

*Writers in culture war over rules of the imagination*

## **New manifesto of writers' association PEN accused by its US arm of backing 'cultural appropriation'**



*Jennifer Clement of PEN International: 'The ability to write or speak freely stands as much for trans writers as for JK Rowling'.*

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It's a venerable global cultural institution, dedicated to freedom of expression and set to celebrate its centenary this year. Yet the writers' association PEN is being drawn into dispute over a declaration claiming the right of authors to imagination, allowing them to describe the world from the point of view of characters from other cultural backgrounds.

At issue is a charter manifesto, *The Democracy of the Imagination*, passed unanimously by delegates of PEN International at the 85th world congress in Manila in 2019. A year on, through the social upheavals of 2020, PEN's US arm, PEN America, has not endorsed the manifesto, which includes the principle: "PEN believes the imagination allows writers and readers to transcend their own place in the world to include the ideas of others."

While welcoming the commitment to freedom of expression, officials at PEN America indicate that aspects of the declaration might be perceived as straying into the contentious territory of cultural appropriation.

A spokesperson for PEN America told the *Observer* that the manifesto had not been explicitly rejected – two members of PEN America helped draft it – but "that does not

necessarily indicate that we as PEN America formally endorse that action on behalf of our staff or board”.

Behind the scenes, however, the manifesto has caused friction between PEN International and companion PEN organisations around the world. Being asked to adjudicate disputes in a time of cultural upheaval is not uncommon for an organisation dedicated to supporting writers, but it’s one it would sooner avoid.

Last year PEN International was called on to weigh in on accusations of transphobia against JK Rowling. “The ability to write or speak freely without harassment stands as much for trans writers defending their rights as it does for JK Rowling,” PEN’s president, Jennifer Clement, stated.

Joyce Carol Oates has previously criticised PEN’s decision to award a free-speech prize to Charlie Hebdo magazine. Photograph: Walter McBride/Getty Images

While accusations of misrepresentation are often made in social justice activism, only rarely have they extended into the realm of the imagination.

“The interplay between historic barriers to access to the literary community and lack of representation is part of what makes this issue so contentious,” said Suzanne Nossel, chief executive of PEN America and author of *Dare to Speak: Defending Free Speech for All*. Nossel says that while the principles expressed in the charter “are a strong declaration of PEN’s mission to defend the work of writers”, she acknowledges that lack of representation in literature can manifest in frustration, and consequently the belief that someone who does not come from a certain community should not be writing about a certain topic.

“From our point of view, we’re focused on dismantling historic barriers while working on freedom of the imagination and expression for everyone,” Nossel said. “In our diverse, digitised and divided society you need to be able to say a whole series of things in one breath ... to say you acknowledge the harms of speech, working against hate speech and hate crimes, defend unpopular speech, make space for contrarian viewpoints.”

In short, Nossel said, to be a credible defender of free speech in 2021 “you need to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time”.

The manifesto, which was presented by Clement, presented five governing principles:

We defend the imagination and believe it to be as free as dreams.

We recognise and seek to counter the limits faced by so many in telling their own stories.

We believe the imagination accesses all human experience, and reject restrictions of time, place, or origin.

We know attempts to control the imagination may lead to xenophobia, hatred and division.

Literature crosses all real and imagined frontiers and is always in the realm of the universal.

The manifesto, however, may only serve to establish that freedom of expression is an area of increasing dissension. In 2015, PEN America was met with dissent from writers including Junot Díaz, Peter Carey, Rick Moody and Joyce Carol Oates over its decision

to give its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to Charlie Hebdo. More recently, members of PEN's LA arm staged a protest over an invitation to Julian Assange to speak on press freedoms.

According to Chiari Bottici, author of *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* and professor of philosophy at the New School in New York, the manifesto is beset with problems.

“Imagination is the faculty to imagine what is not there, to give us the capacity to put ourselves in other people’s shoes, but it is also what enables us to lie, and even purports such massive collective lies such as racism, sexism, classism, and thus even fascism,” Bottici told the *Observer*.

Moreover, Bottici argues, the invocation in the manifesto that literature is universal is also problematic, “because historically that is far from being the case. Imagination is always double-sided: the faculty of the universal and of the particular at the same time.”

Third, Bottici says, “a lot of racialised and sexed people have been unable to inhabit ‘their own space’ because they have been overwhelmed by the ideas and worldview of others. So I can see and sympathise with them if they are not tempted to sign a manifesto that begins by glorifying a faculty that ‘allows writers and readers to transcend their own place in the world to include the ideas of others’.”

Stepping away from the issue’s overt political questions, Alex Gillespie, a professor of psychological and behavioural science at the London School of Economics, points out that while the imagination is often presumed to be unreal, its effects are not.

“Imagination is highly consequential, because control over it is control over the goal and the future. Imagining what could be is a very powerful tool,” he said. “Imagination is so consequential, so people have always tried to control and regulate it as a political issue throughout history.”

And for good reason, Gillespie pointed out, citing both the flowerings of imagination about a centralist utopia before the Bolshevik revolution and a boom in science fiction before the moon landings. “Imagination about what’s possible can have revolutionary consequences.”