On reimagining what success means

Poet Megan Fernandes discusses valuing personal relationships, the importance of messiness in the creative process, and reconciling your politics with what you make.

September 17, 2021 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2534 words.

Tags: Poetry, Process, Politics, Success.

Your book is so apocalyptic.

Oh.

What is there left to write into? What fuels your poetry?

What do you mean by apocalyptic?

I felt like there were a lot of poems about the world ending. Are there not? I mean, there was like global warming and societal collapse…

Yeah, no, there's the Anthropocene poem and the nuclear war one…

Yeah, yeah. All that.

Well, like a lot of people having Anthropocene guilt or climate despair, I think it takes on different psychological valances. So, for me, I think it's very helpful as a coping mechanism to build out almost like a fantasy structure about what that could look like and these sort of small, controllable moments of it. So in "Nukemap.com," there's this point where I'm trying to convince my roommate at the time that if the bomb goes off above 39th street, because I live on 8th street, that maybe we'll both survive, which of course is not true and would definitely not happen. But it's a way to explore wishful thinking within a doomed state.

It's also a way to play with fatalism. Like how much fatalism can I bear? Where can I find humor within fatalism? Where can I find survival within fatalism? What would that look like? And I think humor is a big part of that. I remember taking this quiz that was like, "How long would you last in an apocalypse?" And my friends took it and they got two weeks because they could name their closest fresh drinking resource or something, and mine was like less than 24 hours. Like, I'm the first bitch to die in the apocalypse. And because I'm the first bitch to die in the apocalypse, part of me is like, "I feel like I could really write a good exit letter," because it would be the *first* exit letter.

What was it like to release a book of poetry on such a highly acclaimed press at the beginning of 2020? Right before lockdown?

It sucked. It was great for three weeks. For three weeks, it was like a dream. I got to six cities, at least: San Francisco and LA and Montreal and I got to see people I really loved, but like everybody else, the early pandemic was sort of at the brink of the unimaginable. And when I look back on it, I really worry about my book launch, which was in February. New York City shut down three weeks later. And I worried about that, it was like 80 people. And I'm like, "Was that a super spreader event?" All of a sudden you're anxiously doing this calculus backwards while also trying to juxtapose these ugly feelings that you have about the shit luck of having a book come out during a global death event. And these two things can both be true at once. You can feel shitty about it and then on the other hand understand that obviously there are much more important things happening.

But in a way, it was really good for me to rethink my understanding of what a meritocracy is, because the reality is, who gives a shit about poetry if people don't have health insurance? It made me think a lot about the basics, like food insecurity, accessibility. It made me think more deeply about the way I move in this city, the way I glamorize this city to a point where a lot of the basics disappear and how that's problematic.

I think it changed my poetics and my relationship to speed in terms of my writing—2020 did—because instead of seeing the city as this playground of adrenaline, which is how I saw the city previous to the pandemic, I think it made me slow down. It made me think about the constraints of the city (and I mean that formally). It made me think about what a street is, like I mention streets in my poems all the time because I love New York School poetry. But then when you actually have to rethink what makes up a street and what makes up its ability to sustain itself, you're also coming to terms with this idea of what it means to have a drink at a bar, when on the same street, somebody else can't fucking eat.

In other interviews, you talk about messiness in poetry, but is this your writing process?

I gave this talk last year at Tin House with a friend of mine, where we talked a lot about the wasted line and the idea of improvisational lines. So lines that kind of feel like, "Where the fuck is this poem going?" Or like, "Why would this person keep this line in a poem?" I'm sort of against economy in a poem and maybe that's really different from the genteel tradition. Certain poets are like, "Every syllable counts, every period counts." Everything is so tight and precise. For me, that feels outside the realm of the improvisational arts that have kind of helped produce my own aesthetic.

I grew up listening to a lot of nineties hip hop. I loved poetry that was much more oral and invested in spoken word cultures. And it's really easy to shit on that because there's this elitist understanding that, in order for something to be good, it has to have the look of precision as opposed to the feel of improvisation. And that's never been an interest of mine. Sometimes I have a line in a poem that's just there to give me the syllabic space to get to the next epiphany in the poem, but without that breath there, the epiphany can't arrive.

So there is prophetic movement, not just in my work, but in the work of a lot of poets that I really like, where the poet is trying to understand something about flow in real time. And they want flow to feel, even if it's not actually messy, even if it's heavily curated, like you don't know what's going to come next, like there's something you can't anticipate about where the poem is going. And I think a lot of that also has to do with point of view. Sometimes I think a poem can feel especially messy when the reader is walking alongside the speaker of the poem, as opposed to a speaker who is omniscient and in this controlled, aerial position.

That's just not how I write most of my poetry. I write it with the reader close next to me. I write it with a sense that the flow is going to be a little bit unruly. And I believe in unruly. Philosophically, I believe in it because it's anti-colonial, and it feels really global south to me, it feels informal and inconvenient and cognitively disruptive. So for me, that's very crafted. Improvisational flow is a craft because you need to know how much you can get away with. And what you are trying to get away with is time. Digression. Clearing your throat. Clearing the air. Being against efficiency… which is also a way of being against capitalism.

Why is messiness looked down upon in academic spaces? Why are they so sterile?

Girl, how much time you got? Well, let's just say it like this: what is privileged and protected in academia is a certain way of self-presentation, a certain way of performing expertise. The easy answer is because of racialized

and gendered understandings of what authority looks like, authority has to look a certain way. But as anyone who's ever had a messy and angelic friend knows (that friend who lives in slightly a different dimension than maybe the rest of the world), they know that some of the wisest, most thrilling insight and takes come from that person. And to be honest, yes, academia is my livelihood. And I like to read critical theory, I find it interesting. But I think the space of it and the institutionalization of it is deeply violent. And part of that violence is the way that it reproduces a sense of order and a sense of hierarchy.

Because the good thing about messiness is that you can't hierarchize it, you can't taxonomize it. So how do you actually evaluate something that is not something you can put into a word? You can't name it. If you can't name it, you can't govern it.

So, maybe it's not messy, maybe it just looks messy. Or it feels messy, but maybe that says more about how the reader organizes their interiority, not necessarily how the line is organized, if that makes sense. That also might be why some of the identity politics stuff happening right now feels a bit off to me. There is a violence in being too legible.

There's an urge in your poetry to share specific details and memories with the reader. I'm thinking of the diagrams of the residency that the speaker of the "The Edward Albee Barn" drew to show someone important to them. Does the fulfillment of this urge help you to feel more understood?

Yeah. I really like infrastructure. I love a room. I think things that can happen in a basement can't happen in a kitchen, can't happen in a bathroom, can't happen in an attic. Those are spaces that produce different kinds of intimacies. And similarly in New York, there are things that can happen at one intersection that couldn't happen on another intersection. On the Upper East Side, I always just feel fucking poor up there. And someone's always mistaking me for a nanny or something. So I'm a different subject up there than I am when I'm below 14th Street. And I'm a different subject below 14th Street in Manhattan than I am, let's say, when I'm hanging out at my friend's house in Crown Heights.

There's a great freedom there to figure out the space between two personhoods. And I think being a woman, being a person of color, that's sometimes really fluid. How I was read in Echo Park in LA is really different than how I'm read in Montreal, how I'm read somewhere in France, how I'm read when I go see my family in India, you know what I mean? That kind of mutability. I think the only way to kind of tether yourself to the earth is sometimes to say, "I'm in the kitchen. It's cold outside. There's a tennis racket here, there's a dried lavender, I planted thyme."

Also, when kids are in a psychotherapist's office or whatever, the therapist will put a bunch of objects in front of them and try to tell what the kid is doing or storytelling based on how they put objects together. It's a way of building associations. Poets do that, too.

So there's a poem in Good Boys called "Bad Habit." And it's like, "Let me put this dead deer in the fog and The Kinks together in one space and within a few lines of each other." What am I building through this association? Is it about California? It kind of is about California, but it's also about how you can be multiple persons within a few lines, even if you're here in the same geographical space. So maybe it's also about not being fully tethered. There's also a lot of vaporous, amorphous imagery in the book. There's a lot of fog and attention to dissipation or feeling like you're coming undone a little bit, which maybe goes back to that messiness. What is it like not to be a condensed subject?

To not have the same container at all times.

Yes, exactly.

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success? How do you define failure?

No.

No?

Well, I think this is like the pre and post pandemic feeling. I'm not going to say that I don't believe in certain kinds of merit, because I do. I believe in certain kinds of wealth, and those things have changed. I believe deeply in my friendships. I believe friendship is one of the most radical ways of loving somebody with a real selfless commitment to another human that allows them the gentleness and room to grow. So, I'm thinking more about the wealth of those intimacies as a way to feel successful as a person, as opposed to what's on my CV.

And that's been a relatively recent pivot. I mean, I've always cared about my friendships, but I also spent my entire twenties in graduate school. I got my PhD and my MFA at the same time— I'm fucking tired. And at the end of the day, does all that matter? Maybe, I don't know. It was good when it was stimulating for my brain, but it's just not a way to measure yourself. It's not a good barometer of humanness. I'm trying to figure out what are the barometers of humanness that matter. And I think: Do you have a community? Do you take care of your community? Do you love the people that you love? Well, how can you love them better? How can you do work on yourself that makes you better able to be with the people you love in the world? And keeping that as a sense of achievement on the daily, as opposed to some career mile marker.

I was up for something in the spring and it was devastating when I didn't get it. And I was with my friend, who's a boxer. And he was like, "Dude, even if you got it, that's not going to solve your thirst." He was like, "You would have been happy for three days and three days later you would have been like, 'What's next?'" And he's right. I would've just been like, "What's next?" Nothing will be enough. So, you gotta kind of curb that thirst in a way by sort of just saying, like "No, I'm not going to look at it too closely or attend to it." It's impossible under capitalism, but I'm trying to just figure out other ways to have dignity in this very merciless system. If that makes sense. But it's a struggle. It's really hard to do. And it's disingenuous to be like, "I don't give a shit about that." Of course you do.

Of course you care about that. But there's also a part of me that's like, "Look at how many other people are living different kinds of lives, not just here but all over the world." This is not the only way to live, but it's also not even a good way to live, where a few people get some things and other people don't even have health insurance. Sorry to go back to talking about basics. It's just kind of wrong. It's not kind of wrong. It is actually wrong.

Megan Fernandes Recommends:

Film: *The Macaluso Sisters*

Food: Hera

Wordsmith: Taylor Johnson

Art: Elisa Giardina Papa

Sound: Sudan Archives

Name
Megan Fernandes

Vocation
Poet

Rivkah Gevinson