

Tsitsi Dangarembga: the voice of Zimbabwe

First Nations journalist Amy
McQuire on believing the
Black Witness

Uyghur poetry
flourishing beyond
the borders of East
Turkestan

Western journalists
thrown out of Russia

Chinese dissident
artist Badiuca
on activism
through
art



FROM OUR WRITERS

PEN Sydney works to free writers who are at risk of being silenced. The words of these writers give us the motivation to continue.

“We are aware that promoting freedom of expression in a place like Iran has a price to pay. But it does not mean we accept such an unjust verdict voluntarily. We expect all writers around the world to pay attention to this issue and to not allow writers to go to jail very easily.”

REZA KHANDAN MAHABADI

A prolific author, researcher and leading member of the Iranian Writers Association, he was imprisoned in 2019. Partly through the work of PEN Sydney and PEN America he was released in February 2023.

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PEN Sydney is supported by
the Faculty of Arts & Social
Sciences, University of
Technology Sydney

Printed by UTS Printing
Services

Cover photograph by
Hannah Mentz



Journalist toll in Gaza mounting

PEN Sydney strongly condemns the violations of freedom of expression in the war between Israel and Hamas.

As we write 36 journalists, reporting on the crisis in Gaza, are amongst those who have been killed, including 31 Palestinians, four Israelis, and one Lebanese. Additionally, eight are reported to be injured, and eight arrested.

On October 13th, a Reuters journalist was killed and six other journalists from Al Jazeera, Agence France-Presse and Reuters were injured in southern Lebanon by missiles fired from the direction of Israel, despite wearing marked journalists' attire.

In one example of attempts at intimidation and harassment of journalists, on October 15th, an Israeli armed police personnel appeared on TV, threatening Alaraby TV reporter Ahmed Darawsha during his live coverage from Ashdod, Israel. BBC journalists Muhannad Tutunji, Haitham Abudiab and their BBC Arabic team covering the conflict were assaulted and held at gunpoint after police stopped and searched them in Tel Aviv.

Systematic silencing of voices

Reports of attempts by mainstream media outlets to suppress journalistic coverage of Israel's extensive bombing of Gaza, including distortion of its own reporting, are of particular concern. The Guardian fired its long-serving cartoonist Steve Bell for his cartoon depicting Benjamin Netanyahu performing self-surgery with the caption, 'Residents of Gaza, get out now.'

The BBC is reported to have taken six reporters in the Middle East off air and launched an investigation into their social media posts that were allegedly pro-Palestinian. The investigation seemingly followed complaints from a pro-Israeli media monitoring body accusing the journalists of bias against Israel.

Palestinians living in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, expressing solidarity with Gaza or criticising Israeli actions are facing reprisals. On October 16th, Dalal Abu Amneh, a prominent



Palestinian singer and neuroscientist, was arrested from her home in Nazareth for alleged incitement to terrorism because of her social media activity.

A number of literary and cultural performances have been cancelled or postponed because of recent events. For example LitPromm, the awards administrator of the Frankfurt Book Fair, postponed the award ceremony for Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, during which Shibli was set to receive the LiBeraturpreis for her novel 'Minor Detail, citing "the terror against Israel" and stating that the book fair "stands with complete solidarity on the side of Israel".

Restriction on rallies

Several countries have imposed restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly in response to recent events, using a pretext of maintaining public order. Hundreds of Jewish activists were arrested during a sit-in at the United States Congress in Washington, DC, where they demonstrated against "Israel's continuous oppression of Palestinians." French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin instructed the police to ban and arrest organizers of pro-Palestinian demonstrations due to concerns about public order. In Germany, 174 protestors were reportedly arrested at an "unauthorized" pro-Palestinian demonstration in Berlin, following tensions over protest bans. In the UK, the Home Secretary Suella Braverman issued a letter to the police in England and Wales suggesting that "waving of a Palestinian flag may not be legitimate."

Words in a war

Tetiana Gubii is a Russian-speaking Ukrainian. She fears her mother tongue is being silenced in the conflict.

My mother is Russian, and I'm Ukrainian. On the 24th of February 2022, we both woke up listening to the sound of explosions, which announced the beginning of the full-scale invasion. At that moment, we were in Mykolaiv, my hometown in the South of Ukraine, where the population mostly speaks Russian.

What language did I use to think about the Russian missiles falling on my city for almost a year? I may not remember the exact wording of my thoughts, but I remember clearly that these thoughts were in Russian. You can control what you read and write, but it's not that easy to control the way you express your emotions.

Language is something that you never think about. It is something that you use to express your thoughts on other matters. The limits of my language are the limits of my world. So, limiting the use of the Russian language might be able to limit the spreading of the Russian world, which is trying to erase us, Ukrainians, from the Earth's surface just because we don't want to be a part of that Russian world.

The Ukrainian government seems to support the opinion that there is no place for the Russian language in Ukrainian society.

There is freedom of speech, but if you speak Ukrainian, you are more likely to be heard. If you speak Russian, you are more likely to be blamed for using the language of the enemy. So it goes.

When the war started, many people I know voluntarily switched to Ukrainian. Even if someone uses Russian in their daily conversations, their social media personalities speak and write Ukrainian.

I've committed the act of censorship as well. I've removed all the pro-war Russians from my library, playlists, and social networks. What should I do with the language my mother gave me? Does it make me less Ukrainian if I speak Russian? If I switch to Ukrainian and still think in Russian – will it be treason?



On the other side, it is wrong to associate the Russian language with Putin's Russia only. Not everyone who speaks Russian is Russian in the same way that not everyone who speaks English is from England.

My Russian-speaking friends are fighting at the frontline. They are ready to give up their lives to defend their motherland.

Should they be forced to give up their mother tongue as well?



Tetiana Gubii lives in Switzerland and is a language teacher, translator, and illustrator.

She was in Ukraine visiting her mother who was in a coma when the war began.

Her mother woke up to the sound of bombs falling, with no memory of life before the war.

by Tetiana Gubii

Uyghur poetry preserves a culture under siege

Uyghur poets in exile are continuing a rich poetic tradition influenced by sufism, shamanism and the defiance of the Uyghur people to survive.



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Uyghurs are suffering under the colonial regime of the Chinese Communist party. Writers and academics have always been considered dangerous to any colonial power. Yet now it is also a language and literary culture that is being wiped away with Uyghur schools and government buildings being repurposed for internment camps. Uyghur bookstores and publishing houses are being closed, editors and writers are disappearing, and websites that host Uyghur poetry and culture are being taken offline. Yet, Uyghur poetry has continued to flourish beyond the borders of East Turkestan and into the diaspora.

Poetry is the richest and longest lasting tradition in Uyghur culture, particularly given the highly developed oral and musical traditions that were created to transmit knowledge amongst its people.

Even in recent decades, books of poetry had become very popular in East Turkestan with children growing up memorising and writing Uyghur poems. As Indigenous peoples under hostile colonial rule Uyghur writers and poets have always been targets for the regime. Dissidents and Uyghur poets have 'been disappeared' or imprisoned. However despite the gag orders, poetry is being valued and kept alive by poets writing in the diaspora. It is heroic that they continue to do so, despite the consequences that have followed.

Part of the process of ethnic cleansing is to extinguish the language, thus, Uyghur as a language of instruction has been removed from schools in East Turkestan and those who try to keep the dialect alive are severely reprimanded, particularly linguists and educators.

An example is Abduweli Ayup, who is one of many working to preserve the language. Ayup established the company Mother Tongue Ltd., which taught Uyghur language in Kashgar, and as a result has been imprisoned and fined up to 130,000 yuan (AUD \$28,100).



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Rahile Dawut - a PEN International Writer of Courage

Another intellectual who has been penalised for uplifting her heritage is Professor Rahile Dawut, who is an expert on Uyghur folklore. She spent 25 years researching the religious traditions and culture of the Uyghur people, publishing in the Uyghur language as well as in English and Chinese, and has completed a PhD on Uyghur pilgrimage sites. She was disappeared in 2017 and has not been seen since.

In September 2023, it was reported that Dawut has received a life sentence for “endangering state security.” One month after this catastrophic sentence, Michael Rosen the winner of the 2023 PEN Pinter Prize, identified Dawut as the International Writer of Courage, with whom he chose to share his prize. Rosen cited Dawut’s heroism and said that she “actively defended freedom of expression, often at risk to [her] own safety.”

Dawut’s research into the Sufi saints and the Uyghur *mazar* Festivals was considered to be at odds with the colonial aims of the regime. Despite the dangers she continued to publish work capturing the soul of the Uyghur people through research into performance of music, such as the “classical” *Muqam* tradition, the *dastan* (story-telling), the drum-and-shawm dance music, and the Sufi *zikr* rituals.



Photograph by Peter Dodd

She insists that her research is apolitical but with the Uyghur language outlawed and everyday practice of Islam criminalised it is no surprise that she was a target for state security.



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Ahmatjan Osman - a leader of the Misty poetry movement

One of the most prominent Uyghur poets is Ahmatjan Osman, who proclaims that **poetry is “the soul of the Uyghur language.”** Osman was born in the capital of East Turkestan, Urumqi. Uyghurs see Urumqi as the centre of cultural and economic development. Tragically now anyone who identifies as a Uyghur on their passport, does not have the freedom to travel to Urumqi or anywhere else in their own country. Many are sent to re-education camps, are labelled as Islamic extremists or terrorists, or have managed to flee the country due to persecution. As a revered Uyghur poet, Osman never accepted the colonisation and the regime’s authority in East Turkestan. He was targeted by security forces. Despite the great risk to his personal safety, he, like Rahile Dawut, continued to create. Today, Osman lives in Canada where he found asylum with the assistance of Dolkun Kambari, the director of Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur Service.

In 2014, Osman published *Uyghurland, the Farthest Exile*. It includes 20 years of his poetry and is the first Uyghur poetry anthology to ever be translated into English. Jeffrey Yang collaborated with Osman to translate this collection into English. The following poem is from this anthology, it expresses Osman's personal weariness and captures the experience of all persecuted Uyghurs.

How Weary I Am

"How weary I am,"
says the night,
"of dying stars.."

"How weary I am,"
says the door,
"of widowed nights.."

"How weary I am,"
says the threshold,
"of shut doors.."

"How weary I am,"
says the heart,
"of abandoned thresholds.."

And as dawn breaks it says,
"Oh... how weary I am
of stars and nights,
of doors, thresholds
and hearts!"

~ *Ahmatjan Osman*

Osman's work has textual integrity; his use of personification and celestial metaphors to describe a deeply weary human condition has profound resonances for the universal reader. **As a Uyghur poet, the greatest pain that Osman has to endure is not only the loss of a physical homeland, but the extinction of his language.** The poet Osman explains that the titular "Uyghurland" is not just a place to belong to as a Uyghur, it is an "imagined place," to which he belongs because he is a poet. For Osman, it is the Uyghur language that has become his true homeland.

Ahmatjan Osman's development as a poet is extremely fascinating. In the 1980's he was the leader of the Uyghur New Poetry (*Gungga*) movement. *Gungga* advocates for Modern Uyghur and Chinese poets to write for art's sake alone, and not for the Chinese Communist Party's political, ideological aesthetic. These *Gungga*, or *Misty* style,

Chinese poets wrote about beauty in abstract ways that were considered anathema to the realism of the Communist aesthetic. **The Misty poets celebrated the unique, the original and the individual, as opposed to the collective and ideological.** Osman's poetry brought the sacred and mystical to merge with modern imagism, capturing the sacred, the philosophic and the transience of the human condition.

Uyghur poetry has been influenced by Persian, Arabic and Turkish literary traditions. Uyghur poetry is also imbued with the Sufi or Tibetan philosophies of self-abnegation or emptiness of the ego, which allows for the entering of the divine. He also asserts that Uyghur poetry is primal and has roots in Shamanism and animism, which is recognised as the deepest aspect of the human psyche. Poetic language is a gift from the gods, recorded by poets throughout all time. Osman describes the genocide of the Uyghurs through the following imagist poem.

Eagle's nest empty---
Urumqi...

~ *Ahmatjan Osman*



Ahmatjan Osman

Common Night

This is a night made from words.
This is a night poured into our spines like pig iron.
This is a night that puts us up in slippers and in our
bedrooms inside books.
This is a night that makes our noses shed hellfruit leaves.
This is a night for us to make merry with lovers in
illusory castles.
This is the spring night that grows soft grasses from the
footprints we trample each day into prayer
rugs, and constantly weighs down our eyes.
This is the celestial night that turns advantage into
likelihood.
This is the mother night that suckles death verses.
This is a night that no elegy, ode, rain, or beam of light
shall ever reach.
This is a hungry night, this an unclothed night.
This is a night far from Satan and from God.
This is a night that reminds us
of the darkness of the womb
of the vague sobs of infancy
of the solo games of adolescence
of the first love of youth
of the sudden futility of adulthood
of the grim dusk of old age
of the terror of the moment before death.
This is the night that patiently waits
to seep from our pores
and violently seize our whole body
as we cast off from shore.
This night is a sky for all buildings, shadows, traditions,
revolutions, mattresses, bats, novels, songs,
pictures, betrayals, journeys, murders, and
smokable substances.
This night is ink to all pens.
This night is bosom to all secrets.
This night is the Antichrist dragging the land of history
along with his tongue.
This night is the mud that sticks to our shoes as we walk
in the forest of meaning.
This is the night that splinters Noah's ship and makes
traps of its decks.
This is the night that takes all that we have, hands it over
to the only one that speaks, and quietly walks
on.

*~ Merdan Ehet'eli, translated from the Uyghur by
Joshua L. Freeman*



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Merdan Ehet'eli - a poet of the Nothingism School

Osman's work in poetic form galvanised new movements in poetry. His use of free verse diverged from many Persianate, Turkic and Arabic traditional forms and influenced other modern Uyghur poets, such as Merdan Ehet'eli. Merdan started writing poems in secondary school and was influenced by Osman's work in the Nothingism movement. Nothingism poetry is not the nihilism of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist Being and Nothingness. It is far more transcendental and concentrates on a muse universal intelligence who inspires and works through the artist or poet as a vessel.

The Nothingism School is concerned with the nature of artistic expression, concluding that poetry is a life source and lives independently outside of its creator. Osman suggests that Roland Barthes' Death of the Author concept contains something of this movement, which is that the poet is essentially a copyist of a text written by an anonymous author who originates in the unknown. It can be understood as the ancient muse of poetry. Osman refers to Heidegger who suggests that the poet listens to an unknowable language, and speaks it into being for us through poetry. The following poem by Ehet'eli has been deeply inspired by these schools of thought.



Merdan Ehet'eli

Chimengül Awut - an award winning poet imprisoned without trial

Chimengül Awut is another Uyghur poet who was targeted and disappeared. She was an editor at a publishing house and an award-winning poet. Awut and 12 others from her workplace were sent to a camp in 2018. The following is her poem, translated into English by

. Abdulla has been a translator for many Uyghur poets, some have been included in this article. She is the co-founder of the Tarim Network, a scientist, and a passionate writer, Uyghur literary translator and also works on initiatives like the Uyghur Collective.



Chimengül Awut

Cry, Wind

Cry wind, for the leaves you have spilled
Cry wind, for the wounds you have torn apart
Cry wind, for the forests you have concealed
I will learn to cry, to cry from you
Cry wind, for the flowers, the lilacs you have
scattered
Cry wind, for the rivers held still with blue ice
Cry wind, for the treeless courtyards
I will learn to cry, to cry from you
Let these dark eyes that held my beloved be yours
Let the words of heartbreak I spoke to my beloved
be yours
Cry wind, the bullet in your heart is mine
I will learn to cry, to cry from you
Cry wind, for the anguish of stones and mountains
Cry wind, for the hopes and dreams of falcons
Cry wind, for the torment of the lovers
I will learn to cry, to cry from you.

~ **Chimengül Awut, translated by Munawwar
Abdulla**



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Abdushukur Muhammet Qumtur - a poet in exile in Sweden

Some diaspora poets have been more direct in their expression and a strong poetry movement has been building outside the borders of East Turkestan. Abdushukur Muhammet Qumtur, who has been subjected to severe control and harassment until he was eventually forced into exile in 2003, has written nine powerful books, that include collections of poetry and essays. Currently he is a member of Swedish PEN, the Swedish Writers' Union, and is the Chairman for the World Uyghur Writers' Union, which he founded along with other Uyghur writers in the diaspora. Generations-long oppression of free speech and the experience of being under constant surveillance is explored in the following poem.

An Ear on the Wall

As soon as we arrived
Our parents convinced us the walls had ears
It was only later that we realised everything
else did, too.
The story was, as the elders said, mouths
pressed to ears,
The youths we had grown up playing with
Had vanished one night as if abducted by jinn
They had been standing under a wall with
ears.
Until the day we arrived in Sweden
We lived a thousand years per day surrounded
by them.
There were no eared walls here
In fact, the people had none either
You may try to tell them something
On the streets and squares with loudspeakers
Yet no one listens

They were too anxious to dream, to think
Because they had ears on themselves, too
They could not live without them
They did not believe the Swedish walls had none
Unable to imagine an earless life,
Scared to death of standing below an earless wall
They lived. Eventually,
Part of them became an ear on the wall.

When the Truth is Among Us

Just as a painter makes us touch
the untouchable
with his colours
the light and the shadow ...

just as a poet makes us feel
the unfeeling
with his words
the self and the silence ...

just as a bird makes us perceive
the imperceptible
with its flight
The sky.....

When the truth is among us
we are capable of reflection or burning
~ *Ahmatjan Osman*



Fatimah Seyyah

Fatimah Seyyah - a poet who refuses to be defined by genocide

At the aforementioned Sydney PEN Event, Fatimah Seyyah also read her new poem, *Negation*, which she describes as speaking to the human soul from her own soul'. My longing for the beloved is the connection to our essence.

Seyyah states that her work has been influenced by Ahmatjan's style. *Negation* is infused with a transcendence towards beauty, as this is where humans reach for when under such great duress.

Negation

Of course!
You were always That.
From a height You were looking at me
While I was busy looking for you:
Where are You?
Are you stroking the head of that child playing
hide and seek with the world?
That sad and happy child with the firm belief in
being found and never to be lost
Is this You?
Of course!
It is You!
The child sees everything without a distance:
A limitless expansion of the moment
An infinitesimal point of gathering.
And all in between, the soothing Flow
Such gentle, friction free Flow
The Flow is slowly moving and kissing and
embracing and holding everything and everyone
in Itself
Yes, I live for that Flow
Oh, Flow!
The negator
The affirmer
You reset all that is positive into all that is negative
You exchange all that heaviness with all that
weightlessness
You switch sides of the equation
Nothing remains still with You
But all flow and expand and gather
And the distance of one limitless to the other
Gets filled with You.
Child says:
Isn't the ending the beginning?
Of course!
You touched me with Your invisible hands
I hear Your voice from within
Then the child said:
You live for the Flow.

~ *Fatimah Seyyah,*

Fatimah Seyyah writes in Uyghur and English; her Uyghur poetry collection *The Mystery Land* was published in 2018. Munawwar Abdulla describes Fatimah's diasporic poetry as focusing on longing, homeland, borders. As beautifully identified by Abdulla, "With each word written in public and private, the language, culture, ideas and dreams of the Uyghur people remain vibrant and alive." This poem has also been used as the lyrics of a song in France.



Photograph by Peter Dodd

Longing

Somebody asked:
Have you written poems for your homeland?
The earth shook, my fingers were still.
Will grief-pressed weighted shoulders
move from mountain to mountain?
Could Homeland be strong tea
That quenches thirst and gives pleasure?
Could Homeland be the narrow path
Whose trees give shade yet
When barred is desert wilderness?
Or is it the sunlight of a tense noon
That reddens your two cheeks?
Perhaps it is the reflection of a full moon
Branded on a lonely river.
Or the plaintive call of the athaan
That has settled in your souls.
Or the whooshing winds of summer
That blew us straight to a smile.
Could Homeland be the rain perhaps
That awoke mercy in a parched heart?
Or say the thick snowfalls of winter
That pressed all of life to its breast?
Homeland –
Maybe it is that fistful of soil
That you never take out of your cabinet.
Maybe it is that group of people
Which does not churn your heart.

Homeland –

A tembur's sound, a dutar's voice.
A red-faced pomegranate seller,
A girl looking down in a green scarf,
A pair of laughing brown eyes,
One verse of Uyghur's words,
One endless love,
Perhaps tears frozen in the form of droplets,
That no one could wipe away.

~ *Fatimah Seyyah*

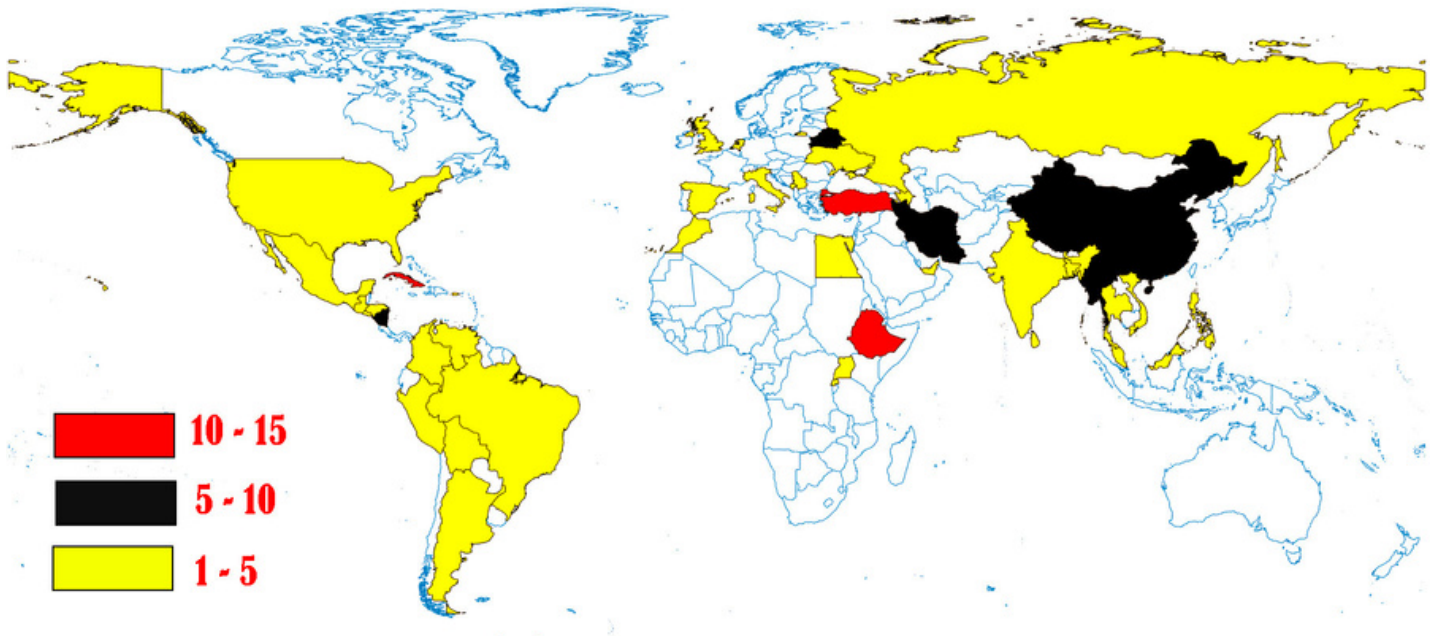


Photograph by Peter Dodd

Acknowledgement and thanks need to be given to the dedicated translators around the world who have translated Uyghur poetry into English. Jeffrey Yang, Joshua L Freeman, Munawwar Abdulla and our very own Fatimah Seyyah. Thanks to those translators, we are able to read the work of these Uyghurs, who are risking their lives by simply writing poetry.

by Kathy Raheb

Imprisoned writers across the globe



Yellow represents 1-5 imprisoned writers; black is 5-10; and red 10-15 writers in prison

The latest [PEN International Caselist](#) documents stories of 115 writers at risk.

Across all regions writers have continued to be arrested for vaguely worded offences relating to national security.

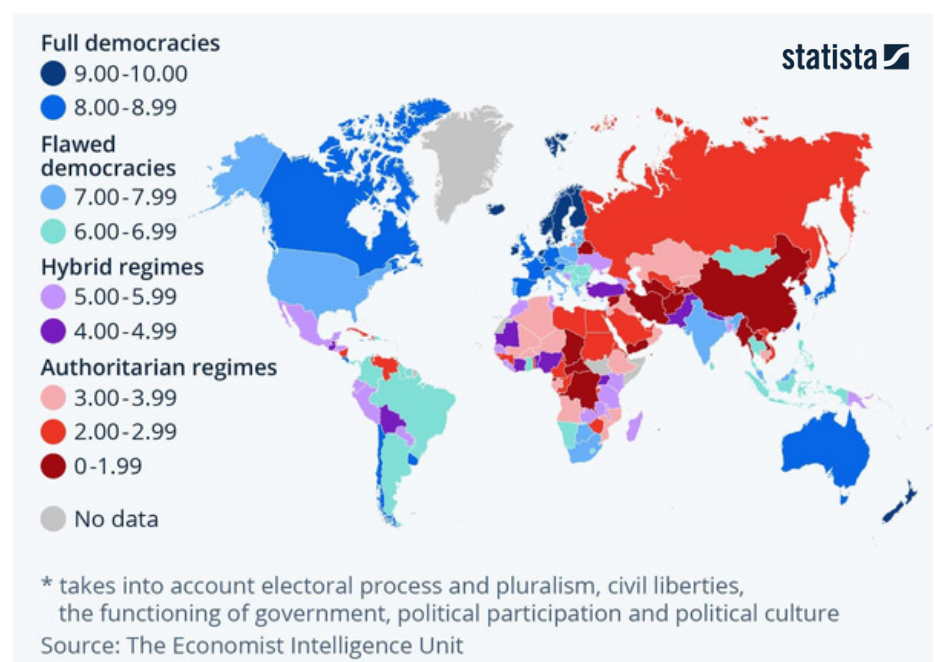
War and conflict in **Ukraine**, **Palestine** and **Ethiopia** has posed extreme risks for journalists reporting and commenting on them.

The number of writers that a country detains is often an indicator of the state of democracy in that nation. Writers have had to flee persecution in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Cuba and Nicaragua and in **Italy**, **Egypt**, **Malaysia**, **Peru** and **Türkiye** defamation laws have been used to harass or silence writers. **Mexico** remains the most dangerous country for journalists outside active war zones.

"The writers featured in this report have put their lives on the frontline and made enormous sacrifices – risking their safety and liberty – to hold the powerful to account. They have dared us to visualise a different world, a better one"

~ Ma Thida Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee

Global Democracy Index rates, by country/territory (2022)*



by Fatimah Seyyah

Believing the Black Witness

The PEN Lecture delivered by Amy McQuire
at the Sydney Writers' Festival

Amy McQuire questions the idea of 'good journalism' in the coverage of First Nations news and calls for all of us to believe the Black Witness.

I began my journalism career at the small independent black newspaper the National Indigenous Times, who had, before I began, been raided by the Australian Federal Police for publishing a leak based on Howard government cabinet documents that showed the true reason behind the abolition of ATSIC – I knew very early on in my journalism career, as a 17-year-old cadet, that true, fearless journalism is not a given: it is something that we must continually fight for because it will always be a threat to those in power.

My work has always been about challenging 'silence' and 'silencing,' tactics which have been employed against black communities, and particularly black women, from the very first days of the invasion of our lands, to now. It is through silence that violence is sustained and reproduced. But the Black Witness has never been silent. Instead, Black Witnesses are continually silenced. My central message to you in this presentation today is this: the Black Witness must be heard, and the Black Witness must be believed.

The mainstream media has so often been used as a tool against our people. I am only able to recognise it because for most of my career I have not worked inside the mainstream media, but from the outside, in the margins: in black media. It's something I am proud of, because it is in black media that my politics were watered, that there were displays of caring, that our voices were supported and sustained and upheld.

I am a Darumbal and South Sea Islander woman from Rockhampton in Central Queensland. I grew up on my traditional Darumbal homelands, not fully knowing the history of this country because it had been deliberately concealed from me.

In the frontier days, Central Queensland was a killing field, where Darumbal mobs were massacred en-mass and the survivors were forced onto distant reserves and missions.

My family intermarried with South Sea Islanders, my other ancestors, who were kidnapped off the beaches of islands in Vanuatu and the Solomons and were brought to the colony to work as slave labour for the emerging sugar and pastoral industries.

Queensland was a brutal place, built upon racist colonial violence and we remember the past, not as divorced from the present, but as fundamentally connected to it: that is why for us, history and truth-telling is so critical to our work towards liberation and towards our continual reassertions of our sovereignty and our right to exist as Indigenous peoples on Indigenous lands.

Over the past year in Queensland, we have had three inquests into the disappearances of Aboriginal women in the state – the first time it has ever happened. What I realised through sitting in the coronial process, was how the most brutal forms of violence against black women were being obscured by so many things – by claims that Aboriginal women had just disappeared themselves, that Aboriginal women had gone walkabout, that the police had done everything they could to find them. Even as these disappearances occurred with the likely existence of perpetrators – white men. In all of these cases no charges have been laid. In two of these cases, the women are still disappeared.

I witnessed how this violence was not just concealed, but also the effect this concealment had on those families who were there for their loved ones.

As the women were described in dehumanising terms, I couldn't help but feel that this was sending a message to the many Aboriginal women who sat there, on the other side of the court: They don't care about us. This message is violent in itself: an expression of colonial terror. As I witnessed this, I tried to think of ways to write through the innate violence of the process, and I realised that the



way we do journalism, even as black journalists, was not up to the task. That is part of what I want to talk about today: how we challenge the very fundamentals of journalism and its values, when so often journalism is used to devalue our own lives.

This week, a national conversation has emerged on racism in the media, after Stan Grant announced he was walking away from journalism after receiving continual racist hatred and after his employer, the ABC, failed to support him. I wasn't shocked by this – Stan Grant has survived and thrived in mainstream media because, in the past, as he has said, he refused to be pigeon-holed into Aboriginal affairs. He's a talented journalist, no doubt, but that doesn't matter as soon as your advocacy takes on a form that Australia refuses to accept: and that is because, the media as a whole has acted not for black communities, but rather for those in power, and for the 'assumed public,' who are never blackfellas.

In the mainstream media, black journalists are employed not to actively contest the violence of the state, or even of the media, but to translate it into a mode most understandable to White Australia, and sometimes this means not speaking of that violence at all. This sanitisation process often means that Aboriginal journalists are made to conceal the parts of their work that are most important to our communities, because their roles in the mainstream media are not set up to fight for our communities, but to inform on them.

Mainstream media spaces are not often safe for black journalists unless they are willing to conform to the standards of "good journalism," and this can have a further disempowering impact on them both personally and professionally.

There are Aboriginal journalists working in mainstream media who can contest this, but the toll it takes can be emotionally taxing, and heart wrenching in ways that are not recognised by their employers and their non-indigenous colleagues. It is here we see again how silences are sustained and maintained, through the ways the writing and voices of Aboriginal journalists are orientated towards a way of speaking that secures the borders of what we can and cannot say.

I come to you today with a heavy heart, knowing that in Rockhampton, this history of racial violence has not disappeared, just as we have not disappeared. In fact, just recently, this racial violence has reared its ugly head. Over the past few months, the Aboriginal community in Rockhampton has been terrorised by white vigilantes who have been showing up in groups to harass young black kids under the guise of 'fighting crime'. It was shocking but not shocking at the same time, because family members in Rockhampton have been telling me for a while that racism in the community has been getting 'worse,' although I would not say it has worsened, only that racists are becoming more comfortable in spreading their hate. This comfort comes from the belief that they are protected, that they can act in any way they want without consequences. A close family member told me that he has been called 'black

c***' numerous times just while working in his job. I've heard stories of the mob on the riverbank being directly threatened with weapons. Online, hate has proliferated.

Rather than listening to the black community in Rockhampton, who feel terrorised by these outright displays of white supremacy, sections of the media have instead regurgitated the claims of these white vigilantes by framing them as protectors against crime, amidst concerns for public safety. The Courier Mail ran a long, feature article privileging the perspective of the white ringleader, while a Channel Seven journalist drove around with him in a car, portraying black residents who were defending themselves as the 'violent' ones. This is just one example of how 'journalism' operates in local areas, always predicated not on the voices of black witnesses, but rather the word of white witnesses, who are always given legitimacy and believed even while they are enacting public violence against black people. This reporting not only positions the white vigilantes as reliable and their actions as justifiable but also represents black kids as violent and in need of 'law and order,' as if these black kids have not been let down by a brutal structural violence that sees locking them up as the only answer.

I could go through many examples of unethical journalism in the mainstream media but what I really want to critique is the role of what I call 'good journalism,' which often still disempowers the voices of the Black Witness. I began thinking of the role of 'good journalism' back in 2020, during the Black Lives Matter protests, when I wrote an article about the police shooting of an Aboriginal woman named JC in Geraldton for my independent newsletter Substack. At the time, the cop who had shot JC had just been charged with murder, and yet the only media coverage I could find of such a historic occasion was in a short news article in the West Australian. This was at the same time as the overwhelming coverage provided by the Australian media to the murder of George Floyd.

The Australian media often outsource their outrage overseas, while ignoring the devaluation of black lives on our own shores.

The piece was widely shared, and I received a lot of feedback, including from a local journalist in Geraldton, who said that they had tried to do their best to cover JC's death. I don't deny that they had good intentions, just like many other non-Indigenous journalists, but when I read their piece, I saw how they had not presented JC, they had not spoken of her in the way her family remembered her, but instead had recited her criminal record in devastating detail. There was nothing wrong with the piece in terms of 'good journalism', and yet the impact of it made JC seem like a criminal, even though she was the one who had lost her life.

To give an account of a black life as described by the institution that had criminalised her throughout her life, felt like another form of violence to me.

JC was not here to speak back. Only the police were there to tell their own accounts. And ultimately, that cop was acquitted. He walked free.

Black Witnesses are never seen as reliable: in order to be reliable, the Black Witness must first be legitimised by authoritative accounts, the accounts of White Witnesses – from academics to lawyers to the courts, to the police. It is the police who are often the primary definers in cases where Aboriginal people have died in custody, or in cases where Aboriginal women have disappeared, or in other cases of police brutality. They make their brief media statements, and these statements are replicated in early media reports which are largely just copy and pasted. Police often absolve themselves of any accountability even prior to an independent investigation, and there is rarely any concerted questioning over this.

In order to be believed, Black Witnesses have to go to greater lengths, and that often means being forced into showing the footage of these deaths, in order to provoke an apathetic Australia not just to care, but also to show that we must be believed. But so often, these images do not provoke any outpourings of care, and instead feed an

insatiable appetite for images of black pain and trauma and wounding. While we are made to air the injuries of our loved ones to validate the testimonies of the Black Witness, White Witnesses like the police are often immediately believed.

I respect Stan and his stance: his refusal and his walking away. But I know that I do not have to walk away. Instead, I'm running towards another place: a place of a sovereign black media. Over the past few years, I've been trying to understand and write to a central question: how do we in black media report on violence without reproducing that violence?

How do we write through silences in cases where black women are victims of violence, without further re-perpetrating that violence on the bodies of those who are not here?

I began thinking of a methodology of presencing, as developed from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson - a Mississauga Nishnaabeg First Nations writer from Canada - in which we speak of Aboriginal women through their active resistances in life, telling their stories in full to make visible the violence while not undermining agency.



Amy McQuire delivering her address at the Sydney Writers' Festival

Presencing to me continually evolves in the doing – in the sitting and listening to Black Witnesses and families, in developing relationships and in being there, being present as witness to this violence. Working with the idea of five key planks:

With Responsibility,

we acknowledge that we do not own the story. We do not have the right to claim ‘exclusivity’ or see the story as one that must be told due to the journalistic standards of the ‘public interest’. Instead, we hold responsibility for the story, and not just to the story, but to the women, the families, the communities, and the ancestors. We should be guided by a black ethics in which the women, as they have lived, are centred, and in their moments of death we fight against the dehumanising accounts of them that will be told by police and the courts.

With Reciprocity,

we realise that our stories are not ‘extractive’, but instead, are to be used to give back to the communities we write about, to be used to strategise towards a form of black justice. With reciprocity, we give our stories to mob to use as a weapon. Our stories are a gift back towards community.

With Repatriation,

we realise that in stories of disappearance, the key focus is not the supposed justice of the courts, but in bringing loved ones home. This is not only a physical repatriation; it can also be symbolic, by repatriating the memories of the loved ones, and holding them, and ensuring that they are safe and loved.

With Relationality,

we realise that a core part of our strength as black journalists lies in the relationships we hold with communities—not just our own, but also the communities we write about. In all the stories I have worked on over the years, I have realised that our communities are uniquely connected in ways I do not think even exist in other settler-colonies. Throughout the process of this research, I would speak to mob who were connected to my own community, Darumbal people, who were part of the stories I was working on. We would find connections to each other, and the families of ‘disappeared’ women would often have their own connections to other stories. I realised that it was not just signs bringing me to certain stories, but real relationships that have never been severed, even despite the devastating colonial violence wrought to disconnect us from each other.

With Resurgence,

I build upon the proposal by Betasamoske Simpson that eradicating gender violence should be at the heart of our resurgence as Indigenous nations. The settler-colonial

project was founded upon the sexual violence inflicted upon the bodies of black women, and that violence has not stopped. Through fighting to honour our loved ones, to mourn them, and to ensure they are not forgotten, we work towards a resurgence of our nations that recentres Aboriginal women and the roles they held and continue to hold in our communities. Resurgence at its heart is about nation-building.

I dream of a Black Media that can be there at every inquest, but even before any inquest: a black media that can be used directly to question the police or prisons straight away when there is a death in custody, or to be there for the families as they search for those who have been disappeared, because so often I have seen, the police do not search for them. A black media is not objective: it is biased. But it is biased in favour of black people, it is a tool that is first and foremost accountable to our communities.

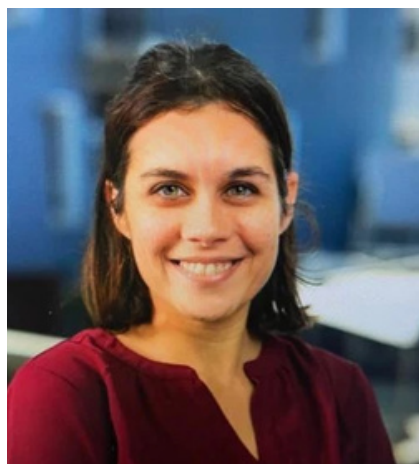
A sovereign black media would have a core goal of ‘justice’, a justice that we define so that we can heal and fight in the best ways for our people. A black media would challenge every ‘news value’ that continually downgrades our people and a Black media would first and foremost elevate and believe the voices of the Black Witness.

We must work in service to Black Witnesses because we are also Black Witnesses.

Amy McQuire is a writer, journalist and academic.

You can read her work on Patreon.

Her book about the Black Witness is due for release in 2024.



Amy McQuire

An artist's unyielding integrity in the midst of oppression

Chinese dissident artist Badiuca
talks to PEN Sydney's Fatimah Seyyah

I felt a rush of nerves as I composed the message on X (formerly known as Twitter) to request an interview with Badiuca. To my surprise and delight, he responded promptly, agreeing to discuss his personal journey, artistry, and identity. And so began my journalistic adventure, poised to send ripples through the minds of readers.

As Badiuca's image appeared on screen, he politely enquired whether he could smoke during our conversation, instantly easing my apprehension. He exuded calm and reassurance, making our interview process remarkably fluid and effortless.

Before our encounter I possessed a vague understanding of Badiuca as a Chinese dissident artist advocating for the Uyghurs. It was through his poignant cartoons, vividly depicting the horrors of the Chinese regime's death camps in occupied East Turkestan – where my father tragically lost his life in 2018 – that I first became aware of this artist's work. The tears welled in my eyes as

I beheld his creations on X, not only because they rekindled painful memories but also because they affirmed the presence of someone who cared deeply for the plight of others.

From that moment, I became an avid follower of his art and social media posts.

During our conversation, Badiuca shared insights into his upbringing in Shanghai, a city in China distinguished by its relatively open-minded atmosphere, a legacy of past Western influences. Despite the geographic distance that now separated him from his city, friends, and family – a divide that could never be bridged – his affection for them remained palpable.

He spoke fondly of a college professor from his law school days, recounting how this mentor had enlightened him about the ruthless nature of the Chinese dictatorship and the importance of protecting one's

integrity. This professor had instilled in him the value of an open mind and the importance of speaking out against oppression and censorship.

Visual art was not a realm Badiuca had ventured into prior to his arrival in Australia, but he was immersed in a world of creativity and expression thanks to his filmmaker grandfather who arrived in Shanghai in the 1930's to make films. Fueled by the desire to articulate his thoughts and experiences, Badiuca left China, even though his parents had cautioned him against such a bold move. In his new haven, he realized the possibility of freedom of expression like never before.



Badiuca seated before his artwork. Photograph by Jan Slavik.

"I can discuss anything, I can depict anything; this is the essence of democracy."

And so, his journey as a cartoonist began, characterised by vibrant colours and stark contrasts. His canvases predominantly portrayed the oppression perpetuated by the Chinese regime, often satirising contemporary political figures such as Mao Zedong, Jiang Zemin, and Xi Jinping. His political cartoons found resonance among the Chinese populace, with subjects ranging from the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo to Liu's late wife. Employing the cryptic language of cartoons, Badiuca's work spread rapidly across the internet, evading the grasp of censors and filters.

Yet, Badiuca chose to remain concealed behind a mask, a shadowy figure representing resistance, until 2019. This led to a puzzling question: Why did he choose to obscure his identity in a democratic haven like Australia? Who or what posed a threat to him here, or conversely, whose existence felt threatened by his presence?

The omnipotent hands of the Chinese regime had never ceased to hound him. Concealing his identity



Photograph by Jan Slavik

was an act of shielding his loved ones and friends in China from potential harm due to his political activism.

Regrettably, in 2019, his anonymity was forcibly stripped away, and he was compelled to step into the public eye.

Now, he is Badiuca, day and night, navigating the intricate interplay of light and shadow in a world forever altered.



Photograph by Camila India Viadana Fotografia



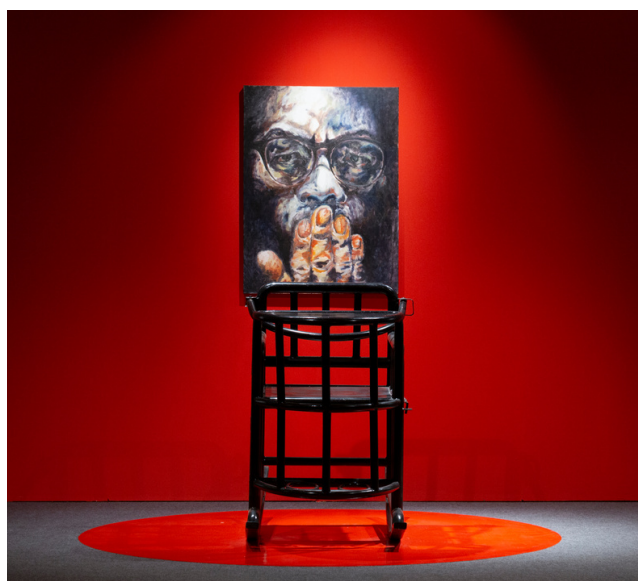
Photograph by Camila India Viadana Fotografia

Over the years, Badiuca's artistic journey has evolved, leading him to adopt a more global perspective on political issues. Gone is the youthful naiveté that once painted Australia as an all-inclusive haven of freedom. Instead, he has come to realise that the landscape of liberties is not without its shadows. His recent works of art are about Ukrainian victims of the Russian invasion.

Badiuca revealed to me that despite being an Australian citizen, he has never had the opportunity to showcase his artwork in his adopted homeland. His freedom to exhibit was never explicitly curtailed by the Australian government. Instead, the chilling factor has been the galleries themselves, which have chosen to forego featuring his work, due to the looming specter of economic repercussions from China.

While he has been able to exhibit his art in various European cities, the Chinese regime's heavy-handed tactics have consistently obstructed peaceful exhibitions. One poignant incident occurred during his recent sojourn in Poland, where the Chinese embassy persistently harassed the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, seeking to shut down the exhibition.

I enquired about how his art is received by the younger generation in China and whether he is optimistic that it will influence them to shape a more open and democratic society. Badiuca responded "I remain positive that the art activism I've pursued through visual language isn't something alien to many young Chinese people."



Photograph by Camila India Viadana Fotografia



No I can't, No I don't Understand. Photograph by Camila India Viadana Fotografia

Even though their voices may be periodically suppressed and silenced, it doesn't mean they lack a desire for universal human rights. Their capacity for empathy and understanding, particularly for the struggles of others like the Uyghurs, hasn't been entirely eradicated. This gives me hope that my art can still resonate with the younger generation within China."

He added "Furthermore, many Chinese students abroad actively participated in last December's Blank Paper Movement, and that spirit hasn't dissipated, even though the movement itself has concluded. What remains is a legacy, providing the younger generation with a beacon to recognize the value of protest in the streets, especially for many overseas Chinese students."

by Fatimah Seyyah



Neon from HK. Photograph by Camila India Viadana Fotografia.

Tsitsi Dangarembga on the corrosive effects of *Empire* in Zimbabwe

Four days after learning that her novel, *This Mournable Body* had been longlisted for the Booker Prize Tsitsi Dangarembga was arrested. In March 2020 she had been holding a placard inscribed with: “We want better. Reform our institutions.”

On that same day hundreds of police and soldiers had been deployed on the streets of Harare, ahead of planned demonstrations against President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government. Residents were ordered to remain indoors after officials described the protests as a “planned insurrection”. According to Dangarembga there was nobody else on the street that day, as there had been abductions and citizens were terrified.

She was convicted of inciting violence and given a six-month suspended sentence, along with a fine of 70,000 Zimbabwean dollars (\$350). Dangarembga has

In May this year Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga’s conviction for inciting violence was successfully overturned, after her arrest in 2020, ostensibly for holding placards at a demonstration.

been a fierce critic of president Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government, which has been accused of nepotism, corruption and human rights violations. She says he and his Zanu-PF party were operating an increasingly repressive regime.



Tsitsi Dangarembga, winner of English PEN's 2021 PEN Pinter Prize, at the British Library. Photograph by George Torode.

***Black and Female* (2022)**

Dangarembga's experiences in post-colonial Zimbabwe have heavily influenced her writing. She witnessed firsthand the struggles faced by African women in a patriarchal society and the experience of economic disparity and poverty.

Her passion for storytelling was nurtured during her formative years. She lived in England from the ages of two to six, while her parents attended school there. Her initial education was in the British school system, and the young Dangarembga became fluent in English at the expense of Shona, her native tongue. Returning to Zimbabwe she later pursued a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and English Literature at the University of Zimbabwe.

In 2021 Dangarembga was awarded the prestigious PEN Pinter Prize, given to an author who has "a significant body of plays, poetry, essays, or fiction of outstanding literary merit, written in English." She has written for theatre, the screen and even directed a feature film *Everyone's Child*, about the orphaned children of AIDS victims.

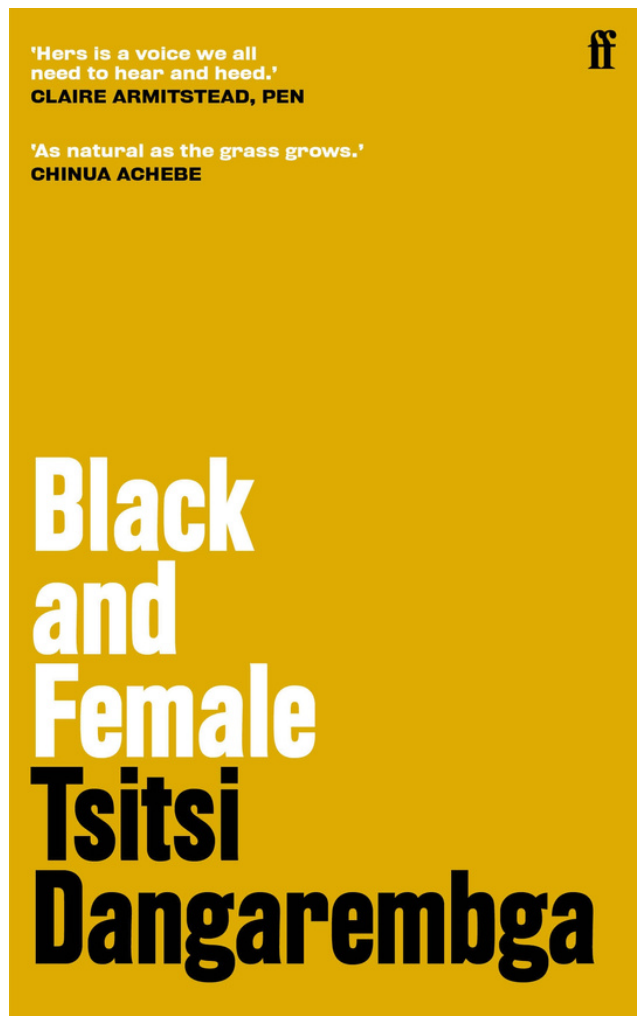
Recently she published a book of essays, *Black and Female*, that elucidates the corroding effects of Empire. It also weaves together the personal and political, in an illuminating exploration of her complex relationship with race and gender.

A trilogy of award winning novels

But it is her trilogy of semi-autobiographical novels for which she is most celebrated. Her debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*, shattered barriers and became a seminal work in African literature. It won her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa section) in 1989. It was the first book to be published in English by a Black woman from Zimbabwe and was named by the BBC in 2018 as one of the top 100 books that have shaped the world.

The second novel in the trilogy is *The Book of Not* (2006) and finally *This Mournable Body* (2018). All three books chart the life of a female protagonist named Tambudzai, also known as Tambu. Their backdrop is the social and political history of Zimbabwe over five tumultuous decades, including the War of Independence, the hope of liberation and the disappointments of the new order.

Nervous Conditions begins as Tambu is a girl living with her Shona family in a Zimbabwean village, being treated as "less" because of the effects of Empire and patriarchy. But she is a girl with a powerful voice, in this extract she's doing battle with her father.



"My father's idea of what was natural had begun to irritate me a long time ago, at the time that I had had to leave school. I used to try to avoid having it explained to me by maintaining a sullen silence, which according to my father was also unnatural: 'Now that the mouth is shut, the heart is proud.? He would threaten to beat me but, preferring to be lazy, never bothered to catch me when I ran...Relieved, I set about pleasing myself, which antagonised him even further."

Nervous Conditions is set during the liberation struggle, which emerged in the 1960s after white Rhodesians, led by Ian Smith, declared independence to avoid Black majority rule. At that time, countries across Africa were ousting colonial powers, yet it took 15 years to remove Smith. He was replaced as Prime Minister by Robert Mugabe in 1980. However, the freedom that Zimbabweans longed for with this win did not last long. Civil war broke out and more chaos ensued for the new nation.

A novel of disappointments and dashed dreams

The second of the trilogy is *The Book of Not* (2006), which primarily takes place in the 'Sacred Heart' an exclusive Catholic girls' boarding school. Tambu is sent there by a benevolent uncle after her brother dies. She is now the child expected to get an education and support her family. It is set during the tense and frightening period of fighting against colonial oppression, and the emergence of a new Zimbabwe. News of the War of Independence occasionally filters into the school, causing the disappearance of some of the students, and fear for those like Tambu, who harbour confused, dual loyalties.

"There were a lot of students who could not go home in the year of our A-Levels, because their homes had been taken over. Occupied the girls said. The 'Voice of Zimbabwe on Babamukuru's radio, broadcasting from Maputo said liberated. So there was more whispering and there were more tears than usual in the common room that end of term, when we left Sacred Heart not to return to it. Angela, who was head girl that year, and Tracey were returning to bungalows in Hatfeld and Mabelreign, far away from the smells they grew up with and knew, and their girlhood memories."

It's a thought-provoking, multi-layered novel that looks at the effects of colonialism through one girl's education, her striving to succeed and the systemic prejudice that prevents her from being able to do so. It's also about the development of her 'undu' (personhood), something she strives for, that is undermined by the colonialist system within which she attempts to develop it.

It is a novel of disappointments and dashed dreams, both Tambu's expectations and those of the independence movement overall. Dangarembga initially supported Mugabe's Zanu-PF movement but later became extremely disillusioned and left the movement because of its violence and corruption.

She argues in her book of essays that Zimbabwe inherited a system of Empire that was already flawed. Perhaps it was inevitable that this flawed system was not going to work, even after Mugabe took over from Smith and the country was supposedly liberated.



Photograph by George Torode

An example of the devastating policies of Mugabe's, which outraged human rights activists, including Dangarembga, was **Operation Murambatsvina** (Move the Rubbish), also officially known as **Operation Restore Order**. This was a large-scale Zimbabwean government campaign to forcibly clear slum areas across the country. More than 2 million people were indirectly affected. Many of those made homeless by this policy joined housing cooperatives to collectively purchase land, on which to rebuild their lives, only to have that land taken by Zanu-PF supporters, with backing from government ministers.

These events find their way into the novels, making understanding the history of Zimbabwe so real. For example, in *The Book of Not* Tambu cannot find a home, she cannot fit into her country. She is not white and will always be invisible to the hegemony of Empire or colonialism, no matter how clever, how competent and how outstanding Tambu is as a student or an employee.

Shortlisted for the Booker Prize

The third novel of the trilogy is *This Mournable Body* published in 2018. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and has won a host of commendations. One of the joys of Dangarembga's writing is her descriptive language, which is always evocative, as well as being political.

"You discover you are the pool. The shadows in the dayroom are ponds. Together you form the ocean. This ocean pours from your eyes without end."

In the novel, Tambudzai is now a woman living in Harare in the 1990s, when the economic implosion begins in Zimbabwe. At the time Zimbabweans were stunned, they were so sure that their education was going to stand them in good stead as a nation but that was not the case.

Dangarembga especially wanted young Zimbabwean women to see themselves in this book, even though it's set in the 90s.

In *This Mournable Body* Tambudzai's cousin Nyasha is raised in England, far from Rhodesia and suffers from anorexia nervosa. Dangarembga uses this illness as symbolic of Empire's traumatising effects on any black Rhodesian/Zimbabwean girl. Nyasha is never accepted by white society in England and her anorexia reflects that imbibed self-hatred by shrinking her body to invisibility.

A powerful aspect of the book is that the narrator, Tambudzai, speaks in the second person – using the pronoun 'you' – giving her an even further sense of displacement or alienation from herself. Her decades of maturation have not given her the sense of fulfilment that she expected or was promised. Tambudzai was a nonperson to white society, even in her own country, despite her competence and her rigour.



Photograph by George Torode

As Dangarembga states “*Empire is like a guillotine...Empire required my parents to leave their home in Southern Rhodesia to travel to London on scholarships for professional education. This...was to enable them to return . . . and be even more useful to empire.*”

Inspiring a powerful and rich literary landscape

Tsitsi Dangarembga's impact on African literature cannot be overstated. She has opened the door for other Zimbabwean women writers to tell us about modern Zimbabwe, a country where false narratives proliferate, and public speech is often controlled.

NoViolet Bulawayo, who uses the pen name Elizabeth Zandile Tshele was named one of the Top 100 most influential Africans by New African magazine in 2014.

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu wrote the award-winning *The Theory of Flight* about the Gukurahundi massacres, committed in the 1980s under the direction of Robert Mugabe, which killed an estimated 20,000 people, predominantly ethnic Ndebele from Matabeleland and Midland regions.

Other emerging authors from Zimbabwe include:

Valerie Tagwira, who is also a specialist Obstetrician-gynaecologist and her debut novel is *The Uncertainty of Hope* published in 2006.

Novuyo Rosa Tshuma who wrote a novella called *Shadows* and a novel called *House of Stone*.

Sue Nyathi wrote: *A Family Affair* then *The Polygamist* then *The Golddiggers*, *An Angel's Demise*, *When Secrets Become Stories: Women Speak Out*.

These are fearless women who write about violence, love, pain and politics and try to tell the complicated story of the past and the present for Zimbabwe. They remind us that the power of literature is transformative.

by Kathy Raheb

What being thrown out of Russia taught me about the Kremlin's war on the media

Moscow is quietly cracking down on the country's last independent observers.

During my 10 years as a Moscow-based journalist, I struggled to imagine how and when I would eventually leave Russia.

Half Russian myself, I had moved there in 2013, keen to learn more and report on a country that I felt was often misunderstood by many in the West.

In the end, the decision was made for me last month when a representative of Russia's foreign ministry called to tell me that my visa would not be renewed and I had six days to leave.

The decision, I was told, had been taken by the "relevant authorities," a term widely used to refer to the security services.

After POLITICO published a [news story](#) on my expulsion, I received a message from a fellow journalist wishing me luck.

"The same thing happened to me," they wrote.

In the days since, other colleagues have shared their stories about their de facto expulsions from Russia. Most have deep ties to Russia and speak the language fluently. Taken together, their cases illustrate a worrying trend: Journalists from Western countries are slowly being squeezed out of Russia, as the Kremlin cracks down on the last few independent voices covering the domestic impact of the war in Ukraine ahead of a presidential election next year.

"It is a way of setting the tone," Alexander Baunov, a former Russian diplomat, now a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, told me. "Otherwise the Western press corps might think they are free to do as they please. The point is to have them ponder every phrase, weigh their every word."

Eva Hartog was editor-in-chief of the Moscow Times before reporting from Moscow for Dutch news magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* and *POLITICO Europe*.

The home front

As Russian tanks lined up on the road to Kyiv in February 2022, back home the Kremlin was launching a second assault: on the country's independent media.

First, government censor Roskomnadzor blocked online access to the handful of critical outlets still operating. Then, new laws were passed, effectively banning the word "war" and introducing a penalty of up to 15 years in prison for the dissemination of information that called into question the official narrative on what Russia calls the "special military operation."

Russian journalists took their cue and fled the country en masse. Concerned by rumors the authorities were about to impose martial law and close the border, many of their foreign colleagues followed suit.

As weeks and months passed, however, many of the latter gradually returned.



Eva Hartog



Photograph by Frans Van Heerden

While Russian citizens were being prosecuted under the new censorship laws, “it seemed then that we weren’t going to be sent to jail [for our reporting],” Arja Paananen, a correspondent for the Finnish newspaper Iltä-Sanomat, told me in a phone conversation.

This fit within a long tradition of foreign journalists being spared from domestic repression. In the years before the war, the ticket to that special status came in the form of an accreditation issued by Russia’s foreign ministry, for which journalists were required to reapply once a year in order to then secure a visa.

As relations between Russia and the West took a nosedive following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the paperwork increased. Starting in 2022, for example, Russia introduced mandatory health checks for foreigners, involving fingerprinting, a chest X-ray and a session with a psychiatrist.

Some journalists began to be told to submit samples of their work along with their request to renew their accreditation. But the extra red tape was largely viewed as a harmless, albeit cumbersome, formality.

It therefore came as a shock when in summer 2021, the longtime BBC correspondent Sarah Rainsford was told upon returning from a reporting trip in Belarus that she had been designated a “security threat” and was being barred from Russia for life.

Officially, her de facto expulsion was described as an answer to the two-year-old case of an employee of the Russian state news agency, TASS, who had reportedly been denied leave to stay in the U.K.

Several months later a Dutch journalist was ousted, this time over two old administrative offenses.

Still, the two expulsions appeared to be anomalies rather than bellwethers of a mass purge, and the general assumption that the Kremlin paid little heed to non-Russian media coverage remained largely intact.

Only in March this year was that belief finally quashed, when Wall Street Journal journalist Evan Gershkovich was arrested on espionage charges in a case unprecedented since the Cold War. His detention was, as Paananen put it, “a warning sign to all correspondents.” The news sparked a second exodus of Western

journalists. But dozens, the majority of them citizens of European countries, stayed behind, even as they faced harsher restrictions and growing uncertainty.

‘It’s all over now’

Since the war, for citizens of what the Kremlin calls “unfriendly countries” (those which have imposed sanctions on Russia), the accreditation cycle has been shortened to three months.

The foreign ministry never formalised or explained the change. But during a press conference in February, roughly a month before Gershkovich’s arrest, ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova announced the end of what she called the old “regime of maximum favourable treatment.”

“It’s all over now,” she said. Foreign journalists “are going to live their lives and get their documents in a new way: the way it’s supposed to be.”

She added that journalists would not be allowed to work in Russia if they “treat us, our country, our people boorishly and disparagingly.”



Photograph by Vasily Kleymenov

Asked for comment, the foreign ministry said its decisions to exclude foreign correspondents were a reaction to the “real terror” being waged against Russian journalists in the West.

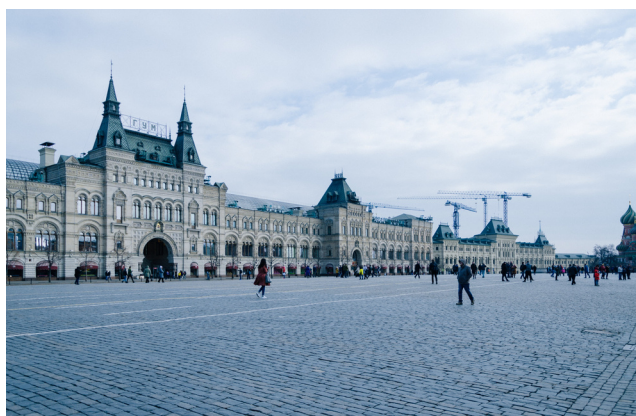
In practice, the three-month review appears to have been used as a way to filter out some journalists — while keeping others on their toes.

Often, a negative decision is not made explicit or formalised, but is communicated to the journalist through an intermediary and presented as a temporary, procedural issue.

Once they have left Russia, the person is left in limbo only to conclude months later that they, in fact, have been expelled.

In my initial conversation with the foreign ministry, I was told that according to “international law,” I would not get an explanation or reason for the refusal. But after my ousting received broad media coverage, Zakharova in a statement volunteered several.

Among my transgressions were that I had been away from Russia for a large part of 2022, during which I had not published enough articles for my employer. But the main argument was geopolitical: In light of the “bullying” of Russian media and journalists by the EU, there “should not be any questions” about the visa problems of a Dutch citizen.



Agitprop lecture

Another journalist, who requested anonymity to speak freely, recalled being summoned by a Russian official for a “comradely” meeting.

“The tone was jokey, friendly, theatrical at times,” the journalist told me.

During what the journalist compared to an “agitprop lecture,” the official argued that any inconveniences faced by European journalists in Russia simply mirrored those experienced by Russians in Europe.

“The person insisted that it has *nothing* to do with what we write about Russia, and that the authorities would *never* get involved in editorial stuff.”



Photograph by Simon Berger

But then the journalist was asked why, if they regularly traveled to Ukraine, they even needed Russian accreditation. Considering their absences, one could suspect the journalist of being a spy.

“It could have been a threat, maybe not, you never know in these talks,” the journalist told me. “The person was smiling.”

Although they did eventually get their documents, they are no longer in Russia. “I definitely felt unsafe,” the journalist said. “It’s not worth the risk.”

No official explanation

Most of those who spoke to me suspected that a specific report acted as a trigger for their ousting.

In July 2022, Paananen, the Finnish journalist, wrote an opinion piece where she accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of displaying “the doublethink of an autocratic leader in the style of George Orwell’s novel 1984.”

The foreign ministry slammed the piece in an online riposte as “a blatant example of anti-Russian propaganda.”

Two months later, in October, for the first time since 1990 when she first started covering what was then still the Soviet Union, she was told her accreditation papers were not yet ready.

From Finland, she kept contacting her handler at the ministry who gave her the same polite answer: “She understood that it was a massive inconvenience for me, but kept telling me that she was still waiting for the right signatures from the ‘bosses’ who’d been very busy and so on.”

Leaving open the possibility it had been a mistake or delay, she waited until February this year to say openly that she’d been expelled.

“They never gave me an official explanation, but they don’t have to: They’re starting to prevent foreign journalists from working here, but are doing it in a soft way,” said Paananen.

In its written answers, the foreign ministry declined to comment on specific cases or disclose the number of journalists it had expelled — but accused the West of far worse treatment of Russian journalists.

“The countermeasures of the Russian side are exclusively retaliatory in nature and are not commensurate in their scale with the mayhem caused by Washington and Brussels.”

One false move

Even those who do secure the right paperwork to remain in the country face a series of new challenges.

Some are relatively innocuous: This year for the first time journalists from “unfriendly” nations were not accredited to the St. Petersburg Economic Forum.

Others, less so. The Wall Street Journal has reported that, prior to his arrest, Gershkovich was being followed and filmed by security service officers.

Journalists have most commonly experienced harassment while on reporting trips to Russia’s regions, often in the form of local media crews who happen to know their exact itinerary or the location of their hotel.



Interrogations by border officials, in some cases lasting hours, have become part of the process of leaving, and returning to, Russia.

Several people told me they were ordered to hand over their phones or share their IMEI number, which allows their location to be tracked.

One journalist was told by a Russian friend that they had been visited by the FSB — the main state security agency — and ordered to cut all ties with the journalist.

In the months leading up to Paananen’s expulsion, she twice came home to her St. Petersburg apartment after a trip to find her fridge leaking and the power mysteriously cut off.

“The first time could be an accident, but the second time I had been physically cut off from the main switchboard. The electricity company dismissed it as a misunderstanding.”

Such anecdotes reinforce an impression since Gershkovich’s arrest that Russia’s security services consider foreign journalists a legitimate target.

“One false move, a conversation with the wrong person or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you could end up facing accusations you’re a spy,” said one journalist in Moscow, who was granted anonymity for reasons of safety.

‘Logic of the prison camp’

“By kicking some people out, they’re trying to scare the daylight out of the rest,” said one of the Moscow-based journalists. “And by providing different ‘reasons,’ they’re trying to make those who are left behind think that if they behave this or that way, they might get to stay. It’s the logic of the prison camp.”

Many of the journalists I spoke to expressed sadness at being ousted from a country with which they had a long history, but they said their experience in Russia had taught them to take things one day at a time.

“I covered the collapse of the Soviet Union and I remember how quickly that went,” said Paananen. “I can’t predict what will happen in Russia but I’m quite hopeful that I’ll live to see it.”

“The Russia I loved is gone,” the French journalist told me. “I already said goodbye a year ago. This time it was not as hard.”

by Eva Hartog

This is an edited extract of an article first published by POLITICO, on [politico.eu](https://www.politico.eu), September 4, 2023.

Academics targeted in Egypt

On February 7, 2020, Egyptian authorities arrested Patrick George Zaki, a graduate student and human rights activist. He was detained at Cairo International Airport after he had returned home to Egypt from Italy. In jail he was reportedly beaten, verbally abused and threatened with sexual assault by authorities. He was then charged with being part of a terrorist organisation, but that was just the beginning.



A person places cutouts depicting Patrick Zaki as people attend the demonstration for the release of Patrick Zaki in Rome, Italy, 07 December 2021. Photograph by Maurizio Brambatti

Zaki was a graduate student of **Gender Studies** at the University of Bologna in Italy and a researcher with the **Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)**, an Egyptian human rights NGO. He was arrested because of an opinion piece he had written and published on the "Daraj" news website, in which he recounted a week in his life as a Christian Egyptian. For this he was charged with: the spreading of fake news that undermined the social order; incitement to illegal protests; subversion against the Egyptian authorities; threatening national security; and promoting terrorist propaganda. In the first 24 hours of his detention Human Rights Watch learned

that he was **subjected to torture**, including electric shocks.

When his arrest became known protests demanding Zaki's release erupted around the world, even actress Scarlett Johansson made a video asking for the "immediate release" of four members of EIPR, including Patrick Zaki. The **University of Bologna** took up his case, it became front-page news in Italy. Students demonstrated across several cities, and Italian officials issued demands of the Egyptian government.

The Italian mobilisation was driven largely by parallels with the case of Giulio Regeni.

Regeni was a 28 year old Italian student who vanished in Cairo in January 2016, only to be found dead 10 days later, with signs of extensive torture.

Like Zaki, Regeni was interested in social and political equity, he had come to Cairo to continue his research into Trade Unions.



“Truth for Giulio Regeni” banner displayed by the Municipality of Turin in April 2016.



Protest in Italy for Giulio Regeni

According to Human Rights Watch Egyptian Authorities are using arbitrary travel bans to target key people for their work in social justice, including human rights lawyers, journalists, feminists, and allied researchers. Both Regeni and Zaki were considered a threat to the regime.

‘Everyone in Egypt knows torture is commonplace, but those who speak out face the risk of torture themselves.’

These are the startling words of Clarisa Bencomo, a researcher for Human Rights Watch. If a Human Rights Organisation speaks out about torture and detention Egyptian authorities obstruct their work by conducting spurious investigations into their funding and then shut them down. For example the El Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture spoke out about Regeni’s disappearance

and two weeks later received an “administrative closure order.” This was despite the internationally recognised work of its director Dr. Aida Seif el-Dawla.

Egypt today is a far cry from the freedom that so many Egyptians felt during the brief Arab Spring of 2011. It saw tens of thousands gathering in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and other Egyptian cities, aided by the power of social media to organise their dissent. After only a month of these protests, that captured the eyes of the world, President Mubarak resigned.

There was initial euphoria with the toppling of one regime but since then authorities have escalated the use of repression and spyware to identify dissidents before any groundswell can occur again. Patrick Zaki was considered a danger for his activism, ostensibly for revealing a week in his life as a Coptic Christian.

After 22 months in jail Zaki received a Presidential pardon, on 23rd July this year. Which was actually only one day after he was sentenced.

However many other prisoners of conscience are not as fortunate. The Committee for Justice (CFJ) estimates that there are 60,000 political prisoners across Egypt. Some have been awaiting trial in appalling conditions for 10 years. Some receive Presidential pardons but are then immediately rearrested.

Since his pardon Patrick Zaki has been given citizenship in Italy, he has no plans to return to Egypt in the near future.

by Kathy Raheb

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