

# The Writer as an Agent of Change

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## Why I Write

I write to answer incipient questions that trouble my mind. I write to relieve some form of anxiety, the question of anxiety being an unanswerable question, since the object cause of anxiety, the shadow of it, cannot be symbolised. I write because I must do so, exhilarating, detestable, painful though this act or impulse might be. I write because it is my joy, the paradoxical satisfaction that I derive from my symptom and the excesses of an enjoyment that is closer to pain than pleasure. My reasons for writing echo the words of Dominique Hecq, a scholar, a friend, a mentor—in her article “Writing the Unconscious: Psychoanalysis for the Creative Writer” (Hecq 4), who looked at the potential usefulness of psychoanalysis for the creative writer. These are words that speak to me personally. I think of the writer as an agent of change. As a writer, I have the persistence, the perseverance, the responsibility, the energy and desire as a creative to be an inspiration, in representing diversity, a voice for the voiceless, in connecting through storytelling.

I choose speculative fiction as a safe space to confront matters of the “everyday,” albeit in imagined places. Any fiction may be a journey through time, taking you back to your childhood, reminding you of a more innocent time. Fiction can put us at ease, but speculative fiction in particular can help us, mind-travellers, journey to mystical worlds with characters we’re curious about. Sometimes even non-humanoid characters can remind us of our own humanity. In its outside-mainstream alterity, speculative fiction embraces difference and invention, aspects that underpin the fundamental “what if” questions that drive its invention. In its cosmological timeframe and perspective, speculative fiction can provoke or offer responses to global racial, gender, environmental, and other crises.

## Writerly Agents of Change

I’d like to share with you some notable agents of change. In his letter from a Birmingham, Alabama, jail, penned on 16 April 1963 (Bill of Rights Institute, 2021), Dr Martin Luther King, Jr wrote: “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.” That same year, he delivered his renowned “I Have a Dream” speech that marked him as an agent of change who would later die for his dream, his belief, his hope in humanity. Kurdish–Iranian refugee writer, Behrouz Boochani, is another agent of change. Boochani wrote a memoir on WhatsApp while detained on Manus Island. He wrote himself to freedom. His memoir *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) won the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Victorian Premier’s Prize for Nonfiction. Boochani touched the judges, and the many he clearly impacted. Toni Morrison is another writer who is an agent of change. She was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993). In 1988, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* (1987). Morrison stated in her Nobel lecture: “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (30). Morrison made her writing personal, and she cast her characters—their battles with or acceptances of being black—in an accessible way. For Morrison, the black novel is important because, as Rachel K. Ghansah writes, it can “suggest what the conflicts are, what the problems are,” not necessarily as a means of solving them but as a way of recording and reflecting them (9).

Similarly, speculative fiction has equipped authors like Octavia Butler with the foundations to cultivate inclusive worlds and characters. Butler finally decided to “write herself in” because the stories of her time did not feature an “other” like her. She wrote speculative fiction of change, sexism, power and politics, with black heroine protagonists as in *Fledgling* (2005), a speculative fiction novel that stars a young black vampire girl. I learn from these authors as mentors and use surreal stories in dreamlike sequences as calls to action for change in fantastical literature that demands the reader to trust and find immersion in the story’s impossibility.

### Performing My Readings: The Visual Power of Text

When I perform my stories at conferences and events, it is my hope that the listeners might immerse themselves in the illusions I offer, or become entranced by the imagery, or cement an idea through my satire, and even find ways that my work challenges accepted tenets of realism. Because I intend to provoke my readers and audiences, I accompany the reading with grotesque illustrations of excess designed to shock.

Here is an example of my prose poem “Damaged Beyond Words”:



Illustration by Elena Betti. Reproduced with permission of artist.

Phone zombies, incapable of loving, meander across the streets in a smear of shapes, a rain of fate. Disenchanted with life, they shadow frenetic social media in tweets that never look like missing. As lightning strikes, winter falls, the silent march is a drum circle. Dogs yap yap as the zombies stalk our planet, eyes glued on their smart phones, uncaring to gravity or friction as real people pass them by.

(“Damaged Beyond Words” 14–15)

I rarely offer explanations of my work and prefer to let the text (and associated imagery) speak for itself. The image of a child does the heavy lifting in “a mist blanket”:



Illustration by Elena Betti. Reproduced with permission of artist.

she walks with a gap across a city choked in smoke each day  
 disrupted as cynics protest pundits joke theories fly  
 about the cavernous hole in her torso why tar-shined  
 ravens and death-watch beetles soar through it no one  
 offers a mist blanket so she can fold her wings at midnight  
 she looks at herself mutters a prayer or a dream of rings  
 gives anyone who looks an opus of her hollow

(“a mist blanket” 27)

I often display a stark image of a skeleton alongside “lost skin”:

*it's too much so she stole her husband's  
 scissors—  
 as he huddled in her bed—  
 and snipped memories of belonging  
 thatched roofs that hum, the names of all those  
 people, a knock on a door to beg salt ...  
 each snip is an altarpiece  
 a reminder of tragedy  
 from every eave*

(“lost skin” n. p.)

### “Unlimited Data”

This is the story of an illiterate village woman who gives up everything for her husband and child, all for a program that comes in the form of a Bluetooth chip inserted into her body. A simple image of a woman wearing a “gomez,” also known as a “gomesi,” the traditional Ugandan dress, works well for the story set in Old Kampala. The audience can relate to the gomez when it appears in the text:

Natukunda had a stall at the market in Old Kampala. Wood, sticks and sacks held the ramshackle thing together. She sold pineapples, mangoes, watermelons, bananas and jackfruits, sometimes papayas, guavas, sweet potatoes and tomatoes. What she earned was a pittance. But she could buy the occasional *gomesi* of imported cotton, six metres of it. Rose and lime were her favourite, puffed sleeves brightly coloured and reaching the floor. Each *gomesi* fitted her just right, its sash over her hips. When the metres allowed, she made a headdress.

Sometimes she sent money to her parents out east in Mbale. They were always sick with malaria, bilharzia or dysentery, and the witchdoctor's herbs and beheaded cockerel were not working. The old folk needed to walk into a clinic, and the white man's tablets cost money.

Now she looked at her husband, as though he wore empty tins around his leg. 'You're mad, foolish or both,' she said. 'Take me back to my parents and they will return your dowry.'

'Crooked wood shows the best sculptor. The programmer is working with nature. His invention will change our lives.'

'And who knows about this programy?'

'Everybody.'

'So why aren't they buying it?'

'He who can't dance says the ground is full of rocks. But you and I know better than that. We dance like there is no tomorrow.'

'And you say a chippy?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Inside my body?'

'Yes.'

'Will it hurt?'

'So tiny in your neck, you won't feel a thing.'

'Like when I cut my foot on that hoe and the dokita at the clinic did me tetanus with a needo and I didn't get sick?'

'Yes, easy like a shot. You're doing this for us. For you and me and Mukasa. And your parents. I can work with no worry about data on my phone, and you can send more money to your people. It's important that you do this.'

'For whaty?'

'Unlimited data. It's called Bluetooth. Waves from your body will connect with my smart phone and we'll pair. You'll never need a telephone for yourself—your whole body will be a smart phone. And I'll never need to buy data bundles again. It all comes with the chip.'

'Bullytoothy for how long?'

'It lasts a lifetime,' he said.

'And a man named after the rediyo told you this?'

'When you show the moon to a child, it sees only your finger. Natu, try and see the shiny moon beyond the finger.'

'Why can't you do it?' she asked, as Mukasa whimpered drowsy-eyed at her breast. She tucked her wrap around him.

'You take the chippy.'

'A woman is the queen of the Earth. The code needs your fertile body to work properly.' ('Unlimited Data,' 57–59)

The identification makes the story starker when the audience must confront Natukunda's dying:

Everyone was complicit in a fact that was neither fiction nor myth, but data. It did not depend on age or knowledge, just the insertion of a chip that started with an ideology and set into code. What happened after was unprecedented.

The first victim, Natukunda, was a woman in her twenties who lived in Old Kampala. Natukunda started displaying black moods and nearly battered her toddler Mukasa to death, if her husband hadn't snatched away the ill-fortuned waif.

By nightfall of the same day, the woman was complaining of severe fatigue. She refused to eat or drink, even when a relative girl—a teenaged daughter of a cousin of a cousin of an aunt—brought the woman her favourite plate of *luwombo*: cassava meal steamed in banana leaves and served in groundnut sauce.

Natukunda wouldn't consume anything all through the next day. She developed a dread to be seen and spoke in undone language, dreams inside dreams. When her husband dragged her from dark pockets under the bed, in a corner of the pit latrine, under sacks in a grain store ... she came out scratching at him and tearing at her neck. But she also displayed a shortness of breath.

The mental aberration when it happened exposed the woman to have forgotten her own name, that of her child and her husband.

'Natu,' said the husband. 'It's me, Kaikara.'

She blinked at him.

By the time her eyes lolled and her body shuddered, she was sobbing through tissue, blood and spit. It was too late to predict anything other than her chest would stop moving. Her pulse dimmed and then vanished, and no air came out of her nose.

Just then, glass-eyed, she gave one last shudder.

Heaving words fell from her sigh and cast swirling. They formed a line like night ink and, to anyone who could read—sadly, her husband couldn't—the words in a jumble said, 'Live, tracking, assessment, non-conformance, positioning, proof-of-concept, market, network usage volatile sad part unmute hop on hop on hoponhoponhoponhopon nononononono.'

(“Unlimited Data” 59–61)

### “When the Water Stops”

When I give readings of this story of a village woman in a vat, I tend to employ vivid images of crimson water droplets, slashing and dripping:

What she's doing this week is sitting in a bowl, right there in the heat shimmer. She's awash with memories of drowsing, unfolding, everything in slow motion. When she looks back on this time, what will she remember? She watches the smoke swirling like a benevolent hug, giant clouds bubbling out the words: *Where are you now?* Her soul is an object brightest in the sky. Today, she's a bleed. Tomorrow is a wish.

(“When the Water Stops” 75)

When I tell the story of “the big leader,” I employ a cartoonish caricature of the leader of the nation:

Ten years ago, the big leader came out of his shelter, keen to stand on the steps of a shrine opened as a museum to the Pope. He stunned human rights leaders, a few high courts and many mothers when he pushed out his lip and held a bible for one full minute, as the cameras snapped. Riot police fell with fat sticks, rubber bullets and gas masks on peaceful protesters brandishing slogans about the art of cherishing and love. What was a drop of blood when the economy outweighed civil unrest and stocks soared higher? Did you see the Dow, a gain of 267 points? And the advances in the Nasdaq Composite? Evolutionary theory was about natural selection, the form that would leave the most copies of itself.

Light years on, every archbishop in an alternate universe outraged by the misuse of a facility of worship would consider the historic violation of the principles of humanity, and utter three spaced words: I. Can't. Breathe.

Protests were always ugly, thought the leader. And a new election was coming up. (“When the Water Stops” 76)

Then there's the rich woman in the metropolis, killing people in her cellar—“Turn off the sound of their groaning!” she snaps to her servants, as she clutches to her breast a labradoodle puppy. Or a black man who gazes out in trepidation of what he has done to his village wife, and the fourteen ravenous children that are, for him, simply “options.” An image of Afia, a hungry-looking child, gazes at the world:

I am a broken egg on a blistered road. A dying bird on a razor wire fence. The jackal trots this way, that way, sizing how to eat me. My nostalgia is here again, no school, no soup. Just an empty sky whistling as we bury our dead. I am a marked card, red marks the spot. The arrow will whiz into the eye of a dried-up fountain. Are you my mother? There's a skeleton trapped in the black mamba's hissing. Grey feathers swirling the wrong way. (“When the Water Stops” 79)

A skeletal child droopy-eyed, bones sticking out of ribs, reminiscent of the photos we saw of a famine-stricken Somali—manifests the youngest child who speaks:

I'm in search of something I don't know. There's a hand and a gaze, a smile and a scent. It's a comfort, it's a warmth. I don't remember the face that comes and goes, the love that is a crack. It's complicated, it's unsafe. Blurred and full of crumble. (“When the Water Stops” 79)

A long silence generally follows each reading, and the ominous nature of the story's closing words:

You think of this moment, over and over, wishing you and the rest of the world remembered different. (“When the Water Stops” 79)

## A Writerly Dream

In closing, I hope these prose poems and speculative stories, along with the way I perform my readings of them, suggest my vision of writing as a tool of subversive activism. As writers, we can only hope that the reader understands what is at stake.

And now I am going to tell you one more story. A story that is a dream. It's not speculative fiction, although it is speculative; it's in everyday language. My story offers the words that Dr Martin Luther King might have written in the currency of our turbulent times. These are words he might speak from the grave, as crowds march, and protestors fight each other, as others chant for peace, for justice, for equality, for humanity.

*We live in a perilous world. Surrounded by cyber threats, terrorists, poverty, disease, local and global political upheaval, and intolerance.*

*Australia is at a time that comes with a fierce urgency of Now. This is not the time to be complacent. It's not the time to sit on the fence. It's a time to know what we stand for, and to engage with difference in a meaningful way. Now is the time to find unity, for we are one.*

*Black or white or red or yellow, we are a people together.*

*Now is the time to rise from racial discrimination, age discrimination, gender discrimination, disability discrimination, religious and all other discrimination. It's the time to engage with difference in all its faces, and ask ourselves how we might find unity in a breaking world.*

*Are we so complacent in our place within society to notice how the world is breaking, and others are hurting? Now is the time to find kinship, to make justice and equality a reality for all... No one must walk alone.*

*As we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I have a dream that one day this world, this nation, this state, this community will rise and live out the true meaning of all men and women are created equal. That we will be present, that we will live in the moment, that we will let our voices, our choices be heard.*

This is my hope. This is what I seek in my writing. As a writer who hopes to be an agent of change, I seek to break the circle of silence and to engage with difference. Let us work together, struggle together, stand together for freedom and tolerance and equality. And maybe... there will be the day—there will be the day when all people of Australia might sing with new meaning: *For we are one and free.*

And so let freedom and equality ring from the streets of Victoria.

Let freedom and equality ring from the beaches of New South Wales.

Let freedom and equality ring from the mountain tops and river trails of Tasmania.

Let freedom and equality ring from the outskirts of Noosa, Queenscliff, Broome, Woolloomooloo, London, New York, and in all places like Gaza and Lebanon and Ukraine where the world is bleeding.

From every street and mountainside, let freedom and equality ring.

Let freedom... tolerance... equality.

*I write to answer incipient questions that trouble my mind ...*

*I write because I must do so, exhilarating, painful though this might be.*

*I write as a writer who is an agent of change because I have a dream.*

*I have a dream.*

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