Writing as Resistance, Writing as Love

hunched over on a small chair in the library’s corner, I’m invisible in my physical surroundings and on the pages I’m devouring. It’s my usual Saturday morning extravaganza—read until nauseated, stagger back to the house with an armful of books, snatch every free moment during the week, dive in.

Books shone brightly on the desolate landscape of my childhood, in ways both profound and basic. They provided fantasy, escape, a reality in stark contrast to the one around me. I especially loved reading about children with happy home lives and positive experiences with a friendly, bustling outside world. But equally profoundly, books, and the children who inhabited their pages, betrayed me by ignoring my world. Where was I? Where were workers? Arabs? Rarely to be found. And if found, never a good word. Stupid janitors who couldn’t think, idiotic truck drivers who couldn’t write, dirty Arabs who couldn’t be trusted.

And still I read, still I coveted shelves full of books, still no one could offer a better present than a book. Still I carried a deeply buried and mostly jumbled desire to carve my own niche in this world. Yet I couldn’t imagine anything other than renewing my library card year after year, reading someone else’s stories—entering this world of words and books on someone else’s terms.
THINKING CLASS

Similar feelings plague me today, after working as a writer for several years. Is there a place for me? Claiming writer status remains so difficult I can barely say the words. If I manage to, I fight the impulse to cover my mouth with my hand, the exact same motion made by toothless family members. Fear and shame prompt their gestures, and my impulse. Who ever heard of someone from a general motors city, destined for secretarial work (if a great deal of luck came her way), thinking, saying, she can write books? Who ever heard of a working-class Lebanese writer?

Daring tongue maneuvers

I pace back and forth in the living room of the ugly apartment my lover and I rent. We pay too much money for it and the creepy landlord never fixes things when they break. I’m getting small shocks from the shag rug and the radio’s turned up. Every day I change my mind. I’ll never turn on the news because the American media has taken lies and distortions to new levels in this particular imperialist venture taking place in the Persian Gulf. No. I’ll keep the radio on all the time because it might alleviate my feeling of utter helplessness a tiny bit.

This day, tuned into public radio, I hear someone introduce Edward Said very distinctly: “Edward Said is an Arab-American intellectual.” This astonishes me. Edward Said has ten minutes to talk about American imperialism and anti-Arab racism? Miracle of miracles. But then the full impact hits and I don’t hear anything Said says. Someone, a talk show host on national radio no less, used “Arab” and “intellectual” in the same sentence. And not as part of a comedy routine. The words catch in my chest and something tears wide open. Arab-American intellectual. Can it be possible? Do these words fit together? Can the combination work?

I’ve always understood the power of words. Certain words can be crunched together into a hard ball and flung with lightning speed. They can knock you off your feet and leave you gasping for breath. It happened to me with the word Arab. People enjoyed hurling word combinations at me—Arab whore, greasy Arab, crazy Arab—and bowling me over, day after day. I never believed anyone who said, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me.” Names did hurt me.

Then, a turning point, a revelation. Words hurt; they also heal. Words jostle my insides, wake me up, jump-start my brain. Someone can place “Arab” side by side with “intellectual” and say it over the radio and the earth moves. And if I can keep my understanding of the power of words front and center while I devise my own wild mixtures, maybe I can open up worlds for people like me, maybe I can offer my writing for healing and resistance.

the importance of silence

The ropes around my ankles and wrists cut into my skin, but the tightest gag cuts across my mouth and tears into the corners. Before tying me up, my father tells me, “You’re so bad. You’re so bad.” Over and over. After he stalks out of the room and slams the door, I try to figure out what I did. I wrack my brain, but nothing comes to mind. Time crawls by. Has one hour passed, or five, or ten? Finally, my father decides—relying on some internal method I can never discern—he should undo the knots. I crawl into bed and hold myself every bit as tightly as the ropes did.

Silence is critically important. Or, more precisely, my silence is critically important. I knew that from day one. Inordinate efforts, overt and covert, went into shutting me up. Teachers rewarded quiet children. My mother told me if I didn’t have anything nice to say not to say anything at all, and she meant it. The priests who routinely ripped my body and mind apart held knives to my throat and told me they’d kill me if I ever said a word. My father tolerated me best when he had me muzzled.

All systems of oppression—from child abuse to racism to ableism—function most effectively when victims don’t talk. Silence isolates, keeps us focussing inward rather than outward, makes perpetrators’ work easier, confuses and overwhelms. I didn’t know this as a child and teenager. I just knew I had to be quiet. The few times I managed to croak something truthful, I experienced repercussions, swift and brutal, that left no doubt about my oppressors’ intentions.
I take speech seriously. This revolutionary action often comes with severe consequences. Speaking out carries danger, and not in abstract, theoretical ways. Telling the truth can’t be taken lightly, or engaged in glibly.

At the same time that I understand this, I want to speak. Through those brutal decades, the part of me that wants to talk—and talk honestly—somehow survived, and now gains strength daily. That part of me propels me to the desk, picks up a pen, pushes me to write honestly, to write in spite of fear, because of fear. It refuses to let me live out my life bowing to the dictates of perpetrators and accomplices who tried to destroy me.

**public persona and privilege**

Audience members at the reading don’t sense my terror, because I’m an expert at hiding feelings and functioning in the face of unmitigated disaster. If I wasn’t so afraid, I’d be amused at the gap between their perceptions and my reality. Someone asks a question about my fiction. I say: “Characters show up in my head and start talking and I try to write it down. These characters are often gregarious and talk loudly. So far I like all the characters who have arrived on the scene, except for some minor ones.”

The audience perceives some radical leap of creative artistic energy on my part and is impressed. I consider a street person approaching any of these people and daring to speak about people in her head. The audience member would walk away as quickly as possible, after labeling the street person crazy. No audience member knows I’ve been labeled crazy and locked up in a psych ward. Would it change their opinion of my creative artistic energy if they did? But I can’t know the answer, because fear locks up my lips.

I don’t want to minimize my terror, but neither do I want to dwell on that alone, ignoring my fulfillment and privilege. Writing excites me. Fiction comes from characters who appear out of nowhere and talk to me. I wake up with the first two lines of a poem on my lips. I can’t get ideas down fast enough when writing analytical essays. My fingers itch, and I place them on the computer keyboard as often as I can. This cultural work satisfies me; no adult I knew as a child got this from daily work.

And I can’t forget I have a kitchen with food in it, writing utensils, clothes. These are privileges. They should be rights for everyone on the planet, but right now they’re privileges and I must think about how I use them. Another of my privileges—which should also be a right—is literacy, the ability to read and write and express myself. I grew up around people who could not do this, and I understand the internal frustration and social scorn and illiteracy evokes. Sharing class location with an illiterate person doesn’t mean our experiences mirror each other’s. In this case, I experience a privilege she is denied.

So, how do I handle my privileges? Do I espouse the oppressive lie about “pulling myself up by my bootstraps,” and insist that if I can get my words published, anyone can? Or do I understand my literacy and writing skill as one tool for resistance and liberation? Why do I write? For who, for what? Who benefits?

**resistance and love**

No one told me, as a child, that the first writing system and alphabet emerged from what is now the Arab world, about Arabs creating algebra, about the amazing Arabic traditions of literature, story-telling, poetry, and philosophy, about the working-class history of political action and critical thinking, about great working-class storytellers who blend humor and sadness. I know these things now; activist work (my own and others’) opened up a world of historical and cultural information that changed my life. Slowly and painfully, I’ve come to believe working-class people of color, including myself, have important artistic/theoretical contributions to make. This simple truth proved powerful and liberating. It doesn’t solve every problem or eradicate oppression, but it makes an enormous difference in my daily life. Without it, I couldn’t write.

When I believe my life has meaning, believe it enough that I write down life experiences and my analyses of them, I resist oppression. Each piece of writing, whether analytical essay, poem, or fiction, contradicts lies about working-class people of color: we can’t think critically, we’re too enmeshed in life’s dreary
necessities to create art, our mundane lives can't possibly generate interesting material.

My writing results from this desire to resist; it stems from deep feelings of love and caring—for people in my communities, for dogged survivors who refuse to succumb to forces wearing them down day after day, for the ones who've generated beauty in spite of incredible hardship, for the wise, articulate, sweet people I grew up with who disappeared quietly into the night because they were too yellow and too poor.

**final words**

Writing this essay terrified me. At times fear prevented me from seeing the words on the page. *Who do you think you are? How dare you open your mouth? Have you forgotten what we can do to you?* Part of me still believes speaking the truth is dangerous, foolhardy, and a recipe for disaster, still believes I'm worthless and stupid. Oppressors burned these messages into my brain and beat them into my body, and it's hard to get rid of them. Only with a supportive community, a political analysis, and love am I coming to perceive myself as an artist and creator who can move through debilitating fear.

And so I say to other working-class writers of color: for ourselves and all those still terrified and terrorized, we must take ourselves and our work seriously. We must treat ourselves with respect and care, believe in each other, understand the forces aligned against us, hold out hope in a world that teaches us despair, refuse to live out our time on earth as passive victims, understand the power and magic of words and how they heal. The ancestors wait. My ancestors wait for me to claim my place as a working-class Arab halfbreed queer girl who loves to think and write and does it purposefully and creatively. Your ancestors wait for you to seize power. Let the waiting time be short.

**notes**

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