

## Experiencing the Other

As a kid, I was obsessed with doorknobs. I would go around the floors of the apartment building I lived, examining my neighbors' knobs until I knew them all: type, color, "face." In my imagination, the knob was more or less the door's face, with a nose aquiline or plump, with a tightly shut mouth unwilling to reveal its secrets. My obsession did not have anything to do with break-in plans – or maybe in a way it did, as I was curious to know what life was like if you were living behind this or that door, and I cast myself in the role of my neighbors. The knob stood for somebody else's life. It was a symbol of otherness that could yet be explored or at least imagined.

This weird obsession did not last long, and as I grew up, I all but forgot about it. My memory of it came back when I started writing my first short stories and I was struck by the uncanny realization that I was experiencing something quite similar. I was living bits and pieces of other people's lives, only now I had the tools for putting these fantasies down to paper. As it happened, I wrote a short story about the doorknobs, too. It's titled *Self*, but it's actually about the tantalizing possibility of being other.

What if you lived behind one of those doors? What if you lived in another place, another time? What if you could cast yourself as the character of a novel? I believe this sort of *what-if* is what makes us read fiction in the first place, and in many cases – not necessarily in all cases – this is what drives writers in creating their own fictional worlds, alive with *not-selves* that we reach out to, by way of imagination and empathy.

That's very much what literature is about, for me at least: experiencing the other. First, as a reader, embarking on a thousand different voyages to other places or even other worlds to meet people who are very different or may not even be people but rather animals, aliens, gods, trees, or rivers. Then, as a translator, by definition transferring, transposing, transcoding the product of somebody else's mind in another language, culture, and time. Finally, as a writer, literally adopting somebody else's voice, imagining oneself as the not-self, which must be such a basic human need if we only look at children's play. In this, writers are very much like children, yet their own play has the advantage of being interesting for *others*.

I expect some of you would argue that literature can also serve as a way to express your own identity, which is, in essence, the Romantic project. Yet think about that: in its usefulness as a tool to affirm identity, along with other arts and media, with lifestyle and politics, literature is not unique; but in its capacity to nurture imagination and empathy, it probably is.

I am not saying that writing the not-self is an innocent occupation. Nothing is innocent—not even children's play. Of course, it is an activity containing the seeds of what we call imperialism of the imagination. The writer assumes the voice of another person without asking for permission. It is the moral responsibility of an author to speak *for*, rather than *instead of* others. And thus, establish a democracy rather than an empire on the plane of imagination.

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, April 8, 2022

Angel Igov (Bulgaria); Hajar Rachedi (France); Sara Jaramillo Klinkert (Colombia); Shehan Karunatilaka (Sri Lanka)

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Obviously, that is valid for fiction writers more than it is for poets. Yet poetry, in its own way, is also very often about writing the not-self, for poetry is unique in probing and testing the limits of the self to the point where the self is not the self anymore but transforms or dissolves, or even explodes. Who should be the witness here but Rimbaud? With his famous phrase: *Je est un autre* (I is someone else), his wild whim to cast himself as a fantastic drunken boat, and finally, his decision to erase Rimbaud the poet from his own life—which was an extremely poetic gesture in its own right. Far from being complacent, it shows how writing the not-self can actually be quite dangerous!

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