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# Is This It?

A first-time author's expectations versus the crush of reality

BY HEATHER BABCOCK



**LOCATED AT THE END OF A STREET** in South Etobicoke lined with modern, sharp-edged buildings, the little yellow bungalow is like a satisfying slab of butter on the tip of a sterling silver knife. Its faded green door boasts a filthy yet gorgeous Art Deco window, and its overgrown lawn is dotted with friendly dandelions. Once upon a time, this little house was somebody's pride and joy.

I discovered the little yellow bungalow during the sweet, ephemeral period between the time after my debut novel, *Filthy Sugar*, was accepted for publication and before it was released out into the world. Like many Canadians, particularly those of us who make our living in the arts sector, the idea of home ownership is less of a dream and more of a fantasy, but during that blissful post-acceptance/pre-publication period, I allowed myself to dream a little. The little house came to symbolize all of the hopes I had for my book's success: I pictured glamorous wine and cheese launches; a whirlwind nationwide book tour; and, of course, my little yellow bungalow to come home to. I'd never feel insecure again. This was it — I had arrived.

I didn't realize then what I know now: that rejection doesn't end after publication.

My novel was released in May 2020, during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the day my book was launched, instead of getting all dolled up for a wine and cheese party, I spent most of the afternoon on my front steps waiting for FedEx to deliver my author copies. I was so afraid of missing them that I'd forgotten to put sunscreen on; by the time my delivery arrived I was as hot pink as my book's cover. I remember ripping open the box, taking one of the books out and holding it reverently in my hands, waiting to feel something.

But all that came was a sinking sensation: "Is this it?" After the many years of hard work and anticipation, sitting alone on the floor of my basement apartment with a cardboard box of books in my lap felt anticlimactic. My disappointment intensified when my publisher, Inanna Publications, informed me that due to the pandemic, Amazon and Indigo had cancelled all their spring book

orders. As I anxiously texted friends and family the news that the best way to buy my book was directly through my publisher's website, I realized that if my novel was going to be at all successful, I would need to be its biggest cheerleader. And that meant that this formerly brick-and-mortar girl would need to get online, stat.

My novel is set in the 1930s, so my dear author friend Liz Worth hosted a fun "virtual speakeasy" over Zoom to celebrate my book, while my publisher also held a virtual

launch that was attended by almost 100 people — much more than many physical bookstores would have been able to accommodate. I became active on WordPress and Instagram, where I reached out to book bloggers — and was pleasantly surprised when a few agreed to write reviews. In spite of the pandemic, and with the help of Inanna's wonderful publicist, my novel had a debut that I'm pretty proud of.

**... I realized that if my novel was going to be at all successful, I would need to be its biggest cheerleader.**

These were the highs, but of course, there were lows. If being a newly published author feels a bit like Cinderella, the first bad review is midnight striking. And damn, it strikes hard. A glowing write-up in *Historical Novels Review* had me walking on air but my first one-star Goodreads rating a week later quickly shot me back down to earth. Dustin Hoffman nailed it when he said that "a good review from the critics is just another stay of execution."

Today, when I walk by that little yellow house, I think back to that blissfully innocent post-acceptance/pre-publication period and I smile: my novel wasn't the happy ending that I had anticipated. It's only just the beginning.

.....  
**Heather Babcock's** debut novel, *Filthy Sugar*, was published by Inanna Publications in 2020. She has had short fiction and essays published in many literary journals, most recently, *The Humber Literary Review*. In 2015, her chapbook *Of Being Underground and Moving Backwards* was published by DevilHouse Press. Babcock is currently working on a novel tentatively titled *The Memory of Crows*.  
 .....



COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE



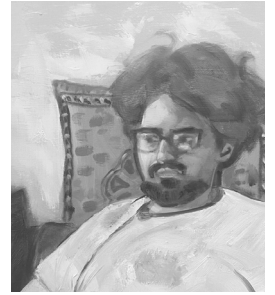
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# On Power, Propaganda, and Cross-Lingual Poetry

BY KHASHAYAR MOHAMMADI

**THERE WAS A VIRAL TWEET** going around the back-then-Twitter of 2021. The tweet had tens of thousands of interactions whose exact numbers I don't remember. A fellow BIPOC poet was addressing a problem numerous multilingual poets face: when using words from the mother tongue (i.e., not English) should they always be translated for the English speaking audience or not? It's a question that follows many writers who work across languages, and it's not one that I'm particularly interested in responding to — but what specifically struck me in this short 280-character quip was the author's claim that BIPOC “didn't have to translate themselves for a white audience.”

## Cross-lingual writing

All the omitted information here is intentional, since my conversation is not with anyone on that thread. The thread simply helped me form my own view of how poetics can be conveyed cross-lingually, regardless of “translation.” A view I will hopefully elucidate over the course of this essay.

By the time I was reading the above-mentioned tweet, I had published a debut collection whose third section was entirely based on homonyms between English and Persian, and when time came for a notes section, I wasn't particularly keen on including translations (or any context really) for this cross-lingual presentation. So my general response to the tweet was one of sympathy, but my more specific response was not about the fact of translation itself, but a simple misjudgment of audiences.

At the heart of that tweet was an experience that I had

grappled with personally: writing my first book across *my* language and English, I had somehow assumed that my audience will be divided into the two sides of “Iranian audience” (simple and reasonable so far) and, through some weird leap, the remainder had become “white audience.” The simple logical response here is that between “Iranian” and that nebulous “white” there is an endless range of readers who in fact cover the majority of any audience, not only mine. This <insert culture> versus <white audience> (whatever it means in its endlessly nebulous form!) are both incredibly small minorities at either end, both of whose ethno-national commitments to homogeneity breaks the very foundations of translingual writing.

I first encountered cross-lingual writing through the writings of Canada's own legendary Erin Mouré; someone whose profound linguistic curiosity has fuelled me every day since the evening I first found a first edition copy of her book *Furious* at She Said Boom!, a secondhand bookstore in Toronto. In Mouré, I found an unwavering faith in superstitious language, by which I mean a language that is not afraid to not understand, a language of sounds and surfaces. Mouré specifically celebrates what we may not understand and not only revels in ambiguity of languages, but in my opinion, considers that ambiguity an incredibly important act in radically liberating language from heteropatriarchal forces that want to “tame” language out of metaphor.

Mouré trusts sound, an incredibly important aspect of poetry that has been slowly stripped from the written form in an act of dividing language into the mind/body

dichotomy of writing/speech. Through this process, spoken word and oral traditions are cleverly overlooked, while the page is elevated. This return to the dynamics of sound is a return to the language of the body: it is a radical act of liberation from, firstly, the colonial forces that create borders across languages and homogenize its use, and from the patriarchal forces that dismiss the vernacular entirely.

I say all this now, almost 10 years after my first interaction with Mouré's work. In the beginning, her work was "difficult" for me; but I've always had a knack for difficult work. I persevered to understand Mouré's project. I do not mean I tried to understand every word; I was simply trying to get from the ambient discourse budding around the "accessibility" of poetry to where I am today.

### **A different side of "accessibility"**

Here is where I need to speak very carefully. I'm going to discuss a side of "accessibility" in poetry but want to be clear that this is separate from the disability activism that has been crucial in the growth of accessible poetics in the past 10 years.

When discussing poetry, there are two different meanings for "inaccessible":

First, writing that refuses to take disabled audiences into account and therefore completely severs them from certain literature. There is always a need to improve accessibility here, and this is not what I mean when I discuss "accessible" and "inaccessible" writing.

In contrast, there is writing that challenges the status quo. Writing that refuses colonial vocabulary and narrative. Writing that radically challenges the very foundations of oppression in our language. Writing that does away with all harmful information embedded within language we've been fed our entire lives.

The language of disability activism, a tool for radical liberation and a call for mass education, can be manipulated into becoming a language used for the oppression of radical language itself. The general discourse of "accessibility" becomes appropriated from the first sense of "liberation for all" to the second stage, where those in power don't feel included in the discussion, or worse, feel threatened, and therefore use the term "accessibility" to strike down any writing that challenges them. Before we know it, any language that dares to question where power is located within the vernacular is deemed "inaccessible" in an ironic twist.

### **The canon and linguistic boundaries**

The challenge to the status quo can come from crossing any literary boundary, but considering how literature is a language-based medium, the challenge of crossing

linguistic boundary comes into direct contact with the idea of "canonization." Canada's literature has spent considerable time carving itself a distinct identity — one that has been undoubtedly affected by municipal, provincial, and federal funding bodies. This literary identity is a "body" that is created, first against an already existing canon (in Canada first against British and then American poetry) and then, assimilated into a body of its own. A funded literature is therefore always measured through and against a canon built on ethno-nationalist agendas. The very crossing of the linguistic border challenges perhaps the most fundamental of these measuring devices. Unlike many categories within the literary tradition, translingual writing holds more diversity within its category than outside of it.

A funded writing will always therefore feed the nationalist interests of its funding body to preserve the canon or to move it ever so slightly towards a future that expands it but does not undermine its very fundamentals i.e., the nation-state.

## **Living across borders of language and culture trains one's mind into holding various meanings.**

We are living in a time of rampant nationalism, a time of ever-so-heightened patriarchy that fuels a worldwide machinery of femicide, a fervent anti-intellectualism that prevents any effort to break down fascism, warmongering and its underlying systems of colonial violence, and I'd like to think that so much of the general lack of intellectual curiosity stems from a simple lack of linguistic curiosity.

### **The "apparatus of language"**

We think in language. We express ourselves in language. We connect ideas together through language. In our constantly televised and audio-visually propagated world, each reference has severe consequences. The president of the United States can call Covid-19 "The Chinese Virus" and it can fuel years of anti-Asian hatred. Words hold crucial meaning in our daily lives, and the average consumer of media is consuming language without the proper inquisitive toolkit to break down its various misdirections.

This is where working across languages can serve to sow profound doubt on the apparatus of language itself. Living across borders of language and culture trains one's

mind into holding various meanings, considering layers to languages and their development, and on a deeper level, recognizing the very basic philosophical idea that language isn't as precise a tool in describing the real world as most give it credit. A cross-lingual education opens one to banal but elusive ideas such as that two people using the term "accessible" may be referring to two different concepts.

This is not to undermine the power of the vernacular, but it is important to note that a chronically monolingual culture often puts too much faith in the precision of its language, either by naïveté or through the cunning oversight of the education system. This lack of

## **Language is a dangerous tool in the hands of political power, but it is the most democratic form of expression, one that does not cost us.**

linguistic curiosity is one of the reasons it is so easy for propaganda to ensnare us by using keywords. A political leader has clear access to a minority's neuron web of linguistic terminology and knows which terms to reach by plucking which neuron web. Only through a deeper linguistic education can one easily catch the common traps of media itself. Propaganda can only work within a single symbolic order, and it struggles to dupe someone who has ever experienced a disturbance in their symbolic order.

Fascism works best in rigid language, which is a preserving and safekeeping of an ethno-nationalistic symbolic order.

By learning certain languages, one can learn that there are in fact, languages less susceptible to certain ideologies. A Japanese speaker, who can choose between a selection of 18 first-person pronouns to express their age, gender, and general self-expression, may have a much more complex relationship to pronouns than a Persian or Malay speaker with no gendered pronouns in their languages at all. Without such experience of the intricacies of words, one might fall into a deep "superstition" of language as mentioned above. Where "meaning" is a nebulous series of qualifications, a "superstitious" approach to language can eliminate all possibilities for meaning other than the socially presented one.

Writing across languages therefore becomes an important act in democratizing the thinking process.

One might argue that one does not need to learn other languages to deepen linguistic curiosity, but even linguistic curiosity within one language comes with the learning of all languages that accumulated into what it is today. Is it really possible to grasp the deeper meaning of English without knowing Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes? without understanding the Germanic and Romantic roots of English words? without the Ancient Greek loan words? Therefore, a curious writing within one language itself is also writing across languages.

Intimacy with a language comes with the acceptance that language isn't a "problem" to be "solved." Yes, it does operate on the grounds of logic, but the drive to "solve" language into singular responses is exactly what I called above, a "supersititious" response. It is okay if language isn't always understood, because understanding is the exception and not the rule. It is enough to "play" this game of language as Wittgenstein would have put it.

Language is a dangerous tool in the hands of political power, but it is the most democratic form of expression, one that does not cost us. We can express ourselves in language with no material cost, and each of us has been privileged with a voice, sonic or not. Language can hold the seeds of revolution. Writing across linguistic boundaries is a revolutionary action that can help shape the minds of future generations into evading political entrapment. Reading, writing, and experiencing languages across cultural and national boundaries are crucial in shaping a future where we are immune to propaganda.

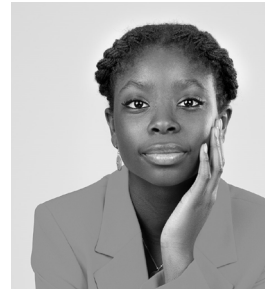
.....  
**Khashayar "Kess" Mohammadi** (they/them) is a queer, Iranian-born, Toronto-based poet, writer, and translator. They are the winner of the 2021 Vallum Poetry Prize and the author of four poetry chapbooks and the translator of three others. They have released two full-length collections of poetry with Gordon Hill Press, the full-length collaborative poetry manuscript *G* (Palimpsest Press) with Montreal Poet Klara Du Plessis, and a full-length collection of experimental dream-poems *Daffod\*ls* (Pamenar Press). Their translation of Ghazal Mosadeq's *Andarzname* (Ugly Duckling Presse) is forthcoming in 2025, as is their fifth poetry manuscript, *Book of Interruptions* (Wolsak and Wynn).



# Being a Youth Poet Laureate

“Strength and power that you can’t deny”

BY DÁMINÍ AWÓYÍGÀ



ON MAY 3, 2023, I became one of Halifax’s inaugural youth poets laureate (along with Asiah Sparks).

But my journey with poetry began seven years earlier, when I was 10 years old and attended the annual Girls Conference at Mount Saint Vincent University. The mission of the conference is to help girls “develop, appreciate, and celebrate their own abilities and talents and those of other girls and women, to help them to empower themselves, build confidence, and be a positive influence in their communities.”

At the conference, I read the poem “Black Girl Fly” by Fumilola Fagbamila, a professor at California State University, Los Angeles. The poem spoke to me because it portrayed the Black girl positively and profoundly. It spoke to a Black girl’s intelligence, joy, and triumph but also her struggles and her barriers. I really enjoyed the rhythm of the poem; it flows very smoothly when spoken, and it felt specifically dedicated to me.

I also enrolled in a workshop about the power of poetry run by author and activist El Jones, Halifax’s poet laureate from 2013 to 2015. My love for poetry blossomed through that workshop, and El became my mentor as I became an active spoken word poet in the community, performing around Nova Scotia and connecting with many people. My dreams started to expand, and when the youth poet laureate position was created, I knew I had to apply.

Many Canadian cities now have YPLs. We are resident ambassadors of poetry, storytellers, wordsmiths, and performers. During my year in the role, I promoted the positive impact of literature, poetry, and spoken word, and composed and wrote more than 50 poems, some performed at municipal events. I hope to one day publish them all in book form.

As the YPL, I performed at various events throughout the municipality, including Emancipation Day. On June 28, 2023, I wrote an entry in my poetry notebook, titled *Poetry Diaries: My Experience as the Inaugural Youth Poet Laureate*: “I’m planning on getting some new books from the library because I want to start writing some new poetry. I also believe I have a poetry performance on July 11 at 6 p.m. I’m excited to get started on my projects.” Later, on July 11, I performed my poem “Mirrors, Reflections, and Representations” for the regional council and mayor.

But being a YPL is about more than the performances. The role is an opportunity to show young Black, Indigenous, Brown, and other racialized youths who have been through similar experiences as me that they too can rise to achieve great things. In addition, being YPL gives us a bigger microphone to amplify our poetry, creating greater reach and awareness.

Early in my term, I felt it was important to bring youth poets laureate from across Canada together. I organized the YPL National Meetup, which provided an opportunity for us to connect, discuss the impact of our work, and share our poetry. Planning the event was challenging as I had to balance it with schoolwork and other creative events. However, it was a great success, and YPLs from all over Canada participated on Zoom. The meetup was filled with laughter, meaningful conversations, and shared poetry. I planned a collective poem activity to ensure that we could all connect, despite being miles apart. The collective poem turned out perfectly, and we wrote a meaningful piece that focussed on the themes of hope, inclusivity, and futurity.

Reflecting on my journey as the youth poet laureate, I am grateful for the opportunity to touch lives, inspire others, and leave a lasting impact.

As I continue to write, perform, and share my poetry, I dream of one day publishing a book that will carry the essence of my poetic journey and words spreading its magic far and wide.

.....  
**Dáminí Awóyigà** is a 16-year-old high school student, activist, and spoken word poet. She is also the founder of the Afro-Indigenous Book Club, a youth freelance journalist for CBC Radio in Halifax, and vice chair of CPA High School’s Black Student Association, in addition to serving on other boards and advisory councils. As a spoken word poet, Dáminí loves to write, sing, and perform poems that bring attention to social justice issues. She was a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Find her at [daminicreatives.com](http://daminicreatives.com).



See the back cover of this issue for a collage art work by Dáminí that accompanies this article.

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