

May 2024

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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.

“The role that writers can play in times of uncertainty, diligently curating narratives to nourish empathy, encompassing glimpses of joy and ultimately offering the gift of hope, lacks formal recognition, and this lack of acknowledgement or coherent protections can ultimately decimate expression and propel rampant self-censorship.”

MA THIDA

Ma Thida is the chair of PEN International’s Writers in Prison committee

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Facing the anaconda: China and self-censorship

The stakes were high for memoir writer Qin Qin as she struggled with the unwritten red lines of the Chinese government



'I'm genuinely scared of bringing up so many negatives about China. The place is run on self-censorship because of fear,' I wrote to Annie, my editor and a fellow Chinese-Australian.

I thought back to when I worked for UNICEF China. Flying back into the country after a holiday, I stood in the Xiamen airport customs queue. A row of screens near the x-ray machine caught my eye. In Australia, strict biosecurity measures require travellers to declare food, plant or animal items. In stark contrast, customs officials in China look out for a different contraband. *'Journalists declare!'* the screens proclaimed in English, a warning that was somewhat softened by cutesy cartoons of a microphone, notebook and pen.

At first glance, **my debut memoir, *Model Minority Gone Rogue***, shouldn't raise the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) suspicions: I was never a foreign correspondent, a researcher, or human rights activist; nor was I a woman with a PhD or a gay man, all potentially subversive to the regime.

Plus, the CCP targets literary writers, the late Liu Xiaobo (imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize-winning writer) and Yan

Lianke (twice-Man Booker prize-nominated whose most renowned works are banned). They did not target commercial authors like me whose book is stocked at *Big W* in time for Mother's Day (please do gift it to your mother though).

And the memoir is about career pivots, and failing and unlearning – **seemingly nothing to do with Xi Jinping's obsession with disremembering history.**

But as a **first-generation Chinese-born Australian** with years studying and working in the mainland and Hong Kong I couldn't separate my personal story from The Middle Kingdom.

The **Tiananmen Square movement**, one of China's most taboo topics, alongside **Tibet** and **Taiwan** (the 'Three T's') saw **courageous students call for democracy**. They were the reason for the Hawke government's unprecedented offer of asylum for Chinese students in Australia, including my father at ANU. My mother and I left China and joined him in Canberra in 1989.

'May be better not to mention [the] Bob Hawke thing,' my dad texted when I showed him a draft paragraph. He knew instinctively what was safer not to say.

That's because Mao's Cultural Revolution formed the backdrop to my parents' childhood. **It was a time when persecuted people fell out of windows and committed 'suicide,'** continuing a suspiciously common historical proclivity that Russian oligarchs have now taken over.

Scanning the final edits, my chest tightened knowing the manuscript would soon be published. My words would not go over well with the current **authoritarian regime**, given their fondness for **disregarding historical facts** and their **loose definition of free speech**.

The academic Perry Link compared the CCP's censorship apparatus to an **anaconda in the chandelier**, always watching, ready to drop down as a looming threat. Even in the safety of my Canberra home, the anaconda looms.

Bringing up **anything China-related risked consequences, especially under ~~Big Brother~~ the CCP's watchful 'saving face at all costs' eye.** The concept of face is partly why the regime is so hypersensitive to criticism. Even unwatered grass is politically sensitive. To maintain the facade of steady progress and aesthetics, the government directs workers to spray-paint dry grass and barren mountains green and spends billions on **global propaganda campaigns**.

Was it going to be worth it, to reveal when I looked after my cousin Yuanyuan who had attempted suicide from

overdosing on pills? She was referred to a hospital which specialised in 'poisoning' since **mental health** was a **cultural stigma**. Or my shock at seeing rows of trees on a residential Beijing street each hooked to intravenous drips for nutrients?

Then there were the everyday instances of the **security apparatus** I mention, such as my "allegedly" bugged Beijing office, civil-society friends being asked to '... tea' with the authorities and discovering the local police had rifled through my homework during a yoga teacher training course. The questioning was the point (and to the CCP, the problem).

The real feat of the regime is not only in its rapid transformation of China into an upper-middle-income country. It is the **government's act of psychological engineering to stay in power**.

It **stifled those of us who could speak but didn't**, whether in-country or not, or who were complicit in other ways: scholars, businesspeople, politicians, and multinationals like Apple.

My grandma is still in China. Most of my relatives still live there. **Will publishing my memoir mean I can't go back for fear of being detained?** What if I can't see my granny before she dies, or my relatives are targeted because of my work, a strategy the regime has honed, as more dissidents escaped overseas?

'Those fears are extremely valid. There is truly no pressure to share more than you're comfortable with,' Annie my editor responded, validating my concerns.

Besides, how can anyone criticise the Communist party? The Party has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty (let us not mention the tens of millions of deaths from man-made famine and violence). Surely that's more impact than even the World Food Program has had delivering hunger relief globally.

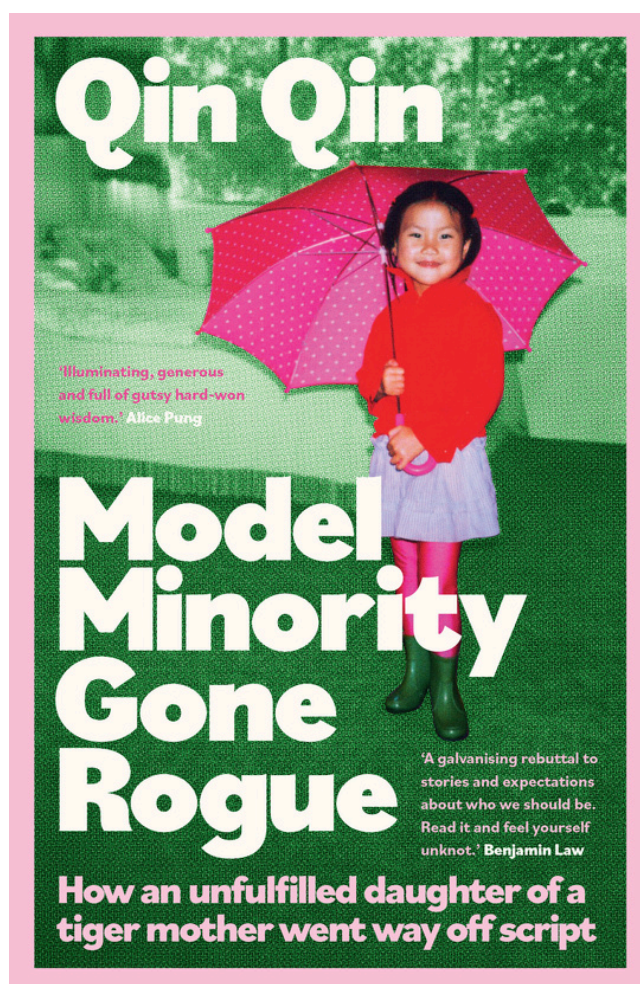
But how could I write about myself without writing (truthfully) about China?

As I was struggling with the edits, I thought back to the wave of protesters who had endured too many COVID lockdowns by late 2022. They gathered on the streets clutching blank sheets of paper. The paper could **'represent everything we want to say but cannot say,'** a man told Reuters. **That wasn't a protest, not technically.**

Maybe there was a way I could do something similar – evade the risks of writing about China, but also make a point.

I dragged my mouse pointer to select a chunk of text, then clicked on the 'text highlight colour' to choose black. **Sentences instantly disappeared under the cover of darkness** (e.g.: ██████████).

The **manuscript started to resemble an Australian government's Freedom of Information request for a report on asylum seekers' treatment**. But at least I'd



avoided criticising the CCP. Satisfied with the solution, I re-submitted the pages to Annie.

'I am not too sure about the redacted text,' she replied the next day. *'It kind of disrupts the text and makes the paragraphs themselves a little more difficult to understand.'* That was a polite way to say, *'WTF are you doing?'*

Problem-solving out of fear wasn't going to work. 'You can't sit on the fence,' my journalist friend Sue-Lin said, when I called her for advice. *'The fear is a feature, not a bug.'* She used to report from China but was forced out of the country when her work visa application was denied.

Layers of conditioning had made me afraid to speak up, including knowing what happened to the **Tiananmen student protesters**. But their slain bodies – slaughtered, crushed and pulped in their **fight for free speech and democratic ideas** – were the only reason I made it to Australia in the first place. And the point of my memoir is to speak my truth, **continuing the legacy of all writers who face, and have faced, far more risks in doing so.**

Anaconda be damned. I sent the manuscript back to Annie **unredacted**.

Qin Qin (formerly Lisa Qin) is a first-generation Chinese Australian writing on the lands of The Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri peoples

Poetry and Palestinian resistance

‘Poetry carries my spirit back to the olive groves of my childhood’

by Nahed Fraitekh

It's 1978, I'm 10 years old and inside our crowded house in Nablus my mother is screaming at my older sister to turn the radio off because Israeli soldiers have suddenly appeared on our street. **If they hear us listening to the music of Palestinian revolutionary songs, my whole family may be joining my 14 year old brother in prison.** It's a searing memory that reminds me of both the **terror** we all felt in that moment and the **power** of our poetry.

Since the **Israeli occupation started in 1948** thousands of Palestinian writers and artists have faced harassment, discrimination and unlawful arrest for expressing their dissenting views about the political landscape that entombs their lives. **Writers like Samih Al-Qasim, Tawfiq Zayyad and Mahmood Darwish**, whose contributions to literature and poetry have painted vivid pictures of their **yearning to return to their homeland** and defined the essence of Palestinian resistance.

Samih Al-Qasim is revered for his poignant work that traverses the landscape of Arab identity and resistance, Tawfiq Zayyad is a multifaceted personality known for his poetry of protest and Mahmood Darwish has been dubbed the National Poet of Palestine. They have all had their **voices stifled** through detention in Israel. Darwish's imprisonment in the 1960's gave birth to some of his most powerful works, including *The Prison Cell*, a testament to the **spirit of hope and liberation, even behind bars.**

The Prison Cell (1960s)

*... It is possible
It is possible at least sometimes
It is possible especially now
To ride a horse
Inside a prison cell
And run away
It is possible for prison walls
To disappear,
For the cell to become a distant land
Without frontiers:
What did you do with the walls?
I gave them back to the rocks.
And what did you do with the ceiling?
I turned it into a saddle.
And your chain?
I turned it into a pencil...*

~ **Mahmood Darwish**

A personal journey with poetry

As for me, poetry was always the way to express my feelings, hopes and dreams. Growing up in Ramallah in the late 1970s, I was immersed in the profound verses of Mahmoud Darwish and Tawfiq Zayyad through the melodies of Marcel Khalifa and Ahmed Kaabour on the radio. That was **our way of expressing our love for Palestine during The First Intifada in 1987.** Their resistance poetry brought hope to all Palestinians, despite their words being outlawed by Israel.

At 17, I **found my own voice through poetry**, though I kept my verses to myself. Writing poetry felt deeply personal, a reflection of my inner world. Yet, fear held me back from writing about Palestine directly. Instead, I penned love poems, embedding my longing for the homeland in metaphors and symbols. Eventually though, life got busy, and I stopped writing.

The year 2020 marked a turning point for me. As the world grappled with the Covid pandemic, I faced personal trials that challenged my identity and sense of belonging. I was fortunate to become an Australian citizen but this meant that the Israeli government automatically cancelled my Jerusalem ID, the document that allows me to enter Palestine. The right for Palestinians to continue living in East Jerusalem is made very complicated by the Israeli government.

Stranded in Australia, unable to return to Palestine, I turned back to poetry. Writing became a form of therapy



Dana Dajani, Rand Farmawi, and Iyhab Barakat performing at a session titled 'Without Hope We are Lost Remembering: Mahmoud Darwish' at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature 2024 CC BY-SA 4.0.

that helped me process the feelings of love and life, as well as the feelings of loneliness brought on from **separation from my family**, my house in Ramallah and my homeland. Then more recently the current situation in Palestine, especially in Gaza, has brought on other feelings of hopelessness and uselessness. Poetry has helped me express everything.

I started to share my poems on Instagram, just to feel good about myself. Then a few months ago I was given the opportunity to read my poems out loud for the first time at *Salat 2*, a gathering held in Bankstown a few months ago to honour the Palestinian people of Gaza. When the event ended, people came up to me and said 'You made us cry.'

The experience was bittersweet though. Sweet, because I felt the impact of my words, my ability to reach out and touch the hearts of others. Bitter, because the poems were born of a deep-seated sadness about my inability to visit my homeland.



Colour photograph from late 19th century by French photographer, Felix Bonfils, of olive trees in Gethsemane in Jerusalem, public domain.

Though I cannot physically return to Palestine, my poetry bridges that vast distance, carrying my love and my spirit back to the olive groves and ancient trees of my childhood.



The olive tree at Nahed's home.

The House is My House (2023)

*The house is my house, the land is my land,
and the blood is my blood
And this ancient olive tree firmly rooted in the
land is mine
It tells stories about the women of my country
Martyred or bereaved Mothers, Sisters, and
Wives,
whose lives were mixed with bitterness and an
erasure of sweetness.
And that crimson mulberry tree rooted in the
land
tells stories about children who are no longer
children
Children who've grown as vast as the nation
Becoming symbols and memories of dreams
unfulfilled
As for the almond tree, it tells us tales of
defiant youth
whose blood nourished roots as old as the
nation
Blooming every spring into the white almond
blossom, harmonious with the colour of the
purest blood
And the anemone sings songs of freedom
To delight souls filled with love for the
homeland.
As for me, on the horizon, I behold only my
shadow
Extending towards a sacred tree, its branches
embracing the sky of hope
A sky parted from my homeland only by the
souls of martyrs
Angels soaring joyously in a paradise spanning
the heavens and earth
Awaiting fervently and patiently the imminent
freedom of their homeland, which is now
close, I swear to God.*

~ Nahed Fraitekh

The Logic of the Boycott: Germany, Israel and Historical Responsibility

Tom Morton on Germany's unique challenges to freedom of expression around Israel and Gaza

Two Australian academics are no longer working at prestigious German Universities because of statements they made about Palestine.



Pro-Palestine protest in Berlin. Photograph by Abdulmomen Bsruki.

'The demand that Auschwitz must never happen again is the foremost requirement of all education. It is so much more important than any other that I don't believe I must, or indeed should, have to justify it. To justify this statement would have something monstrous about it, considering the monstrosity of what happened.'

With these words the German sociologist and philosopher **Theodor Adorno** began a speech for German radio in 1966 entitled *Education After Auschwitz*. Adorno was the son of an Italian mother and a German Jewish father who had converted to Protestantism. Already a prominent intellectual in the Weimar Republic, Adorno was classified as Jewish under the Nuremberg race laws and dismissed from his academic position in 1933. He went into exile in 1934, spent the war years in the United States, and returned to Germany in 1949, because he believed he could 'do more there practically and theoretically than anywhere else.'

Adorno believed that the social basis for fascism continued to exist in postwar Germany, even though the Nazi regime had collapsed. His practical and theoretical endeavours were devoted above all else to ensuring that 'Auschwitz must never happen again' – a fundamental principle which Adorno described elsewhere as 'the new categorical imperative' which Hitler had forced upon humanity.

How far should this principle extend?

The Max Planck Society's decision to dismiss Australian scholar **Ghassan Hage**, and numerous other instances in which both Palestinian and Jewish writers, artists and intellectuals in Germany have been attacked, boycotted, or had prizes or invitations to speak at public events withdrawn, raises an uncomfortable question: is that '**foremost requirement**' now being instrumentalised, employed as a **cultural weapon to silence anyone who does not express unquestioning support for the state of Israel and its ground and air offensive in Gaza**?

That is the view of **Meron Mendel**, an Israeli-German writer and Director of the Anne Frank Education Centre in Frankfurt.

In a courageous commentary for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Mendel writes that ‘the current climate in cultural life [in Germany] has become **poisonous** for Israeli and Palestinian artists.’

‘In the context of the Middle East conflict,’ writes Mendel, ‘artistic freedom in Germany is being attacked from two sides. On one side are pro-Palestinian activists, who disrupt public events and shout down speakers.’ Mendel gives the example of a 100-hour public reading of **Hannah Arendt’s** *The Origins of Totalitarianism in Berlin*, which had to be stopped when one of the readers, **Mirjam Wenzel**, Director of the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, was abused by protesters calling her a ‘racist,’ ‘Zionist’ and ‘supporter of genocide.’ On the other side, according to Mendel, are ‘office-holders in artistic and cultural institutions who want to banish Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices from public life.’ According to Mendel, both **threaten artistic freedom** and both employ ‘**selective empathy**’ and the ‘logic of the boycott.’

Hage’s dismissal by the Max Planck Society, one of Germany’s most prestigious scientific and cultural institutions, is one more example of this ‘logic of the boycott.’ Hage was sacked after an article in the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* **accused him of ‘fanatical support for the Palestinian struggle’ and ‘preaching hatred against Israel.’** On October 7th, Hage had posted a link on Twitter to his poem, *Israel-Palestine: The Endless Dead-End That Will Not End*. The poem closes with these words:

‘... And here we are today. And the Palestinians, like all colonised people, are still proving that their capacity to resist is endless. They don’t only dig tunnels. They can fly above walls.

And the Zionist response is to say: we’ll show you! No more Mr. Nice Guy! We’re going to further upgrade our occupation to at least monstrous, homicidal and diabolical.’

~ Ghassan Hage

The *Welt am Sonntag* claimed the poem, and in particular the words ‘they can fly above walls’ amount to ‘**glorification of Hamas’ terror,**’ and alleged that Hage’s subsequent social media posts had equated Israeli violence with the anti-semitic violence of the Nazis.

The German Federal Government’s Commissioner for Anti-Semitism, **Felix Klein**, told the newspaper he expected the MPI to take a ‘clear position.’ ‘Statements like this must not go unanswered,’ Klein told the newspaper, ‘Hatred and smear campaigns must be exposed for what they are.’ Two days later, the Max Planck Society issued a statement saying Hage’s social media posts expressed ‘views that are incompatible with the core values of the Society,’ and that it had ended its working relationship with him.

Klein, too, is a controversial figure: in 2020, four distinguished scholars of The Holocaust and cultural memory wrote an open letter to the then Chancellor Angela Merkel

criticising Klein’s robust public condemnation of critics of Israel.

One of the signatories was **Gideon Freudenthal**, Emeritus Professor at Tel Aviv University. Freudenthal told the *Berliner Zeitung* he signed the open letter because ‘**the accusation of anti-semitism has been used systematically in Germany in recent years to silence any criticism of Israel’s policy.**’



Mural of Theodor Adorno by Justus Becker and Oğuz Şen in Senckenberganlage, Frankfurt. Photograph by Vysotsky CC BY-SA 4.0.

A direct line from Adorno to defending Israel today

Shortly after the Hamas-led massacre on October 7 2023, in which 695 Israeli civilians (including 36 children), 71 foreign nationals, and 373 members of the Israeli security forces were murdered, German Chancellor **Olaf Scholz** declared at a joint press conference with Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel had the right under international law to defend itself against ‘**this terror,**’ and that ‘**German history... makes it our duty to stand up for the existence and the security of Israel.**’

In November 2023, following widespread demonstrations in Germany against the Israeli invasion of Gaza, Germany’s Deputy Chancellor and leader of the Greens, **Robert Habeck**, issued a statement on Youtube. Habeck said many German Jews feared for their safety and their children were afraid to go to school ‘today, in Germany, 80 years after the Holocaust.’

‘The founding of Israel after the Holocaust,’ said Habeck, ‘was the promise of protection to the Jews. And Germany is compelled to ensure that this promise can be fulfilled. This is a historical foundation of our republic.’ Habeck reiterated the statement made by then Chancellor **Angela Merkel** in a speech before the Knesset in 2008; that ‘**Israel’s security is part of Germany’s raison d’état**’ (Staatsräson).

There is a direct line leading from Adorno’s declaration that ‘**Never again Auschwitz**’ is the ‘first requirement of all education’ to Habeck’s Youtube statement. Adorno was one of the intellectual godfathers of the German student movement of the late 60s, and the social movements which grew out of it. For the generation of 1968, ‘Never again Auschwitz’ was not only the first principle of all education, but a fundamental article of faith, the **core of their political identity.**

Habeck and his predecessor **Joschka Fischer**, the former leader of the Greens, are heirs to this tradition. Fischer himself attended Adorno's lectures in Frankfurt. In an article for *Die Zeit* in 1985 he declared, in words which echo Adorno's, 'Only German responsibility for Auschwitz can be the essence of West German Staatsräson. Everything else comes afterwards.'

In 1999, as German Foreign Minister, Fischer again invoked the principle 'Never again Auschwitz' when he supported NATO military intervention in Serbia to prevent a genocide of Kosovo Albanians.

The far right justifies racism by evoking anti-semitism

But in 2024, the far right in Germany is attempting to co-opt that principle. As Meron Mendel puts it, 'all of a sudden, an anti-semitic party is portraying itself as the protector of Jews. **Right-wing extremists are using the accusation of anti-semitism to legitimise open racism' against Palestinians.**

That 'anti-semitic party' is the extreme-right wing Alternative for Germany (AfD). In one of the grotesque ironies of contemporary Germany's relationship with history, today's AfD is a staunch supporter of Israel while denouncing the 'cult of guilt' about the Nazi past.



Stickers against the AfD sourced from conceptphoto.info CC BY 2.0

In January this year the German investigative journalism website Correctiv.org revealed details of a secret meeting of the AfD in Potsdam. The meeting was attended by senior members of the AfD, German businesspeople, doctors, lawyers, neo-Nazis, and two members of the Christian Democrat Party. The meeting discussed a '**master plan**:' the deportation of two million 'foreigners' to a 'model state' in north Africa.

The 'master plan' echoes a Nazi plan developed in 1940 to deport 4 million Jews to Madagascar. The failure of that plan led to the Final Solution. **In 2024, however, it is not Jews the architects of the AfD's master plan want to deport, but Muslims.**

The *Correctiv* report led to mass demonstrations against the AfD throughout Germany, and a fall in its standing in opinion polls. Current polls give the **AfD 18% of the national vote**, making it the second most popular party after the Christian



Multilingual 'Never Again,' from *Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site*, Southern Germany CC BY-SA 4.0

Democrats, though in Eastern Germany the AfD leads the polls with between **30-35%** of the vote.

The AfD's support for Israel shows how far the logic of the boycott has distorted Germany's cultural and political landscape and perverted Adorno's "first requirement of all education."

Adorno's most famous book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with **Max Horkheimer** and published in 1949, attempted to explain why Germany, a country which had produced many of the great thinkers of the European Enlightenment, had reverted to 'barbarism.'

Adorno and Horkheimer document how the critical spirit of Enlightenment philosophy had placed itself in the service of power – beginning with Napoleon – and 'offered its hand to those it had previously stood against.' In so doing, it 'transformed the positive principles it had espoused into a negative, destructive force.'

In Germany, the 'logic of the boycott' and '**selective empathy**' dictate **what can and cannot be spoken**, not only about Hamas' brutal and cynical massacre on October 7th, but about the **indiscriminate slaughter of 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza**, in what one former Israeli intelligence officer describes as a 'mass assassination factory.'

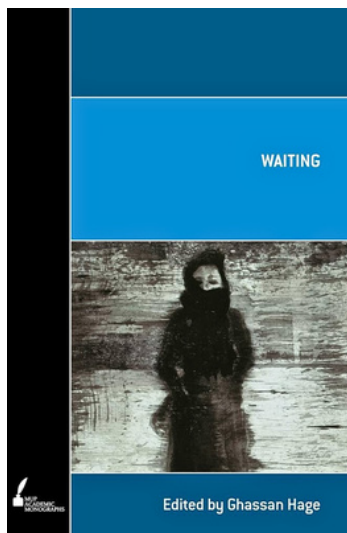
Perhaps it is time to ask whether the 'first requirement of all education,' that **Auschwitz must never happen again**, has itself been transformed into 'a negative, destructive force.'

Tom Morton is a former ABC broadcaster and journalism academic, writing on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation

Ghassan Hage's response to his sacking by the Max Planck Society

On Wednesday 31st of January morning I woke up to an email from the right-wing newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*. They declared me to be 'an activist for the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement for years' which has never been the case. I take my job as an academic too seriously to have time to be an activist.

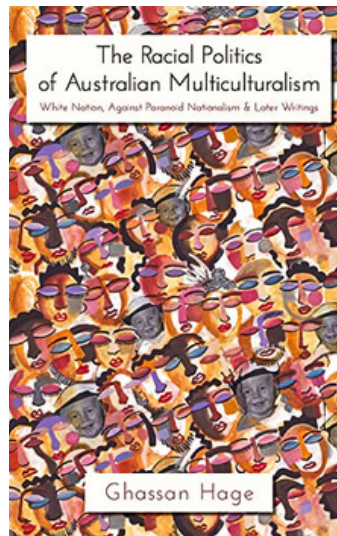
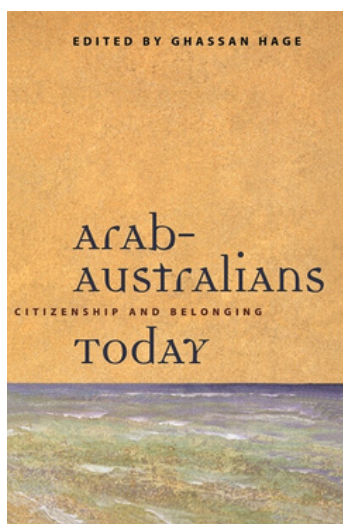
I was informed by the newspaper's so-called 'research team' that 'since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th, we have noticed that you have been making increasingly drastic statements towards the State of Israel'... **It didn't seem to occur to them that maybe this was because Israel was engaging in an on-going mass murder of Palestinians.**



They had selected a few of my social media posts and wanted to know if I could understand if '**critics classify your statements as antisemitic?**' I did not reply to this email. In my experience, the questions were a prelude to a fascist ideological assassination job which was going to happen regardless of whether one says or does not say something.

Indeed, the article did happen. In it **I was portrayed in conspiratorial terms as the henchman of some kind of BDS group. My job, to infiltrate academia.** I had finished doing my job in Australia and was now set on infiltrating Germany.

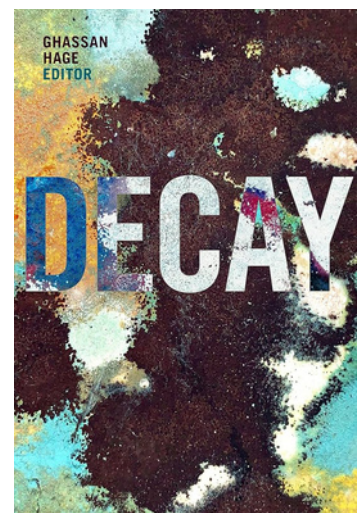
But before the article was published, I sent the above email to the Directors of MPI (Max Planck Institute of Social in Halle) on the same morning I saw it. I was informed that a similar query was sent not only to them but also to the President of the Max Planck Society in Munich. I was also informed that the President has sent the email to the society's lawyers. No one in Munich, lawyer or otherwise, contacted me or sought my opinion about the above. The next day, on Thursday



morning, the directors of MPI informed me that there was a central decision requiring that MPI sever its relationship with me. The decision was based on the way **antisemitism has come to be defined and institutionalised in Germany** which has been analysed and critiqued by many.

For anyone who knows the German landscape at the moment, there is nothing surprising about this happening to me. Many people other than me have copped a variation on this same treatment. It does not make it less infuriating.

Needless to say, I stand by everything I say in my social media. I have a political ideal that I have always struggled for regarding Israel/Palestine. **It is the ideal of a multi-religious society made from Christians, Muslims and Jews living together on that land.** My academic writings on that matter, and they are considerable, attests to the way I have always struggled for this ideal. **I have criticised both Israelis and Palestinians who work against such a goal.** If Israel has copped and continues to cop the biggest criticism it is because its **colonial ethno-nationalist project is by far the biggest obstacle towards achieving such aim.** This is also true of my social media posts. My declarations of these ideals is there in my social media. My critique of Palestinians who work against such an ideal is there in my social media. And so is my critique of Israel's ethno-nationalism. If some right-wing journalists who dislike my politics decide to pick from all what I have written my critiques of Israel and accuse me of antisemitism, I expect my employer to know or at least to investigate my record and defend me against such accusations. **Believing in a multi-religious society and critiquing those who work against it is not antisemitism.** I will not be put in a defensive position where I have to justify



FORCE, MOVEMENT, INTENSITY
THE NEWTONIAN IMAGINATION
IN THE HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES



Edited by
Ghassan Hage & Emma Kowal

myself for holding and working for such ideals.

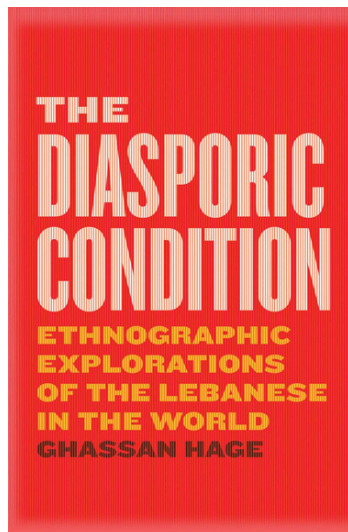
As importantly, I have **more than 35 years of writing and teaching** behind me, I have taught whole courses and parts of courses on Middle East anthropology throughout the world, to students with all kinds of political persuasions: Never, EVER, have I had a student or an employer come to me and tell

me that anything about my teaching has offended them or hurt them. On the contrary, the **list of those who praise me and my work for making them think harder despite disagreeing with me is very long.**

This is why, when the Max Planck President's Office treated me as a liability that needs to be managed, and proposed that I go silently with a non-disclosure agreement, I refused and **asked to be unilaterally sacked.** I felt it was important that they produce a document where they state why they have chosen to sack me (this is yet to be sent to me btw).

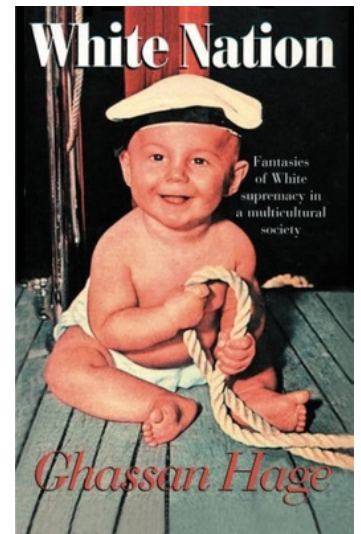
Two months into the Israeli bombardment of Gaza and its killing of thousands of Palestinians, my colleague Livnat Konopny-Decleve, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, invited me to participate in an EASA (European Association of Social Anthropology) organised debate on Violence and Post-colonialism. The thought came to me that if anthropologists have anything specific to add to the scholarly analysis of political violence, it probably had to do with trying to show that political violence is not something that is the same everywhere: **there are different cultures of violence.** Looking at a photo of naked Palestinian prisoners being led by Israeli soldiers in the ruins of Gaza, I began thinking about the **relation between violence and humiliation.** As I often do when I am writing, I posted the idea I had on Facebook:

*'The Israelis like to say that what they are doing in Gaza is like what the allies did in Dresden. But this is not true. The allies never tried to humiliate the people of Dresden. **Israeli violence resembles far more Nazi antisemitic violence in this regard in its destructive power and desire to humiliate. It also resembles Nazi violence by its vulgarity.'***



I am taking my time contextualising this Facebook post as it is one of the posts that were deemed by the lawyers of the Max Planck Society to put me in contravention of the law in Germany: it is **apparently antisemitic to engage in a comparison between Israel and Nazis.** That is what I was told anyway. As far as I understand, this is, in a nutshell, what has put me at odds with Max Planck Society's lawyers. **What to me is a fair, intellectual critique of Israel, for them is 'antisemitism according to the law in Germany.'**

This is why, if Max Planck Society's president limited himself to saying something like above, I could have lived with it. I might not like the way **the critique of Israel is conflated with antisemitism, and I find the German's pseudo philosemitism self-serving, and at times racist, instrumentalised to racialise the Palestinian and more generally the Arab and Muslim community in Germany.** But as a visitor there is a limit to the extent to which I feel entitled to critique this.

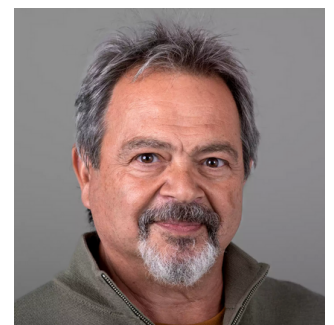


I cannot describe how saddened I am by this. I felt I was participating in and achieving some great things with some wonderful people at MPI. **The fact that this intellectual world I was part of can be destroyed so easily and that the managers of academic institutions run scared and let it happen rather than defend the vitality of the academic space under their management is a real tragedy.**



This was posted to [Hage's blog](#) on 8th February 2024

Ghassan Hage is Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He has held a number of visiting professorships including at the American University of Beirut, University of Nanterre - Paris X, the University of Copenhagen and Harvard.



Partners in Crime:

John Keane on The German Shibboleth, Israel and Genocide

Karl Marx, a rebel son of Jewish parents, famously remarked that in politics Germans had only thought what others had already done. His quip needs a flip: Germans are nowadays doing things others find **unthinkable**. Virtually every major institution in the country is engaged in tracking down, harassing and bullying into **silence critics of Israel**. **Palestinians, Muslims, peoples of colour, Jewish anti-Zionists, writers, musicians, poets, rappers, filmmakers – anybody who dares criticise or cast doubts on Israel is smeared with charges of ‘anti-semitism.’** Shortly after October 7th, Vice-Chancellor **Robert Habeck** reaffirmed the template and set the tone with a **tough-tongued media statement** that emphasised that Israel’s security is part of Germany’s Staatsräson (raison d’état). The ‘special relationship’ arose from Germany’s **‘historical responsibility’ for atoning for the Holocaust** through the founding of the state of Israel, he explained. **‘Israel’s security is our obligation,’** he concluded. ‘Germany knows this.’

Few Germans seemed either to notice or care that Habeck’s words practically **absolved Germany from past Israeli crimes against Palestinians**, or that they granted Netanyahu’s government *de facto* a **‘sovereign’ right to imperil the ‘security’** of millions of people, including starving and terrified Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and Arab and Jewish citizens living inside Israel.

And so, immediately after October 7th, with little public fuss or pushback, Germany began to practise the unthinkable. **In the name of combatting ‘anti-semitism,’** pro-Palestinian rallies are now regularly broken up by riot police. Commemorations of Nakba, wearing keffiyehs and displays of Palestinian flags and colours are discouraged or prohibited. Gatherings of liberal and leftist Jewish citizens who despise Netanyahu are banned because (police say) they are mis-used by troublemakers of ‘Palestinian origin.’ Springer and other employers enforce oaths of loyalty to Israel. Germany’s dockyards have **long supplied Israel with nuclear-tipped U-boats** while **last year German arms sales to Israel increased ten-fold**. Even the Bundeswehr comes to its defence. In early February, without a Bundestag mandate, the warship **Hessen** sailed from Wilhelmshaven, headed for the Red Sea, carrying an unspecified number of ‘Seebataillon’ naval infantry troops mobilised to deal with the anti-Israel, Yemen-based Houthi ‘terrorist’ militia.

So what are German intellectuals saying about all these worrying trends? Almost nothing. Their **cowardice** is shocking. There are indeed brave souls who dare to dissent from the orthodoxy, but even when the intelligentsia comment on Israel’s war on Gaza, or

pronounce on the principles of ethics and politics, as Jürgen Habermas, Rainer Forst and others did some months ago, their stated ‘solidarity with Israel’ functions as a German shibboleth unquestionably inscribed on Israeli stone.

The ancient Hebrew word **shibboleth** (שבילת) is the appropriate word needed here, for a shibboleth, as readers of the biblical Book of Judges know, is an utterance that functions as a password used by adherents of a group or sect to **distinguish themselves from their enemies** and, if necessary, as the biblical Gileadites did to the Ephraimites, **exterminate them**. The shibboleth ‘loyalty to Israel’ is oddly thin, but powerfully thick. It functions as an **empty floating signifier with full-on inclusionary and exclusionary effects**. Its semantic elasticity is used to mobilise and bind together its adherents by targeting their opponents as outsiders and foes. In consequence, as the Berlin-based group Archive of Silence is documenting, the list of German institutions shamelessly collaborating with Israeli genocide is long, and fast growing longer. Finger pointing is rife. Rumour and suspicion rule. Bullshit alibis flourish. **Shadows are falling over universities and other supposedly enlightened, ‘reasonable’ institutions in which evidence, honesty and integrity nowadays seem to count for nothing.**



Photograph by Andrew Worssam, 15 January 2024.



Pro-Palestinian demonstration in Frankfurt, Willy-Brandt-Platz, 3 February 2024, CC BY 2.0. Protesters hold sign that reads: "Stop the criminalisation of Palestinian resistance and solidarity."

Loyalty to Israel is a bullying shibboleth with silencing effects, as I discovered first hand when receiving a nasty kangaroo-court letter accusing me of sympathy for 'terrorism' from **Jutta Allmendinger**, the Praesidentin of the *Berlin Social Science Center* (WZB), where I had worked as a research professor for a quarter of a century. The letter accused me of being a secret supporter of a fear-spreading 'terrorist organisation' known as Hamas and therefore under German law liable to criminal prosecution. I replied with a letter of resignation, in which I emphasised the Praesidentin's **one-sided, prejudiced preoccupation with Hamas and unthinking support for official state-sanctioned definitions of 'terrorism.'** I asked her two questions:

*Why was her letter **silent** about such vile matters as non-stop aerial bombardment, settler violence, the ruthless and reckless destruction of hospitals, schools, mosques, churches and universities, and crazed Israeli plans for the forcible removal and starvation of millions of people from their ancient homelands?*

*And why is the WZB **denying scholars their right to speak honestly**, to say the unsayable, to ask **why a state born of the ashes of genocide is now militarily hellbent on the 'physical destruction in whole or in part'** (Genocide Convention Article II c) of an uprooted, terrorised people known as Palestinians?*

More than a million people read my resignation letter on 'X' and Facebook; untold others commented and praised it on other social media platforms; private messages of support poured in from all points on our planet; while in China, where my work is read and discussed, my resignation letter truly went viral on the *Little Red Book* (*xiǎohóngshū*) lifestyle sharing platform. Several professors living outside of Germany bravely called on President Allmendinger and the WZB to apologise publicly for the unscholarly tone and insulting substance of her allegations. But she fell silent. Seemingly unbothered by the barbarous and terroristic behaviour of the current Israeli government, the WZB professors and researchers followed her lead. Putting down their pens and zipping their lips, they closed their laptops and folded their arms. Their reasoning? **Perhaps: better to do nothing than risk opprobrium, disgrace and unemployment.**

Or perhaps (as the distinguished German philosopher Karl Jaspers long ago predicted) their silence is the **haughty self-righteousness of people convinced that their parents' confessions of guilt to past crimes and their own unquestioning loyalty to Israel grant them absolution.** Or more primevally: conform to German folklore (*Deutsche Volkskunde*). **Rather be wrong than different.** Respect and bow down to the rules of 'political coordination' (*Gleichschaltung*). Be proud of being German. Whatever satisfies the soul is truth.

Making sense of silence is notoriously difficult, but what can safely be said is that the cowardly silence of one of Europe's most prestigious research institutes typifies the general atmosphere in a Germany now in the grip of a

shibboleth whose roots stretch back to the 1950s Adenauer period and which nowadays is producing ruinous political, reputational, legal and moral consequences. German Jews whose faith moves them to condemn Israel feel stifled; **it's as if they don't belong in a country claiming atonement for its past annihilation of Jews.** Perversely, German government praise for Israel's steel-fisted stance against 'terrorism' and 'Islamic extremism' is feeding support for the avowedly pro-Israel, xenophobic, far-right populist AfD party, which commands the support of around 20% of voters and is now represented in **15 out of 16 state parliaments.**

Enormous damage is also being inflicted on the global reputation of Germany, Germans and things German. The last generation's efforts to rid the country of fascist thinking and sentiments by purging guilt and shame were impressive. In a matter of months, all the reputational gains have been undone globally by foolish declarations of unconditional loyalty to Israel. **By condoning Israel's self-destructive cruelty, Germany's self-inflicted moral bankruptcy benefits neither state.** And the damage done by the German shibboleth has legal consequences, as Nicaragua is demonstrating in the International Court of Justice by suing Germany for 'facilitating the commission of genocide' by selling weapons to Israel and cutting aid to the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA).



Pro-Palestinian demonstration in Munich, 9 October 2023. Photograph by Henning Schlottmann, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Worst of all, most tragically but least obviously, the **German shibboleth prompts doubts about the grand legitimization narrative of the German state.** The preamble of its constitution (*Grundgesetz*) states that 'the German people' are the foundation of the republic, but the inconvenient truth is that the German shibboleth serves as a reminder of what W.G. (Max) Sebald, one of the greatest writers of the post-1945 generation, called the 'well kept secret' of Germany's remarkable bounceback after the disasters of the first half of the 20th century.

*The secret is dirty: buried in the foundations of the German state are the millions of corpses of **Nazi genocide**, the **Allies' revenge bombing of German cities**, which **killed 600,000 civilians** and left more than **seven million homeless**,*



Pro-Palestinian demonstration in Frankfurt, Kaiserstr, 3 February 2024, CC BY 2.0.

*and an earlier genocide of the **Herero** and **Nama** peoples in the colony of Southwest Africa – the first genocide of the 20th century only recently and reluctantly acknowledged by German politicians, but so far without offers of reparation to its victims.*

*And now there's another secret out in the open, in all its filth: a collaboration with genocide in which the foundations of the **German state are mixed with the corpses of thousands and thousands of innocent Palestinian women, children and men who yearned only for a better future freed from the chains of racist humiliation, colonial injustice, organised hunger and murder.***

Opinions expressed in this essay are solely my own and do not express the views or opinions of my employer.

John Keane is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney.

Renowned globally for his creative thinking about politics, history, media and democracy, he is the author of the best-selling *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (1995), *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009), *Power and Humility* (2018), *The New Despotism* (2020) and *The Shortest History of Democracy* (2022), which has been published in more than a dozen languages.



He was nominated for the 2021 Balzan Prize (Italy) and the Holberg Prize (Norway) for outstanding global contributions to the human sciences.

His latest book is *China's Galaxy Empire*, published this month

Remembering Sarah Hegazi

A rock concert, a rainbow flag and a fatality

It was September 2017 and 35,000 fans at Cairo's Festival City were dancing to the music of Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese band. Hamed Sinno, the lead singer and openly queer activist, described the atmosphere as being *'thick with love and abandon as all the audience were singing along with every word so loudly that we couldn't hear ourselves singing.'* He noticed two people in different parts of the audience that climbed up on friends' shoulders and **unfurled rainbow flags**. The audience cheered. For the rest of the night, Hamed said *'The crowd felt safe, they felt seen and they felt loved.'* One of the people who had unfurled those gay pride flags was Sarah Hegazi.

Things took a turn for the worse after the concert concluded. Hamed explained that: *'Egyptian news stations were saying that thousands of **perverts** had gathered for a **gay satanic orgy** in the heart of Cairo and that Al-Azhar University had issued a **fatwa**. **Death threats** and **insults** were flying everywhere.'* In fact, as they were leaving Cairo the band heard that there was a warrant out for their **arrest**.

Then came the audience arrests; over the course of a week after the concert, **75 people were locked up**. Some of them were arrested after showing up to fake dates set up by undercover police officers. The media frenzy continued for weeks. Pictures of Hamed and Mashrou' Leila holding rainbow flags at the concert circulated on social media as proof of the *'depraved forces threatening to invade Egypt.'* **Queerness in the Arab world is always framed as an external threat, corroding the infallible core of Arab morality from the outside in.** Video testimonials appeared showing alleged concertgoers confirming it as a demonic orgy. Fake news was everywhere.



Sarah Hegazi at protest march in Canada CC BY-SA 4.0

A week after the concert 30 year old LGBTQAI+ activist Sarah Hegazi was arrested. The charges initially were *'membership of an illegal group... [and] promoting the ideas of the group.'*



Sarah Hegazi, 2017, courtesy © Wikimedia Commons.

Throughout her three months in detention, Sarah was repeatedly **electrocuted**, she was **beaten**, **sexually assaulted** and **tortured**. She was eventually released and was given political asylum in Canada.

Three years later Sarah Hegazi took her own life. She had previously written of suffering from **PTSD**, depression and loneliness. She left the following suicide note.

'To my siblings – I tried to find redemption and failed, forgive me. To my friends – the experience was harsh and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me. To the world – you were cruel, to a great extent, but I forgive.'

Her note reflects the **unbearable trauma** of the violence and the injustice she faced for her sexuality. In her suicide note, **Sarah apologised for being 'too weak to resist'** the freedom that death would give her.



Sarah Hegazi mural in the Jordanian capital Amman. Mural covered with blackout paint shortly after its creation. Photograph by Raya Sharbain CC0.

The Lebanese musicians inspiring queer activism across The Middle East

Hamed Sinno and *Mashrou' Leila* were devastated by what happened to Sarah. In an interview with Lebanese podcast *Sarde After Dinner*, hosted by Médéa Azouri and Mouin Jaber, Hamed was asked if he felt guilty about the arrest of Sarah Hegazi and her subsequent suicide. Hamed, who was clearly deeply troubled over the tragedy, said he had thought about it a great deal and despite a lot of despair said he **'shouldn't feel responsible for the institutions that oppress us.'**



Hamed Sinno performing with *Mashrou' Leila* at Rudolstadt-Festival in 2018 CC BY-SA 4.0.

Sinno also told the *Sarde* podcast that:

'Many a queer Arab has lost lovers, chosen family, friends and comrades. But Sarah's death cut differently. Grief swept through the queer community and the diaspora faster than the pandemic, and we took to doing what we've done for generations: we mourned.'

Mashrou' Leila were **banned** from Egypt immediately after the concert where Sarah had raised the flag. Then, like falling dominos, other Arab countries also banned them. So the band resolved to perform outside the Arab world. They did several concerts in the US including a [Tiny Desk Concert](#) in Washington DC. They were extremely well received in the [UK and Europe](#) also.

Mashrou' Leila sang about **love between men in a place where it cannot flourish**. Their bold decision to sing about sexuality in a region where this is disapproved of was unprecedented. Take [Shem El Yasmine](#) ("Smell the Jasmine"), which is a ballad about a gay relationship where the lovers must abandon each other for a prescribed marriage. It is sung by Sinno as though he is torn between pain and ecstasy. The lyrics in translation are:

*'I would have liked to keep you near me
Introduce you to my parents
have you crown my heart
Cook your food, sweep your home
Spoil your kids, be your housewife.'*

In the interview with *Sarde After Dinner* Sinno describes taking inspiration for this song from his first kiss in an alley in Beirut under graffiti challenging the government.

The graffiti read: *'It is forbidden to smell the jasmine.'* This line reflected how constrained and disenfranchised young people in Lebanon felt at the time.

Hamed Sinno's powerful lyricism won him adulation across the Arab speaking world and won incredible strides for queer visibility. Another of the band's controversial songs is [Fasaateen](#), which admonishes a lover for not being strong enough to stay in the relationship but rather **buckling under society's expectations**.



Mashrou' Leila, December 2009, album release concert at Demco Steel Warehouse in Beirut CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Origins of *Mashrou' Leila*

Mashrou' Leila are a Lebanese four-member indie rock band: Firas Abou Fakher, Guitarist Carl Gerges, Violinist Haig Papazian and Hamed Sinno as lead singer and lyricist. The band formed in Beirut, Lebanon in 2008 at a music workshop at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Organisers posted an open invitation to musicians looking to come and jam to vent the stress caused by college and the unstable political situation.

It was during this time at the AUB that Sinno came out as queer and began experimenting with subversive lyrics. When Fakher, Gerges, Papazian and Sinno first began jamming together, they had no idea they would receive such adulation and meteoric popularity in the Arab world.

As Sinno said, *'we were in the right place at the right time.'* It was a time of protests calling for political reform. People were sick of the inequality and the sectarian fighting. Many could relate to Sinno's lyrics expressing their desires and frustrations, both socially and politically.

It was inevitable that *Mashrou' Leila* would garner criticism in Beirut for the candour of their lyrics. They began to raise the ire of conservative and corrupt elements fomenting inequality.

Their song *Lel Watan's* lyrics criticise the ineffectual government. The words are accusatory asserting that whenever one dares to ask about the worsening situation in Lebanon, you are silenced with politicians' pithy slogans and fabricated conspiracies. The English translation of the lyrics are as follows:

Lel Watan (For the Motherland)

*Others have tamed hurricanes to control/steer
fate*

*But by a breeze we're blown away, and to ruin
we abate*

*And when **you dare ask about the deterioration
of affairs***

*They **silence** you with slogans and conspiracy
theories*

*The masses (literally: herd) accuse you of **treason**
when **you demand change** in the motherland*

*They made you despair so that you sell your rights
to save the lost motherland*

They told you,

"Enough preaching, come dance with me a while"

*"Why are you frowning? Come dance with me a
while"*

*They taught you the anthem and said **your
struggle is good** for the motherland*

*They sedated you in the artery and said your
lethargy/apathy is good for the motherland*

They told you,

"Enough preaching, come dance with me a while"

*"Why are you frowning? Come dance with me a
while."*

Mashrou' Leila return to Lebanon

After ten years of performing together Mashrou' Leila were back in Beirut in 2019, scheduled to perform at the Byblos Festival. Sinno detailed to *Sarde After Dinner* the hate speech that was posted on his Facebook page the day before the Byblos concert. Online, the campaign against Sinno and the band was being led by right wing Christian militant groups like *Jounoud al Rabb* (Arabic for 'the Lord's Army'). The group, along with other social

media users, cited several memes shared by Sinno that they **claimed mocked Christian and Muslim faiths**. Sinno says that they *'were accusing me of things which were completely untrue. They were spreading lies, saying I was a blasphemer and deserved to die and so did any queer people at our concert.'*

Philippe Seif, a popular vlogger and advocate of the right-wing Maronite Kataeb Party, said in a post that the band's *'legs should be broken before they try to set foot in Byblos,'* adding that the musicians have *'insulted both Islam and Christianity.'* The band were accused of being satanists. The festival organisers cancelled their appearance *'to prevent bloodshed and maintain peace and security.'*

Mashrou' Leila condemned what they called a 'defamatory campaign' with the following statement:

'We are four Lebanese men from different faiths bonded by our love of music and studying architecture at the American University Beirut... Our goal is to promote our art and shed light on human causes, not more not less... while respecting all faiths and their symbols.'

Mashrou' Leila have not played together since that concert in 2019, but Sinno has continued a solo career in the US. His latest project was called *Westerly Breath* and was performed in New York in January 2024. It was an opera commissioned by the MET. The work weaves Ancient Egyptian myth, architecture, immigration, autobiography and the history of speech synthesis to explore the voice as the site of political embodiment.

Written by **Kathy Raheb:**

English and History teacher on Gadigal Land.

She is a member of the PEN Sydney committee and passionate about freedom of expression.



[Mashrou' Leila's 'Tiny Desk Concert' on Youtube](#)



He wasn't even there: the fight for Hany Babu's freedom

Professor Hany Babu's wife, **Dr Jenny Rowena**, continues the fight to free her academic husband who has been imprisoned in Mumbai for three years without charge or proof of any crime. **Professor Babu** is an anti-caste activist and an advocate for quotas to support marginalised students' access to education.

Robin Bower spoke to Dr Rowena recently in Delhi.

It's my first time back in India for 30 years. Superficially not much has changed in Delhi. The most noticeable thing to me is the technology. Everyone has a smartphone, and everyone uses WhatsApp, from hotel staff, to tuk tuk drivers, and stall holders. You can even order a tuk tuk using the Uber app, called Ubertuk. As that now costs \$2 for me, I wonder what the tuk tuk driver earns. Enough? Probably not.

I've arranged to meet Jenny Rowena, the wife of Hany Babu, at a café near Delhi University where she is a **professor of British literature and South Indian film studies**. She is calm and gracious, despite the stress and anxiety she's experiencing, not knowing what will happen next for her husband. I ask her how she and her daughter are coping?

'**We stay hopeful** and we are grateful for all the international support. My daughter has become very unwell, worried about her dad. It is continuous.'

Babu (as Jenny calls him) is a 54-year-old professor of linguistics at the University of Delhi. **He has committed no crime and has been held in prison for three years without charge.**

Babu has been arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, which allows the federal government to arrest individuals without charge or proof of any crime. There is no evidence to support his arrest but the background to it is alarming.

On 31 December 2017, a conference called the 'Elgaar Parishad' was held to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. In 1817 this colonial battle, which the British won, **exposed the caste fractures within the majority Hindu community**. Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) were instrumental in winning the battle for the British.

When the Dalits celebrate the battle today it can still **open up deep-seated communal antagonism**. The Dalits have had to struggle for their rights against traditional caste-based marginalisation, and despite constitutionally guaranteed jobs, they have remained among the poorest groups in India. The day after the commemoration, a large public rally was held in Bhima Koregaon that was attended by a group of Dalit people.

Police have **alleged** that 16 activists at the rally incited the group of Dalits to riot, which led to one death and several people being injured. The activists are accused of being Maoists or members of the Communist Party of India, and of plotting to overthrow the Indian government.

Babu is accused of being one of these 16 people, who include poets, journalists, lawyers, professors, artists and a Jesuit priest. **Yet Babu did not attend the Elgaar Parishad conference or the public rally**, or any of the commemorative events held the day after. It is proven that he was at home some distance away.

'*They **raided our house in 2019**, a year after the event he supposedly attended but he didn't. They had **no search warrant**, took our phones, kept us for six hours, went through the entire house looking for books, videos of every title and confiscated some they said was evidence,*' said Jenny. *'They say they found a document as evidence on his laptop. Then nothing, and a year later there was a summons for his arrest. In 2020, he was taken for five days and interrogated. Then he was arrested with 15 others.'*





Jenny claims Babu's laptop was hacked, and incriminating evidence was planted. The National Investigation Agency or NIA is a specialised counter terrorism law enforcement agency set up in 2008 after the terror attack in Mumbai. This is the organisation that is **accusing Babu of being a member of the Communist Party and plotting to overthrow the Indian government.** Forensic evidence exists that reveals unidentified hackers fabricated evidence using malware on the laptops of several activists who were arrested and ended up in jail. Amnesty International also has evidence of a broader hacking operation to plant information targeting multiple activists.

At the beginning of January 2024, Babu's case was heard in the Supreme Court which has now asked the NIA for a response. There is no timeframe for this. **If convicted, Hany Babu faces 10 years in jail.** While currently in jail, Babu is not receiving proper health care and, because of this, his health continues to deteriorate. **Jenny travels 20 hours by train every week to visit him in Mumbai.**

Babu and Jenny are both from the caste called **Other Backward Classes** (OBCs). Babu is a Muslim. His only 'crime' appears to be that he **fight for the rights of marginalised people in higher education.** Both he and Jenny were given the opportunity to work in the university sector due to affirmative action for marginalised groups, or as India calls it 'reservation.' As Babu had this opportunity many years ago, he is fighting for other OBCs to continue to get places at university, both for teachers and students. **He openly campaigns for the rights of OBCs, to increase the number of places at university.** The state of the employment market is such that there are routinely 1,000 applicants for one academic position.

PEN International, with all the PEN organisations around the world, continues to raise awareness of his case, with the sincere hope that he will be released before his health deteriorates further. Jenny, and their daughter, will continue to fight for her husband's freedom.

'Babu is a first-generation university professor who needs to get back to his job of teaching. All I want is for the Indian Government to repeal the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and to free my husband.' Jenny remains defiant in her fight.

Robin Bower is the Writers in Prison Coordinator for the Perth chapter of PEN International



Photograph of social reformer B. R. Ambedkar and his followers at victory pillar memorialising fallen Mahar (dalit) soldiers at the Battle of Koregaon. Taken in 1927 (Public Domain Creative Commons).

Making the radical sound real

Devana Senanayaka meets the authors
of *We Have Also Survived*

Vikita Mehta and Inaya Yousaf, the editors of the collection met at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada, as undergraduate students and bonded over their passion for social justice. In November 2020, they applied for an experiential learning scholarship and pitched the collection as their project. While brainstorming ideas, they constantly came back to art as a tool to incite social and political change. They chose poetry as their form of art because of its simplicity, accessibility and universality.

Over the next two and a half years, they conducted research and spoke to a number of sources such as **poets, politicians and academics** over zoom. They handpicked countries troubled by political crises and social unrest such as **East Turkistan** (the homeland of the **Ugyhur** people), **Yemen** and **Nigeria**. The final section looks at an unexpected location: **Canada**.

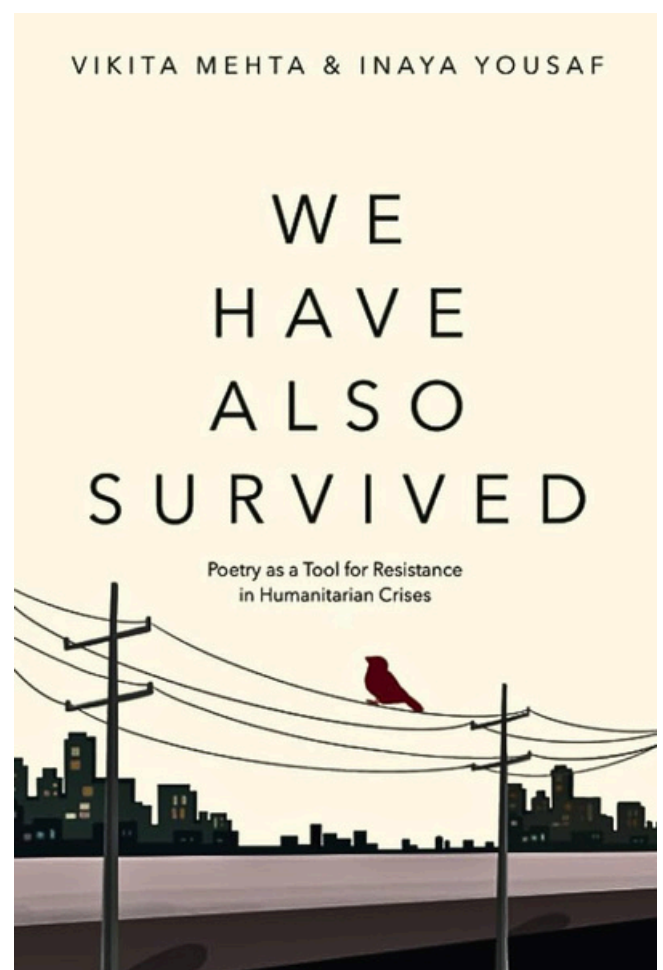
'We wanted to educate people about some of the humanitarian crises in the world which the media might be biased about. We also wanted to explore how poetry was a form of resistance for individuals who lived within these crises.' Vikita and Inaya told me.

One of the most impressive components of the book is the inclusion of **voices from the diaspora**. The collection understands that people are connected to a site because of familial links, past lives and a decision to oscillate in-and-out. There is a complexity added to the idea of 'local' poetry and questions about 'authenticity' arise. Amina Atiq's poem *Dried Cherries* is particularly memorable. Amina is Yemeni-Scouse (Scouse is a reference for people from Liverpool) and her poem explores this dichotomy. Her reference to abundant fruit 'dried cherries,' exotic scents 'coffee, frankincense and myrrh' and rare materials 'spice,' 'ancient silk' and 'pearls' expose her deep love and connection to Yemen. To her, Yemen is beautiful and alluring—a reality that does not currently exist. This richness is juxtaposed against the tepid description of the UK as a 'people's democracy.' These descriptions reveal that Amina feels a sense of dissonance in the safety of her current home and in her yearning for her old, 'rich' home racked by tensions and violence. There is also a sense of survivor's guilt as the Yemenis continue to die as she nestles in 'elite rooftops.'

Writing poetry to process trauma

Other poets, such as jaye simpson, a First Nations poet from Canada, have used poetry to process their trauma and heal. They opened up about the private and public demarcations for their poetry. They informed both editors that certain poems are for them, and only, them: 'it's not safe for my readers.' Similarly, Titilope Sonuga, a poet and performer, from Nigeria re-imagines the livelihood of her subjects, the

pupils kidnapped by Boko Haram from a school in Chibok in 2014. As of April 2024, 80 out of 276 girls remain missing. In *They Are Still Laughing*, the girls are described coming out of their 'hiding places,' from 'behind the curtains' and 'from under the bed.' The stagnancy of their reality is reimagined in animation and movement, as they are 'untangling,' 'unleaning,' 'loose[ning]' and 'peeling.' In the poem, life is injected into the stories of the subjects as they are alive, active and autonomous.



We Have Also Survived is a stunning collection of poetry, essays and visual art. Crises from across the world are used to evoke questions about the nature of poetry, the character of resistance and the importance of reflection.

Why is ‘resistance’ poetry on paper valued more than ‘oral’ poetry that is performed? Titilope, notes that conventional poetry is considered to be an elite form of art and she resisted this by penning poetry for performance. Her audience is ‘people on the margins’ and her poetry is intentionally, familiar and accessible. John Hill, a First Nations poet from Canada echoed this sentiment in his poem *Queer Waves* and in his essay. He also manages to reconcile both forms. Conventional poetry can make ‘something radical sound real and achievable, holding the potential to change individual perspectives’ but spoken poetry can attract ‘the necessary numbers to achieve change on issues folks are already passionate about.’

Canadian First Nations resistance poetry

The final section of the book is about Canada—a choice that evokes much speculation as the country is consistently noted for its peace, safety and stability. With this collection, the editors convey that the violations in the Global South can also be seen in the Global North.

[We Have Also Survived](#) is available on Kindle

This section touches on the residential schools for First Nations children, tensions over natural resources and access to land. The essay about jaye describes their distraction as their concern for a missing friend overrides their ability to participate in the conversation. An [Amnesty International report](#) noted that from 1980-2012, 1017 women who identified as First Nations were murdered, which is 4.5 times more than that of other women. Reflecting on this experience, Inaya notes: ‘...the three of us live in Canada, [but] we do not experience the same Canada.’

‘We hope this collection shifts how people receive information. We absorb information with next to no critical thinking or further research. We hope people realise that this is not a laborious task and can be as simple as learning from local art and artists,’ Vikita and Inaya told me about their hope for the book.

Devana Senanayaka is a writer and journalist based in Sri Lanka



Inaya Yousaf (left) and Vikita Mehta (right).

Poetry in the shadow of war

Vikita Mehta interviews Yemeni-Scouse poet Amina Atiq about the complexity of writing resistance poetry in the diaspora



Amina Atiq. Photograph by Robin Clewley.

There needs to be a space for the children of the third culture,' Amina Atiq remarked in her thick Scouse accent from Liverpool England. Inaya and I paused for a few moments as Amina explained her interesting choice of words. Amina resides in what she calls the third house: the diaspora. Amina immigrated to Britain from Yemen at the age of four and has since travelled to Yemen every summer. **She lives in the murky space between Yemen and Britain, neither of which she can fully call home.** She is Yemeni-Scouse, and she expressed in her poem *Dried Cherries* that she has had to merge the two worlds of her identity in her daily life and in her poetry. One world is where she was born, a Yemen ravaged by trauma and war, but also rich with vibrant culture and hope. The other world is one in which she was physically safe, an isle seemingly abundant with opportunity and security, yet impoverished of her culture and people.

However, the grim truth was that in an age of **modern imperialism, Britain had been selling arms to Saudi Arabia while Saudi Arabia was at war with Yemeni Houthi insurgents.** Britain was therefore a key contributor to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, causing Amina's worlds to be in opposition. Amina illustrates this very phenomenon in her poem: *'the dying half of me is in Yemen,'* but she lives in Britain where *'profit is a blinded theft drowning in their inner pockets who drank, ate of my home until their bellies were full, choking on dried cherries.'*

'I am guilty in the people's democracy parading in your tax money shouting from the elite rooftops I justifying why my Yemeni mothers bury their children,' she writes in *Dried Cherries*, describing her complex relationship with both countries. She lives in Britain or what she calls the "people's democracy," riddled with guilt. **She lives peacefully while her Yemeni brothers and sisters are burying their loved ones.**

She often feels that she has little choice but to **shout from her privileged rooftop so that someone can hear her.**

Amina further clarified her place in British society: **'People in the diaspora tend to feel like outcasts and imposters.'** By the way Amina's eyes lost their gleam when she said, *'No one gives space to the diaspora, especially in countries affected by war.'* I knew how deeply she was affected by those words. She explained that her **poetry was a tool to provide that necessary space for the third house, those in between two worlds.** Amina vowed to create a space for those who feel a connection to their homeland but who may also feel ashamed of telling a story that is not completely their own.

Where did Amina's journey begin?

At the age of fifteen, on a bus in Britain, Amina was verbally and physically harassed. Islamophobia endangered her life once again. But it wasn't her

harassers who were deemed perpetrators. *She* was. With no explanation or justification, she was handed a criminal record lasting three years. Amina's eyes glistened when she described the petrifying fear of being targeted for a hate crime, the confusion, and finally the frustration for being blamed with no evidence. But the most pervasive feeling was utter **helplessness**. It was after Amina had to translate to her mother in Arabic as to why she had a criminal record for an uncommitted crime that she realised **she bore a responsibility to articulate her traumatic experiences to others**. This realisation spurred her poetic activism and her resistance.

'I became a poet accidentally. I just became quite angry. And this anger turned into poetry.'

Amina made a distinction that became very impactful for Inaya and me. *'Entering the world of poetry was not a choice,'* she said solemnly. *'I don't think I fully understand what that means yet. I feel like I have to be here.'* Poetry was not an exclusively enjoyable pastime or hobby that she engaged in; there was always a deeper **obligation compelling her to share her words**. *'Poetry is for resilience, imagination, and self-help. I'm not here to entertain. I'm here to **face reality in my writing.**'*

Dried Cherries

We moved to a discussion about her powerful poem, *Dried Cherries*. The title is a play on words, inspired by a story of Yemeni coffee farmers. The Port of Mocha in Yemen used to be the main trading route for coffee from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian coffee beans reminded her of little dried cherries. During the war, however, many farmers were unable to work on their coffee farms. One such farmer went to an abandoned coffee farm and began to revive it. He thought, *how can I sustain Yemeni livelihoods if not by reviving Yemeni farmers?* Amina was inspired by this story about how **activism** can operate through something as **mundane** as coffee. She used this story to illustrate that when you fail to revive something, it becomes quite dry, like the coffee farms of 'dried cherries.'

Amina compared the dried cherries to the war in Yemen. As a **result of the war**, she felt that the land of Yemen had become extremely **dry, devoid of life, beauty, and joy**. Unable to experience the marvellous beauty of Yemen, she felt as if she was starving: *'My native land. My tribe. My children.'* She yearned in her poem: *'Give me my Yemen back.'* It was a painful cry of resistance against the war that had stolen the wonders of her country from her.

I was also deeply moved by the poem's slow unfolding that built to its climactic declaration: *'War is not our only name.'* First, I found it fascinating that Amina used *'our only name'* instead of *'Yemen's only name.'* With this choice, this flip of a single word, she universalised the poem, allowing it to move beyond Yemen as a

country, to encapsulate the idea that war also becomes the names of the Yemeni people, of the Saudi people fighting in Yemen, and even of the people fighting wars outside of Yemen. These names twist and torture, reducing people to nothing more than the destruction around them. But war is **never** our only name.

Writing and reflecting upon this line after the interview admittedly got me quite emotional. It was a sad realisation - though sadness does not and will never truly encompass this feeling-to know that some countries, especially those in the Middle East, are so easily homogenised into states of pre-war, war, and post-war, and that these categories are so skilled at suppressing the beauties outside of war, some of which were noted in *Dried Cherries*: *'Our skyscrapers, our childhoods, our language.'* **Our community, our strength, our love.**

Poetry written for self-help is an act of resistance

After discussing the poem, Amina soon began to illustrate the many forms of resistance poetry. One form that resonated with me was resistance as self-help. I had initially considered poetry to be generally an outward exercise. In my experience, poetry was a tool to share your feelings in an effort to connect with others and build community through collective experience. I recognize that poetry can also be cathartic, personally therapeutic even. It has certainly been an instrument to help me put words to my feelings and examine my deepest insecurities. But self-help as an act of resistance? This was a new and fascinating concept for me.

Amina explained that **humanitarian crises** and the struggles that ensue as a result can be all-encompassing and excruciatingly painful. They tend to be numbing to the point where you feel as though you have little strength and will to express how you feel - often an advantage to the governing group, as **citizens become too worn out to resist**. Furthermore, poetry can guide us to explore parts of our identity that we have buried, or to **channel our frustration into words and calls to action**, helping us to slowly transition from a hopeless and weathered state to one of **agency, action, and perseverance**. *'If I hadn't written poetry, I don't think I would have been able to access these parts of my life,'* Amina said.



Yemen. Photograph by Rod Waddington CC BY-SA 2.0.

Ultimately, that ability for **poetry** to help you explore and examine your inner complexities in a crisis, when the crisis attempts to limit your identity to a homogeneous, static, and permanent construct, is a **powerful act of resistance** itself.

I can't make you see my world if you haven't lived it

Our conversation soon turned to the topic of holding space. This topic is particularly relevant for **immigrants or refugees** who might want to engage in acts of resistance, to **discuss important humanitarian crises** in their home countries, but who **feel**, like Amina, **unqualified to take up that space**. Amina has been approached by many British news stations to discuss the Yemeni crisis, and at first, she gladly agreed because she did not want a white person telling the story of her people. But soon she realised that even she was not qualified to take up that space, as she had not directly experienced the war. While she struggled with the idea of taking up space when she did not have lived experience, she simultaneously battled another complex question: **What then was her space to take up?**

Amina had written a poem in which she described her experience leaving Yemen with the words *'I carried a suitcase on my back.'* She chuckled when she explained that she didn't really carry a suitcase on her back travelling to Britain-she actually flew first class! **She found herself subconsciously hijacking the asylum-seeker stereotype simply to appease the masses, to write what the white majority wanted to read.** A story of progression from suffering to opportunity, from scarcity to abundance, because that narrative would **help the British stay blind to their complicity in the suffering and scarcity.** Even in her writing degree, as the only person of colour, she found her professors critiquing her for the way she told her stories and experiences, rather than usefully critiquing her work's form or structure. *'That's the thing about white spaces,'* she remarked, *'they feel like they have to understand everything. But I can't make you see my world if you haven't lived it.'*

It was during these moments of growth that she concluded that she could only accurately write about **her own experiences**, rather than writing what she thought people wanted to hear or what would be palatable to them. Her goal with poetry now is to be authentic and honest, to **tell her truth while building a space for the diaspora wherein she feels that she also truly belongs.** Amina said:

'We are accountable about how we write, and we are also accountable about how we hold space.'



Haraz Mountains, Yemen. Photograph by Rod Waddington CC BY-SA 2.0.

Now Amina is slowly finding her space. Amina's brows lifted and the corners of her mouth began to rise in a glistening smile as she spoke about her people. *'My Yemeni audience is growing. I write for my community. But when I go to a gig, my people are not there. It can cause a lot of confusion for me. I'm writing for you, but you're not here to listen.'* She recognised that it was not that these community members didn't want to support her. But **she is telling them to come to a space they haven't historically been invited to.** By including Arabic in her poetry and using creative ways to invite her community in, Amina remarked that she's slowly but surely **building an accessible and safe space** for her Yemeni people.

We ended the interview with the question we asked all our participants: **Can poetry be used as a tool for resistance?** Amina wholeheartedly agreed.

*'Poetry has a **historical legacy**. It fills in the gaps between communication and activism. It is a tool for resistance.'*

She concluded with an important caveat. The impact wanes when you don't fully attach yourself to your poetry.

*'Never separate yourself from your poetry if you want to make an impact. People are as interested about the **life of the poet** as they are about their poetry.'*

However, it seemed to me that Amina was not saying that the life of the poet and the life of the poem are the same thing, only that **they are entangled** with each other. After all, a poem is not simply a transparent autobiographical statement. A poem does not recount the life events of a poet; rather, it **wrestles with the complexities of a poet as a truly human being, fraught, layered, muddled, self-divided, a mix of memories and feelings, and without a singular rigid "identity."** So, if the poet is this mixture of things, so too will the poem be. **Our stories** - and the way they are conveyed to us through poetry are some of **our most powerful weapons.**

This is an extract of *We Have Also Survived*

Dried Cherries

By *Amina Atiq*

Commissioned by the *Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT)*



Listen to Amina Atiq
reading *Dried Cherries*

Go gently,
the dying half of me is **in** Yemen but my body
like a
curved dagger curled under the coffee tree in a
horizontal band of sacrifice, hope, dark days
and a blue star in the sky. I am no storm; I am
war dried
cherries, gunpowder and iron scraps-

the tribesmen, hell they forget your
mark, **Made in Britain.**

Go gently,
they learnt of your name
when profit is a blinded theft drowning
in their inner pockets who drank, ate of my
home until their
bellies were full, choking on dried cherries.

Go gently,
the children treasure hunts your metal scraps
running the streets in their father's eyes when
you forked their small bodies-

I am guilty in the people's democracy
parading in your tax money shouting from the
elite rooftops justifying why
my Yemeni mothers bury their children.

Between the dealer and buyer is a dictator's best
friend a
finger on a trigger, does it matter who pulls it?

Go gently,
Don't trust the crowned occupier who left your
land with
two brothers left to arm their borders
when they share the same vine grapes from their
father's tree.

Hell, my Yemen forgets.
This land is your battlefield, the children
are your soldiers, your profit is blood.

Go gently,
A child soldier studying your pockets at the
checkpoint, their
eyes black peal, with a future caught in
tomorrow's propaganda headline.

What do you say to a child at war?

Go gently,
Monsters run wild chewing on dried cherries, the
other half of me is raging, raging
in your pain, I am your ache.

This is my Yemen, my native land. My tribe. My
children.

My home fires are burning, too long
this stage you've acted trialled your weapons.

Now go gently, leave us at peace-

in my thick skin, my Yemen you are my shade I
fell in love with home
like my first teenage crush bloodline
written on my face.
I am in you
lost, alone and scattering-

Go gently,

in war is not our only name
the mess you make, is our magic find
us in your dried cherries
your coffee, frankincense and myrrh give
me language, take me through the spice
trading routes
stoned skyscrapers, Queens and ancient silk give
me
childhood, the past is ever present.

Give me my Yemen back
to rest on the eagles' wings taking the blue stars
out of the sky and
shape our borders in iron and ivory
to surrender arms, lift hands in roses and pearls-
the

children of Yemen are returning home.

Amina Atiq is a Yemeni-Scouse poet, performance artist,
creative practitioner, and award-winning community
activist based in based in Liverpool UK.

She is also a writer-in-residence with Heart of Glass, a
2019 BBC Words First finalist, and a Young Associate and
anti-racism group member for Curious Minds.

Prisoners find their voice

Damien Linnane's boredom behind bars drove him to give prisoners a place to share their writing and art. The magazine has now gone global.

My life changed when my partner at the time told me she had been sexually assaulted. She had done the right thing by telling me, but she unintentionally re-traumatised me. The knowledge reminded me of my own childhood, and how in the same way as her, I never got any justice for abuse that happened to me. Eventually, I couldn't live with the guilt of knowing I hadn't done anything about it anymore. I felt I had to do something to make it right. So I went to the home of the man who she said abused her. I intended to assault him, but he wasn't home, so in my anger I set fire to his house and it burnt down.

I was 28 when I committed that offence, my first conviction; I'd never been in any serious trouble before. My sentence was relatively short, but it was more than

long enough to feel the pain and isolation of not having a creative outlet. Not long after entering prison, in late 2015, I was told I wasn't eligible for any rehabilitation, or educational courses besides basic literacy, but I already knew how to write. Fortunately, I was able to put my literacy skills to use, turning to creative writing as a form of 'escape' from the day-to-day boredom of prison. I finished a couple of short stories, in between writing a full-length novel. It was hard to stay motivated though, because I had no readers to share my work with. I came across a couple of other writers inside, and I asked if there was anything like a prison magazine to send our work to. There have been many prison magazines over the years, though there hadn't been an active one for over a decade. Nobody I talked to could even remember one.

Once I was released, knowing what a difference it would make to writers and readers inside, I got involved with a new prison magazine that was launching called *Paper*

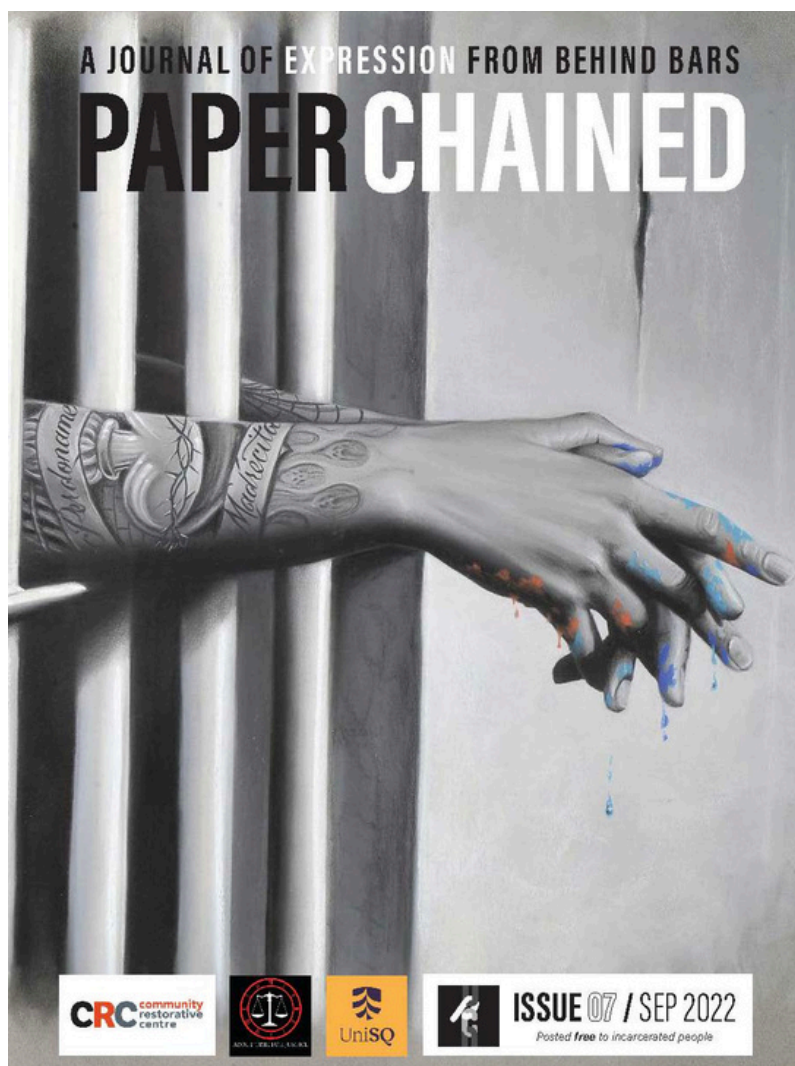
Chained. Then in 2021, I was given the opportunity to become the editor. I've published nine issues since then. We mostly print poetry and drawings, but we get all kinds of writing and art. I also generate content such as doing interviews, mostly with former prisoners, or writing articles on subjects that I think will interest people inside.

Helping prisoners with their mental health

'Be the change you want to see in the world' is an aphorism I've always identified with. *Paper Chained* is what I needed in prison, and if nothing else, I'm thankful that my incarceration has indirectly given me the most meaningful and enjoyable job I've ever had. The magazine appears to have been what other people have needed too. The letters I get from people in custody have been overwhelming. Some of it really hits home.

'I would like to share my gratitude... for influencing me to add my poems that I thought would stay in my shoebox forever. I appreciate this platform and all the people who are brave enough to share their truth. Much Love and Respect.'

I've been told *Paper Chained* is the closest thing people have to 'anything educational or rehabilitative' inside, and that it helps people with their mental health, with staying positive, and even with just escaping boredom for a little while.



Issue 7 artwork by Gary Brunzo in Nebraska, USA.

'Thank you for allowing us inside to have the freedom of expression of a voice we at times feel is lost.'

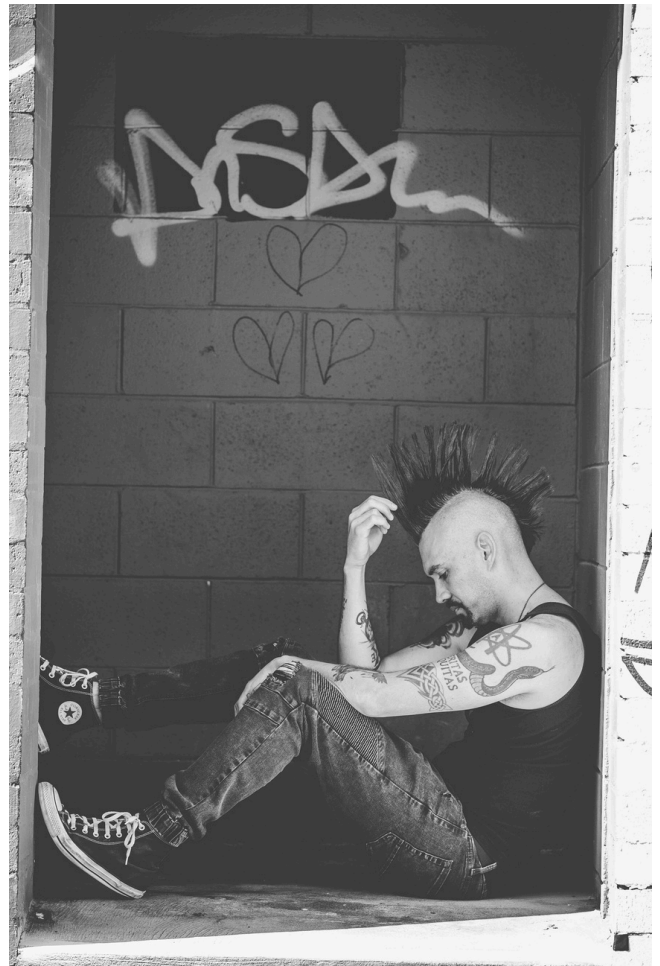
Sharing the words of prisoners all over the world

It's impossible to say how many readers we have for several reasons. Firstly, there are two versions of the magazine. The one that is freely available on our website, and the one that is loaded onto the tablets now made available to the **12,000 people in custody in NSW**.

But the reach of *Paper Chained* extends well beyond our home state. Individual prisons and custodial staff in Victoria, Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory have told me they download the magazine from our website and make it available for prisoners. *Paper Chained* has also reached **prisoners overseas**. One day I got an email from a man in New Zealand, thanking me for giving his brother a creative outlet, saying he hadn't seen him so excited to make art in years.

Unfortunately for some, the magazine came a little too late. One prisoner in Texas sent me a single, tragic poem about his dysfunctional childhood, and giving up hope during his life-sentence. He lamented he had thrown out a collection of hundreds of poems a couple of years earlier, out of frustration at not being able to do anything with them for over two decades.

Paper Chained is subject to some **light censorship**. For example, **NSW Corrections** won't allow us to criticise by name or even **mention controversy about any current or former NSW public servants**, even if the writing is

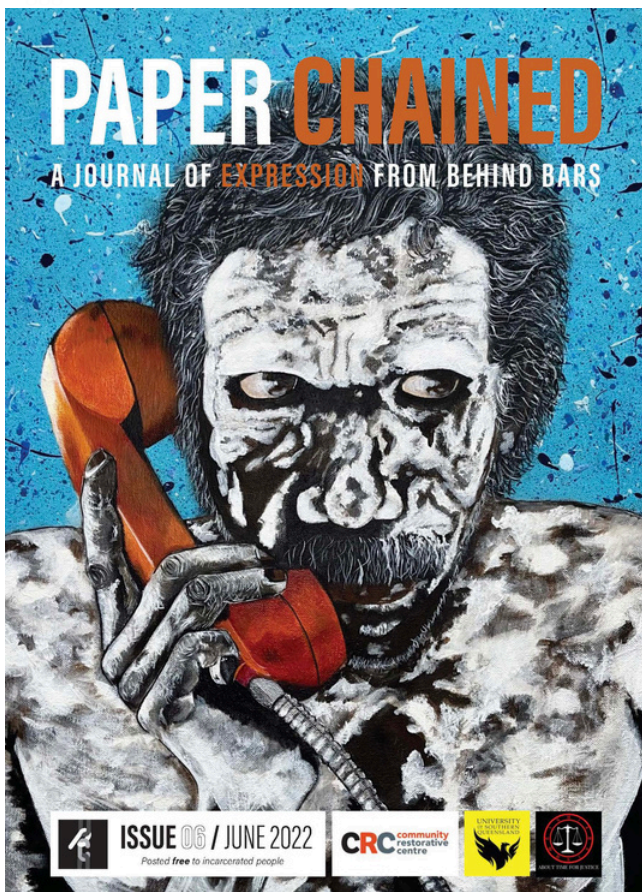


undeniably true. We also used to run a **pen-pal program connecting people in different prisons**, but Corrections in Victoria, NSW and QLD all had a problem with that, and started banning the magazine. **Eventually we had to shut down the program to get the bans overturned.**

Overall though, our contributors have been given a lot of freedom to talk about their **personal issues and air constructive criticism of the prison system**. I genuinely believe doing so is healthy, and can only serve to reduce tensions inside by **making people feel heard**. I know personally how **not having a voice or avenue of expression can affect your mental health in custody**.

I've become extremely fascinated with the history of prison publications in Australia and now I'm doing a PhD on the subject. People keep asking me what I want to do with my studies, and if it's a stepping stone to academia. It's actually just a passion project that expanded out of my involvement with *Paper Chained*. Ideally, once I graduate, I'd like to dedicate more time to the magazine. We are **hamstrung by a lack of funding** but it has incredible potential for expanding its reach and the amount of services it can offer. I look forward to hopefully many years of **continuing to support incarcerated writers and artists by providing them with a voice**.

Damien Linnane is the editor of *Paper Chained*, a journal of expression from behind bars



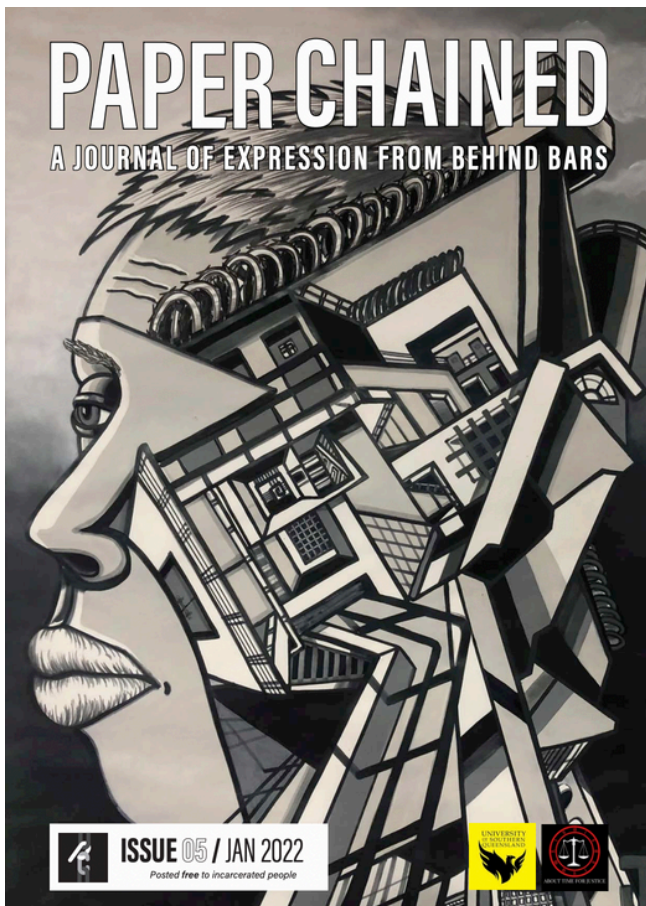
Cover artwork of Issue 6, *Past is Calling*, provided by N21.

Deadman Talkin'

By Ojore McKinnon, published in Issue 5 of *Paper Chained*

Look who's talkin'
A deadman walkin'
Comin' live from death-row
Payin' a debt a jury says I owe
My life, was decided by who put
on the best show
My innocence, never was an issue
The D.A. said, "I'm out to get
you"
Now I'm waitin' in the attorney
line
Behind the guilty, who admitted
their crimes
Where are the protesters for my
injustice

Where are the people I entrusted
I'm a deadman talkin' with
disgust
Society I object
To your legal right to inject
With murderous poisons
You already got me illegally in
prison
Told me ignorance of the law is
no excuse
You should've told that to the
attorney you appointed for my
use
And addressed the government's
misconduct and abuse
You make 'em, you break 'em
They are your laws
You raised reasonable doubt and
won on probably cause
I'm too black for you to see your
flaws
And the nerve of you, to require
me to sign the death certificate
Or it's the choice of your wish
Gas or electricity
Isn't this a crime against
humanity?



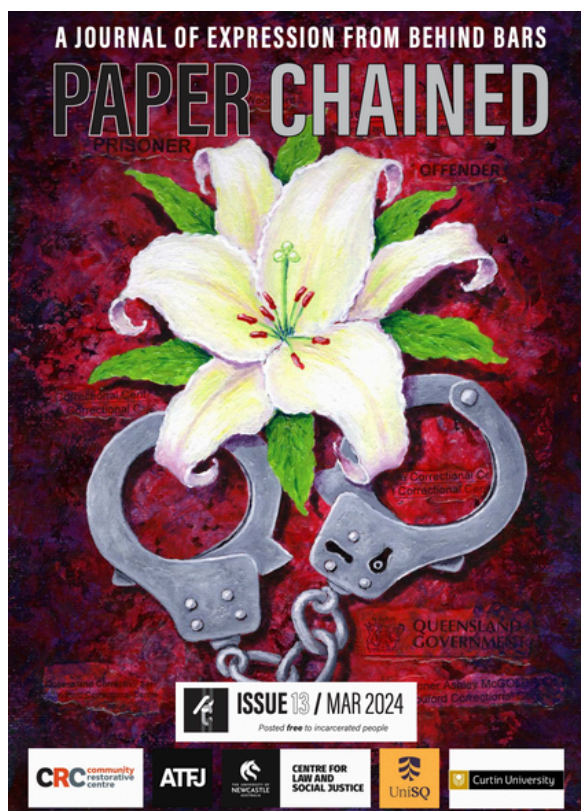
Issue 5, cover art by Jayde Farrell.

Crandell Ojore McKinnon denies he committed the two murders that he was jailed for in 1999. He is on death row in San Quentin Prison in California.

An excerpt from publication of *Paper Chained* magazine

by Stacey Stokes

Plastic Gangsters



Issue 13, cover art by Ashley McGoldrick.

Plastic Gangsters are carnivores and will hunt in packs, using ambush tactics to surprise and easily overpower their prey. They will then consume every part of the prey, leaving no trace. The main prey of Plastic gangsters are Rock Spiders.

It has been suggested that the Plastic could be used by dog handlers in the army, harnessing their aggression.

But so far they have been found to be too easily startled and too cowardly for anything actually useful and prone to run off.

It was also shown that they sniffed people's butts more than the dogs did. Due to this strange development, the Plastics were then used as a sort of sniffer dog, but they ate all the drugs they found, resulting in many overdoses.

Research continues into a constructive use for these semi-intelligent creatures.

Plastic Gangsters is an excerpt from a unpublished novella, *12HEROIN, the Great Destroyer the Road Never Ends*

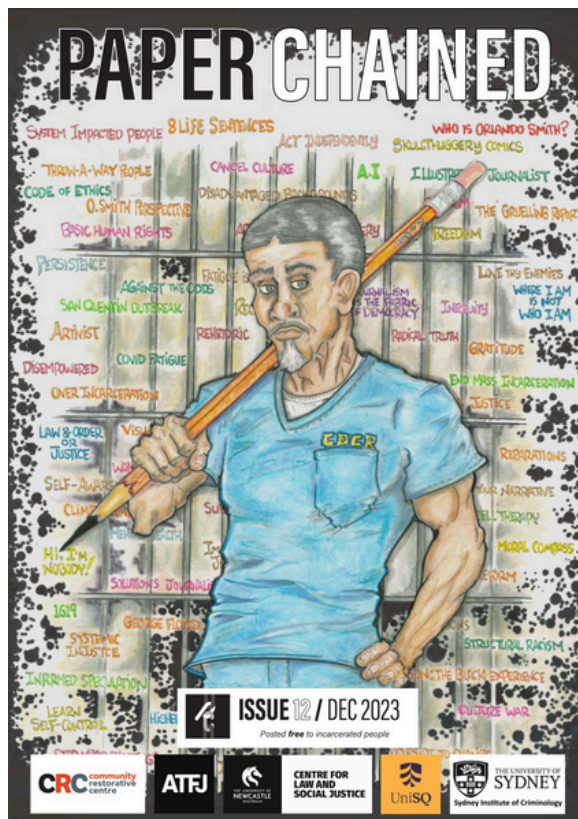
The Plastic Gangster is a native animal of Victoria and as such is a protected species. Meaning they are kept in protected environments away from any real danger.

Despite being highly aggressive, they are also extremely cowardly, and will flee at the first hint of danger.

A Plastic Gangster can be easily identified by their posture. They stand and walk as if they are carrying very heavy objects in both hands and puff out their chests.

Every Plastic Gangster wears extremely tight human clothing they have found somewhere. But researchers aren't sure why.

Perhaps the easiest way to identify a Plastic Gangster though is by the distinctive facial markings in the shape of a tear under one eye.



Issue 12, cover art by Orlando Smith.

Writings by **Stacey Stokes #208153**

Langi Kal Kal Prison

An evening with Behrouz Boochani

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah on dignity, identity and future directions



On a spring evening in November last year, I headed to the NSW State Library for an evening of dialogue with Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish writer known for his piercing blue eyes, unruly hair, and seldom-seen smile. The event was a conversation between Behrouz and his friend **Ben Doherty**, the international affairs correspondent for *The Guardian*. It was hosted by *PEN Sydney*, as part of 'PEN International's Day of the Imprisoned Writer.'

The audience's anticipation was briefly interrupted by a false fire alarm, but as Behrouz humorously remarked, **'They can't silence me.'** Behrouz began by sharing his experiences as a writer, exercising his creativity and reflection. **Growing up as a minority under the Iranian regime**, Behrouz knew from a young age that he would be a steadfast **seeker of freedom**, regardless of the paths life might lead him down.

His quest for freedom took him to **Manus Island**, where he was **detained as an asylum seeker**. It was there, in the confines of his cell, that Behrouz began writing on WhatsApp, sharing the untold stories of his fellow detainees—people who still believed in blue skies, peaceful smiles, and the graceful seasons of life. Writing became his lifeline, reminding him of his humanity, dignity, and the innate desire to live fully amidst life's adversities. 'I am a writer,' he affirmed to himself repeatedly. When a guard handed him hundreds of letters from his readers, he felt a profound sense of equality with the guard.

'I am not just an asylum seeker, a refugee,' his inner voice reiterated, 'I am a writer.'

And that identity, he vowed, would never be silenced, as he continued to write and create.

Labelling writers needs a rethink

How often do we encounter interviews, introductions, or documentaries about writers whose identities are layered with descriptors like 'immigrant', 'Muslim', 'refugee', 'black', 'aboriginal', 'female', and more? **We're forced to consider the significance of a writer's background in such instances.** Whenever Behrouz is introduced, he is often prefaced as 'Refugee writer Behrouz.' But how crucial is it for readers to know whether a writer is a refugee or immigrant, **beyond mere marketing and sales strategies?**



Behrouz's discussion about identity deeply resonated with me. I am often labelled as a 'female poet,' 'Uyghur poet,' 'refugee writer,' and so forth. I have grappled with this labelling, feeling a longing to be introduced simply as a writer. Have you ever heard someone introduced as a 'white Australian Christian writer'? I doubt it. So why should we, as minorities in Australia, constantly have titles preceding our names? What purpose does it serve other than to further segregate us from society, hindering our ability to belong and integrate fully? I wouldn't mind being introduced as a 'talented writer,' 'courageous writer,' 'productive writer,' and so on, just like any other 'normal' writer in Australia.

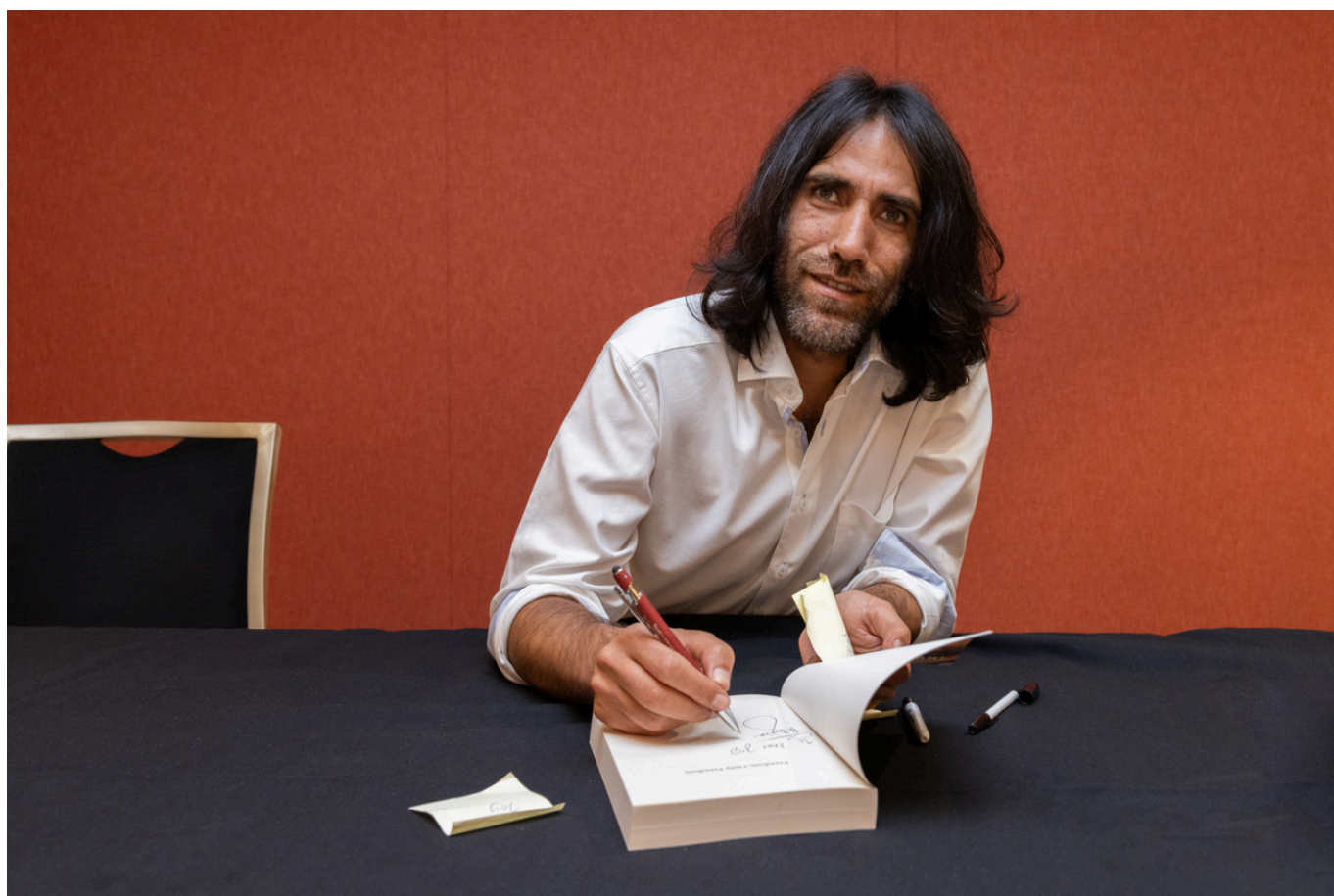
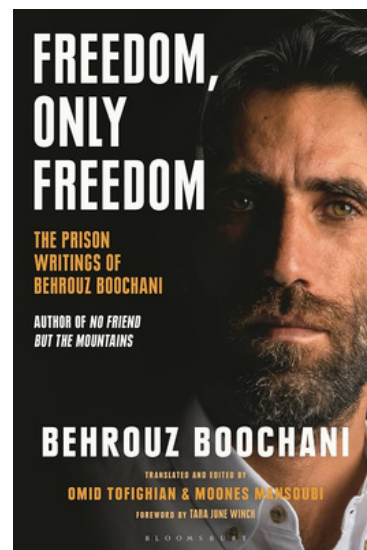
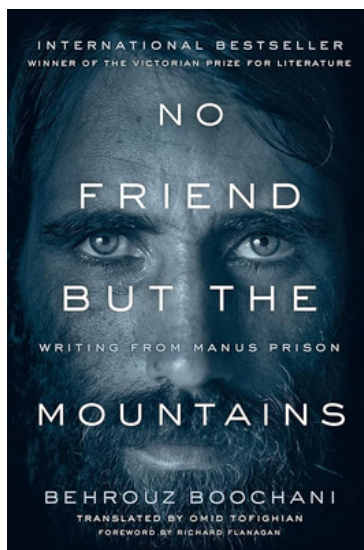


Relentless pursuit of freedom

In Behrouz's eyes, I noticed a profound sadness—a sadness not just stemming from his personal suffering as a Kurdish writer in Iran or his time in the Manus Island detention centre, but a sadness borne from a deep concern for humanity. In his latest book, *Freedom, Only Freedom* Behrouz articulates this concern and his relentless pursuit of freedom.

Behrouz Boochani's presence that evening was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, the power of storytelling, and the enduring quest for freedom.

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah is a poet and geophysicist living and working on Gadigal land



FREEDOM TO WRITE

FREEDOM TO READ

PEN Sydney has been protecting freedom of expression for more than 90 years.

Raising awareness about writers in prison

Fighting censorship of the media, the internet and publishing

Promoting the voices of writers who are marginalised

Supporting writers fleeing war or political oppression

Defending the right to write and read in any language

Creating a community of writers, readers and activists sharing ideas

**Be a part of the conversation – become a
PEN Sydney friend**

You'll receive: the PEN Sydney magazine and early tickets to our events.

Your annual membership of \$80 or \$40 is tax deductible.

Use the QR code to make a difference.

