

Kirmen URIBE

Writing from Form

My daughter loves History. Ancient Egypt. And she also loves Playmobil. So I gifted her a Playmobil for her birthday. But then I realized that all the figures were men. The pharaoh, the soldier, the thief, even the skeleton and mummy. How was my daughter supposed to play? She needed a female figure. I searched the catalog and found a Cleopatra. I paid another 20 euros. Problem solved.

One often pays more when one belongs to a minority or excluded community. This is frequently the case with blacks, gay and lesbians, and vegetarians: you have to work, wait, or pay more. I myself am from a minority, the Basque. When Dictator Franco was in power, the Basque name, Kirmen, was forbidden. But my mother registered me under this name anyway. To Franco, it was the language of poor people with no culture—a useless language, and worse, the language spoken by those on the losing side in the Spanish Civil War.

In these 40 years since Dictator Franco's death, however, considerable work has been invested in Basque to transform it into a language suitable for culture, science, and communication. The number of Basque language-speakers is rising, as is its presence in society. Moreover, it's grown so much that a Basque writer has even been sent to Iowa!

Minorities often experience tensions with majority communities, but minorities also experience their own inner conflicts. Living in a minority can also be a kind of prison. The collective good overrides the individual's. As a child in the Basque Country of the 80's, I remember communal violence everywhere. There was one word in particular that bothered me: "zuek" (you, in plural). It was used all the time in arguments. There was so much, "you, no you!"-ing thrown back and forth that I wondered who 'you' even referred to: the B (Basques), or maybe LB (Leftist Basques), or the LBWAAV (leftist Basques who are against violence), or LBNWAAVWRB (leftist Basques who are against violence and who read books), or why not LBNWAAVWRBLJU (leftist Basque nationalist who are against violence and who read books and like Joyce's Ulysses)— really just me. I was shocked that they identified me in a group, rather than seeing me as an individual person.

How can you be loyal and critical to your community at the same time? That's the question. How can you build a society that respects an endangered culture, and weaker language, while also respecting the multiple identities that live there?

I found my answer in "Basque Country" (*Euskal Herria*), which literally means a group of people speaking in Basque. *Euska Herria* is not a place, but rather a group of people linked by language. Basque (*Euskaldun*), therefore, refers to anyone that can speak Basque, or anyone who wants to learn it, regardless of genetics, passports, or borders. In this way, both my Japanese translator and my mother are both Basque! Currently, Basque society hosts many migrants. Nowadays, migrants and their children comprise the majority of Basque speakers, not only its inheritors from three or four generations back. This is a step forward.

Languages are like living things. As such, they are equal—we should respect and preserve them. Recently, I heard a famous writer in Dublin say that Swahili is a minor language compared to English. Outrageous. Similarly, 40 years ago, the Spanish president said physics can't be taught in Basque. Today, in 2017, a Basque physicist is a candidate for the Nobel Prize.

If you belong to a minority, it means hard work. In the context of literature, this means fighting the clichés and prejudices others have about what you are supposed to write. The task of the writer is not to tell about the exotic particularities of a place, but rather, to write "from" an individual's distinct place in a community and the world. Joyce and Beckett were Irish, but we don't expect them to write about sheep. They wrote from the margin, which freed them to write in new forms. Free from social restraints, let's write without fears or ties, like a girl playing with a Playmobil pyramid.

You know, my daughter did not like Cleopatra. She preferred the thief, who to her imaginative eyes, was female.