

**Zaza Muchemwa**

## **Cultures in Conflict**

When I started preparing for this panel, I had a tough time. I come from Zimbabwe, Africa. Stories in mainstream media on Africa often only have to do with war and misrule as if we can be distilled into a single story. Yet, if a conflict has affected one's country, it feels disingenuous to not want to shine a light on that. Whilst several Zimbabwean people are having a positive impact on the world, many of my people are suffering.

So, I ask myself, why do I write? What does it mean to be a writer right now?

I see a writer as one who is in constant dispute with her environment. She conflicts with the culture around her and needs to write back, to make a sense of herself. I was born in the midlands part of Zimbabwe, raised, and educated in the southern part of the country. And have for the past 17 years been making a living in the north, Harare.

I was an outsider in these places. Because they were intolerant of identities like mine; female, creative, single, no children, and still finding my path spiritually.

What do you do when you exist outside of the culture?

I have to fight through my writing to make space for myself. In the midst of that, I have seen young people going through mental health crises, young girls and women being vulnerable and abused by the economic and political situation. Decades of state sponsored violence to silence dissent, religion used to co-opt people into a singular narrative, sexuality being weaponized for political expediency, and fear being mongered until it became public fodder.

Zimbabwe is a country with some of the most educated and hard-working people on the planet. We are often warm and friendly to visitors and neighbors alike. Yet, searching for better lives, Zimbabweans have been forced to leave their homeland to become outsiders in new cultures.

In the early 2000s, inspired by the poet and novelist Dambudzo Marechera, young poets pushed the boundaries of artistic expression. The unrestrained totalitarian rule had stolen our futures. We joked about how, in Zimbabwe, there is freedom of expression, but what comes next? Laughter and poetry were our way to distract us from the deadly threats.

It worked for a while. Our audiences and readers were happy to be seen until real-life portrayed on pages and stages became a new kind of trauma. Writers had to create alternate realities so that readers could escape their reality.

In my travels, I have often been asked: "Why do you stay in Zimbabwe? And why do you keep going back whenever you get a chance to leave?" I keep going back because I believe things will become better. I am hopeful, so I keep writing.

One year after a coup in 2017, we held our first presidential elections. After these elections, protesters were shot by the army on the streets, in broad daylight. Although there is evidence, no one was held

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 2, 2022

Zaza Muchemwa (Zimbabwe), Krystyna Dąbrowska (Poland), Ainur Karim (Kazakhstan)

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accountable. With the current administration rising, promises were made to revise the laws, AIPA, and OSA limiting freedom of expression and movement. A few months ago, the government made clear: that no art or media would be broadcasted without going through the Censorship and Entertainment Control Unit.

If you live in a country of constant change, with powerful men using violence to get more power, using sophisticated machinery to silence dissent, what is your purpose as a writer?

For the past few days, I have had illuminating conversations which I sum up like this:

“You, the writer, have been blessed with gifts; a voice and a chance to exist at a particular time and place. But you must choose what you dedicate those gifts to. Should you ignore injustice, oppression, and violence?

Or should you speak truth to power? So many choices to be made, each with its dangerous consequences.”

I come here today believing-beyond anything, that writing means carrying the voices of my ancestors into the living world, locating myself in a larger narrative. It is about valuing the small stories, keeping the memory alive, to un-other myself and my people. It is to be truthful to the contradictions, shedding light on what it means to be human in a place of crisis.

And what is my place? It is to exist and create a space of imagining, recording the present, and offering kinder futures.

And because terrible powerful men are afraid of the writer’s voice and will do anything to silence it; the writer must isolate oneself from harm, be self-aware, make space for their healing, and create places of dreaming and wonder for themselves, before they can do the same for others.

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