

Writing As a Form of Activism

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Childhood, Memory, and the Power of Words

From childhood, I knew that if I did not learn to tell and write the story of my parents and my own, no one else would. My parents built their house on the harsh desert south of Lima, Peru's capital, where I grew up with my six sisters and the animals we raised. Like many others from the Andean and Amazonian regions, in the early 1960s, my parents migrated to Lima in search of work, better living conditions and education in response to the profound neglect those regions had endured.

We were part of a massive process of internal migration that reshaped Lima's culture, music and arts which were objects of mockery and disdain at the time. The arrival of these waves of migrants marked the end of an era. Lima would never be the same.

My mother, who had never been sent to school, learned to write her name as an adult — a source of great pride for her — and she urged me to draw or record everything happening around us. She told me that the only way to preserve a memory of what we were living, was for us to write it ourselves. What she said made sense: once memories are put into writing, they acquire structure, a body that cannot be erased, and they leave marks and occupy space. As a child, I had reflected neither on the immense power of words to affirm realities nor to erase them.

To tell my parents' story and my own, to speak of the transformation of the city we lived in, its music and its people, was what compelled me to write as an act of resistance. In this sense, writing was my first form of activism. I was convinced then—and I still believe—that writers are those who preserve, shape, and transmit collective memory.

Migration, Platforms, and Collective Writing

Years later, when I left Peru and began my life as a migrant, this conviction led me to found the platform *Sivuvalo* in Helsinki, Finland, dedicated to promoting literature written by immigrants in their mother tongues. This was the activism to which I devoted the most time and energy. It allowed me to interact with people from many parts of the world—refugees stranded in a small northern country where one of the world's most difficult languages is spoken.

I found myself negotiating with cultural and literary institutions, promoting translations, and organizing multilingual poetry events. From these experiences came themes for my writing, but also many questions. Through the platform *Sivuvalo*—a word that means “the light that shines but no one sees”—we demanded, and continue to demand, translation grants into Finland's official languages for works written in immigrants' own tongues. Through *Sivuvalo* we also promote a *culture of translation*. We fought as well for our right, as

immigrant writers and citizens, to apply for literary grants without being confined to thematic categories imposed by institutions—often clichés about “the immigrant experience.”

Finland still has a generous system of literary grants, though it is now being dismantled by the current government, led by the populist, ultra-nationalist True Finns party.

Global Struggles, Shared Voices

As a migrant woman, I felt called to take part in various forms of activism, each one rooted in networks of solidarity. I am grateful for the learning I gained through the feminist collectives we formed together with Mexican artists in Helsinki. Volunteering with *Welcome Refugees* led me to question my own Eurocentric gaze and opened me to worlds different from my own. One of the movements I most admire is the solidarity movement with Palestine. As a writer, one feels useless in the face of such horror—the genocide and forced displacement of the Palestinian people is intolerable. And yet, even if words can do little, I believe it is vital to name what is happening before the eyes of the world and to condemn it. I also learned from Russian-speaking writers in Finland who demanded an end to the war in Ukraine, and from the circulating anti-fascist activism resisting the dismantling of the welfare state. Nor can I forget the creative interventions of *Elokapina*, the ecological movement demanding urgent action to save the planet. Often, all these movements come together in a single voice: a call for peace.

Literature, Propaganda, and Responsibility

Some writers fear that activism contaminates literature, just as some reject the word *politics*. I see no problem in a writer being an activist, or engaging with activism. Activism is a way of inhabiting the world. For each writer, it is a personal choice—whether to treat activism as separate from writing or to put writing in service of activism.

Activism emphasizes direct and public action to provoke social, political and/or environmental change. Its texts are often propaganda, pamphlets. Literary writing, by contrast, requires a different kind of labor: deep work with language, reflection, and exploration in uncertain terrain. At first, themes may not be well defined—this often happens with poetry—but in the process of writing, they find their path.

I like to swim in that uncertainty, to search for new vocabularies and realities. What I hope to spark in readers is curiosity, and if I am fortunate, empathy. This, I believe, is what ignites the flame of critical thought. Propaganda has a different purpose—but I believe all material, even pamphlets, can serve as raw material for writing. Literature is never just literature. It is always intertwined with philosophy, sociology and life itself.

Conclusion: Writing With and For Others

There are many ways of writing, and many ways of being a writer. I do not believe that simply labeling a text as “political” makes it so. All literature is inevitably woven from political circumstances. The personal, too, is political.

Each writer decides whether to take a public stance on the events shaping our world—whether it be Palestine or Ukraine, or the rhetoric of populist nationalists that spreads like a threatening virus. No one is obliged to imagine alternative futures or offer solutions. Yet from an ethical standpoint, as intellectuals writing of and for the world, we should not wait to be pressured to take a position. Taking a stance does not mean selling one's soul to a cause. There are many ways of doing it. But these times demand responsibility. We are walking on a minefield.

Activism has given me knowledge and stories I would never otherwise have had. It has provided the raw materials for a writing practice in constant dialogue with communities and other living beings. I firmly believe in collaborative writing. As Cristina Rivera Garza reminds us: *"We think we create alone, but the truth is that we do so from others, and therefore they accompany us in our act of creation."*

All my life, I have felt—and still feel—like an acrobat walking on a thin rope, surrounded by fog. Yet it is in this balancing act, precarious and full of uncertainty, that I continue to write.

ORIGINAL:

Desde niña, fui consciente de que, si yo no aprendía a contar y escribir la historia de mis padres y la mía, nadie lo iba a hacer.

Mis padres levantaron su casa sobre un áspero desierto al sur de Lima, la capital del Perú, donde crecí junto a mis 6 hermanas y todos los animales que criábamos. Mis padres, como muchos otros pobladores de las zonas andinas y amazónicas, a inicios de los 60s tomaron la decisión de mudarse a Lima en busca de trabajo, mejores condiciones de vida y educación. Una reacción al profundo abandono en que estas regiones se encontraban. Mi familia, yo, fuimos parte de un acelerado proceso de migración interna que moldeó una nueva cultura, música, estética, y que entonces era objeto de desprecio y burlas. La llegada de estas olas de migrantes a Lima marcó el fin de una época. Lima nunca más volvió a ser la misma.

Mi madre que no fue enviada al colegio y no aprendió a escribir y por lo mismo se empeñaba en que yo anote o dibuje todo lo que nos pasaba, me decía que la única forma de que quede un registro, una memoria, de lo que estábamos viviendo es que nosotros mismos escribamos esas memorias. Lo que decía tenía mucho sentido. Una vez que las memorias se traducen en escritura, adquieren estructura, un cuerpo, que no se borra, más bien van dejando marcas y ocupando un lugar. Aún era una niña y no reflexionaba como ahora sobre el inmenso poder que tienen las palabras para afirmar realidades o desaparecerlas.

Contar mi historia y la de mis padres, hablar del proceso de transformación de la ciudad que habitábamos, su música y sus personajes fue lo que me empujó a escribir como un acto de resistencia. Y en este sentido Escribir fue mi primer activismo. Estaba convencida de que los escritores son quienes se encargan de preservar la memoria y aun lo creo.

Para responder a las preguntas planteadas para esta conversación tuve que hacer memoria de todos los activismos que han acompañado a lo largo de mi vida como poeta y como gestora cultural. Me pregunté si estos activismos le hicieron bien o le hicieron daño a mi escritura.

Les hablaré de lo que considero el gran legado que me dejó el activismo: valiosos insumos para mi escritura. Estos insumos o materiales, que alimentaron la poesía que empezaba a escribir y que continué escribiendo surgían de mi interacción con la colectividad, de los acontecimientos sociales y políticos que la rodeaban. Para la joven que empezaba a escribir lo político estaba en cada acto de la vida cotidiana y social. Era simplemente parte de la vida.

Posicionarme de este modo frente a la escritura me impulsó años después, cuando dejé el Perú y empezó mi vida de migrante en el mundo, a fundar en Helsinki, Finlandia, una plataforma para promover la literatura escrita por los inmigrantes en su lengua materna. Mi trabajo en esta plataforma debe haber sido el activismo al que le dediqué más tiempo y energías. Me permitió interactuar con personas de diversas partes del mundo, refugiados varados en un pequeño país del norte de Europa donde se habla uno de los idiomas más difíciles del mundo. Me vi en medio de negociaciones con instituciones literarias y de la cultura de Finlandia. Estuve promoviendo traducciones, organizando eventos multilingües de poesía. Experiencias de vida que me dejaron temas para mi escritura y muchas preguntas. Exigíamos entonces y aun ahora, pues la demanda persiste, becas de traducción a alguna de las lenguas oficiales de Finlandia de los trabajos de escritores inmigrantes que escriben en sus propias lenguas maternas. Lo que resumimos como activismo que promueve una cultura de la traducción. Además, exigíamos y seguimos exigiendo, nuestro derecho como escritores inmigrantes y ciudadanos de postular a las becas de escritura sin estar condicionados a

temáticas creadas por las instituciones finlandesas para los inmigrantes. Por lo general, temáticas basadas en estereotipos. En Finlandia aún existe un generoso sistema de becas para escritura, sistema que viene siendo dismantelado por el actual gobierno encabezado por el partido populista ultranacionalista True Finns.

Agradezco todo el aprendizaje que me deja participar en mi colectivo feminista junto a artistas mexicanas en Helsinki, así como el que me dejó cuando fui voluntaria en Welcome refugees. Evoco el movimiento de solidaridad con el pueblo de Palestina. Y aquí me detengo: como escritora una se siente inútil ante semejante horror. El genocidio y el desplazamiento forzado del que el pueblo palestino viene siendo víctima es intolerable. Y aunque las palabras sirvan de poco me parece importante nombrar lo que viene ocurriendo en Palestina frente a los ojos de todo el mundo y condenarlo. Aprendí muchísimo de la cooperación con los escritores de lengua rusa residentes en Finlandia que exigen el fin de la guerra en Ucrania. Evoco el conmovedor activismo antifascista en Finlandia en contra del actual gobierno liderado por el partido True Finns que vienen dismantelando el welfare state. Y no puedo dejar de mencionar las ingeniosas intervenciones de Elokapiina movimiento ecologista para la salvación del planeta. Muchas veces todos estos movimientos se reúnen en uno solo que pide paz para el planeta.

Personalmente no veo qué problema hay en que un escritor sea activista o se relacione con activismos. El activismo es una forma de estar en el mundo. Creo que es decisión personal del escritor cómo se mueve dentro de este terreno, si lo asume como una actividad independiente a su escritura o si pone su escritura al servicio del activismo.

El activismo es una práctica que enfatiza la acción directa y pública para provocar cambios sociales, políticos económicos o ambientales, destacando su rol para desafiar desigualdades y amplificar voces marginadas. Los textos al servicio de los activismos por su naturaleza son textos de propaganda. Panfletos.

La práctica de la escritura literaria, por el contrario, exige un trabajo con el lenguaje, y mucha reflexión y exploración en terrenos inciertos. Al principio puede que los temas no están bien definidos -esto ocurre comúnmente con la poesía- pero en el proceso de escritura encuentran una ruta. A mí me gusta hacerme preguntas en este proceso, nadar en ese desconcierto. Ir en busca de nuevos vocabularios y realidades. Y no espero más que generar curiosidad en los lectores y con mucha suerte, empatía. Creo que muchas veces esto es lo que enciende la chispa de una práctica crítica de pensamiento. Los textos de propaganda tienen otro propósito.

No obstante, creo que todo material es útil para la escritura, incluidos los panfletos. La literatura no solamente es literatura, siempre está vinculada con otras cosas, con sociología, filosofía, etc. A estas alturas no desearía nada.

Hay muchas formas de escribir y de estar en la escritura. No creo que exista algo que haga que una literatura sea política. No creo que decir esto es político lo haga político. Toda literatura es un tejido de acontecimientos inevitablemente políticos. También lo personal es político.

Creo que cada escritor decide si quiere tener un posicionamiento público con relación a lo que pasa en el mundo. Las catástrofes de las que somos testigos en Palestina, en Ukraina. Las

decisiones y discursos de odio de políticos y mandatarios de partidos populistas ultranacionalistas que son como un virus que avanza amenazante. Tampoco creo que todos estén obligados a imaginar futuros alternativos para el mundo ni dar soluciones.

Sin embargo, desde un punto de vista ético, como intelectuales que escribimos del mundo y para el mundo, no deberíamos esperar a que nos presionen para tomar una postura. Tomar una postura no significa vender el alma a una causa. Hay tantas formas de hacerlo. Vivimos momentos que exigen responsabilidad pues caminamos sobre un suelo minado.

Los activismos me proporcionaron a lo largo de mi vida una fuente de conocimientos y relatos que de otra manera nunca habría tenido acceso. Me hice de insumos para desarrollar una escritura en constante interacción con las comunidades y otros seres vivos. Creo firmemente en un tipo de escritura colaborativa.

Me pidieron un ensayo y más me bien me incliné por escribir un testimonio. Pensé mucho en qué momento los activismos pudieron haberle hecho daño a mi escritura. Creo que también un aislamiento absoluto del mundo podría haberme hecho mucho daño. La escritora mexicanoamericana Cristina Rivera Garza dice: “Pensamos que creamos solos, pero la verdad es que lo hacemos a partir de los otros y, por tanto, ellos nos acompañan en nuestro acto de creación.”

A lo largo de mi vida me he sentido y aun me siento como una acróbata que camina sobre una cuerda delgadita en medio de mucha neblina.

Writing as a Form of Activism

Wong Ching Hang (Hong Kong)

Fiction writers hope that their characters are alive, that they leave an imprint in the reader's mind. Their method is to describe, within limited pages, the unique experiences and emotions of a character's life—thus, they acquire a face, something recognizable.

This may be an old saying, but I believe it still holds meaning. In modern society, many do not expect us to have names nor do they wish us to be unique individuals. In everyday life, traces of people are everywhere, yet they are buried, erased, or dismissed as irrelevant.

Take our mobile phones, for instance. Who thinks about who assembled them, who transported them? I doubt even the producers themselves imagine the next step in the process, or what other workers in the chain are enduring. A phone is the outcome of the labor of many, yet those people do not know each other's destinies, and the users do not know the workers' predicaments. Their fingerprints are wiped away from the surface, leaving us with an object that conceals the histories embedded in it.

I once wrote a story about a dockworker and a masseuse who had once worked in an electronics factory. Their working conditions were equally harsh. The dockworkers, for example, were poorly paid, sometimes working up to twenty-four hours for just 180 U.S. dollars, and their wages had, instead of increasing, decreased over the course of a decade. They ate and relieved themselves under towering cranes, endured sweltering humidity without air conditioning. Remember: under Hong Kong's labor law, it is extremely difficult to seek justice if a worker dies of heatstroke on the job. Many, after years of bending over shipping containers, ended up suffering from sciatica and other long-term pains.

In 2013, this finally led to a forty-day dockworkers' strike in Hong Kong.

Around the same time, the electronics factories producing iPhones were exposed after a spate of suicides among employees working under appalling conditions. Other factories in the industry were revealed to be similar. Some companies, fearing workers might organize, even forbade them from speaking to one another. A few years earlier, due to inadequate fire facilities, more than eighty workers burned to death on the job.

Have you heard of these stories? Looking at objects devoid of any trace of handiwork, it is difficult to recall the workers who produced them. In fact, in many products, we even regard the marks of the human hand as flaws. The industrial system demands perfection and uniformity, while literature, in contrast, insists on showing the cracks, the lines, the individuality that cannot be erased.

One of literature's possibilities is to reconnect people, to restore their faces through imagination, to resist the slow erasure of the human.

In one scene of my story, the masseuse feels the dockworker's injured back with her hands, while the dockworker senses her peeling skin. They are not highly educated, they do not know how to articulate themselves in words—but their bodies are their best language. Through touch, they understand each other's wounds and begin to speak of their pasts. Literature translates this silent understanding.

Here is a passage:

At first, she noticed the tattoo on his back and thought it unremarkable. But on closer look, the billfish's mouth was too short, its lines a little rough. Yet this crude tattoo, etched upon his body,

radiated a strange vitality, like the old stone carvings she once saw in a scenic site whose name she had forgotten. ... The massage oil continued to sting her hands. She had worked in this trade long enough that her skin had grown fragile, shedding and renewing like a reptile, yet never having the time to harden into calluses. Eventually, the lines on her palms slowly disappeared.

I must admit this scene was inspired by Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, when the narrator eats a madeleine and memories surge forth. Both moments are triggered by sensation leading to reverie. Yet in my story, touch not only summons personal memory, but also evokes compassion and understanding.

Another scene unfolds like this: the dockworker and the masseuse, after smoking, sit on the ground and turn on the television. They recall once singing 'The Internationale' outside a factory gate, a moment captured on film by a Hong Kong journalist. Might that footage have been broadcast in the dockworker's home? And if he later joined the forty-day strike, would the masseuse remember it?

The story also depicts their political awakening. I only sought to capture one fleeting moment of their connection—and the act of reading the work is itself but a fleeting instant in life. Yet as Zen Buddhism teaches, enlightenment arises in a single instant; amidst countless moments of existence, one may always glimpse the chance for transformation.

Here I end with *On Benevolence (Renxue)* by Tan Sitong, a radical Chinese reformer executed more than a century ago for plotting revolution. In that work, blending traditional Chinese thought, science, Buddhism, and even anarchist ideas, he wrote:

Ren (benevolence) means connection above all. Ether, electricity, the power of the mind—all point to the means of connection.

He compared ren to ether, envisioning it as a substance through which human beings might communicate, empathize, and understand one another. Since his death, revolutions have failed and begun again. I do not know how to launch a revolution, but I hope that through writing and reading, we may increase human understanding and help build a better world.

Even if we cannot change much, at the very least, I hope that through literature we may change ourselves. To write, after all, is to leave a trace—to assert that lives matter even when institutions deny them.

Yes—I forgot to say—those forty days of labor struggle eventually ended in failure. The workers' wage increase was minimal, and many of those who led the strike later lost their jobs. The movement was crushed, but their stories should not be forgotten. A strike may be defeated, but in literature it can remain, suspended in time, carrying with it the dignity of those who stood together.

I do not know if my story will ever be translated into English, but I hope that through these words, you may see some faces. And if literature succeeds in restoring even one erased face, then perhaps it is already doing the quiet work of revolution.

Writing As a Form of Activism

Myle Yan Tay (Singapore)

Frequently, it is purported that writers owe a unique social responsibility toward advocacy and activism. I don't think that's true. I think writers, like any engaged citizen of the world, should uplift the downtrodden, question power and imagine better futures. Perhaps the writer is better equipped for this act of imagination, spending most of their days in their head, deliberating between words to strike at truth. But words are only ever the start, if they do anything at all. They cannot replace or supplant the sustained, continuous, and direct action needed to create material change. The writer, as a citizen, can be a part of these efforts. But to do so, they must leave their keyboards and pens behind and engage with the world.

This might be considered as a narrow viewpoint, but it's what I find myself feeling acutely, living in a state of soft authoritarianism. Singapore, my home country, grants me many things for which I am grateful; freedom of speech or the right to political expression is not one of them.

When I imagine an activist, I picture the hard-working people in my country, who risk a great deal to make their beliefs known. They are targets of arbitrary, punitive laws and of undignified police inspections because the state does not want to encourage this kind of "troublesome behaviour." I, on the other hand, feel like I risk very little when I sit down to write.

It isn't because I am allowed unique freedoms of speech in Singapore as an artist. It is firmly the opposite, with censorship coming from both within and without. What I do have are the tools of craft at my disposal that allow me to cloak my true, allegedly dangerous, feelings. My novel, *catskull*, follows Ram, a disenfranchised teenager who decides to wear a mask and punish the criminals Singapore does not prosecute. The book is an exploration of masculinity and violence in a highly legalistic society, and importantly, it's a work of genre. The mode of the thriller gave me permission to quell the ever-present fear of censorship and punishment, so I could dig into the taboo, unencumbered. Each crime Ram chases in the novel is inspired by real cases, whose reality I softened to meet the rigorous demands of "believability" in fiction. The real world was crueller than I could depict.

I use those same tools of subterfuge onstage, in my plays, *Brown Boys Don't Tell Jokes*, and *Statement Piece*. In *Brown Boys*, a group of men from racial minorities reconnect the night before an important election, only to realize one of their friends is carrying a dangerous secret. Race in Singapore is one of our most sensitive topics, with strict laws that punish anyone who dares speak out of turn about our lauded and supposedly precarious multiculturalism. That is why, though the play is ultimately a tragedy, it was vital for me that it also be funny. Comedy is a trick; we laugh at the things

that hurt us so we can pretend they don't wound. And comedy allowed me to dance around the danger, without losing the emotional truth.

In *Statement Piece*, a gallerist must contend with the ethics of displaying a new painting from her favourite artist, depicting Singapore's recently deceased, much venerated and borderline sacred founding father in an intensely sexual and violent manner. Onstage, the painting is kept hidden from the audience's eye, but when it is finally displayed, it is blank. The audience must conjure up their own vision of the defamatory image, mentally performing their own private desecration. Even then, there were questions about the script from Singapore's Infocomm Media Development Authority, which really is a longer way of saying: Censorship Board. They wanted the play changed. But the play itself makes no mention of the man's name or the time period. So they had no choice but to allow the play to go on. And the Singaporeans in the audience understood what was left unsaid, about legacy and idolization.

All of this is to say is that I have learned from the Singaporean artists before me how to talk in hidden ways that evade state control and suppression. I have learned to speak backwards, in negation, in satire and irony to elude punishment. But as our world continues to burn, as my nation continues to execute people for the "heinous crime of drug possession," as the famine continues in Gaza, I question whether my tools of subterfuge prevent me from saying what I need to say, doing what needs to be done.

Three activists in Singapore are currently under trial for delivering letters to our President asking him to pledge his support towards ending the genocide in Palestine. They are under investigation specifically for forming an "unlawful public assembly." This illegal assembly was made up of 70 like-minded individuals with shared moral convictions, peacefully marching together in downtown Singapore towards the Presidential Offices. In Singapore, an illegal public assembly is any group of people that have gathered to "publicise a cause or campaign."

It is legal to mail a letter to our President. It is apparently illegal to hand-deliver it to his office, while shielding yourself from the rain with a watermelon-emblazoned umbrella. The police, in their interrogations, have fixated on the umbrellas. "Why the watermelon? What does it mean to you?" The activist insists it's simply her favourite fruit. She knows admitting to its transnational significance will act as fuel for the prosecution. She knows that in Singapore, there are no right ways to care about the wrong things.

A month ago, I was lucky enough to attend panels with two of the alleged ringleaders, at Singapore's second Transformative Justice Festival. The day before, they had been in the Courts to receive the charges being laid against them by the state. When I heard them speak with conviction and passion, undeterred by a power much greater than them, I could not help but view my own writing as cowardly. I could not help but think that formal experiments and synonyms and metaphors are deceitful distractions, ways to ignore the little fragments of us that die each day as the death toll rises. I know, really, that there is no combination of words I can put together that can end a genocide.

Then I think about what got them in trouble. The police and courts contend that it was their gathering that was illegal. I don't think that's true. What the state is really upset

about is their audacity to speak freely. To say what they feel. To be brave enough to pen down their honesty.

That, to me, is activism. I still lack the courage in my writing to follow suit, at least without my bag of tricks. But I hope that one day, they will allow me to form a thought on paper that can shake a few pebbles loose in someone's head. To make an activist out of someone else. And if I do that, I'd be gratified knowing that my work contributed the tiniest iota, a single erg of energy, a fingernail of a something, towards justice for all people.