

## **Blurred Boundaries – Priya Hein (Mauritius)**

I land at the Iowa/Cedar Rapids Airport one balmy September evening with a J-1 visa, a few books and very little else.

During my first week in this renowned UNESCO City of Literature, I start to feel unwell and am eventually tested positive for COVID.

And while my fellow writers are socializing, I am self-isolating in my room at The Graduate Hotel, feeling miserable. Despite feeling weak, I am still able to take part in some of the events online, including a talk about my debut novel that I was invited to give at Cornell College, which the organizers were kind enough to switch to Zoom when I could no longer participate in person. When I finally leave the confines of my hotel room, I am greeted with an exceptionally warm spell in a city that's buzzing with students.

In those early days when the city is a stranger to me, I roam the streets of Iowa without purpose, staring at the historical buildings, libraries, literary inscriptions and museums in awe. I walk for hours at a time, often along the meandering river, marveling how the city bears a resemblance to the European cities where I have studied and spent long stretches of my life.

Every now and then, I lose my bearings, but when I come across something vaguely familiar, I catch myself wondering whether I could be more than a writer-in-residence here, in Iowa.

Traversing the roads in leafy neighborhoods, I have a renewed sense of possibility. The feeling of helplessness I was initially plagued with begins to clear as a new space slowly opens up.

When I come across a first edition of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* at The Artifact antique shop, I happily hand over a fair amount of my Visiting Scholar stipend in exchange for this literary gem that I just cannot resist. As I open my newly acquired treasure with its ornate Morocco binding, the words start to dance in front of my eyes, and I am reminded of how far I have come:

From Mauritius. Out of Africa. To Iowa.

*"It is impossible that a town will not play a part in your life, it does not even make much difference whether you have more good or bad things to say of it, it draws your mind to it, by a mental law of gravitation."* Karen Blixen. *Out of Africa*.

And just like I have crossed oceans, lands, rivers to get to this place where I am sitting today, my novel has often been described as experimental for having crossed boundaries in terms of form and genre. In retrospect, I was testing literary boundaries the same way I was questioning historical and social boundaries in both the story and the world we inhabit.

For most of my life, I had to fit into neat little boxes that have been used to define me. In Mauritius, I am a descendent of coolies, a great-grand daughter of plantation workers from British India. My illiterate ancestors were brought to Mauritius as indentured laborers and servants to work on the sugarcane fields after the abolition of slavery in 1835 in what was called

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‘The Great Experiment’ where Mauritius was used as a testing ground. This experiment was so successful that other colonial powers went on to use the same system of exploitation in their colonies.

I am also a daughter. A woman. A mother. A wife. A person of color. A foreigner. An immigrant. An immigrant woman.

Although I was born on the island of Mauritius, I have had the privilege of studying and living in many countries such as the UK, France, Belgium and Germany. This was largely thanks to grants, scholarships, student loans and part-time jobs.

My cosmopolitanism was born out of traumatic history and *herstory*, remnants of colonialism that still haunt us to this day. But it has also given me the chance to belong to something bigger, beyond my immediate origins. Something that transcends boundaries.

When I wrote my debut novel, *Riambel*, for the first time in my life I decided that I did not want to conform. I was tired of having to fit in, to assimilate and follow rules. The book came from a feeling of anger after being discouraged from speaking about my experiences as an immigrant woman. And I felt compelled to write in a way that I had never written before: unapologetically. Although the book is written in English and published in the UK, it contains passages in French and Creole. It is peppered with words from Bhojpuri and Malagasy to illustrate the multiculturalism of my island which did not have an indigenous population before it was colonized. I also weaved in recipes, songs and poems, without caring about genre conventions or whether they would fit in, for I did not want to cave to Anglophone-dominated aesthetic pressures or stylistic conventions.

Writing *Riambel* provided me with a certain freedom, where I was allowed to be blurry. To leave my comfort zone behind, to be bold and take risks. It allowed me to move between worlds, languages and stories fluidly and seamlessly like the ocean that I grew up with.

Today, I am deeply humbled and honored to be here and to be considered a voice who is contributing to this new wave of experimental literature. And as literature can be appreciated from anywhere, it has the power to transgress physical boundaries, to break down barriers and challenge social convention. So, who is to say that we should not challenge the blurry boundaries of literature?

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## Blurred Boundaries

Nathalie CHANG (Taiwan)

I have chosen this topic by a kind of impulsion, because there is a music band called “Blur” that I loved so much when I was younger. I usually introduce myself as an odd writer and avoid pretending to be queer, since “queer” seems too academic for me. Queer theories about the blurred lines have been explored in novels and art. Here, I'll just touch tiny parts of this.

When “blurred boundaries” are applied to gender performance, that is an aesthetic which prefers fun to serenity, and ambivalence to clearance. In this context, “blurred boundaries” are synonymous with joy and liberation.

I will approach this topic from three different angles. First one is in my short story *The Forty-Third Floor*. Immigration is a big topic in this plot but there is another thing I want to put in this story: The real subject we must deal with is not only immigration. It's also the unknown. So, I let the narrator say that she thought this “unknown” had no penis and she didn't know why. Sure, you could consider the possibility that this person is a transgender person or somebody like that. However, it might be better to keep this suspense for feeling how much the frames of gender and sexuality could shape our judgement and identification when we read. In this case, blurred boundaries serve to uncover the positions of authority and therefore cause a short-circuit of the system.

Next, I'd like to talk about “using blurred boundaries as the means to welcome justice”. That allow me to introduce a beautiful friendship between NIEH Hualing (novelist and co-founder of IWP) and a philosopher YIN Hai-Guang. First off, let me give you a bit of the history behind this.

In 1895, a war broke out between Japan and China. After China's defeat, Taiwan was ceded to Japan as a colony. For the next 50 years (1895-1945), Taiwanese people were regarded as Japanese under international law. And then following the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) led a group of Chinese to Taiwan (1949), hoping to defeat the Communists and return to the mainland. However, two years (1947) before their settlement, a conflict erupted between the Chinese military and Taiwanese civilians, resulting in a massacre of Taiwanese people.

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This has left a trauma to the society. Generally speaking, we can say that those who came to Taiwan in 1945-1949 (Waishengren) closely aligned with KMT and the other Taiwanese (benshengren) endured many years of fear and silence. There is a common expression we often use: we are “the brave Taiwanese “——when I was younger, I always got angry at that because I don’t want to be a brave Taiwanese, I just want to be an ordinary Taiwanese. Bravery is so emphasized because of our history of terror. Now, there's a feeling that we must be brave in the face of China's civil and military threats against Taiwan. While I'm not particularly nationalistic, I find it deeply inhumane and unacceptable that Taiwanese people are forced to endure this fear. And in 2022 an editor from Taiwan forcibly disappeared in China. (Searching: Fu Cha back to Taiwan)

What is special about NIEH and YIN is that they more or less gave up their loyalty to their sense of belonging (Waishengren). They refuse to condone Chiang Kai-shek ‘s authoritarian rule. The speaker in the novel, *I’am leaving* got her name from YIN. I made this decision not only because it kind of embodied the spirit of the times but also, I agreed that YIN occupied a crucial place in our history. He has broken the boundaries of the two groups.

Sometimes, we can only love each other when we allow for blurred boundaries. In my writing, I showed how both groups acquire this wisdom from another side, and practice to break free from their original socio-cultural roots to strengthen other values. A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, but if we abuse this need, we may sacrifice a lot of things. Just look how those Far Right extremists try to seduce people by inflexible boundaries.

The last example can be found in *Not long in love*. When this book was published, there was a lot of controversy surrounding the idea of a lesbian author writing a novel about a heterosexual and homosexual love story. Someone said that portraying the protagonist as bisexual is the best choice to imply that the average lesbian is too closed-minded. And I said that if we talked about the diversity, there won’t be the so called “best choice”. But still, I let people talk whatever they want because I don’t care.

Although same-sex marriage was legalized in Taiwan in 2016, I knew the LGBTSQQ community remained vulnerable, and I chose to defend our right at that moment. However, that forced me to sacrifice a bit of my love for literature. As a novelist, what I am interested in is exploring all kinds of taboos. A gay writer hit the nail on the head after reading the novel, and he wanted me to talk more about this point that has nothing to do with the previous controversy. I refused to discuss it because I didn’t like to provide any direct answer. Furthermore, what matters the most

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in a novel is where it makes readers think for themselves. But now I could summarize that core point I really want to talk about in one sentence: Can a victim make a mistake? The answer is yes.

Even as woman, survivor of pedophile abuse, non-white / non-occidental / non- heterosexual person, the heroine of *Not long in love* remain ignorant of the experiences of other victims: this woman thought that the man she met can't be trusted because he couldn't express any emotion about Shoah, but she has missed one point: that man himself could be Jewish. With all good will, it is still possible to make a mistake. I don't think I participate in the trend of always oversimplifying the issues into the so-called gray area. As novelists, we have the responsibility to deepen the blurred boundaries when the fixed ones erase the complexity of life.

Bonus: The friendship between NIEH and YIN

YIN is someone so considered as a political figure, but he also predicted NIEH's future literary career. Once, he came up with a long story as an excuse just to give NIEH a very expensive Parker pen. Another time, NIEH refused to present flower to a great intellectual who just came back to Taiwan from America, and Yin said to her: "You are right! You will be a writer one day, so how can you now just be a flower presenter for him!" So here I'd like to pay homage to Yin not only for his status in our democratic history but also for his passion for literature.

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**Blurred Boundaries/IWP**

Elena Salamanca (El Salvador)

This panel appeals to me from the deepest part of my body. My body is fragmented/bordered by two non-human beings. A near-fatal attack by a dog that has split my skin and turned me into a sewn and patched body, like these beautiful quilt sheets that grandmothers used to sew or knit. Also, I carry in my blood a bacteria called *Borrelia Burgdorferi* that inoculated me with Lyme disease. So let's say here, in me, in front of you, there is a specie-border-thing. I am a woman, a dog and a bacteria.

[Lynn Margulis would love this topic, because it's a way to demonstrate symbiogenesis.]

From my background, this panel also appeals to me. In my daily life, as a historian, I write about borders. I review maps, political constitutions, and review documents on geopolitical and intellectual disputes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a human being, I am also traversed by borders. In 2005, I decided to live outside El Salvador, then (and still today) one of the most violent countries in Latin America. But borders also crossed me in the stories of my compatriots, born in the five Central American countries. Since 2018, in Mexico, I have been volunteering in migrant shelters. I have cooked, I have shared, I have laughed and I have cried, especially with women and children, with those people who, stranded in Mexico, just want to get to the United States.

But today we are invited to talk about other frontiers, other frontiers that, at least for us, allow life to have other horizons. Not the frontiers that separate and block us, but those frontiers that I cross with freedom, and they are the frontiers of writing and genres.

I can say that my first books did not even want to become national historiography, because the Salvadoran land of writers was a masculine and violent territory. But neither did I want to enter the literary genres. They were like little boxes where an academic was going to put me and probably leave me locked up for much time. When I was 18, I took a course at the university on creative writing, and the rules were these: the story had to have 3 parts and the poetry should preferably have metrics, if it was a sonnet the better, because “anyone can write in free verse” or “anyone can write conversational poetry”, in other words, according to this premise, anyone could be Nicanor Parra, Marosa Di Giorgio, Roque Dalton or Gloria Anzaldúa.

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So I isolated myself, I focused on my own, similar to a collector to accumulate things, or texts, that nobody cares about, but that make me, us, happy, they seem beautiful, important, sharp, shiny and necessary. These were fragments of writings that at some point found their own structure and way of being in the world. But El Salvador was definitely a border country. And this does not mean that it was a country between two spaces. It means that writing in El Salvador was a blocked space, if you didn't follow the great male masters.

I don't want to write *global* or *international* literature. I want to write the stories and the history of my country, a forgotten place in a piece of land between two oceans. But I have to do it *out of place*.

Writing, for me, has always been a *desire of place*. *Un deseo de lugar*.

For 20 years or more, I have written as a professional writer without a conceptual-genre-boundary, and I have been happy. There are people who suffer while writing (I suffer when I write human rights reports), but for me literature is joy, happiness and of course escape. But I like being a fugitive.

My method of work has been fragmentary, and fragmentariness allows me to break out of the tight fields of genres. Fragmentary writing has allowed me to write a two-handed academic book, and it has allowed me to use scientific evidence in my poems or work with a translator who is an editor but also is a biologist. Every intuition and metaphor can be, for me, confirmed by the scientific evidence of archaeologists, biologists or geologists. That is a relief because I carry in both hands the research method of history, which is also science. But above all, this becoming, which can be called transboundary, is a becoming of situating my space in the world. This border may be a place. It is the only place I know how to get to.

I would like to sound smarter in English and speak much better about my writing, science and joy, but I hope to meet later, somehow, in some (non)place.

My place in the world is knowledge, without the colonial divisions and epistemic violence of academic knowledge as the one and only science; and submitting ancestral knowledge as *tradition or whatever else*. These frontiers that divide knowledge and its dissemination are another frontier that I am willing to cross. Because finally I am a woman-dog-bacteria. And we already know that bacteria are almost invincible.

Writing is not just an act of genuflection in front of the computer.

Writing is a vital act composed of other acts that cross me, such as caring, cleaning,

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loving. I don't want to put a border between the essential works either.

I have always wanted to hang a sign on the door of my house, like in those old stores that said: “Other people's washing and ironing”, *Se lava y se plancha ajeno*; but instead, I would say “Own and other people's washing, ironing, writing and weeping”. *Se lava, se plancha, se escribe y se llora lo propio y lo ajeno.*

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**Blurred boundaries: the role of imagination Catarina Gomes (Portugal)**

Let me begin by sharing with you a habit I've had for as long as I can remember, while I wait for the subway in Lisbon, my first instinct is to observe the people around me on the platform. I'm in the silent process of choosing someone. Once I've made my decision, I get closer to "my" person, because when the train arrives, and all the doors open at once, I have to be quick. By then, I need to know exactly who I'm pursuing. Whether it's something a person is wearing (or not wearing), their posture, their gaze, something I've heard them say, an object they're holding, I follow the person who intrigues me the most — the one I imagine to be the most interesting, the one I feel I would want to know more about.

If there's room on the train, I sit beside my "most interesting person." Before cell phones, I preferred pairs of people because they provided lines of dialogue for my imagination to continue its work. With cell phones, half a conversation is even better; the rest I can guess. By the time they get off the train, I've already written a story about that person in my head, often more than one. I once told a boyfriend of mine about this habit, and he replied: "You're not normal". He was obviously not the man for me.

When I first started writing professionally, the boundaries were apparently very well defined. I was a journalist, and in journalism, to imagine is an accusation, you can almost talk of a commandment: "Thou shalt not imagine." Officially, journalists don't imagine, they pursue facts. Yet, even in journalism, I found that my imagination was at work long before I began writing down words and sentences for my newspaper.

For example, if I had to report on, let's say, a street protest, a very common assignment, I would act very much like I did on the subway: I would spend the first part of my time choosing my characters, one or two at most. I imagine my protagonists before I even approach them. Only after I made my selection would I start asking them questions. Depending on their answers, some stayed as my characters, others were quickly discarded, they would not do, not even as extras. Then I followed my protagonists, watching them move around, talk to other people, writing down their words and actions. As I was doing my research on the street, I felt that my mind was shaping a story before I had even written a line. It had selected scenes, dialogues, sequences — a narrative.

Stories begin with imagination. Before I came to Iowa, I imagined each one of my colleagues; I envisioned the entire experience before it unfolded. We travel before we travel. Before anything happens in our lives, our mind anticipates.

When I wrote my first book of creative nonfiction after I decided to leave journalism, I discovered that imagination continued to be a central tool for my writing. Here's an example: In

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2011, while exploring the attic of a closed psychiatric hospital in Lisbon, I came across a box full of personal belongings of former patients, all long dead. I wanted to tell their stories, but I had no idea where to begin. I chose the ones that most captured my imagination, like a metal box filled with clock hands. Who had owned it? A watchmaker? Was he always on time or sometimes late?

The box contained dozens and dozens of objects, the ones that didn't arouse my curiosity remained silent forever, untold stories, my imagination didn't choose them. You follow what sparks your desire to know. I realized that imagination acted almost like an editor, leading me down certain paths and steering me away from others. Even when my discoveries diverged from what I had originally envisioned, it was my imagination that got me there in the first place. In both journalism and creative nonfiction, I found that "I wonder" and "I guess" were perhaps my most vital research methods.

Although I was aware that imagination played such an important role in my journalism and nonfiction writing, when I decided to try fiction, I felt paralyzed. I could no longer select my characters from the people around me, I could no longer follow "the most interesting ones", there were no real faces, no voices I could hear, no bodies I could touch. The realization that I now had permission to imagine anything was overwhelming. I felt lost for many years.

I found my solution by interviewing my fictional characters as if I were a journalist. I would sit with them in my mind and ask them questions. Without a recorder, I scribbled down what I "heard" them say. They proved to be much friendlier than my nonfiction subjects, I could even "call" them in the middle of the night — they were always available.

Now, I'm in Iowa working on what will be my most personal project yet: an autobiographical book about my father. Will it be creative nonfiction? A novel? A memoir? Autofiction? A mix of all the above? I'm not sure yet. Everything feels a little blurry, but that's alright; I trust my imagination will guide me through. I will follow its lead.

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