identities have nothing to do with my citizenship or my communal origin: they are related to my biology (I'm a female homo sapiens), to my professional skills (I'm a writer), or to my transient pursuits (I'm a reader, or a talker, or a doubter)... But the more of them I have, the richer I feel.

# The Burden of Belonging

*Harris Khalique*

I remember Rashid Rehman reciting an Urdu couplet by Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib when a mutual friend asked him to be careful in these testing times. It was some months before Rehman's death. He looked her in the eyes and said smilingly: *Zamana sakht kum aazaar tha ba-jan-i-Asad / Wagarna hum to tawaaqo ziyada rakhtey thay* (time has not tormented Asad's soul as much / I had, in fact, expected a lot more). Rehman was a lawyer. He was shot dead in the city of Multan, Pakistan, for defending a young academic charged with blasphemy. Rehman was famous across the country for his pro bono representation of bonded labourers, landless peasants, distressed women and minority groups. In May 2014, when the news of his death arrived, I was sipping coffee and quietly humming to myself a line from the verse of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh.

Bakhsh was one of the foremost mystic poets of the Punjabi language and younger than Ghalib, but they were contemporaries for a good part of the nineteenth century. Bakhsh witnessed the fall of the Mughal Empire on the Indian subcontinent, the decimation of the Sikh dynasty in his region of Punjab and Kashmir, the lost war of independence waged by the native Indian forces against the occupying British armies and, subsequently, the absolute ascendancy of British colonial rule in India after 1857. The turmoil of his age is comparable to the one we face today, in Pakistan and elsewhere. Except that in those times the contours of a new era being born were more evident to visionaries in our part of the world – like Ghalib, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Syed Amir Ali – while today we witness a world falling apart without any sign of how the future will manifest itself. Even the best among us grope in the darkness of the present. In his *Age of Anger* (2017), Pankaj Mishra mentions the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who mocked the enthusiasts of Western civilisation during the Cold War era for their claims of the universality of their ideals. Mishra then shows how the long-held beliefs about the impending success of the Anglo-American institutions of the nation state and liberal democracy, rooted in the wish

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that other countries in the world will ape them, have been so vociferously contested. Besides, the very concepts of accountability, stability, rationality and secularism are disputed by so many people in so many places, largely as a consequence of the selective use of these concepts by the selfsame nations and global institutions that propounded the universality of these concepts in the first place.

Hence, there is no standard flowchart of history available to us anymore within a normative framework that would describe the next milestone for those who lag behind in modern knowledge, scientific achievement, cutting-edge technology and sophisticated ideas. It seems that chaos is engulfing humanity like never before. Or maybe this moment marks the end of denying diverse peoples their context in the name of universality, and the beginning of an appreciation for a contextualised discourse to understand the contemporary human condition wracked by death and destruction. The line I mentioned humming from one of Bakhsh's epic poems goes *dushman marey te khushi na karyo, sajnaan vi marjana* (why rejoice the death of your enemy, for your friends will also die).

Life has to be a source of joy. But birth itself – the beginning of life – is purely accidental for the one who is born. The newborn child is indifferent to any joy or sorrow. The race, class, language, faith, location and age in which an individual human being comes to life – these all remain incidental until this person gains consciousness. Once grown up and exposed to the outside world, formally or informally educated and trained, having experienced an initial encounter with both the complexity and diversity in human life, this woman or man finds her or himself 'condemned to be free', to use Jean-Paul Sartre's formulation. But that freedom remains hemmed in by the predetermined limits set by the circumstances of one's birth. Therefore, within these circumstances, the individual is free to make choices that shape her view of the world, her passions and persuasions, aspirations and desires. If she finds an artistic streak in herself and turns into a creative writer, her aesthetic temperament and literary bent, diction and style, subjects and themes are shaped by her unique appreciation of human history and a critique of her culture and civilisation. Based on that appreciation and critique of the old, her views on contemporary politics and society are framed.

In Pakistan, at the time I was born, my parents and those around them who cherished art and creativity in the cultural realm and valued democracy and socialism as their political ideals were subjected to a tough, unpleasant existence. In order to survive, they had to make a choice every single moment – between silence and speech, caution and courage, calm and rage, amnesia and memory. Although I have no personal recollection of the two successive military dictatorships (at the time of my birth and preschool years), I do have vivid memories and possess lived experiences of two more dictatorships in my adulthood. However, my sordid experience is not limited to just those military dictatorships. The ill-fated and short-lived civilian interludes between martial rules, or the period of democracy experienced since 2008, succeeded little in curbing a perpetual feeling of uncertainty, instability, coercion and fear among those who act, paint, sing or write. If an analogy can be drawn with the experience of freethinking artists, poets, writers and musicians of the Soviet Union, in Pakistan we have oscillated between the periods of Josef Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev – between blatant purges and constant coercion and times of soft pressure sugar-coated with the choice of co-option. Noncompliance is dangerous in either case. Therefore, albeit a little differently, the choice the previous generation had to make every

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moment has to be continually made by us as well – whether we write poetry, as I do, or create art in some other form.

There is one significant difference between then and now. Our predecessors in Pakistan faced a visible opponent – the oppression by the state carried out through its coercive arms, which were marked and defined. Now we face multiple opponents, which are not always visible but live among us. They are intimate, and omnipresent. At times they are describable but never entirely explainable. They are polymorphous. Because the key challenge of our times is a society marred by bigotry and xenophobia from within. And, unlike in fascist Germany, there is no unifying force that may coalesce, consolidate and elucidate these stark sentiments. This has caused a polycentric dispersion of authority and a wide horizontal spread of the agency of violence. Even a compassionate analysis of the historic and political reasons for the emergence of an intolerant society can't take away the imminent threat that such a society poses to those who shake up the rigid linearity settled in the minds of people prone to bigotry and xenophobia. Since art and creativity pose a grave threat to linearity by their reliance on discursive categories and disruptive imagination, they make things complex. Therefore, art and creativity should, on such account, be censored and confined if not completely eliminated.

The relationship between art and power – more precisely, if we speak of poets, between poetry and authority – has always remained tricky. There is a constant tension at play, a hide-and-seek, an interdependence coupled with an inherent subversion. When authority sought submission and poetry refused, the verse of Jafar Zatalli, an absurdist poet of Urdu in the Delhi of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, cost him his life: his poetry offered a melange of ridiculous and transcendent ideas; his truthfulness about misdoings, injustices, decadence and corruption, wrapped in bitter satire, would choke in the throats of Mughal kings and princes. Finally, in 1713, Emperor Farrukhsiyar sentenced Zatalli to death.

In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1980), Vladimir Nabokov comments on how one of the greatest Russian poets, Alexander Pushkin, would cause irritation to the Russian officialdom, particularly the Tsar himself. The reasons of disgust with poetry were clearly stated by the authority, and here I quote from Nabokov:

instead of being a good servant of the state in the rank and file of the administration and extolling conventional virtues in his vocational writings (if write he must), [Pushkin] composed extremely arrogant and extremely independent and extremely wicked verse in which a dangerous freedom of thought was evident in the novelty of his versification, in the audacity of his sensual fancy, and in his propensity for making fun of major and minor tyrants.

In present times, many if not most of the poets and writers anywhere are troubled because the experience of living in this world is increasingly more upsetting. But poets and writers in excessively troubled societies like the one I come from are excessively troubled. So the question 'To what do I belong?' is a hard question to answer. There is a deep internal pressure that makes me revolve around the axis of poetry and an immense external pressure that makes me rotate around the orb of politics. The choice is to be made not only between silence and speech, caution and courage, calm and rage, and amnesia and memory. There is an artistic choice that also needs to be made by a contemporary poet like myself between

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absurdity and realism, rhapsody and gloom, sobriety and hedonism, and indifference and compassion. Except in the case of choosing between indifference and compassion, perhaps I end up making no clear choice and keep dangling in between. It is a continuous process of creating a space fringed by two options. It is about negotiating at various levels among and within both internal and external conflicts that emerge from the circumstances of birth – race, class, language, faith, location and age – and the consciousness I gained over time through knowledge and experience.

Over the course of my life, which includes this writing career, the artistic, intellectual, social and political choices I made represent the pressures within and without. These choices are at odds with my social class, linguistic preferences, cultural moorings and religious identity. I am considered advantaged in a society that remains inherently classist and unjust – though not by way of accumulated wealth and possession of assets but because the path my father chose to tread delinked him from a privileged past and allowed him to imagine an egalitarian future for all and sundry. My privilege persists owing to continuous access to higher education for generations, and in the ability to reach the corridors of power if there were any such aspirations. But my writing upends the interests of the class I belong to. For it is my kith and kin, friends and acquaintances – the affluent, urban, educated middle class – whose thinking and action remain the biggest hurdle in creating a just, democratic, peaceful and equitable society in Pakistan. This class is largely conservative, like its counterparts in some other countries, and constrained by the small size of a progressive element within it. It has little stake in democracy because of its small numbers, and because of its heightened sense of superiority over others – the result of modern education and some considerable new wealth it has acquired. It seeks managerial quick fixes to deep-seated political problems. A large segment belonging to this class favours the military generals or superior judiciary to reign in, clean, regulate and sanction the muddled politics and dirty politicians. Consequently, the weakening of democracy and political processes marginalises a majority of the population and shrinks the public space for a critical cultural dialogue and political power-sharing. This enables extremism and violence to take root, grow, expand and prevail. Once these prevail, the cultural dialogue is muffled, the political discourse subdued.

My linguistic preferences are both a function and a result of the languages spoken at home and in school during my childhood. I primarily speak, read and write in Urdu and English. I speak and occasionally write in Punjabi also and have some basic knowledge of a few other languages. But for all intents and purposes, Urdu is my first language and English a close second. If prose is included, I write more in English than in Urdu. That said, Urdu has a rich cultural and literary heritage. On the one hand, in political terms, it was divisive for Pakistan to declare Urdu the sole national language in a linguistically diverse country, thus making speakers of other languages fractious. On the other hand, it has unified us through a shared cultural expression and, through journalism, performing arts, poetry and fiction, chronicled our collective suffering. Even after seventy years of independence from colonial rule, English continues to be the language of power and prestige. Undoubtedly, there is an upside because the English language connects us with ideas and knowledge from the rest of the world. But it is spoken and understood by only a fraction of our population.

English and Urdu also have an internal hierarchical relationship, which is meant to perpetuate the gripping authority of the minority English speakers over the domains of

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policy and practice across our state and society. But knowing either, or both, of these languages brings greater economic and social opportunities compared to knowing other native languages spoken in Pakistan. My grounding in Urdu and English does not prevent me from campaigning for other languages that are disadvantaged: I find no other choice but to confront this decadent haughtiness, borne out of a colonial hangover as the new master begins to mimic the old master. It is disappointing that the notions of linguistic hierarchy have permeated our culture at the behest of its longstanding custodians. Nevertheless, the paradox remains that the aesthetic refinement and the intellectual disposition that mould my sensibilities come from the vast literary experience and cognitive traditions of both Urdu and English.

My emotional and psychological makeup emanates from the secular and plural strand of the broad South Asian Muslim culture and polity. This culture and polity evolved in the Indo-Gangetic plains, which is spread across the basins of the two great rivers, the Indus and the Ganges, and their tributaries, and it is a product of the fusion of two vibrant and powerful civilisations of the recent past – the Vedic and the Persio-Arabic. Later on, the arrival of the British grafted the scion of Western civilisation onto our rootstock, already formed by the synthesis of two civilisations. My paternal ancestors in Kashmir had converted to Islam from Hinduism before moving to the city of Lucknow, the capital of the state of Awadh in northern India and a high seat of learning and art. They imbibed the Awadhi culture and blended their Kashmiri customs and cuisine, outlook and demeanour with those of Lucknow. From there, they spread to other parts of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. My maternal ancestors, hailing from the city of Amritsar in Punjab, lived across Punjab, Delhi and the city of Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh but fell in the same category of South Asian Muslims as my paternal forebears. For two centuries, occasional interfaith marriages and the casual presence of atheists and agnostics in my larger family had a limited impact on its overall South Asian Muslim cultural character, deeply influenced by the plural mystic tradition. But the Western graft has also turned this culture into a hybrid, and the character of someone like me is best portrayed by the leading twentieth-century Urdu poet Meeraji when he says about himself that his poetic temperament is conditioned as much by the East as by the West.

The faith I was born into has now been philosophically reduced to a linear expression of rigid belief and violent practice, by its champions and opponents alike. The discourse that surrounds it and the deeds committed in its name contradict the ideals and values I espouse. I find myself defying everything that is made out to describe the current dominant narrative of my faith by some powerful groups of its own practitioners – the obscurantism, the misogyny, the extremism, the violence. However, there is another reality that must not be disregarded. Since 9/11, every year we lose many more lives to terrorism in Pakistan than the total number of people killed when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. In the last sixteen years, the victims of terrorism who were killed or maimed, wounded or incapacitated are more than a hundred thousand – women and men, soldiers and citizens. Across the Middle East and other parts of Africa and Asia, the numbers add up to millions. Since I have little in common with most practitioners of my faith, I feel tempted to denounce them like some others in a similar situation would do, to detach completely and move on to new pastures. But they are my people, and I cannot cut them loose at the time when they are

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in trouble. Or if I put it differently, I cannot cut myself loose from them when we all are in trouble.

The enormity and perpetuity of conflict and chaos, loot and plunder, extremism and violence, make people either indifferent or compassionate. Particularly in those human societies like Pakistan, which has endured violence for longer periods of time, this dialectic of indifference and compassion becomes more intense. Indifference enables the perpetrators to beget more conflict and chaos, leads to more economic dispossession and social discrimination, and inadvertently helps the cycle of brutality and suffering to continue. Compassion diminishes the lines drawn between the self and the other, ally and enemy, friend and foe, loyalist and traitor, supporter and defector, and with it the notion of 'us' being always right and 'them' being always wrong.

This compassion, an outcome of continuous encounters with human suffering, brings people together to create a constituency of pain. A constituency that is all-embracing and all-encompassing. A constituency that diminishes the lines drawn between the 'self' and the 'other', extending that 'self' to include those who are likeminded and expanding the 'other' to include all who are different. It is a constituency that embraces and connects all who feel the loss and hurt, the agony and despair caused by the prevalent human condition. This is irrespective of where they were born and with whom they chose to stand with at some specific point in time in the past.

However, this should not be interpreted to mean that those belonging to the constituency of pain are so altruistic that they consider none as their adversaries. They see their adversaries in two kinds of people: those who deliberately inflict pain on others and those who remain indifferent. But their belonging to the constituency of pain makes them sensitive to the anxiety and distress of their adversaries, whether they are individuals or they operate in groups. While their adversaries dehumanise them and their associations, they humanise their adversaries by empathising with their angst, fury, alienation and emptiness. When their adversaries try to instil fear in their hearts through violence and infuse helplessness in their minds through coercion, those belonging to the constituency of pain have the ability to feel pity for their oppressors. They can see the fear of extinction hidden at the bottom of the oppressor's heart and the uncertainty of fortune that lurks in the crevices of his mind.

The choices made by poets and writers of my ilk bring us a lot of grief. Yet that feeling of grief is overcome by an inherent sense of pride. This pride comes from the ability of a poet to challenge and ridicule the powers that be – ranging from Western hegemony to Eastern orthodoxy and all that falls in between – through the sheer subversive force of art and creativity. I know well what Arundhati Roy once referred to as fighting on the side of people who have no place for us in their social imagination. But isn't that the whole point in this battle – to create a possibility for everyone, us and them, to broaden our aesthetic horizons and to stretch our social imagination? And, therefore, the winning of this battle rests for us in the diminishing of battle lines.

May you rest in peace, Rashid Rehman. You were a lawyer, and I am a poet. We both belong to the constituency of pain. If your killer is alive, you will not wish to see him suspended from a hangman's noose. I know you as much. You will wish him to live in remorse, and

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prevent others from taking innocent lives. *Dushman marey te khushi na karyo, sajnaan vi marjana* (Why rejoice the death of your enemy, for your friends will also die).

# Between Authenticities

*Birgül Oğuz*

In some countries, your encounter with the State is not limited to television screens, institutions, or streets. It roams your house with its huge bulk of a body, smashing this and that. It hops up onto the dining table and juggles its soccer ball among the chinaware. Sips from your tea, eats from your plate, pees on your bed, spoons marmalade onto your pillow. As for me, it was an unwanted visitor who appeared on the couch in our living room, leaving barely any room for us, never getting up at all. And no matter how hard we might have tried to seem disinterested, the State was deeply interested in us, taking up space, shouting, demanding, constantly making one feel anxious.

So people in Turkey gradually isolated themselves. Call it fear of being with others, learned helplessness, or simply a survival strategy. Call it a syndrome of conscience-numbness or a wishful collective amnesia—something that isn't at all rare in societies where remembering is too painful, and therefore marginalized. And, as the silence grows denser, it becomes easier—indeed more normal—to become its perpetrator.

It is essential, this silence, because it protects you from the turmoil “others” suffer. It encapsulates you so that you can disown “the rest.” By the time the silence is thick enough, what is true and false is only a matter of perception management: the fabrication of truth, the manipulation of faith, the invention of a new normal. And its dissemination can only happen on its holy ground, where the polyphonic nature of truth is upended. Obviously, this is a warfare of narratives. Obviously, the rising extremism and polarization we now face everywhere in the world are being manufactured within the narratives of power structures and networks—narratives that are coercive, monopolizing, exclusive, patriarchal. The television screen, the billboard, the chalkboard, the newspaper—the homophony they create together to shout you down, to tune you up, to basically silence you, is as powerful as it is loud.

Three years ago, I would have been shocked had my neighbor called me “that traitor upstairs.” If that happened now, I would not be surprised at all. Narratives of hatred, exclusion, coercion, are being disseminated at breakneck speed. They do not need to be articulate, convincing, or rational; they do not even need to make sense: they depend, rather, on the long-term absence of the polyphonic aspect of human life, thriving in the lonely silence people suffer, when there is no one to remind them that such silence is deadening even as it encapsulates, deafens.

It was three days after the July 15, 2016, military coup attempt in Turkey that I came to understand what can happen to people living in a society that has, for an extended period of time, inhaled the toxic air of tumultuous social unrest. How chronic social turmoil, systematic violations of fundamental human rights, an absence of healing justice, and the normalization of everyday violence all tend to afflict any self-respecting person living in such circumstances with a certain kind of paranoia. And how nightmarish the world may then look.

I was trying to fall asleep in my house on an island off Istanbul’s shoreline with an ear turned toward the unusual thickness of postcoup silence. Now, I cannot say what it was that made the night so uncommonly silent, as nights on the island are generally silent, a silence every now and then underscored by the barking of a dog. Was it the absence of a newscast coming from next door nightly, until late? Was it because no one around seemed to be in a heated discussion about what would happen in the coming days? Or maybe it was merely the absence of a summer breeze: no trees rustling, no sound of the waves from the nearby Marta Beach, clouds hanging oppressively in the sky. I felt lonely and insecure, much like half of the population did in those days—bottled up in an uneasy silence, desperately projecting onto the island night. Only a week ago my neighbor now warning me to bury my flash stick somewhere in the garden would have sounded quite neurotic. Now the conditions were perfect for a “cleansing”; a government-sponsored witch-hunt was perhaps about to begin, or a civil war was about to break out now that half of the country hated the other half.

Fear and the feeling of helplessness are contagious, especially for those who always stay on the sidelines: no sooner had my sweaty head sunk into the pillow than the silence was suddenly torn apart by a man shouting at the top of his lungs “Hands up!” and in that moment I was sure it was the *Kristallnacht*. It took me less than a minute to appear on the balcony looking down at Marta Beach, an empty wine bottle in hand. There I saw a boat flashing lights from every one of its holes. Something like belly-dance music was blasting away, and the same man was tirelessly repeating the call: “Hands up!” It was all perfectly clear: the antiterror police, wearing snow masks and heavy shoes, was out “cleansing” the country of its pernicious “viruses.” This time they didn’t even bother with excuses: the state would take care of everything under the guise of fighting back the putschists, the “enemies of democracy.” And the loud music from the antiterror police boat was a clever trick, or so I thought: no one would be able to hear their neighbors’ screaming as they were hustled out of their homes. It took almost three minutes before it dawned on me: the antiterror police boat was nothing more than a yacht with some drunk passengers on board. For those three minutes, I was blind with fear, convinced I was in real danger. Now the relief was infused with sadness.

I was not a little nervous about the polarization in the country, which had picked up speed in recent years, and the deliberately exclusionary language of the government, coming with a male bravado that did not bode well for the near future. Moreover, like many others, instead of seeing the state as a lawful entity there to serve and protect me because I pay my taxes, I was taught to always fear it and the erratic ways in which it exercised power on its people. Gradually I became deeply fearful for my own safety, as well as for the safety of friends and my family, who were already equally fearful. Step by step we isolated ourselves, especially from people who did not feel under threat at all—a process we already knew by heart. Of course, the uneasy song we were all singing in unison within our bubble turned out to be the only song we could hear. I am not saying that we were wrong in being so nervous about things to come. But the problem was not being right or wrong: the problem was our being too self-confident in our common sense, too decisive in excluding anything that was outside our zone of common sense, and too angry because our narrative was not going to occupy a position of power at the time. Put another way, we were locked in a matrix of polarization, and therefore unconsciously both confirming and reproducing the dichotomy of discourses that was the real cause of our uneasiness. Living in a bubble is easy because you do not have to face and cope with what is different from you. And it is dangerous because, in the absence of difference, you lose your own reflection.

Eventually I took a step away from this image of myself so that I could watch her from a distance. She was now hiding behind a plastic chair, bottle still in hand, self-assured that someone was coming after her. I sadly sat with her for a while before going back to bed.

There are times when we lose our faith in our common sense, and that is hard to bear. But before shame and self-condemnation overtakes one, there is a moment when things lose touch with truth, what is certain becomes uncertain, the valid void. This feels very much like turbulence, and your points of departure and arrival no longer make sense; there is nothing left but to hear and feel the turbulence as such. That night paranoia had a say; it wasn't common sense but I heard it, though I did not understand it. I wouldn't call this an encounter with a part of me I didn't know existed until then, nor was it some "teaching moment" where I came to understand or feel compassion for my paranoid self. It was a moment of loss and crisis—a crisis of a mind anchored in an opinion—and it was freeing because it was ambiguous. The narratives of true and false, right and wrong, friends and enemies, sensible and paranoid were there just as they are, as narratives: partaking in the polyphony of ambiguity. It was more like a literary experience than an epiphany, though no less powerful in calming me, changing me.

I do not claim that every crisis is followed by awareness. Nor every loss by measurable gain. But I believe that crises and losses can indeed be opportunities that trigger change, especially in times when racial, economic, and spatial segregation are at a dangerous level, and when people in survival mode take shelter in homophonic bubbles. It seems to me this has to do with our capacity to bear, endure, crisis and loss rather than hastily rolling up our sleeves to find an immediate solution.

We are, and should be, preoccupied with thinking about and discussing how the political and societal polarization and the rising extremism we now face in many places around the world can be overcome. The questions we generally ask revolve around how better to understand each other, how to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. But these questions

are generally posed from a position where at least a certain type of familiarity is taken for granted. My neighbor and I count as neighbors as long as we share a certain zone of familiarity—between enemy and friend, or master and slave, inhabiting a shared spectrum of dichotomy no matter how far apart its two ends may seem. It is within this zone of familiarity that we easily recognize each other. And to better understand each other, we generally rely on our capacity for sympathy, empathy, patience, compassion, assuming that no matter who we are and where we come from, “human suffering” (*pathos*) is a universal we all can recognize and feel. Now I am not denying the healing power of our capacity to understand and feel sorrow and pity for each other. But what we mean by *pathos*, and the ways we relate to it (i.e., to the assumption that it can bring people together), rests not on universal but on historical conditions; we shouldn’t overlook the word’s Greco-Latin roots and the unfamiliar ground of such roots.

Lastly, we tend to forget that the capacity for sympathy, empathy, patience, and compassion demands not only mindfulness and a full heart, but also a privileged position allowing one to keep a comfortable distance from *pathos* itself, to keep calm in the face of its elusive nature. Yes, *pathos* is inclusive and healing, but we cannot demand it from everyone. Insisting on its power, universality, and inherent humanism is perhaps to dismiss those people who lack the abundance of feeling required to have compassion and forgiveness for others, those still recovering from a trauma themselves. Compassion is inclusive especially when it is aware of its position of power and history as a discourse on suffering.

There are people in the world who do not have room in their imagination for others: not only because they dwell in different cultural spaces, belief systems, or political histories, but mainly because they aren’t fully aware of this difference. People belong to different geographies and histories of feeling and thinking, with different repertoires of feeling and thinking performances. Recognizing the other is recognizing the difference without taking it as a threat, or a problem to be fixed; neither is difference something to be explored and fully understood. It is, rather, a proof of our authenticity. Only then can we imagine other authenticities. Only then can we feel safe, because we are contained.

I believe moments of crises can be seen as opportunities in that they tilt the fake balance of a mind anchored in opinion, and remind us that every reality has a unique voice, that what we call truth is indeed a boisterous polyphony of different voices. Crises are not disasters; what makes them seem like they are is that they reveal the fragility of the bubbles we inhabit. Being fragile doesn’t make a bubble less of a bubble, but confronting its fragility may free our imagination from its circumference. We need to bear with crises as much as we are able to because they remind us that difference is always already there as such, between our authenticities, unnamable. So just before we roll up our sleeves to assimilate difference into a hierarchical structure, to identify it psychologically, to agree with it, to nominate and define it, to embrace or deny it, or simply to reach for a wine bottle so as to smash its head, there is a possibility of pure recognition.

Literature is a natural space of polyphony; especially in times when resisting segregation is so crucial, it can bring us to the turbulence of different discourses, manners of speech, of different realities and belief systems, and remind us that homophony is not a natural state. Neither is any narrative that occupies a position of power, for it is likely to restart the engine of segregation.

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There are enemies and friends, and there are spaces where neither can prevail.

# Being Female in Nigeria: Where Do I Belong?

*Ukamaka Olisakwe*

A few days ago, I cleaned out an old box and found my wedding photo, the one where my husband and I posed with our wedding certificate, my gaze deadpan, the wedding gown tightly stretched against my protruding stomach. The unsmiling version of my nineteen-year-old self unsettled me. I could not reconcile the girl in the photo with the woman I had become.

The year was 2002. I had just moved from Kano State in northern Nigeria to Aba in the southeast. It was a new beginning. A girl is expected to move from her father's house to her husband's. I had fulfilled the purpose for which I believed I was born. On our wedding day, I was given the certificate; I was no longer Ukamaka Okoye, the daughter of her father. I became Ukamaka Olisakwe, the wife of her husband.

At first, the change was welcome. Neighbors never bothered to call me by my name because it was not important, because I had become Nwuye Olisakwe – the wife of Olisakwe. Because addressing me by my husband's name was the expected thing to do. When I filled out forms at government offices, I was required to input my husband's details – his hometown, local government, state of origin and surname.

I didn't worry about switching identities; taking my husband's name earned me respect. Men in cramped motor parks and open marketplaces apologized for groping me only after they had seen my wedding ring. "Oh, she is somebody's wife," they would say. I was saved the ridicule spinsterhood is fraught with, and when my stomach began to distend, men allowed me good seats in buses. They did not call me slur words – those were reserved for "single" women who dared to reject their sexual advances or cringed when they were groped. I was saved that misery. And when I gained admission into the polytechnic ten

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minutes from my home, my lecturers understood each time I missed class, each time I fell ill. They spoke kindly. They treated me with dignity. And I was grateful.

In 2003, during the final semester of my national diploma course, I missed a test that constituted thirty percent of a four-credit-unit subject. My lecturer understood when I explained that my baby had fallen ill. He set up a make-up test for me in his office. He asked about my daughter and told me to take all the time I needed. Later, after I had handed over the paper, thanked him and stepped out of the office, I saw my classmate, a buxom girl who had missed some classes because she had fallen gravely ill. She looked at me, her lips stretched in a sad smile, and said: "You are so lucky. He says I should come and take my test in his hotel room."

Lucky. There was that word again. My cousins had called me lucky on my wedding day; my in-laws reminded me of how lucky I was every time they saw a gift my husband brought home from his trips. But hearing it this time felt different. It was veiled with threat. I would lose all the protection my husband's name brought if he woke up one day and asked for his name back. I would no longer be lucky. I would be thrust back into the ominous reality my cousins dealt with, a society where they were often violated and were called prostitutes if they hung out at bars by themselves, a society where landlords would not rent them an apartment because they were single women, a world where they could not walk into certain places unaccompanied by men. I would lose the protection of a man's name, the opportunity of dignity and escape from overt sexism.

The worry did eventually wane. I loved to tell myself that I simply shoved it out of mind and moved on to concentrate on my studies, graduate from school and later get a job at a local bank. I was happily married, had healthy children. I did not voice strong opinions during conversations with my husband. I was happy, I often told myself. But, later, when I allowed myself the truth of my assimilation, I realized that what actually happened was I had bowed to fear. Fear that my husband would get mad and send me back to my parents if I misspoke. Fear my mother would be mocked by the church and the community for raising a daughter who could not stay in a man's house. Fear that my two daughters would be segregated by a society that punishes daughters for their mother's decisions. Fear that my rebellion would hurt their future. As a woman, I owed my husband gratitude for the protection he provided me, and my daughters. And so I had to always lay it before him like an offering.

That was the key to a successful marriage in a society that describes a woman as the one "who squats to pee." At the church, we were taught how to keep the man happy. What delicacies to prepare for him and the importance of doing his laundry, preparing his bath, kneeling to apologize when we misspoke. We learnt how to keep our heads down. Year after year, at the Women's Retreat, we were blamed when the man philandered, were taught ways to keep him sexually satisfied, and when he still had affairs, we were taught to kneel night after night, our eyes shut tight in piety, and "pray" him out of his philandering ways. In many cases, when the man was physically violent, families would gather and plead with him to "control" his anger. We were taught to keep our mouths shut. "Do not speak back when the man is angry. If he hits you, it is your fault." And even when you keep your mouth shut and put your head down but still got hit and confined in hospital for weeks, your families told you to return to him, your husband, because what God has joined together, let

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no man put asunder. Yet for all that silence, in Nigeria domestic violence cases are still at a shocking high.

That is the price women are expected to pay for marriage. We shed our former identities and cling to the man's for relevance. We must not question why our children's personal details at school reflect only their father's origin and details. We are the lucky crop of females. We must not be too ambitious. We must remain humble. I swallowed my earlier dreams. I let myself believe I was enjoying this society.

In 2010, when I was twenty-eight, I received a mail request from a senior colleague at the office. After I sent my response, he replied, "Are you a writer?" It was an awkward mail from someone who was my office supervisor and who could dissolve my appointment if I erred. I replied that I was not, and he sent yet another awkward response: "I think you are a writer." He said this in a way that made me repeat my first reply. I had only narrated my version of an event. I had talked too much, I thought. But he as senior staff cared more about the prose, and he assumed the unsolicited position of a mentor. He urged me to write about my daily experiences at the office. He said things that made me believe I could actually tell stories. He persisted, until I budged.

That is my favorite memory from that workplace. I began to make diary entries that would later stretch into my first TV series. I moved into this new phase with ease. Soon, I began to call myself a writer and found daily reasons to scribble stories. My days no longer moved in a blur. I joined the community of Nigerian writers on Facebook and surrounded myself with progressive friends. I read books I had never thought could be written by women. Women who spoke against things I had long ago swallowed, women who dared question the system. They wrote so that I could write, and I was writing all the time. I was back to being the child who once climbed trees and played football with boys. The child who believed she could imagine things and become them. I experimented with memory fiction. I found liberation in my stories. I began to feel a strange, comforting sense of belonging in my stories.

In 2012, I published my first book and, two years later, completed a 100-episode TV series that was aired on a station all over Africa.

My second liberation was in Iowa in 2016, when I participated in the International Writing Program's Fall Residency. The memory that stays with me is all of us, thirty-six writers from all over the world, at the welcome ceremony where we all introduced ourselves to our hosts. I watched women like me, who spent their lives telling stories, talk about themselves. They talked of themselves and not their men. They spoke about themselves as human beings, full human beings whose value was not tied to marriage. They spoke in a way I had never imagined people could do. I was tongue-tied for many days. I was afraid to speak; I never knew women could be allowed such freedom. And many nights when I lay in my bed, I dared to give voice to the questions that had been sitting in my stomach like a stone: what would my life have been if I didn't accede to marriage?

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Do not get me wrong: I cherish my family. But many times, when I lie down to sleep and allow myself the sin of questioning the status quo, I wonder how I would have turned out if I did not live in a society that only permits a woman some dignity on the condition that she marries. At the end of the program, I realized what I wanted to do for the rest of my life: tell stories about women, because through my stories I discovered who I am and what I want.

I love hip-hop. I love Afrobeat. I love jollof rice. I hate driving. I love dark garments. I love cooking. I hate washing things with my hands. I love my children – fiercely. I fear for them each time they step out of the house. I fear something bad will happen to them. I keep them close to me as much as possible. But I hate all the exertion this aggressive protection demands. I don't want more children, and feel I will die first before putting my body through that horror again. In my next life, I won't have children.

I love ice cream even though I immediately regret it after finishing a cup. I love makeup. I hate big cities. I have little patience for nonsense. I hate when people think I don't know what I want. I use "fuck" a lot and hate when people express shock when I say it. I hate being told I am beautiful because I think it is objectification. I am aggressively independent.

I stopped twisting myself into shapes to please people. I stopped having patience for people who used "African culture" as a justification for misogyny, including those who use the holy books to repress women. I stopped enduring bullshit, stopped smiling in the face of daily sexism. I have stopped being grateful and now demand appreciation, too, because love should not be one-sided. It is give and take.

I have no patience for men who blame women for patriarchy, who say "but it is natural for women to raise girls to aspire to marriage." These folks, in a society like mine, refuse to admit that it is the men who give their daughters out to marriage, who marry these girls, who give them new identities, who keep them repressed, who want them to remain forever grateful. Who describe girls using demeaning terms like "the one who squats to pee."

I have no patience for dishonest men who say it is women who mutilate the genitals of girls, but become selectively blind in societies where girls are cut into shapes for the man's sexual pleasure. I have less patience for men who say "women pray to God for a husband," but ignore the society that makes the lives of women a horror if they choose to remain unmarried. I see such men as dangerously dishonest.

I was able to realize all this because I learned to love myself, to see myself honestly. I am not perfect. I am annoyingly argumentative. I am saddened each time I read about women who reject the idea of feminism but thoroughly enjoy the proceeds from feminist struggles. I am deeply committed to changing my society. I want laws that will protect widows from greedy in-laws. I am a feminist. I belong to me, first.

Despite all of this self-love, this discovery and fulfillment in self, I still crumble when gender is raised in public discourse, especially within Nigerian circles. Some days ago, I put up a Facebook post: *Why does society always expect women to thank God daily for the marriage they have?* A few of the men who responded to the post denied the existence of this gratitude culture. "Which society is that?" asked a friend, and then he went on to list how good he is to his wife, how the men in his family respect their women. He warned me not to use "my personal experience" as a yardstick to measure our society. Another man called it "an

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exception.” To these men, such sexism does not exist, and if it does, it is in small, easily dismissible pockets that don’t tell the Nigerian story. But they are wrong, as proven by many who agree that such sexism is a daily occurrence because it is men who run the family.

This sad, contradictory premise has reduced our society to a dangerous place to exist as a woman. Take my friend who has been working in a bank for over eight years. During a chat with her in 2014 when she asked me for yet another “small loan,” she revealed she gave her monthly pay to her husband, and she had been doing this for many years. Here’s what happens: she transfers every single kobo she earns into his personal account, even the car loan she took from the bank. Then she returns to him every day, to beg for money for the upkeep of their family, for her makeup, for pocket money. He polices how much she spends. I was depressed and alarmed by how much she had shrunk herself for the sake of her marriage. To their neighbors, they are a traditional Nigerian family, while he is the kind of man who wears his masculinity like shoulder pads.

One evening, on the day auditors visited from Lagos, we stayed at work until past nine. When the auditors finally left and we stepped out of the office, my friend’s husband was standing by the gate, hulking and visibly angry. She shrank immediately when she saw him, and when she walked over to speak to him, he slapped her across the face so viciously she crumbled to the ground. The men at the security post rushed to hold him back from doing further harm. They begged him to “understand.” My friend was cowering on a street corner, begging him to understand, too. He stormed off and got into the car, and she hurried behind him, calling him pet names. I could not understand why he would humiliate the woman who sacrificed so much so he could stand tall.

Her story is the familiar Nigerian story of women shrinking themselves for their men. Women give away their income so that their families can fit into that old mold of what a Nigerian family is expected to be. They must not ever put their men second, no matter the position of power and prestige they attain. When you read every interview given by one of the world’s richest women – Folorunsho Alakija, a Nigerian – it is always about how submissive she is, how she still washes her husband’s clothes, cooks his food, kneels for him. How she puts her head down, because no matter how successful she is, he comes first. Our media continues to give her submissiveness priority, rather than telling her business success story. Or else, like a Facebook friend put it, the woman would be accused of “crumbling the virtues of family and marriage.”

Shared responsibility can be a good thing, a thing to aspire to. But why do we set different expectations for men and women?

Now, take my experience at the Ake Festival in 2014. After a session on feminism with inspiring women like Zukiswa Wanner and Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a male journalist approached me. He wanted to probe further on the topic of female complicity in patriarchy, which I had raised in the panel. I agreed to the interview. We walked to a corner where we found a seat, but then another writer, a male, walked by, and this journalist begged to interview him first.

“I have been searching for him all around the place,” he told me. I didn’t think much of it, and since I had a free afternoon, I said it was okay. I hung around, half listening in on their conversation, and I was impressed by the critical topics this journalist raised. After the writer

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left, Mr. Journalist finally turned to me with a big smile. He switched on his voice recorder, but for the next five minutes or so, he asked questions about my husband, my children, how I was able to combine work and writing, whether being a mother and a writer was a difficult thing. How I must be grateful that my husband allowed me the opportunity to attend literary events.

These are valid questions, especially if I were talking with young women who needed tips on how to jostle work and family. I often also find myself chirping in talks about having a supportive partner. But it was different this time. This journalist felt the priority was not what I had to say about my works, but my family.

I felt the urge to stand up and leave, but I asked why he didn't pose the same questions to the male writer whose marital status was as much a matter of public record as mine.

The default premise is that a woman must put her marriage first. Sometime in April, I had a tense argument with a Facebook friend. We were having a conversation on the etymology of some Igbo words. To drive home a point, my friend said, "Even a writer from your husband's place in Abagana had written about this." Apparently, he had checked my bio and saw that I noted Abagana as my hometown, and to him that automatically meant where my husband is from, because as a married woman, I must carry my husband's identities at all times, on government forms and even on social media. My friend is the product of a society that expects me to erase my father's history after marriage and to do so without grumbling. And each time I am caught in such situations, I feel invisible. I feel like I do not exist, and I get angry.

I get angry because we continue to be a culture that expects a woman to tap into the root of the man's colorful story for relevance and belonging. It is a culture that refuses to acknowledge a woman as a full human being – a person equal to a man.

We tell women that marriage and children are our priority. And we teach men, among all other things they can be, that they should be generous, valiant beings providing for their obedient housekeeping wives. We become willfully blind when the women are the source of the families' income, or we tell them to shrink themselves so that their men do not feel emasculated. We acknowledge women's position of power and prestige on condition that they bow to men. But we applaud when men do otherwise. We teach women that they are not equal human beings with full rights as men. We teach women that they belong to men. We also tell women that they are responsible for the man's success or failure.

Last December, I travelled with my family for Christmas and met an uncle, a man I had last seen on my wedding day. He hugged me and shook my hand. He was impressed that we came home with a nicer car. He said I brought my husband favor. That comment, even though well-meaning, reflects a deep-rooted culture of blaming or praising the woman when her husband fails or succeeds in business ventures. I not only take on my husband's identity, I become responsible for his success or failure. And it is a hard burden to bear, a burden I had learned to carry when I was only twenty years old when an in-law berated me for the state of my husband's car. He said, "Our son was driving this car when he married you, now look at the car he is driving!" This simple statement he made in passing became an extra weight, like sacks of garri, heaped on my shoulders. I learned to work up my nerves to death in the hope that my husband would succeed so that society wouldn't mock me.

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Conversation about gender and belonging is not an easy one to have in my society. Often, I've been caught in heated exchanges with extended family members over these topics. The most recent was when I questioned the culture that isolates a woman should she choose to walk away from an uncomfortable marriage. My society does not know how to accommodate a divorced woman. We built a strong community for married women. We have the same for single women, which basically preps them for marriage. But the divorced woman is left out. She cannot be assimilated into either community. She is better off as a widow, because a widow still holds on to that distinctive identifier – her husband's name. So her membership in the married women's club is never revoked.

When I was ten years old, my aunt packed her things and left her marriage. She did not take her children with her. She was tired of pretending to be happy in a miserable union. Knowing how dangerously unkind society is to a divorced woman, she travelled far away from home. And for two decades, she remained isolated from the society that spurns her brave kind, until her children, all grown up, found her again and brought her to live with them.

A man is not faced with these challenges.

These are very uncomfortable conversations to have. We have created a culture that normalizes misogyny. We do a great disservice to boys by encouraging a standard of behavior that is also detrimental to them. We raise them to believe that certain negative traits are what it takes to be a man.

I recently had an argument with a male colleague. We had just read about a man, an educated Nigerian man, who sexually abused his teenage domestic staff. My colleague excused the man's behavior as natural. He called it "basic instinct" and said that violence was etched into the gene of every man – that it is what makes men who they are.

But that is untrue. What simply happens is that we raise boys to conform to socially constructed attitudes that shape them into violent beings. We raise boys to dominate and subdue. We fill their world with games and movies and books that emphasize that narrative. We teach them not to show emotion. They internalize this idea of masculinity and as adults become aggressive beings who take and take, who think a woman belongs to them. Who wreak havoc on the bodies of women, because they were raised to believe that the bodies of women are theirs to exploit and conquer.

On the other hand, we raise girls to be subordinates, to play with certain kinds of toys, to play pretty, to be needy, to show emotions and cry. We raise girls to aspire to marriage, to keep their head down no matter the academic level they attain, to swallow their sexual urges. We spend years teaching girls how to become decorative fixtures in the lives of men.

What if we do away with these toxic practices? What if we stop hurting our sons? What if we stop punishing our daughters? What if we teach men that a woman is a full human being who belongs to herself?

My late grandmother lost her husband when her children were small. She raised the seven children – six of them girls – all by herself. She let those girls go into early marriages so they could escape the harsh society that says a woman has no name.

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I advocate for teaching girls self-reliance first. If they come of age and choose to solidify their relationships with their partners through marriage, perfect. But let it be because they chose it, because their childhood was not messed up with the idea that they must aspire to marriage. Because as adults, they are clearheaded and can shape their marriage in ways that are beneficial to both parties, and because we all belong to ourselves first and foremost.

And if that's our definition of crumbling the "virtues of marriage and family," fine. Let it crumble, and let us start all over again.

# In the Rooms of Monticello

*Kiki Petrosino*

*I have here but one room, which, like the cob[b]ler's, serves me for parlour, for kitchen and hall. I may add, for bed chamber and study too.*

—Thomas Jefferson, 1771

*Every house has a room the guests don't know.*

—Gabrielle Calvocoressi, "Monticello Smokehouse Festivity," 2016

1.

Suppose every time I say *here*, I mean this room.

Every time I say *home*, I mean my country, America, strange mansion where I was born.

Now suppose when I say *born*, another room is added to this house.

Try to imagine America as a series of marvelous rooms.

Rooms are spiraling down the green slopes of Thomas Jefferson's mountain, parlor unfolding into library, library into Starbucks and classroom and forest.

Every American life is a walk through the rooms of this house: Monticello, the home that Jefferson never stopped building.

Is it possible to love your country the way you love an old house?

Suppose you were born in a house no one built for you.

How would you write about it?

2.

To move through Virginia is to move through time.

You travel south along old wagon roads, passing plantations that have been converted into luxury inns. Some of the roads are named after landmarks that no longer exist. Some of the roads are named after my ancestors.

I'm descended from a long line of *Afro-Virginians*, which is a term you won't hear often. I found it in a biography of Jefferson and have had it tucked into my back pocket forever. My connection to the Commonwealth is threefold: my ancestry among the free and enslaved; my undergraduate education at Mr. Jefferson's University; and my current residence in Jefferson County, Kentucky (a realm that was carved, in 1792, from Virginia's great western wilderness).

I belong to all of these histories. I feel their collisions across time. While Jefferson gazes from his mountain estate, my enslaved ancestors are alive in the next county. As he opines, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, on the ravenous beauty of Virginia's landscape, as he traces its network of rivers to the western edge of the continent, and as he shapes the laws that will maintain the institution of slavery for so long, my ancestors are here, and so am I, born in a lucky time of freedom, but looking back, over Jefferson's shoulder and down his mountain.

As an American, I live in the shadow of Jefferson's dream. I belong to its loveliness, and its terror. As a writer, I am trying to understand what this means.

3.

*I, I, I*. The American poet deals out this syllable as if from an inexhaustible deck of playing cards. In contemporary American poetry, the *I* is always the first piece on the lyrical chessboard. In *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman formulates a distinctly New World *I*, arguing that it "contain[s] multitudes" and can even contradict itself with impunity. *Very well then I contradict myself*, Whitman declares, and from there, the American *I* launches its incredible life.

I've always understood the ideal American *I* as endlessly free, endlessly fascinating, a room without end, Amen. But as I begin to write about Virginia—about lives connected to mine, but not *me*—I wonder.

In graduate school, I learned to constitute my own fluid, exploratory *I*, seemingly unbound from the biographical limitations of my poet-self. Did you know that it's considered impolite, in an academic poetry workshop, to refer to the speaker of a poem *as the poet*? In poetry workshops, the *I* is always assumed to be a persona, even when the poem speaks about the poet's life in terms and tones that may be tantalizingly similar to the poet herself. Pedagogically, this intentional distancing is performed in order to direct the energy of the critique towards the poem, rather than the poet. Since, in most workshop scenarios, the poet

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is in the room while the poem is being discussed, this approach is meant to protect the poet from personal attacks, and from any stigma that may attach to vulnerable subject matters.

But what does such emphasis on the *I* amount to, over the course of a writing life? In my case, it means that I could, potentially, write forever about myself, about my *I*. It means that I reflexively voice my poems from a first-person perspective, that I equate my *I* with power, agency, authority, freedom. These are vital tools for a female American poet of color, because power, agency, authority, and freedom are privileges from which, historically, we've been excluded. American poetry, like American popular culture, invests a lot of value in the notion of freedom. And the language of freedom often is entwined with that of individualism. Paradoxically, however, I've found that the liberty seemingly afforded by the continued use of an *I*-shaped persona can create an oppressive duality for the poet, who must now attend to (at least) two *Is*: the biographical and the lyrical. In poetry workshops, the biographical *I* is silent, while the lyrical *I* may speak in any number of performative voices. Both postures, silence and speaking, require my attention. To professionalize myself as an artist-poet, I must energetically compose and perform multiple selves.

There's something else, too. Spending so much time perfecting my *I* gives me the perfect excuse for not thinking too much about how I may constitute the other in my intellectual work. When we consider that a vital responsibility of the writer is to reimagine the other, to advocate for the other, even to speak, in some way, on behalf of an *other*, I must admit that I don't always have a grand unified theory of who my *other* may be—besides some notion of a literary reader, that is. In an interview, Arundhati Roy once said that living for social justice may mean fighting “on the side of people who have no space for me in their social imagination,” a statement that I read as an argument for extreme empathy across ideologies. To write as a woman of color in America complicates this for me, since writing as myself already means writing *as an assumed other*. And if I'm already an Other, then who is the Other for whom I'm advocating in my work? If I'm already an Other, then from which community of belonging do I position my writing? All of the identities that constitute my subjectivity—the writing self, the gendered self, the race-marked self—contradict in ways that could potentially isolate me in an echo chamber of my own *I*.

Lately, I've been thinking that merely developing a strong first-person voice isn't enough for my poetics. I have to think more deeply about whom I'm talking to. Or talking back to.

But what is certainty in writing?

### 4.

If you want certainty, come to Monticello. There's a room I'd like to show you.

Completed in 1770, the South Pavilion was the first brick structure that Jefferson added to his five-thousand-acre estate. When he moved into the upper room, he was twenty-seven, a lawyer and delegate in Virginia's House of Burgesses.

That year, Jefferson argued before the General Court of Virginia on behalf of a mixed-race man, Samuel Howell, who had sued for his freedom on the grounds that his grandmother

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was a white woman. "Under the law of nature, all men are born free," Jefferson told the Court. "Everyone comes into the world with a right to his own person, which includes the liberty of moving and using it at his own will." It was an argument he would use several years later in the Declaration of Independence, though by then, he would mean only white men.

As Jefferson argued before the Court, and as he and his client lost this case, his own slaves at Monticello were filling the South Pavilion with pewter and creamware. They were hanging fashionable Venetian blinds in the windows and laying green silk on the bed. Working by hand and by the individual bucketload, Jefferson's slaves leveled the top of the mountain, making space for his main residence, a large jewel box of interlocking rooms.

But this first place, the South Pavilion, where he brought his wife Martha Wayles Skelton to live, was Jefferson's opening move in an expansive game. He would own more than six hundred people in the course of his life, buying and selling them, borrowing against the credit their bodies represented. In his public writings, Jefferson would insist on the intellectual inferiority of black and mixed-race people, even as he relied on them to look after his house, his farms, and his family. He would father free children with Martha Jefferson and enslaved children with Sally Hemings, and these children would live in distinct, yet entwined, ways on the mountain, a microcosm of Virginian culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jefferson's home life and his writings would cross over each other, contradicting themselves, leaving Americans to wonder what to make of his legacy.

Today, the South Pavilion still stands as Jefferson himself once did: with certainty, an elegant vertical presence on the grounds of Monticello. It is not unlike the rook in a game of chess, calmly dividing the landscape into a series of conquerable squares.

### 5.

Recently, I set out to write a book of poems about the legacies of slavery and freedom in Virginia. I began with my own ancestors, using the practice of genealogy. It's difficult work. My ancestors left comparatively few written records, a fact that reflects Virginia's slave codes prohibiting black literacy. For many black families, there are no old Bibles with handwritten birth records on the flyleaves. No diaries or packets of letters tied with ribbons. No daybooks, no scrapbooks, no obituaries or wedding announcements clipped from the newspaper.

The enslaved weren't meant to have legacies. Not in written language, anyway.

In conceptualizing the poems for this book-in-progress, I've struggled to find forms to properly contain and enact the fragmentary histories I've discovered. I'm haunted by an urgent, yet unspoken command to *be ethical* in giving life to these poems. This inner voice is silent, however, on exactly what *ethical* writing might mean. Mostly, I don't want to co-opt my ancestors' pain. I don't believe that a poem can redeem their suffering, make their enslavement seem acceptable in light of some "larger plan" culminating in the tautological

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image of Me, Writing This Poem. As Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, “the enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history.”

Because so many of my ancestors could not read or write, much of their journey has been lost to time. I know only pieces of their lives. As a poet, I am tempted to write my way into the mysteries that exist in the historical record, coloring them in like the squares on a Jeffersonian gameboard. I could even write poems that speak in the imagined voices of my ancestors; after all, persona is a major tool of poetry. And yet I find myself resisting this, avoiding the persona poems I could write. There is something deep and sad and unassailable about the silence; I wish to amplify it rather than offer something in its place.

But even as I write that sentence, I wonder if I’m actually somewhat afraid to try on these ancestral voices. This project feels so much more urgent to me than my usual game of *I*. So far, these new poems are emerging as bricolage, braided stories, and incantations. I’m trying to incorporate the language of the historical sources I’ve found, writing into the cadences of legal documents and census records. The resulting poems display a combination of styles and vocal registers. I’m pleased with their textures. And yet the question of persona remains.

Suppose I were to write a poem in the voice of a lost ancestor. For whom would I write it? This question brings me back to the issue of the *other*, my other. Such a poem might have, as one of its goals, the evocation of sympathetic emotion in a reader who is, in some way, distant from me. *Remember, this enslaved speaker, whose voice I’m imagining for you, was also a person, like you*, that poem could say. In this case, my supposed *other* is a white reader who may or may not be aware of his or her privileges, including the privilege of not having to think (too) much about enslaved people and their humanity. Am I not expected, as an American poet of color, to respond to whiteness itself, to the whole network of privileges, assumptions, erasures, and hierarchies that undergirds the situation of race in America? *Responding to whiteness* could be a plausible mission for these family history poems. But is the mere evocation of responsive feeling enough of an objective for such a battle? I fear that writing lyrically—writing for shared feeling, using a tool like persona—means following an externally imposed script for the Poet of Color™. It means working within expectations and against mystery.

And don’t we need mystery to write new poems?

### 6.

In this room, my ancestors arrive in Virginia.

They come in chains, on ships that have maneuvered their way up the Rappahannock River from the Chesapeake Bay, and before that, from the West African ports of Calabar and the Bight of Biafra.

Their ship lies at anchor near a riverside plantation called Corotoman. The owner of this place, Robert Carter I, is famous for having himself rowed out to the middle of the river, where he boards the vessels in order to personally select his slaves.

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Robert Carter I has a nickname: King Carter. My ancestors have names, too, African names, but in this room, no one pronounces them. The moment King Carter steps onto the ship, all those names travel away from us, surging back over the Atlantic, dissolving forever.

7.

In the libraries of the Commonwealth, guests may conduct genealogical research in special areas called “Virginia Rooms.” Lately, when I talk about how poetry can serve our contemporary moment, I want to talk about what it means for a creative writer to walk into a room full of historical documents or click a link that unfolds new truths. As a poet, I’m drawn to the archive because I want to investigate silences in the historical record, but I also want to highlight stories that are present, but submerged. Writing from history means writing away from the *I* of my own life, a process I’ve found incredibly generative of new poems. Yes, I’m starting with my family history, but I’m not stopping there. My hope is that my family’s stories will enable my poetry to contemplate the larger systems of power that affect the lives of people of color.

I usually describe this macro-hope of mine as *finding the place where public and private histories intersect*. To explore these intersections in poetry, I have to commit to two seemingly contradictory projects: the project of *fact-finding* and the project of *imagination*. Fact-finding takes place in the archive and is, potentially, an eternal task. Imagination occurs at the moment of composition and continues through revision. The writing process does have a fixed end point, as every poem must finish somewhere. Perhaps it is the seeming contradiction between the endlessness of research and the mortality of composition that creates an opening—a nexus of mystery from which new language can emerge.

In the United States, mainstream academic poets have started calling investigative poetry (i.e., poetry that includes history) *documentary poetics* or *docu-poetry*, but of course it’s not new. Contemporary African American poets like Camille Dungy, Natasha Trethewey, Shane McCrae, Tyehimba Jess, and others have mobilized archival research in order to reimagine lost worlds, lost voices. Joseph Harrington, in his introduction to *Tracking/Teaching: On Documentary Poetics*, reminds us that “poets are the unacknowledged historians of the world” and goes on to describe some of the contemporary subjects that documentary poetry may address:

The murdered  
The enslaved  
The colonized  
The surveilled  
The silenced  
The disappeared  
The invisibled

Harrington notes that “if the poet aims to overturn or detourn oppressive structures of power, she must re-fashion the archive, refuse to let someone’s history be destroyed.” I understand this to mean that the forms of poetry must serve the material being discussed, rather than the material being reshaped to fit the received patterns of form. Ideally, documentary poetics would mobilize verse forms that amplify the stories and voices of the marginalized. It sounds paradoxical, but perhaps a good docu-poem uses the constraints of form to *open* the subject matter to investigation in language.

But, again, I don't believe that a poem replaces history. A persona poem, no matter how beautifully rendered, can't stand in for the voice of a person whose actual voice was lost to time, violence, or disenfranchisement. So in "re-fashioning the archive," perhaps poets are actually *creating multiple archives* instead of expanding some platonic ideal of the "one" prevailing narrative. If we poets regularly traffic in amplitude (breadth/depth/range), then I'm discovering that public historians do, too. More and more, it seems that public art and public history are mutually invested in presenting the multiplicity of perspectives that may proliferate from a single moment in time.

8.

For days, when I type my third great-grandmother's name into *Ancestry.com* and *Familysearch.org*, nothing appears. Then, by accident, I add an extra "t" to *Harriet*, and she surfaces in 1866, one year after Appomattox, with her three small children, looking for her husband who went missing after taking a job at a hotel in Richmond City.

In the complaint, recorded by the Freedman's Bureau and digitized by the National Archives, Harriett says she's been married for thirteen years. So the document is, simultaneously, a marriage record and a deed of separation, since the marriages of enslaved people weren't legally recognized and seldom tracked by masters. Despite the sadness of the narrative, I'm happy to have found it. Knowing this story, any story, about my ancestors who were denied the chance to read and write is a win. It momentarily overturns the silence imposed by centuries of racism.

Other stories arrive, in snippets and bursts:

a spreadsheet noting all antebellum slave births in one small rural county;  
a certificate of free negro status from 1831;  
a surveyor's drawing;  
a census;  
the gravel road leading up to a rural farmhouse, now burned.

One day, an archivist at the Fairfax County Public Library emails me scans of a large sheaf of documents. Among the various papers, relating to a 1907 chancery case, is a receipt for \$0.32, made out to my twice great-grandparents. At the bottom of the receipt, in shaky script, I glimpse the signature of my ancestor Ezekiel Beverly, whom census records had categorized as a black man, unable to read or write. Still, he made this signature, tracing it out with purpose. My heart turns over at the image, some deep part of me *recognizing* it in a way I can't fully explain. Here is another victory, another rare moment when the historical record has preserved an artifact of individual intent. Ezekiel Beverly wasn't supposed to write. He did it anyway.

Ezekiel's signature is the oldest evidence of my family's journey to literacy in Virginia. Recently, I had the strange pattern of loops and twisting characters tattooed along the edge of my left arm.

Here's one way to remember.

9.

In this room, I'm about to write a new poem.

My hands pause over my keyboard. This is the moment of greatest mystery in the writing process, when the mind confronts a blank screen. The heartbeat slows, and the body waits.

My poem is about Virginia. It's the place where America began, but it's also a place without a single beginning. Virginia contains and excludes. It contradicts itself. The language I must find for this poem will have to be strong enough to carry many conflicting stories, and light enough to witness without adding weight.

What is the right word, in English, to describe these countless worlds, the wilderness of beginnings and endings? Too many to be contained by any singular *I*.

At last, I lift my hands to type:

*We.*

# Belonging: To a Future

*Patrícia Portela*

It's one of those days. I am packing the last books, closing up the boxes, and addressing them home. The next home. I make a quick calculation: two years in Macao; one in Utrecht; a couple of months each in Paris, Helsinki, Berlin, and Iowa; fifteen years in Antwerp; a few more in Lisbon, in several different neighborhoods; and a couple in Paço de Arcos. And here I am packing again, the reason for leaving as sudden and as unexpected as what had once made me stay here.

Living somewhere beyond the duration of an occasional holiday or a love affair can't help but make you wonder: where does one come from when one is going somewhere else to stay? Where does one belong to while in transit? To the place one leaves behind, the original place, the latest place? To the place one is going to? Or to the place one has been the most? At first sight, these may seem unnecessary and trivial questions, but the possible answers open a Pandora's box.

Where do I belong to now, today, at this moment of transition?

The question haunts me like a dark cloud over my head.

I sit at my desk, trying to look at my life as if it weren't mine, to explore it from as many angles as possible. Will I be able to choose the right narrative that can explain to what, and to where exactly, I belong, belonged, will belong?

I hope to be able to sit at this desk and start the detailed research right away. Check, in thorough detail, my whole life, my deeds and those of my family, my city, my nation, my continent and map, a complete and rigorous image of the where, the what, and the how of where I belong, so that I'll be able to readily answer, without hesitation, to anyone who asks, and above all ... to myself.

## Belonging: To a Future

As an impulse of that indispensable muscle called imagination, I sketch, with no further reflection, a myriad of possible answers to my own question.

Do I belong to the legacy given to me by my parents? And if so, to which legacy: the emotional one? The political one? The historical one? And do I belong to the local, the philosophical, the common legacy shared by the two of them, my father and my mother, which established the difference between the two of them and the rest of their family. Academic revolutionaries in the 1960s, political activists in the 1970s, but also soldiers during the colonial wars, happy free citizens celebrating Portugal's Carnation Revolution, then after 1976 desolate and disappointed utopians, jobless and emigrants in the 1980s, neoliberals in the 1990s, unhappy in the early 2000s, premature retirees soon after, for reasons unavoidable and imposed by the European crisis, perhaps people of faith at the end of their lives.

Am I the result of a wild and recklessly pro-cultural education during the first years of a democratic era in one of Europe's most ancient countries? A time when schools' creative projects burgeoned, philosophy was at the center of secondary school education, your practically teenage parents were of the same age as those in power, and the whole country seemed like one ongoing literary and artistic happening? Those who grew up in the Portugal of the 1980s live on with an adrenaline deficit and an excessively utopian attitude, unknown and unheard of on the rest of the continent, a *whiff* of Revolution easily detectable to those like-minded, and incomprehensible or outdated to those from other historical backgrounds.

But perhaps I am (also) a product of the more recent European Union: the first generation to be given the opportunity to travel without any special permission through so many different countries, the first that could get to know the world with their own eyes, marry someone from another country, settle down in a region with other beliefs, other convictions, other political systems, without fearing an immediate cultural or social shock.

Or maybe all this is deceiving. Maybe we all belong to a heavier and deeper History, the History of the places we were born or grew up in and which, no matter what, we carry in our bloodlines, letting it surge at the first moment of crisis no matter in how amnesiac a state we choose to live our daily life, no matter how sleepy, how zombie-like we may seem. Life goes along without special obstacles until the moment someone makes that one single inappropriate comment about you that awakens your sense of belonging, unleashing the clichés and the ready-made sentences you'd always promised yourself to avoid but which, at that moment, let you have a feeling of recognition, which reassures you that you aren't an alien amongst other equally strange *others*.

But if I belong to that deeper, longer, heavier, older History, which part of it should I claim as mine? The modernist Lisbon's poetry culture I grew up listening to and learning by heart, using the poems' best lines, as if they were proverbs or part of daily speech?

Or do I belong to something older yet, say the millennial culture of my country, a unique country at the margins of Europe whose borders are fixed, one that Julius Caesar said was "unmanageable by emperors but also not able to manage itself," filled with beheaded kings (or just defenestrated, as happened to the last one), a country with an endless assortment of pirates, mercenaries, missionaries, merchants, and visionaries responsible for astronomic

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discoveries, gruesome conversions, and the birth of global trade? Can I really choose? Can I accumulate?

Or is it perhaps the case that, with all the history I carry thanks to the geographical accident of having been born in Portugal and to Portuguese parents, I have really been shaped as a citizen of this world by the two years I lived in Macao between the age of eight and ten, a period so short and yet one that gave me my only childhood memories?

Do I belong to where I have lived for the past fourteen years, in Antwerp, Belgium, in a place with three languages, none of which I speak as fluently as I'd like to? Do I belong to the language I write in and am educating my child in? Do I belong to the place where I chose to live with my husband? Do I then *unbelong* to it if I do not wish to further be married to him and his country? And what about my daughter: does she have to choose where she belongs? Does she have to feel divided each time? Does she have to comprehend, understand, know in depth the history, the geography, the functions, and the malfunctions of her two rather unusual countries in order to feel they both belong to her? Does she have to share her time equally between them? And me? Am I more Belgian because I have a Belgian daughter? Does a place of belonging need to be a place? A geography? Or a time zone, a timeline, a certain history?

Couldn't my place of belonging be a language instead? A language bound not to a nation-oriented logic but to a line of thinking? Could I belong to Pessoa, to the way he spoke and changed my language? And if so, which of the many Pessoa's I've read: the atheist Ricardo Reis, the decadent Álvaro de Campos, or the hunchbacked Maria José, forever at the window, dying of tuberculosis while wondering whether the blacksmith next door will ever notice her?

Somehow none of these possibilities satisfy me as a path for deep reflection. History is the story of the powerful, the story of the winners. The history of the oppressed is a counter-history, and I, as a Portuguese trying to carry all my possible pasts, cannot but admit that in my story I am both the victim and the oppressor, both the colonialist and the freedom fighter, the lost heretic soul of the witch and the converted Catholic, the slave *and* the master. Travelling is a no doubt a great story trope, but can I really consider myself Chinese, Dutch, Belgian, North American, French just because I have temporarily tried to grasp these different cultures? Or am I a very open-minded Portuguese? But language cannot be a sole home. Language carries History as much as Poetry and Philosophy do, as much as Wars. Language belongs to us, we do not belong to language; it is our duty to own it rather than be owned by it.

The idea that I could belong simultaneously to all of these *belongings* and be some kind of melting vessel of all of them challenges me even less. The fear that no matter what or where I think I belong to, what others recognize in me might be totally different than what I expect triples the doubts and the questions. No matter how hard we try to convince ourselves that we are enough by ourselves to be substantial, the borders between us and what surrounds us are organic, fluid, and therefore unpredictable. We keep happening in too many unexpected ways to be one thing only; we dress like an onion, in several layers. We are children of too many circumstances; very little is in fact in our control, or has a good and solid reason to be what it is in the moment we live it. We are, rather, a roller coaster pointing

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at a future. So something tells me that, as a writer and rewriter (as I often call myself), and as a maker of “alternative worlds” in words and images, I only can, should, and have the responsibility to belong to the future, and to the future alone.

I should belong to change, to the possibility of what might come after all the transits and all the transitions. After us, after the end of our common story. I should belong to an ever-ending after, and to a never-ending struggle of trying to understand what could be different during our lifetime that would shape the present, to then be handed over to future generations. And future generations. And future generations. How can I read my past, my stories, my memories, my traditions, my ideas, and own them in my own particular way so as to continually make room for change, but also allow for a continuity of knowledge? How can I read and write in order to rethink, rewrite, reread, allowing for what is not there *yet* as a place of a shared belonging?

This urge to think and practice some kind of belonging, that is, *act* upon it rather than merely find, understand, or choose one, should be the mission and the responsibility of anyone who has a voice in the public space, whether as an artist, a writer, or a spokesperson of any sort.

My modest contribution as a writer must be an attempt to understand and practice my role as one that has to belong to a place not yet extant but already possible, a place made of several ways of belonging that can foresee, suggest, promote, and improve the future instead of reading, closing, and explaining a very specific past.

But why am I so intensely inclined to see the future as my chosen place of belonging, the place where I intend to bury my body and to which I intend to offer, commit, all my strength, energy, and creativity?

Beyond carrying an inheritance, remembering a past, and absorbing the natural consequences of geographical and genealogical circumstances, one has the right as well as the duty to make one’s own history one’s own, and only then everyone else’s. But how to do this without stealing or erasing someone else’s past? How to be creative without being a revisionist, a conservative, an authoritarian progressive mind living off of someone else’s traditions?

It is to answer this last question that I intend to write. How to be free enough to reimagine a world without avoiding or inflicting unnecessary conflicts. That is the difference between inventing a future without ignoring its past and rereading and interpreting a future you must belong to with all your pasts.

# Defining Moments That Led to an Undefined Person

*Mabrouck Rachedi*

Just back from Tangier, on metro line 7, Paris. On a loudspeaker, a mechanical voice says: "Beware of pickpockets. Make sure your bags are properly closed. Keep an eye on your belongings." Really, can my belongings be stolen? For five days in Tangier, everyone who talked to me in the medina would say "hello," "bonjour," "hola," "guten Tag." I would even hear greetings in languages that I don't know, but no "salam," no "azul".

I'm French. Both my parents are Algerian, from the Amazigh region called Kabylia. The Imazighen (plural of Amazigh) are also called "Berbers." This is a word I never use, as it comes from the Greek *barbaroi* and the Latin *barbarus*, meaning "barbarian." Imazighen have a common culture, a common language, a common flag... There are many communities of Imazighen in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, the Sahara. People from the Rif in Morocco are Imazighen. Tangier is a city at the western edge of the Rif. As a matter of fact, my blood would say that I'm a cousin of the people in Tangier. Yet even in Algeria, I'm often seen as French. When I reveal my Algerian origins, I'm frequently asked which of my parents is Algerian. What has vanished from my original belonging?

My parents migrated to France after the Algerian War, in 1962. They came with a French dream: raising a family in better living conditions than theirs had been. They dreamt big: they had eleven children in France (the twelfth, oldest, died at the age of three in Algeria during the war) who were going to fulfill their wish. Though illiterate, they understood that the achievement they envisioned for us would have to come through good education. The great Algerian writer Kateb Yacine has referred to the French language as "the spoils of war": French became my legacy without fighting.

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At the same time, I did not go to the Arabic “school.” Teaching Arabic is still an issue in France; it was bigger in the 1980s. The so-called school was led by the (more or less) literate fathers in my neighborhood who taught informally, in a basement, which also served as a kind of mosque—this shows something about how Muslims were treated then. The reason I didn’t want to go there had nothing to do with denying the Arab part of my identity, however. Rather, the teachers were well known for hitting their pupils. They reproduced the violent teaching methods of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, whether in France or Algeria, and reinforced by the toughness of the neighborhood stemming from poor social conditions. Year after year, I cried so long and so hard that I succeeded in delaying my schooling to the point that it never began.

During my childhood, the language in our home was mixed: Arabic or Tamazight words could be folded into a French sentence. Conversation with my parents was a creolization, only intelligible to ourselves. They understood our broken Arabic; we understood their broken French. They made an effort to speak an understandable Arabic to us; we made an effort to speak an understandable French to them. None of this was conscious. Only at school did I realize that I used some Arabic words thinking they were French, and that I deformed some French words by reproducing the accent of my parents. Our “creole” was an island to us and, seen by the outside world, a ghetto.

My siblings and I became the good students my parents dreamt of—partly due to their relentless surveillance. While they couldn’t read, write, or help us with our homework, they could threaten us if our grades didn’t meet the mark. The only question they would ask us was not whether we’d had a good a good day at school but rather what grade we got. Nothing other than an A was an option. Though we sometimes cheated, trying to present a B or a C as an A, collectively we realized that we’d better become what they wanted us to be.

But part of our “success” (I’m always uncomfortable with this word) at school was also due to luck. In France, children are routed to schools according to their district. Better schools are located in wealthy districts. Mine was an exception. My street was split into two sections, and we happened to live on the good side. Although the kids I played with were from the same social circumstances, the school I attended was socially and racially mixed. A ten-meter distance drastically improved my chances of a decent education.

School taught me that my ancestors were Gallic. Republican universalism was fueled by a myth of a unique common history, embodied in “le roman national” (literally “the national novel”). I am a product of that myth, the perfect image of integration. At that point in time, I would have been able to quote any classic French author, though not one Arab or African. I had nothing to complain about: I was the good student my parents wanted me to be. Still, the social mix in my school kept confronting me with the fact that I was poorer than most of my friends. This was the difference that, quite early, opened my mind to social issues. When I was a kid—I can’t say exactly how old—our teacher read my class a fairy tale. While prince charming was once again saving a beautiful princess, my first question was why I should admire a privileged guy in a castle built by people who were never mentioned, a guy able to fight dragons for love but who seemed to have no love for his wretched people. The kinds of questions I was asking my teachers made no sense to them, nor to my classmates.

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When my parents encouraged us to be good students, they said we had to be “better than the French.” Their command mixed integration and differentiation. Being better than the French while being French assumed that one was at the same time in and out. And the outside part of my identity, the Algerian one, was in turn divided into two: Amazigh and Arab. My parents told us that if we were asked whether we were Kabyle or Arab, we should answer Algerian. They never told me to say that I was French.

French at school, Algerian at home, I chose—to borrow Eleni Sikelianos’ expression—radical non-belonging. My identity would be not to choose any of these. Fulfilling my parents’ dream of social ascent didn’t require answering any existential problem. I was gifted at mathematics, so I had to become an engineer. Ever since I was a child, when someone asked what profession I intended to take up, I always answered engineer, even while my classmates said firefighter, soccer player, doctor, magician, burglar...

I evolved into a teenager destined to become an engineer when two things happened concurrently. First, a teacher asked me what an engineer was. Silence. I realized I didn’t even know what that was. My goal was an empty shell full of others’ dreams. While seen as clever in the context of school, I was probably the dumbest in the class. Second, at about the same time, I began reading. My questioning grew. Then one day, I discovered Balzac’s *Le père Goriot*, the story of Rastignac and his thwarted ambition—much like mine was. I was impressed by the wonderful writing. Looking back, I can’t tell whether that was what made this book special, or whether it was the novel itself. Was it all about style, or did the story give beauty to the form? Anyway, something more meaningful than simply becoming an engineer made an appearance in my life. It was no longer about what my social function would be. Something like a quest for sense emerged.

I started to write for the pleasure of it. As it turned out, pure form was not enough to make me a new Balzac. My oversized and ridiculous teenage ambition had to confront the practical question all writers face: write about what? The answer came unconsciously, and naturally. I was going to write about the living conditions in a *banlieue*, the inner cities, of sorts, on the outskirts of Paris. My very first attempt at storytelling was the first novel I would eventually publish. In my writing, I was overly conscious of social issues; meanwhile, the student in me was all about material concerns. In and out again.

Materialism won the battle against romanticism. I became a financial analyst, fully integrated in this new life. I sometimes joke about the influence Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* and Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* had on my destiny. One is about a trader, the other about a drug dealer. To get to a position of power, I chose the legal way. I didn’t become handsome and rich overnight: still, after all these years, it was new to go to a club on the Champs-Élysées or to be invited to Monte Carlo by colleagues, to visit cities and stay at fancy hotels. I’d been rejected from far less prestigious places as a younger person.

I had nothing to write about because I had nothing to fight against. Then came 2001. My father died in April. On the morning of 9/11, I was booking a flight to Algeria to attend a religious ceremony in his memory. When I came home later that day, I saw the Twin Towers collapsing on TV. The world was falling apart, just as my own world had a few months ago. I started to question my parents’ dream of social achievement—was it really mine?

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9/11 also raised an unexpected issue: from that day, I was seen as a Muslim. Whether I was observant or not, a believer or not, willing to endorse Muslim culture or not, I was labeled Muslim. This change didn't come *from* me but *to* me, in questions, remarks... Some friends and colleagues introduced a plural "you" into the conversation that was more than me. The illusion of my French republican universalism was swept aside. The social issue turned into an issue of culture, and race.

So it was the conflicting commands of republican universalism against assigned identity that fueled me as a would-be writer. I had to write, and I had to write *now*. This was a way of defining myself so as not to be defined by others. It was time for me to tell my stories instead of complaining about fairy tales of rich princes seducing princesses instead of helping their people. My first manuscript dealt, in addition to other topics, with riots in the *banlieues*. I began collecting notes for it in the early 1990s and started the real writing in the early 2000s. In 2005, I showed it to my future publisher: she said she liked it but was not convinced about the possibility of nationwide riots in France. This was just two or three weeks before they erupted—at which point she called me back and apologized for that unfortunate remark.

At that time, there weren't many books on that topic; I had been consciously writing about the *banlieue* as a way of pointing to this blind spot in French society. My main character was stuck in a series of unfortunate events, which turned him into an ideal culprit. This fiction was a kind of metaphor for what I'd felt in my youth. I've never considered myself a voice of anything else than my own self, but there was a little more than an "I" in that story—a feeling of fate shared with this neighborhood, where it is so hard to be heard.

Taking up what soon became a hot topic exposed me to some interest: I had written a book, so for better or worse, I had to face the consequences. Better meant that I had to develop my opinions, dig deeper into my point of view, respond to the curiosity of journalists, readers, writers... At formal events or in informal talks with these people, I sharpened my knowledge, and questioned more deeply where I belonged. The others challenged me to define myself. Was I still a product of French universalism? Was I the Muslim that society saw in me? Was I a man from a *banlieue*? Was I a French novelist? A multicultural intellectual? As for the worse, there was a whole new set of labels to deal with. My novel, released in 2006, was among several others with the *banlieue* theme. Journalists, then academics, called us "writers from the *banlieue*," "urban writers"... Again, it was my social condition that was determining me: financial analyst or writer, I couldn't escape labeling by origin. Yet what specifically does this mean in terms of social representation? The last example, a very recent one, is a movie scenario I was co-writing at the time. I had been asked if I could add some spelling mistakes to reinforce my "street credibility" with the film producers. "*Banlieue*," "Arab," "Muslim": I cannot escape my social representation.

I therefore decided to become what Hannah Arendt has called a "conscious pariah": I take all the labels I'm given in the name of social solidarity with people who suffer the condition of a "pariah," then turn that condition into an act of rebellion. For me, this means writing. An African proverb says, "Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter." Giving the opportunity to tell their own stories to the invisible and unheard is the reason I teach workshops in *banlieues*.

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The necessity of being a writing lion has grown even stronger for me after the January 2015 Paris attacks. Since then, to be or not to be Charlie is not a question. #JeSuisCharlie is an order, one that tolerates no nuance. Little by little, France has introduced the idea of a new category of blasphemy: the desecration of *Charlie Hebdo* as a new religion, one without God but with its own untouchable martyrs-turned-prophets, whose images cannot be represented other than through compassion and praise. French Muslims, in turn, are told to express themselves in a single, unified voice. But is there such a thing as a group within the French population at large that is able to express itself in a single voice? Even on the occasion of a unifying event like the march at Place de la République, the Front National asked its supporters to refrain from participating. So how then can French Muslims be expected to achieve something that the French in their entirety can't do either? And, given that this can be said for *any* social topic (since such an order, or wish, is not limited to the subject at hand), wouldn't it be worrying if a section of the population expressed itself only as a function of its membership in a specific religion or community? What we call democracy, the Republic, the very essence of the freedom of expression, depends on a plurality of opinions. We must therefore hope that French Muslims—just like all French people—will continue to express a variety of opinions.

French Muslims in particular were prompted to participate in the “not in my name” campaign—as if it weren't already obvious that it was not in my name murderers kill. If ever I felt the need to distance myself from a murderer, it would be in the name of the collective responsibility of each human being when face-to-face with all of humanity, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas so eloquently put it. Then I would be just as likely to dissociate myself from any of the killers, except that, weirdly, I have only been asked to give my opinion on attacks committed in the name of an insane interpretation of Islam. While ordered to dissociate from these horrors, no French Muslim was, however, invited to participate in the collection of short stories *Nous sommes tous Charlie* (“We Are All Charlie”) honoring the victims of the attacks. Sixty writers contributed. Some French Muslim writers are very well known, much more so than me. Is being Muslim only sharing in a feeling of guilt, without participating in any kind of intellectual, positive, contribution?

I saw my country, which for so many years mocked George W. Bush, vote in exactly the same laws (a sort of Patriot Act), using exactly the same vocabulary of war (bombing foreign countries) as his administration. France's “noble” principles were no more than words, and didn't survive the circumstances. To George W. Bush's credit, he had many more victims to deal with, and an event that was unprecedented. We laughed at him but learnt nothing from his mistakes. That is why today, I think, we may still have your Donald Trump emerging in France. Ever since the January and November 2015 attacks in France, it's been hard to express these opinions without eliciting suspicion—particularly when your name is Mabrouck Rachedi.

Recently my interest as a writer and as an intellectual has shifted to the question of memory, a question related directly to the matter of belonging—that which makes us who we are. It is part of my quest for identity. An Arabic proverb says, “In order to know where you are going, you must know who you are.” This is a personal path, and one that resonates among populations with immigrant heritage but also beyond—among people sensitive to individual trajectories capable of connecting human beings to each other. More and more, I

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tend to tell *my story* rather than *stories*. I believe that in “my,” there is “self.” That is also why, in this essay about belonging, there is a lot of me.

My father used to say that we belong to the ground in which we will be buried He chose Algeria. My mother, still alive, wants to be interred in France. She wants her children to be able to visit her when they wish to. I like this pragmatic point of view. For me, it makes no sense to belong to soil. I relate myself to other people. I understand now that when my parents wanted me to be better than the French at school, the integration/differentiation issue was not a dead end. It was human complexity.

While in Iowa City to participate in the IWP, I had to fill out a form in which I was to define myself as a Caucasian, or African, or Asian... I didn't know what to answer, as there was no Arab and, of course, no Amazigh box to check. I asked a member of the IWP staff what to do. She or he—I can't remember who it was—gave me the best definition of belonging I've heard so far: choose. There is only one me, but there is not only one *in* me. I strongly agree with the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf who, in his widely read essay “Les identités meurtrières,” says: “Identity cannot be compartmentalized; it cannot be split in halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries. I do not have several identities, I only have one, made of all the elements that have shaped its unique proportions.”

In the group of writers in Tangier, I was the one with the latest departure. I spent the final morning shopping alone in the medina. Oddly, now there was no “bonjour” and no “hello” from the merchants; instead, some “salams” and an “azul.” It was as if, away from the gaze of the others, something had changed in me. I could even negotiate the prices in Arabic; at the same time, my accent betrayed my French side—proof that no one has stolen any of my belongings. I choose the one I want to be at any given moment. I am literally Amazigh, meaning “a free man.”

# Refuse/Refuge: Be Longing

*Eleni Sikelianos*

I couldn't possibly imagine to what I belonged until I read your words.

Your words were "ocean" and "migration," "snapped" and "country," "decimation," "lost," "crime," and "name." How could I belong to these things?

As a child I belonged, absolutely, to everything. To color, to sound, to warmth, to my mother and the smell of her long purple dress with small crescent yellow moons, to the leaves swirling against the blue sky overhead, to the sharp, clean smell of eucalyptus pods crushed underfoot in the soft mattresses of understory leaves, to the tiny black ants crawling up my leg, to the sunlight filtering gauzily through the window, to the spiced apple-flavored yogurt I was allowed on my birthday, and to the dark, cool recesses of rooms entered from blinding California light.

What I first belonged to was my senses, and the pleasure of each as it encountered the world new, new, new, and new. What the senses first teach us is relation.

And then, suddenly, I didn't belong, to anything or anyone, not even to my own body. I remember looking down at my thighs encased in tights, with my calves tucked under them, while I sat with the rest of my second-grade class gathered around a teacher with a guitar, and suddenly knowing the thighs were too big. My body, my girl's body, if it did not belong to me, must not fit in the world, either.

Looking down at the self, the self is suddenly looking at an object. Do I belong to the self or to the object? There were events that orchestrated that disassociation, too common, we know, to many children, especially girls. And then there were other ways of not belonging. And the further language took over, the less I seemed to belong to myself.

*When you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form.*

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How many suddenly discover that their bodies belong to others? How long does it take, and is it possible, to belong to oneself again? Since I could not speak or act from my body, I was pretty sure I'd grow up to be a man, a body from which I could take action.

In her fabulous book *The Needle's Eye: Passing through Youth*, Fanny Howe wonders what kind of alienation led Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his brother Tamerlan to the extreme spiritual state that convinced them to fill pressure cookers with nails, ball bearings, and explosive powder to rip into other human bodies on an April day in Boston. To what did they *not* belong? How had the experience of relation been broken in them? Who names and gives legitimacy to belonging?

Last spring, the U.S. president did or did not authorize the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used, the "mother of all bombs," weighing 21,600 pounds, to be dropped on Afghanistan. The blast could be seen twenty miles away, and the president called it "another successful job." On any given day, listening to the radio, one might hear the words "unclaimed attack." What does it mean to "claim" an attack? Who was the last American president who did not drop a bomb? Is that part of the job description of "U.S. President," a duty that *belongs* to the office?

If I were asked to describe the present human moment, I might utter the words *connection* and *disconnection*. I might talk about the World Wide Web, which seems to be unraveling minds as it connects them. I might talk about my daughter staring at a backlit screen in a stupor, or how her friends will "chat" for hours without ever seeing each other, how some of them terrorize each other on Snapchat. I might talk about the rise of hate crimes in my country, and the way they are egged on online. I might talk about the way deadly attacks on ordinary life are organized on the internet, or how my memory seems to be failing since I can fact-check nearly everything on my phone, or about the role of Facebook and fake news (Facenews?) in the fake 2016 American election. I might talk about how reality itself seems to be privatized, each person holding onto an individual sense of it. As the world has become more global, humans have seemingly become not so much more local as more localized, i.e., more fractured; the mind is also being colonized. I recently suggested to a friend that the machines had finally gotten out of our control. She suggested that they were the last benevolent intelligence. I don't yet agree, but I do believe our minds are getting away from us, and that we have to attend to consciousness more than ever to make sure our minds are still our own to be made up.

For some ancient Greek poets, chaos (which is more of a gap than a jumble) is the grandmother or grandfather of love. For others, language began to put order to that gaping hole, putting the sky above the earth and the clouds in between. What I read in the news sounds to me like chaos. I do not wish to claim it. Do I still belong to it? (Of course I do.) And, if I refuse this reality, how do I participate? How do I love the world? How do I love my country? How do I love?

From an early age, I was, along with everyone in my family and for various reasons, at odds with the dominant culture. My family structure looked nothing like most of those I saw around me in the small, wealthy California town I grew up in. Although most of us were (are) white, we were not that era's right kind of white (Greek and Jewish), and, worse, there were single-mother families, interracial relationships, and interracial marriages, and the

extended family came in a range of hues, with many cultures in the mix. My mother and I lived in Section 8 housing, paid at the grocery store with food stamps, and usually hitchhiked to school.

Dissidents, drug addicts, homeless people, artists, activists. No one in my family seemed to agree with the government, no matter which party was in office, even though my mother and I benefitted, in various ways, from public assistance. My mother's mother made her living, until the 1950s, as a burlesque dancer. (At night, she dressed up as a leopard and swayed her hips in smoky bars for money.) On my father's side, my great-grandmother was blacklisted, her passport confiscated. She had a vision of world peace and justice via the arts that apparently upset the U.S. government. My grandfather spent time in jail for protesting U.S. policies in Latin America, my father spent time in jail for fighting, my father spent time in jail for heroin, my uncle spent time in jail for drug dealing. My mother is proud to have spent only one night in jail, and says it wasn't her fault. My father died homeless, of an overdose. Thus, I come from a long line of undomesticated women and men, and have thought a lot about ferality—its positive and its negative aspects. On the positive side, there is lots of room to create one's own systems of being, outside of belonging, in chaos's gap. On the negative, not everyone learns to move fluidly in and out of the hole.

To boot, I was an *illegitimate* child. *Illegitimate*, from late Latin, *il* – “not” + *legitimus* – “lawful.” As the great Martinican philosopher and writer Édouard Glissant points out, illegitimacy “threatens the community by leading toward its dissolution,” engendering tragedy. “If legitimacy is ruptured, the chain of filiation is no longer meaningful.” In structures reliant on filiation, we look to our ancestors, just as we might look to the origin of a word, to find out to whom or what we belong. This, he tells us, is an origin myth, a system created to fence out those who cannot pinpoint or claim an origin. Instead, Glissant finds structures, like the many-threaded creolized languages, “organically linked to the worldwide experience of Relation.” It is a state made through links between cultures and languages, not one that proceeds from an origin; it is instead “a language of the Related.” (The feminist biologist Lynn Margulis advocated a symbiotic view of evolution, one in which several species of bacteria merged to combine possibilities like motility and oxygen consumption. This radical—and genome-vindicated—theory is the biological counterpart to Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.)

When I was young, I wanted desperately to have a clear filiation, to belong, but I realized (without exactly knowing the language for it) that to do so I would have to amend the structures around me. Thus, my deepest childhood desires were imaginative and recuperative. I wanted, for example, to save all the animals, endangered and ordinary. To erase racism and hatred. To reunite The Beatles! (Embarrassing, but on trend for a white kid in the 70s from a “broken” family.)

What I came to, instead, was poetry, a way of thinking and being in language that operates by linking disorientation, chaos, and experience into its own other-order, maybe mother-order (to matriline filiation). Poetry was a way to make a different kind of sense, a way to *experience difference*, in textures that allowed difference to feel like both a fraying and a weaving. Poetry always, in its very form and ruptures of syntax, troubles the dominant structures, lapping silently at, ever hoping to erode or unmask, their shores. It exists

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simultaneously at the edges of chaos and in the ordering forces of language. Through it, I could belong to resistance and refusal.

We experience refusal very bodily in the line break, when the poem manifests rupture in language, and we are dropped out into the ragged, empty space of the margin. In that break, I feel the relation between silence and language made manifest in the poem over and over again, in the open space initiated by the line's rupture. When the line stitches itself up, picking up the thread in the next verse, we feel articulation and relation again. That simple shuttling motion, breaking, rethreading, means all the world to me, in the implicit way it allows me to refuse the given—let's say the office of the bomb—and instead veer toward the chosen.

What is the chosen? Following poet Ann Lauterbach, it is the meaning we attempt to make out of what we are given, rather than accepting the meanings given to us. It means refusing to belong to the given offices of meaning. It means choosing to pick up the abandoned threads of a familial or animal line and trying to weave something together, as the ancients did, to create a cloth big enough, metaphorically, to cover the whole community (without blotting out difference).

Venturing out from poetry, I began, some decades ago, as I tried to write about my family, to push forms up against each other, and then to let the forms pull back one from the other, leaving a little gap or gutter. A piece of prose might be thrown against a photograph of my father's belongings, a poem against a list. This was a way, I realize now, to recreate the rupturing feeling of my familial and cultural experience, not to stitch it all up, but to let thinking-feeling also occur in the gutter between forms, much like what the line break allows. It was a way to discover belonging to a history of not belonging or other-belonging that can't be told in narrative terms.

Similarly, a word in a poem might take a little swerve, or hollow itself out so that it can find relational meanings rather than filial meanings, to repurpose Glissant's terms. Words find their word-shadows and word-sisters, and, strangely, in the process, reconnect body to language. (This is part of what poet Charles Olson tells us in his ever-useful "Projective Verse": the body finds an other-place on the page. Re/member: in the beginning, we measured language's rhythms by the body: dactyl and foot.) We might easily locate the trash in "refuse," but we can also punch a little hollow in it and stack in "refuge," as sound and other sensory remnants create meanings that go evolutionarily deeper than logic. Words can gather into new structures of belonging so that I might use those words given to me by you to make

oceans in motion migrate invisibly  
from snapped country to country  
oceans that know decimation, lost bodies  
know crime but not name

What I belong to, as a writer and a human, is the possibility of rupture, and the possibility of relation, the combination of which includes rapture—because rupture sometimes veers toward rapture. What structures can we make as writers, as a provocation and as Refuge within the remains, the refuse?

## Refuse/Refuge: Be Longing

I write to repurpose language, as a way to bring me back to myself and back to the world, to experience its tragedy, delight, and humor in “the ardor of lyricism” (Glissant). I write to find that place where language wakes us up, with a smack or gently, rather than putting us to sleep. That means rummaging around in the gap between language and body/consciousness to make the real real. In that sense, it is a devotional act whose mission is to attend to the particulars of self and other (and others are also animals, rocks, trees, and dirt), to particularize the world (in contrast to the generalizing forces of power). The function of my work is to create alternate structures, to make manifest the feeling that “Everywhere, worlds touch.” I belong to my family and my country’s history, and I don’t. I belong, genetically, to all the animals, sharing 70 percent of homologous DNA with sponges and 98.8 percent with chimps, in much the same way that “rupture” and “rapture” share DNA. Not in a hierarchal way (as Darwin and his inheritors might have it), but in genetic, symbiotic, biospheric relation, which is a relation poetry intuitively finds in language. What poetry offers me, in its strange, ardent refusal and refuge, connecting word to word and word-shadow, is Radical (un)Belonging.

# Contributors

In addition to plays for stage, radio, and television, **Karim ALRAWI** is the author of two children's books, and of the novel *Book of Sands* (2015), which won the HarperCollins Best New Fiction Prize. His honors include the John Whiting Award (UK), the Samuel Beckett Award for the Performing Arts (UK), Parent Magazine's Gold Award for Children's Fiction (USA), National Playwriting Award (Canada) and several Canada Council for the Arts awards; he was twice a recipient of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Theatre and Youth Award for his plays. A former editor of the magazines *Inquiry* (UK) and *Arabica* (USA), he has taught creative writing at the University of Victoria, the University of British Columbia, the American University in Cairo, and elsewhere. He lives in Canada.

**Said EL HAJI** debuted in 2000 with [The Days of Shaytaan], which depicts the void between emigrant parents and their westernized children, and has since written many short stories, including "Little Hamid," which won the El Hizjra Literary Prize. In 2006 he published [Divine Demon], a fictionalized account of changing attitudes in The Netherlands' multicultural society, and in 2011 [The Announcement], a historical novel about pre-Islamic Mecca. Since 2012 he publishes regularly in the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*. His most recent work [Get Up and Live, Father] (2013) is a collection of personal essays about patriarchal culture; [The Brothers Haji] is a novel-in-progress.

**Alisa GANIEVA** is a fiction writer and essayist from Dagestan (southern Russia), now based in Moscow. In 2009 she published *Salam Dalgat!* under a male pseudonym, winning the national Debut Prize. Her next novel appeared in the US in 2015 as *The Mountain and The Wall*; the most recent, shortlisted for the 2015 Russian Booker, will come out in the US in 2018 as *Bride and Groom*. In 2015, *The Guardian* listed her among the "30 most talented young people living in Moscow." Her stories, articles, and reviews are widely published, translated, and anthologized.

**Harris KHALIQUE** is the author of eight poetry collections, including *Between You and Your Love* (2004), *Ishq ki taqveem mein* (2006) and *Melay mein* (2012), which won the 2013 UBL Literary Excellence Award for Urdu poetry. His poems have been anthologized

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internationally. His collection of essays, *Crimson Papers: Reflections on Struggle, Suffering and Creativity in Pakistan*, appeared in 2017. A campaigner for workers', women's, and minority rights in Pakistan and abroad, Khaliq contributes regularly to national and international news publications. He lives in Islamabad.

**Birgöl OĞUZ** was among the winners of the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature for her second short fiction collection *Hah* (2012); her first, *Fasulyenin Bildiği*, appeared in 2007. A PhD candidate in English Literature at Bosphorus University, she lectures on literature at independent academic institutions and theater houses in Istanbul.

**Ukamaka OLISAKWE** writes TV scripts (most recently the series "The Calabash"), essays, short stories, and has one novel, *The Eyes of a Goddess* (2012). Selected in 2014 by the Africa39 Project as one of the continent's most promising writers under the age of 40, she has had her work appear in the *New York Times* and on the BBC, as well as been published in *Jalada*, *Saraba*, *Sentinel Nigeria* and *Short Story Day Africa*. She lives in Lagos.

**Kiki PETROSINO** is the author of three books of poetry: *Witch Wife* (2017), *Hymn for the Black Terrific* (2013) and *Fort Red Border* (2009). Her poems and essays have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *The New York Times*, *FENCE*, *Gulf Coast*, *Jubilat*, *Tin House* and on-line at *Ploughshares*; she is also the co-editor of *Transom*, an on-line poetry journal. She teaches English at the University of Louisville, and directs the Creative Writing Program there. Her awards include a residency at the Hermitage Artist Retreat, and research fellowships from the University of Louisville and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. <http://www.kikipetrosino.com>

**Patrícia PORTELA** has written and coordinated nearly twenty award-winning stage performances and live art works across Europe, the Middle East, China, and Brazil. Widely anthologized, she is the author of the novels *Para Cima e Não Para Norte* (2008), *Banquete* and *A coleção privada de Acácio Nobre* (2016). In 2015 she was one of the five finalists of the MediaArt Sonae/Chiado Museum prize. A founder of the cultural association Prado, she teaches regularly at Forum Dança and in the graduate programs of the Theatre and Cinema school, both in Lisbon, as well as in the Program for Visual Criticism and Film at the University of Antwerp.

**Mabrouck RACHEDI** is a French-Algerian novelist, essayist, columnist and former equity analyst. He is the author of the novels *Tous les hommes sont des causes perdues* (2015), *La petite Malika* (co-written with his sister Habiba Mahany; 2010), *Le petit Malik* (2008) and *Le Poids d'une âme* (2006), and the book-length essay *Éloge du miséreux* (2007). His short stories have appeared in the Japanese literary magazine *Bungakukai*, in the collections *Algéries 50* and *Chroniques d'une société annoncée*, and in the Moroccan magazines *OCP* and *Le Courrier de l'Atlas*, where he contributes a monthly column. He wrote scenarios for animated short against discriminations for the association Remem'Beur, and for the Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, and regularly teaches workshops and visits schools, particularly in the French banlieues.

**Eleni SIKELIANOS** is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Make Yourself*

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*Happy* (2017), and two hybrid memoirs (*The Book of Jon* and *You Animal Machine*). Among her awards are two National Endowment for the Arts grants and the National Poetry Series. Her work has been widely anthologized, and translated into a dozen languages. Currently she is translating Moroccan novelist Mohamed Leftah's *Une Chute infinie*. She has taught poetry in public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons, and collaborated with musicians, filmmakers, and visual artists. A professor of creative writing at the University of Denver, she is also guest faculty for the Naropa Summer Writing Program, and for L'Ecole de Littérature in France and Morocco.

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**Christopher MERRILL** has published six books of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and books of translations; and six works of nonfiction, among them, *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*, *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*, and *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War*, chronicling his travels in Asia and the Middle East in the wake of the war on terror. His work has been translated into twenty-five languages; his honors include a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. A member of the National Council on the Humanities and the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, he directs the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. [www.christophermerrillbooks.com](http://www.christophermerrillbooks.com)