

## Building Bridges through Writing: An Interview with Rohini Bannerjee

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**Rohini Bannerjee**, daughter of immigrant Settlers from Himachal Pradesh, India, was born and raised on unceded Mi'kmaki territory, on the Dartmouth side of the great harbour of Kijipuktuk. Chevalière de l'Ordre de la Pléiade, Rohini earned her PhD in French Studies at Western University in 2006 and is a Full Professor of French in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

A scholar, translator, and creative writer, Rohini's primary research focuses on the literatures and cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean. Papers on Mauritian literature have appeared in *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones*, *Indialogs* and *portAcadie*. In 2021, she co-edited *From Band-Aids to Scalpels: Motherhood Experiences in/of Medicine* with Demeter Press and, in 2024, *Premières Vagues: Poèmes covidien des espaces minoritaires et diasporiques de la francophonie* with L'Harmattan, Paris. During her tenure in both senior academic administration and as Faculty union president, Rohini led equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts at the University. Her short stories and poetry exploring themes on belonging, identity and body image, written in both French and English, have appeared in Canada, Spain, France, and India.

The following interview took place on March 14, 2023, at the University of Salamanca, when Dr. Rohini Bannerjee led the seminar "W/Righting Trajectories

of Diaspora” organized by Dr. Jorge Diego Sánchez. The interview was finished in an on-line chatroom on November 14, 2023.

**Sara Casco Solís:** *In one of your talks, you discussed the idea of self-identification. Why do you think self-identification is important?*

**Rohini Bannerjee:** I think I have to use my privilege to empower young people. African American writer Dr. Toni Morrison did teach us that when you get to the position of power as an educator, you need to make sure you make the space for them to be in that same place in the future. Dr. Morrison talks a lot about the power of education and my job as an educator is to make sure that the next person behind me feels worthy before they walk into the classroom. This is not simply about acquired knowledge or formal education, but to show up, fearlessly, as themselves. This is why self-identification is vital. We ask racialized people to self-identify; we need to acknowledge all of their layered identity. Many people question why this is important. It is important because we need to know who we are talking to, we cannot make changes unless we know this, we need the data. So, why are white people not asked to self-identify? Because the assumption is that they are at the centre of mainstream society and everybody else is *Other*. The racialization of white people, at least in Western society, is something that we are not used to imposing. So, when we all self-identify and if we all use language that is accessible for everyone, it really changes the playing field. We are in fact decentralizing racial identity.

**SCS:** *Canadian writers who migrated to Canada or were born there to immigrant parents have dealt with the issue of social rejection, especially at school. Annahid Dashtgard for example, is one of the writers who addresses this topic in her writings. Do you think this is still a problem in Canada?*

**RB:** Absolutely. When we are young people, there is a social conformity, a psychological connection with others by feelings: if I look like everyone else, I will not be pointed out, I will not look different, I will not be questioned or judged. So, young people, whether they are from an immigrant family or not, just want to look like their friends. Also, when we carry a name that is outside of the white dominant culture norm and when we pray differently or we eat that smells different than that of our friends', we are pointed out, we are found out. The differences are seen as an obstacle. This could change if children can learn at a young age that when they show up as themselves, no matter what, it is empowering, as we lessen the burden of trying to change.

I think that with the social rejection piece the number one is that we abandon ourselves first, we let go of who we are. And as we age, this gets worse and

worse. When we are young, we like ourselves, we do things that we like, and then we are told to be quiet, to stop, to listen, to behave, not to be creators, not to simply play with the crayons, not to explore, not to be curious, not to ask questions. That is a perfect student. We are actually indoctrinating our children into our education systems. Ironically, I am in education, but I want to decolonize education. I want to break the rules constantly—I do it from a safe place of privilege because I do not have a discerning accent when I speak English, I am able-bodied, I am married to a man with whom I have had three biological children—I have this whole set of societal perks, but I am very much trying to decolonize it every day, bit by bit.

One of these things is social rejection—I get rejected from social spaces all the time (sometimes I am oblivious to it and for some moments and spaces, I do not care about it), but when you are young, if those have impacts on how curious and how open you are to yourself, we abandon ourselves, that is, we are not creative, we do not love curiosity, we left that young child behind to ourselves. If we stop abandoning ourselves, the impacts of being socially rejected will lessen; it takes a lot of bravery and courage. The Canadian writer of Iranian heritage Annahid Dashtgard did a wonderful job on this matter with her book, *Breaking the Ocean: A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Reconciliation*.

**SCS:** How would you describe the current situation in Canada with respect to immigrants and refugees?

**RB:** I was on a panel on whether immigration policies are racist, and my question was: the policies can be changed but who are the people who are reading the dossiers when newcomers arrive, who are the people who are reading their applications? Do they have intercultural competence? Do they have a learned and lived history with people's marginalized spaces? Do they know what life might be for someone who is gay in Uganda? What is their intercultural competence? So, you could have all these great policies, but the people who are implementing the policies must have intercultural competence; they have to have a certain *formation* in the humanities. Humanities are going to save us. So, that was one of the questions that I had on that panel. I talked about the fact that there are people who are making decisions who are not interculturally competent. We have bias; however, many of us who come from privilege do not acknowledge the bias. I am not very aware of all immigration policies right now, but I can say that Ukrainian refugees who have come to Canada have had fewer problems finding housing, healthcare support, jobs, schooling for their children and language interpreters than their counterparts from other non-European parts of the world. There have been crises in Yemen, Egypt and Indonesia, from the Global South, and those peoples who would be defined as racialized, do not find the

same kind of welcome. We also have communities in Eastern Canada of African-Nova-Scotian descent, and many have been in Nova Scotia for four hundred years and some of those healthcare centers that provide care for those communities do not have running water, for example. Many of our Indigenous communities do not have running water. So why is that Ukrainian immigrants are treated differently? We do not want to talk about it—we want to say that being a refugee is not a choice, no one chooses to be a refugee (my family history is attached to refugee experience). However, the experiences of refugees are not the same. Our immigration policies must reflect this.

**SCS:** *Have you ever felt out of place in your own country (Canada or India)?*

**RB:** Yes, all the time, every single day. I am not going to lie and say it is perfect. Are you a Professor? Yes. What do you teach? French. And then I just get a lot of questions about that: why it is not Chemistry or Science or Immigration Law or something that works because of the way that I see you? I, a cis-het white dominant person, see you as this, I think that you would be better at this. I was the leader of our Faculty Union, for example, and I was told by faculty members that I am too maternal, and I should not be a Union Leader. Why would you say that? Because I present as feminine, with eyeliner and sarees, because I have children, so I cannot be a Union Leader? Who decides whose professional? I decide, I need to tell people who I am and if I keep abandoning myself and not letting myself be who I am, then I am not going to be able to do justice to my students and my colleagues. We are actually in control of our lives much more than we think because we believe that other people's perceptions are important; however, they do not actually matter. It is very difficult because we worry so much about what other people's perceptions are and it is so draining to our systems and to ourselves. And if we cannot be ourselves, we cannot help others be themselves (this is what we do not understand).

When I go to India, I am an outsider, clearly from the diaspora—I do not speak Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi very well, I walk with a cadence that is particularly seen as othered. When I went to Mumbai, I was a foreigner in a space that was so beautiful and exciting and scary at the same time and it made me long to better know India. I am a mother of three children who are now second generation, whose answer to the question "Where are you from?" takes longer than simply, "India." As a parent, I want to keep that thread to India, and it gets thinner and thinner, but with effort, it still stays. My job is to keep the reinforcement—I cannot add to the thread, but I can reinforce it as much as I can, so that it does not break. There are different ways that I do that: I am delighted that my children can come here to Spain and witness their mother, someone with no Iberian ties, talk on inclusion. There is an irony in all of that: they have come to

Spain for their mom, who is not Spanish, who is visibly and linguistically othered, but attempting to show up for herself as best as possible. So, the challenges will always be there, but it is important how we approach them and that we can choose to stop abandoning ourselves.

In Canada, as someone who is non-white, I will always be non-local, I will always be of immigrants, as Settler, and I understand that acknowledging this fact is empowering. I am of immigrants and so are all of us on Turtle Island; all of you are Settlers unless you are from a First Nation or Indigenous lineage.

**SCS:** *When did you know you wanted to become a writer?*

**RB:** Always. I was a very quiet kid, but I have always made up stories in my head—I have always loved citations and quotations. I love the power of words, I love how words control, dysregulate, and evoke emotions. It is very evocative and visceral for me to utter words. I taught writing for so long; I taught other people's books and stories. I remember one of my teaching evaluations came back and one of the students wrote: "She talks so much about things other than the writing; it is very annoying." It is true because I love telling stories and I am attracted to storytellers, troubadours, the movement of stories. I love oral tradition. I spent some time in Ireland and I was fascinated with Irish travelers and how they tell stories by word of mouth. It is fascinating how my mother's side family, whose roots are from Baluchistan and are tagged as a scheduled tribal nomadic group in India, carry stories through words. So, I feel I have always been a storyteller—I love describing things in detail. I do not always surround myself with people who want to listen to me and that frustrates me sometimes, but then I realize that those who want to listen to me, will. I find the power of the pen is a very vulnerable space and very scary, but I enjoy it.

**SCS:** *Do your experiences shape your writing?*

**RB:** Yes. I think that for a long time I am muffled by experiences. I did not want to talk about my sexuality or interest in the erotic. I did not want to talk about the body shame I carried or my Brown skin. White women would ask me why I wore make-up. For such a long time I hated how I looked, I wanted to look like a white woman with blue eyes and blonde hair because that was what most of what I saw was seen as beauty. This was an internalized racism. I remember one of my Spanish friends, Silvia, said: "Rohini, your eyes are so dark" and I said: "I do not like them because they are so dark." She quickly retorted with, "Do you not know how beautiful your brown hair and eyes are? I love that your eyes are so dark because we in Spain can never get eyes so dark." I never understood it because I was abandoning myself, I was looking

outside of myself for the light. And now, I want to write about our perceptions of ourselves and our experiences because I hope that somebody will read it, and someone will say I know what it feels like or I wish someone had told me that some time ago. I am a cis-het woman, but I am very fascinated with gender and gender nonconformity—it is so courageous. When I meet someone who is gender non-conforming (e.g. the Hijras community of India, who are the third gender), it actually gives me a lot of hope.

**SCS:** *As you are a scholar and a writer, I am curious about the differences you encounter between expressing yourself through fiction and non-fiction.*

**RB:** Beautiful. Someone told me that Neil Gaiman said (I never actually verified this) that “fiction is truer than the truth.” I think with fiction we give some power to the truth. When the Spanish students here are commenting about my short story “The Landing” and asking if the female protagonist is me, I am not sure how to answer. That version of Rohini the writer has become wiser—I am not the same woman who wrote that story the first time. So, I think that when I write a creative essay or creative non-fiction, there has to be the truth in it. However, when you are writing fiction, there is so much more freedom and I love to make up stories—I find that empowering because I can control what a character is going to do, and I can question what the character might do. I have not explored that deep enough. To delve into fiction is very freeing for me. There are many differences between how you can control and develop the characters, but I have a lot of respect for short stories. One of my favorite ones is M. G. Vassanji, a Canadian writer of India descent from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He is my literary crush. I have been reading *Uhuru Street: Short Stories*, which is a compilation of short stories set in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and they are so short, and I feel so abruptly abandoned. Never have I felt so much emotion upon the end of a short story. I am almost angry at the end of the story and Vassanji truly succeeds. The author wants you to want more and that is the emotional attachment that I have with short stories. And if I can get better at them, that is really where I want to go with short stories. I think that a novel would be a great commitment and I would love to do it, but I think short stories are truly powerful.

**SCS:** *Do you think that creative writers have a responsibility to represent or, even better, to make visible some parts of society that are in a way hidden from ordinary people?*

**RB:** This is such a good question. The responsibility part is sometimes an element I struggle with fully accepting. The late great Dr. Toni Morrison was

asked: when are you going to start writing for white people? However, the question she could ask before responding: Do I want to have white characters in my stories? In the poetry that I have been writing, most of the men are white and have been perpetrators of sexual violence because this is what I have experienced. For me the most threatening is the white male. So, I am trying my best to reappropriate that, taking back to my body and re-empowering my body. There is responsibility for me to show up as myself in my writing and if I can keep going back and saying I showed up myself and maybe a young person would read this and identify with it too. So, the responsibility to tell the truth is really important. The truth is really hard, and we do not want to talk about the truth, that is, we do not want to talk about our vulnerabilities. I want to show that I am a Professor, and my life is not perfect. That is what I should ideally tell the students, but I am not, and I want students to know that I am a normal person: I have problems, insecurities, worries and that is why I can connect with people because I know that I am like them and they are like me despite any and all differences. That is exactly what it means for me to be human. The responsibility to be truthful is a burden that we all bear, but I think for a racialized woman myself, I want to make sure that I do not paint my people, my culture or my history in a way that adds to xenophobia or misogyny. I am not, however, responsible for how readers perceive my art. I am responsible for only being myself in the art and offering truth.

**SCS:** *What about genres? Does genre matter?*

**RB:** Good question. Creative non-fiction is one of the genres that I like most because it is sharing a story without a true form—when I write, I find my own rhythm in poetry. There is a point of breath, there is the blank space on the page and even the unwritten and unspoken remain part of the process without having to appear. I think that this genre is the most unregulated and this feels like decolonizing, barrier-free writing. We have issues with Canadian Literature being boxed into racialized people and non-racialized people. Writers like Annahid Dashtgard would be seen as a certain type of writer, which can be empowering but also isolating, and I think creative non-fiction and poetry both break all of that. Poetry I will say is tough to write. Anybody can write poetry, like modern art and abstract art. If it is laced in the sentiment surrounding the image, the depth of an experience readers and writers alike need to stop trying to pigeonhole things, stop telling us that abstract or modern art does not belong as part of the canon. Who is establishing the canon? We worry about the hierarchy of what has the most impact and we think that novels need to be wordy, dense and opaque. *Sense and Sensibility* or *War and Peace* are iconic pieces that have lots of words and they are the ones that have the most impact

on our literary canon. However, a blank page with three words has the same impact, if not more.

**SCS:** *I would like to know about your writing process. How do you approach your writing?*

**RB:** I have a day job, so what I do at the moment is to try to schedule thirty or twenty minutes a day to write. I say try. I really should say, I book and confirm this time. But the reality is, the time does slip away with other life obligations. Sometimes I write in a notebook, on my phone or directly into a document on my computer. I am more in the constant direction of writing and self-expression. It is just putting down words into a space. Then I go back and listen to my voice. It does not have to be so immediate. Words, experiences, lights, space, smells—all those things come to me and I have to be open to hear them. For a long time I did not listen because I was afraid, I did not want to know what the world was telling me because I just wanted to stick to my work, my children and my obligations. I was coping with the overwhelm of my emotions with more productivity and *keeping busy*. However, rest is resistance. I have been resisting and resting, thinking, letting go, emptying the mind and things will come to me now with more flavour, more colour, more realism. Things come and then I subsequently arrive, and I place the sentiment, the words, the description, the turn of phrase, in different places: sometimes it is a poem, an image of a character, a dream or simply an observation of how, for example, my perception of how I passed a glass of water to my child. I am here in life and this grounding of space and stopping of time in the now is helping my writing. And then later, if I reflect on the water I gave my son, other feelings or words will come up and this is also writing. I might not have a blank page so I will record with a voice memo on my phone. This is writing and living at the same time. It is like I am living my writing. The scenes are always happening all the time and then I bring them into words.

**SCS:** *You are based in Nova Scotia: how has living in Nova Scotia influenced your writing?*

**RB:** What a beautiful question! The geographical location has influenced my writing because particularly when it comes to the context of Turtle Island, North America, I understand it and honour this land as a daughter of immigrant Settlers. I am also grateful that Nova Scotia is Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq. This is something that I did not fully understand until very recently. I have to be aware of the historical space I am living in and that I am sharing this land with other Settlers and I am grateful to the ancestors and

present knowledge keepers of this land and the ongoing learners of this land to share the same with me. When we think of Canada, our first images are not of Indigenous peoples, so when I write, I do write from a space of knowing that I have been othered in this space and that I am a visitor in this land, but sometimes writing in itself is a space and a land in itself. It becomes a country in itself, and I also like the idea of writing as placing myself outside of the confines of land and sea but simply in the geographies of the blank paper, aching to manifest as story.

On a GPS, yes, I situate myself in Nova Scotia—I am grateful to be living here, I work and play here, I raise my family here, so I root into this land. I always laugh when people say they can write on planes or trains (places that are in movement), but I like the idea of being nowhere or everywhere at the same time. In this in-between interval space, one can write. I feel that the Nova Scotia space is intertwined to who I am: my English is influenced by my space, the people that I encounter every day. However, I have lived in France, Nepal and other parts of Canada, and understand that I am beyond borders, partly because of my own intersectionality.

**SCS:** *In line with this question, in many diasporic writings, one of the issues that many writers explore is the quest for home. How would you define the concept or idea of home? How do you approach this theme in your writings?*

**RB:** I feel that as somebody who has been born and raised in one geographical space, I have a great privilege because I can feel home, I can see home, I can be in my home. I feel that people who are immigrants and make the movement themselves (my parents, for example) can experience the loss of home. So, their home maybe is actually you—you carry your home with you all time.

I understand the internal space I occupy. I look for home in my children, my friends, my work. It is like being at home when somebody makes you feel comfortable. But maybe home is me. This might sound egocentric, but perhaps it is actually very empowering—it is a reminder that my body is my home. Even if I am looking for home somewhere else, I already have one. I think it is returning to the core of me, letting go of what others think. I am letting go of falsehoods and becoming me. I think I have learned that I am carrying my home all the time. I am like a turtle, in a way. Once you realize that you are your own home, then, wherever you go, you are never alone; you are with yourself, and you have your breath; that means you are alive. I am learning to understand to be alone, to be at home, to be in myself alone. To be home is something that I am rethinking, and I think this will be seen in my work that I am writing right now. I am still interested in the Other and the Otherness of Others, that is, how we

create Otherness. I am trying to see it from a place of home and that home being themselves. I am really working on home being me.

**SCS:** *On a similar note, and this is somehow connected to what you have said: in an interview you mentioned Dr. Toni Morrison's words, "if you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else." Is this one of your main purposes in writing fiction?*

**RB:** I feel that if others can experience someone else's experiences through writing, then they can see themselves a little bit. I am not going to write for Brown women or just women. In fact, the compilation of short stories I am working on is tentatively titled *Broken Men, Broken Women*. At the beginning, I thought including just only men because I am very curious about masculinity and looking at some of the issues that I am seeing in people, but then I decided to look at the binary of it and to break the binary as well. I am looking at women as well and the women who are perhaps attached to these men. It reminds me of Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women*. It really speaks on the relationship and the co-dependency piece of men with women. In the short stories I am exploring sexual fluidity and breaking the binary by calling men and women. I want to assume that they can break and that we can break into gender and fluidity within that brokenness, so I am playing with that.

I think that showing up for other people because I have privilege is important. Moments, scenes, dialogues, venues, people that appear in my writings may have happened at some point in my life journey. So, I think that fiction for me is so powerful because you can find a lot of truth in there and allow the imagination and creativity to create whatever experience you like from that fictional space. It is so empowering. I like the idea of being able to be free and just change lanes back and forth in writing. I have these fixed roles as an academic and a mother, and writing is just a way to let loose. I want the writing to feed me as well. So, Dr. Morrison is calling us to say, if you have these privileges, you must share and show up for others and I take that very seriously.

**SCS:** *Some scholars, especially scholars working on resilience, express the idea that writing can be a powerful means towards individual and collective healing and, therefore, a transformative mechanism that might foster agency and resilience. Do you see writing as a tool to regain agency? What is your advice to people who struggle to express themselves?*

**RB:** Agency is to retake and recharge the mind every day. I think that writing allows for that freedom. I know for a long time I was afraid to pursue the Arts because I was afraid of the freedom it would allow me. I wanted to stick to the

sciences and sustain the lane of reason, didactic reasoning, logic, memory, and despite a deep desire to play with writing and words and my love of learning languages, I was afraid to go to the Arts. I am in the Arts now and I am still letting loose. Writing allows to hold on to emotions, thought, trauma, sadness, joy. Writing is just another tool to allow freedom, so writing is a tool for me.

The agency piece is important to see that you can use it as a therapeutic tool—I do use writing as a therapeutic tool. There is a project I am working on right now titled *UnSent Love Letters*, which is based on love letters that non-white women write to their young teen version of themselves. I am going to be preparing a call for papers with another colleague of mine and we want to put together these odes, these letters of love. That will be an agency piece for me because that collection of writing would be very much in relation to trauma therapy. It would be creative writing as well: formulating and creating a story in that letter while talking to yourself, which many of us do not know how to do. It would be very interesting to bring our thoughts together and talk about agency through writing.

**SCS:** *In line with the previous question, your writings also deal with the topic of identity and its fluidity. Could you say something about it?*

**RB:** For me, this goes back to the point of Nova Scotia as well. I have to code-switch how I present myself and that is something that I have heard with members of the African Canadian communities, particularly where one decides to enunciate every single word perfectly. I am making some over the top effort to ensure my English is very clear that I do not have an accent that could be perceived as distasteful and lacking formal post-secondary education. When I speak French particularly, my mannerisms do change. Depending on who the recipient of my discussion might be, my body and my English change. I am generally aware of my audience and that can be very tiring because you are not really your full self. I am working on being less hyper vigilant and letting loose, like in my writing. It is like that I have versions of myself to show up in different spaces and places. I feel that when we are talking about being ourselves and really truly saying what we want you have to show all your parts of yourself and this implies so much interior work. Writing helps to figure that out.

I was talking to a young PhD female student this morning, and I told her that she should be writing a memoir. If someone had told me that when I was writing my PhD, I would laugh and say: "I am not very famous." I think that writing a memoir is incredibly empowering and everybody is worthy of a story of their lives. I love knowing other people's stories and so maybe I need to start getting curious about my own too. I think it is so interesting that everybody is walking around with their stories inside of them. I have thought about writing

something about my academic career, my writing career, and also some of my personal life. This is a very transformative experience for me because a lot of childhood trauma has come up. Things that I have suppressed and oppressed keeping busy and staying busy. I am wondering about this writing piece and I like to do it—writing a memoir partly means coming to grasp to who you are. My father died in April 2023 and the cans upon cans of suppressed, oppressed and compressed emotions have resurfaced. I am squeezing the pools of emotional pus from my wounds. I am cleaning those wounds. I am exposing them to life. I am healing. I will be scarred. I will continue to share my story.

**SCS:** *In some of your writings, you tackle the topic of body shaming. Would you like to expand on this topic and its importance?*

**RB:** I think shame is something that many of us carry and it can be about a lot of different things. For me, comparing myself to a white woman and the assumption I am not desirable. I wanted to be blonde, fair-skinned and blue-eyed. I see that there is a reason for that: to be honest, most of it is related to my father's infidelities and that is a theme I will be exploring in *Broken Men, Broken Women* and in my own memoir. I am looking to how sex addiction affects families. Body shaming with that is my irrational and unhealthy relationship with food, and also not understanding that food is really for fuel and to feed myself when I need food, but also enjoying lovely food. The luxury of food and the privilege of beautiful food is okay to experience as a large woman. And, so, the more that I realize that I am very strong, but also soft and vulnerable and hurt, the more that I start changing my mind-set.

I had an accident in September 2023 when I fell down some stairs in my house and ended up on the sidewalk and I was very close to becoming paraplegic. I am very lucky that I am walking and talking and moving my body. My body saved me. The physiotherapists said: "Rohini, you are actually extremely lucky because of the body that you have, because you are robust, because you are thick and strong and not thin, you saved yourself, your body saved you." And, so, I am really honoring my body, I love exercising. I have always been told, even myself, that I did not belong in gyms. Our mutual colleague, Dr. Jorge Diego Sánchez reminds me that I do belong in a gym. Now, I am walking a lot, I love weight training. I used to have male trainers who would tell me that I am very lucky because I can gain a lot of muscle, but women do not want to hear that, and so I was afraid to exercise because I knew that I have this propensity to build muscles. However, after this accident, I just said to myself: "You are a strong person, and your strength is what saved you and, so, why not honor your body?" For me, yoga, exercise, walking, running is all part of taking care, honoring myself. So, body shaming has now really turned into body

honoring and I do not shame, but I honor it. I honor that girl who used to hide or wanted to eat more chocolate and felt bad about it. I honor that little girl instead of shaming her. I wrote some poems for a journal on “Excessive Bodies” and shared my experience exercising in the body I have. They should be out in the Fall of 2024.

**SCS:** Now, could you say something about your next writing project?

**RB:** I have some short stories in English titled *Broken Men, Broken Women*, a series based on actual people that I know, who in my mind have been broken or will be broken. The idea is to explore their breaking points and when one breaks open, what loosens around them. Some of the stories are interconnected, so readers will see perhaps the same story but from a different perspective. I find that really interesting. There is the great Clint Eastwood film, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, that was produced many years ago on World War II when one is from the Japanese perspective and one from the American perspective, but it is the same story. Or is it? It is the same series of events but not the same story. I find that this is a powerful way of seeing the same person but from the perspective of a woman or a man and outside of the gender binary.

I am also working on a series of poems on love. This is an act of self-love, actually. I want to celebrate love and I want poetry to be the genre.

The third one is the unsent love letters. I want to call upon people who I know, South Asians or people of African descent, who want to write about themselves and write to themselves.

And, finally, I have a series of French love and erotic short stories. In my mind I see somebody from one part of the Francophone world falling in love with another person from the Francophone world. My French will be poetic and romantic and pulled from my lived experience as learned speaker. For example, I have an idea of a Mauritian marrying a Haitian. I am really interested in transnational love. And the title would be *The Interval*.

**SCS:** Have you been inspired by other writers?

**RB:** Yes, by so many. I recently met Dr. Kim Thúy when she received her Honorary Doctorate at Saint Mary's University, and she was an incredible inspiration for me. Her story of leaving Viet Nâm and making her way to Canada was powerful. She speaks of kindness and she shared with me how she wrote her first novel, *Ru*. It was based on little notes she wrote to herself. Those notes came together in this beautiful novel. She is probably one of the most inspiring people I have met as a writer. She learned English and French in Canada and that is pretty incredible. There are other names, but I will stick with Dr. Kim Thúy

because I think she has been somebody very real and relatable to me. I have met other writers before, but I simply love how she is a person that takes risk and uses her situation to the best way she can. I find her very inspiring.

**SCS:** *Finally, I would like to finish this interview by asking you about your role as Vice-Chair of Senate and President of the Faculty Union at Saint Mary's University. Could you explain more about your main functions?*

**RB:** I am no longer at those roles. I left the Faculty Union and became a Senior Administrator and have now left that role. I am back to the classroom and I am looking forward to it. In March 2024, I received the Ordre de la Pléiade from the French government and am now a Chevalière. As for the transition from the Union to Administration, it was very difficult because of how I was treated by Faculty. I will leave it there. I left Administration for several reasons, but one of them was to secure my health and wellness. I could no longer withstand the way I was being treated by Faculty. What I am also learning is that my academic duties and responsibilities are not my main meal of life. I think that work is a *tapa* and it is a small part of my life. This is a very big mind-set change for me. This is not a North American way of thinking, this is not an immigrant way of thinking—you work, work, and then you die, and I do not want to do that. How much more do I need to do to prove myself? I am saying: "Work is a *tapa*, but I still have another main meal, I have my *paella* in the middle and that is me." I am the main meal and my job and even my children and my husband are a *tapa*. They are all important and I love them all, but they are on the side and I am the *paella* in the middle (not with calamari, because I don't like octopus!). I am really trying to recalibrate where my energy goes, and a thing that I do every night is asking myself: Have you made sense today? And sense is sleep, exercise, nutrition, soul work and emotional health. And I also say: How will you make sense tomorrow? And that really guides me to say work is important and it is part of my campus community, but it is a *tapa* and I have to keep it in the *tapas* region.

**SCS:** *Thank you, Rohini. Thank you very much for your time and for this inspiring conversation.*

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