

NDORO Tariro

From Where We Write (The Grasslands)

When two elephants struggle, it's the grass that suffers – KiSwahili proverb.

As a woman living in the global south or a third world country, or an underserved population (the sociologists have many words for us), I have seen my people suffer, often from policies and wars that are not of their making. Yet somehow, there is a burden to not only survive our struggle but always *perform* it.

Thus, young African writers have a huge burden—our forefathers created movements such as Negritude and pan-Africanism, and from there, they wrote against the colonial. Even after we freed ourselves from our colonial overlords, there remained an unspoken burden to perform our sufferings. Prestigious literary prizes reward books that describe acts of terror and stories of overcoming them, narratives that sometimes perpetuate harmful narratives about the Kalashnikov carrying child soldier and the orphan forced into sex work at a very young age. These are the permitted versions of Africa in most bookshops. They are labeled “Africana,” but we in Africa refer to it as poverty porn which Binyavanga Wainaina pointed out in his seminal blog post, “How to Write About Africa.”

I say this because almost every bestseller in sub-Saharan Africa features some sort-of violence, and perhaps we have normalized this narrative to the point where one cannot imagine better visionary futures in the style of Ursula Le Guin. I say this because most of my colleagues in African literary communities already spend most of their time teaching and talking about black pain. I say this because we would all rather write about unicorns.

Yet despite this view that most African writers and scholars have about such literary works, we serve audiences who often expect us to tackle such issues, especially writers such as Chenjerai Hove and Charles Mungoshi, who wrote against establishments out of necessity. And at each literary festival or talk or reading I've attended, there has always been an earnest/eager young writer who asks, “What is the writer's responsibility to culture?”

I shall tell a story. Once upon a time, a young Zimbabwean man started an online conversation in the guise of admiring my work. My writing technique was good, he said. But I was not political enough, and therefore I was not a Zimbabwean writer. I was just a writer who happened to be Zimbabwean. That is because I had chosen to focus my literary energy on critiquing the patriarchy by writing about dysfunctional families instead of taking a hard partisan line and writing politics. When the elephants have fought and bruised the grass, do they have a right to dictate how the grasslands/grassroots respond? Are the writers and artists, particularly African writers and artists, obligated to focus solely on the world's wounds?

My internal answer is always this: no. Yet it is not a politically correct answer, so I tend to do what most politicians and poets do—I say many words that really mean nothing. However, in examining the place of artists in conflict or conflicted areas, I must split the writer into two. In an earlier panel session, Brazilian screenwriter Luiza Fazio described her own two-faced tension between the playful Muse and the shrewd Marketer when it comes to the economics of writing. When it comes to cultures in conflict, I describe a similar split – the Artist and the Human. The artist is playful and perceptive, and the artist's

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Tariro Ngoro (Zimbabwe) / Felix Nesi (Indonesia) / Raghvendra Madhu (India) / Pamela Rahn Sánchez (Venezuela)

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only responsibilities are to create art that is well crafted and ingenious. It is not the Artist but the *Human* who is obliged to respond to conflict. And how the Human responds to such stimuli depends on so much more than ethnicity. The feelings of a 30-year-old man might be different from a 60-year-old woman. But does this delegitimize either of their stances?

Whenever we force ourselves into political positions as authors, we are in danger of making “bad” or “harmful” art, but when we respond humanely to world events before responding artistically, we create art that is more sincere and thus more useful.

And we return to the central questions. Should tensions be ignored? The Artist says maybe. Can they be ignored? The Human says no.

I was twenty-four years old when Black Easter occurred. Many listeners sitting in this venue do not know what that is. In 2015, there was a large population of undocumented immigrants living in South Africa when a Zimbabwean woman was lynched in the city of Durban. That sparked a wave of xenophobic violence across the entire country. At the time, I was living and studying in a quiet town in South Africa. Mentally, I knew that I was safe from harm. But every day, there were worse images in the news. To make things worse, I had just fallen in love with Latin American fiction, and the Human in me was bombarded constantly by the feeling of homelessness. Thus, when I sketched the first poems of my debut poetry collection, I was not attempting to write “African literature.” No, the Artist in me was crying out because the Human in me was deeply moved.

The real question we should ask is, what else are artists doing? Because if we care deeply about our communities, we do not split hairs about what one should or shouldn’t write. We are also engaged in the deep work of educating and organizing, signing petitions, and supporting causes. Thus, the same Tariro Ndoro who wrote poetry about immigration is the same Tariro who bought blankets and canned food for relief centers. As the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera once said, in response to the question, “And do you simply observe and write?” “How can you observe a stone that is about to strike you?” because he understood that we do not write about struggle because we should. We write because we are human.

And now, after rambling the way poets and politicians do, I realize that perhaps I haven’t answered the original question. What I’m trying to say is, as an African, I will continue to write depressive poetry about femicide and discrimination and racism and poverty because I write from the grasslands and the grasslands necessitate, but honestly, I’d rather write about unicorns.

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