

On making art in a world that profits off our time



Writer Alejandro Heredia discusses difference, community, and dedicating yourself to your calling

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 3710 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Family](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#), [Focus](#), [Politics](#).

Let's start from the beginning. Did you always want to be a writer? Was there an "aha" moment in your young life when you knew that this was what you were supposed to do?

In high school, our history teacher asked us to write a story about a particular moment in history. He asked us to write one page. I went home that night, and I wrote 12 pages. I thought that was normal. The next day [my teacher] went around, making sure that everyone did their one page. When he saw that I had written a ton, he looked at me like, *What? What is wrong with you? Why did you do this?* But I think in that moment, seeing his reaction, for some reason made it click for me. This was something that I did because I enjoyed it, not because it was expected of me. I was always a big reader. I knew that I loved literature, but I didn't know that this was something that I could do.

What does it mean to be a queer son of immigrants AND an artist? Was there any hesitation from your family about your pursuit of an artistic life?

My parents were never discouraging. They were always like, "Do what will make you happy in life." But I don't know that they've always understood what this artistic life really means and what it entails. I think now they're starting to sort of wrap their minds around it. They came to my book launch in New York. I was on the local news in the Bronx, on a small channel. When my mom saw that, when my grandparents saw that, they were like, "Oh my God, you're a serious person. You're on the news." It's been less about them being discouraging and more about working with them to understand what this artistic life entails, what it means, what it doesn't mean.

Just because I have a fancy fellowship here or there, just because I published a book, they think I'm rich. "You're a writer and you're traveling and you're on a book tour, so you have all this money," and I'm like, "No, no, you don't understand..."

That tension between money and art always comes up when I'm talking to my family about what I do. Part of what helped them feel okay with me being an artist is that I always had a full time job in my 20s. I lived on my own. I moved out of my mom's house after coming back from college. I've always sort of taken care of myself financially as an adult. Because they see that, they're like, "Oh, well, we don't care what you do, as long as you can pay for your own rent and take care of yourself."

I would love to hear a bit about your previous work as a community organizer. So much of your writing is about community and place. And I know you yourself are very rooted in the Bronx where you grew up. How has community organizing informed your writing? Why is it important for artists to do this line of work?

I started doing community organizing in college. I went to college around the time of Trayvon Martin's death, and

the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. I was organizing in college around racial justice. When I graduated, I went back home to the Bronx, and I started getting involved in efforts around responding and resisting gentrification. The first moment where I realized that art and writing has a place in community organizing was during a city council hearing with people in power. It was about the rezoning of Jerome Avenue which would change the landscape of one of the longest streets in the Bronx. During that hearing, I went up there and I read a poem. I hadn't planned to read that poem. I just decided at the last minute to do it and I saw how much that shifted the room. I wasn't saying anything that other people weren't saying. [The poem] encapsulated the feeling, the frustration, the anger and the pride in being someone from the Bronx. It really moved people.

And so from then on, I spent a lot of time trying to bridge the gap between writing and community building, specifically trying to bring artists and writers to spaces where folks were already doing community organizing work. I will say it's something that I struggle with. I wrote an essay recently about the tension that I find between community organizing and writing. I think that it is important for artists to be involved and engage with their community, to make their local community the best that it can possibly be for its residents. And I also find it a little troubling the way we talk about art and activism these days. It feels to me like we often judge a piece of writing's value only on its political utility. What issues does it explore? What "communities" is it representing? And I think that is an important part of the conversation, but it cannot be the only way that we judge the value of a piece of art.

Isn't all art political? Does art have to be political to be good?

I just had a three hour conversation with a friend about this yesterday, and he said the exact same thing. He was like "All art is political. Everything is political. You can't escape it." And I said, sure, that's fine, but I want you to know that when I am sitting down to write a story that is not top of my mind. I am not trying to explore or expand or tease out my politics on the page. I am asking myself questions about people and their feelings and their hearts and their minds and the things that draw them together in community or in relationships, and sure that can be political or be interpreted through a political lens. The reader and the critic can do whatever they want with the work, but I am not thinking about these things first and foremost.

As immigrant writers, as queer writers, as writers of color, there is this question of what are you trying to say about your marginalized group? And sometimes I'm not trying to say anything about any group.

You don't want your work to be contrived. You don't want to try to fit into some sort of immigrant queer writer box, in order to be appreciated as an artist.

You are a recipient of the prestigious Black Mountain Institute Shearing Fellowship in Las Vegas. What have you learned about yourself as a person and an artist during your time in Sin City?

First I will say that it has been an incredible honor to be a Shearing Fellow. I have written more than I have written ever in my life in the last nine months. I always wanted to know what kind of person, what kind of writer, what kind of artist I would be if I had the privilege and time to just be a full-time artist and dedicate all my energy and time to being an artist. It's just been pretty incredible to find that out on a very practical level. What time do I write? How do I like writing? How do I revise? Can I make time for reading while I'm writing? There are different questions [to ask] when you have a full time job, as I did for 10 years before I got this fellowship.

I forget who said this. I'm sure many writers have said this: it's best to write about home when you are away from home, in a place very different from where you grew up.

Yes. I 100 percent agree with that. I think often our job as writers is to mystify and demystify what is familiar to us. When you're in *the* place, it's really hard to see the things that you're not seeing. And so it has been really helpful. I have been writing about the Bronx and other projects. I've been writing about communities in the Bronx that are not Dominican. I spend so much time in *Loca* and in other projects writing about what I know, what I call a Dominican village, but it's been such a revelation to write about all these different corners of the Bronx. For example, there's a huge Irish population in the Bronx that I have been researching and reading

about and writing about in my work. It's been nice to have that space away from home, in order to see it better, or to see it from a different perspective.

Distance makes the heart grow fonder.

Yes, and [makes the heart] ask more complicated questions.

Your debut novel *Loca* came out in February 2025. The act of writing/creating is so contrary to the publicity machine of a book tour. What have been the most surprising aspects of promoting your book?

I spent so much time working on this novel, understanding it from beginning to end, backwards and forward, but it's a totally different learning experience when you have to talk about it with other people. It is also incredibly challenging to see your work as an object that you have to sell to other people. You have to anchor your work in the theme and keywords. I have to talk about the fact that this is a queer transnational novel. I wasn't thinking about that when I was writing the work. I was just asking myself questions about these people on the page. And so it's incredibly challenging. And the biggest thing that I have learned is that for things to move along, you have to remain in the driver's seat of the promotional experience as the writer, which is really hard. So if I had to give a piece of advice to a writer that is about to go do this, or will do this one day, it is to get a ton of writing done before your book comes out. Because for a little while there will be no space and time for creativity or spiritual connection to one's work in traditional ways.

Let's pivot to *Sex and the City* for a minute. You have written about your love for this show and spoken about it on book tour. I know it's a comfort show but also deeply problematic lacking LGBTQ+ representation amongst many other pitfalls, despite all that, why is this show important to you?

The show was important to me because growing up as a queer person, I wanted to have the life that these women had; going out, dancing with friends, meeting random lovers, buying nice clothes, having artistic lives and professional lives. As a young queer person, I projected a lot of my dreams and hopes for adulthood on these white women who were not me but who I was able to connect to just on the basis of emotions. So much has changed in the culture regarding representation, and I really value seeing people who look or sound like me or whose experiences are more aligned with mine on screen or in a book. But I also really value that watching shows like *Sex and the City* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* attuned me to connecting to people across differences. I don't begrudge having grown up that way. And sure, it would have been nice to see more people like me on TV or in books or whatever, but I also think that is what has made me a writer. Even when I'm writing about people who are "like me" on the page, I still feel that I'm writing across differences. It just makes me a rigorous thinker and a rigorous writer.

I think it's such an easy cop out to be like, "That's not for me because they're not like me." The whole point of why we open up a book or watch a television show or movie is to learn about other people.

It's so true. I was just having a conversation with a young writer recently. He was like, "I don't read these white people in the canon." And I was like, you know, I understand the sentiment and also white people write things that slap. I would not be the writer that I am or the thinker that I am without having read Virginia Woolf for example. I follow James Baldwin's philosophy. He used to say something like, "I'm an artist. I'm a human being. And so all of the art is available to me." I get to read about the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and connect with those folks, as well as Virginia Woolf or Forester.

What inspires you?

The thing that inspires me the most is [the Bronx.] I'm really interested in the ways in which people share space, even when they don't want to share space, and the kinds of beautiful things and conflicts that come out of living in an apartment building or living on a block with other people.

When I want to connect to a source bigger than myself, I go to nature. I go to the park. I go on a hike. It's the

same feeling that people get when they go to church. And so I need to do that in order to connect. Reading is a huge source of inspiration. Seeing the way that other writers do language on the page usually pushes me to think differently about what I'm trying to do on the page.

There are some writers that don't want to get "tainted" by other people's work. They don't read.

I used to be one of those people when I was in my early 20s, trying to be a serious writer. I was like, "I don't want to be influenced by anyone. I want to be my own person and my own thinker." I appreciate that young version of me and his drive. But I also think it's quite alright to live and write and exist within a tradition.

I would love to talk a bit about endurance. Writing a novel takes stamina and discipline. How do you convince yourself to get up every day and write; "butt in a chair" as the writer Anne Lamott likes to say?

The thing that propels me to sit down and write every day is just the fact that I'm going to die. When I tell people this, they sort of look at me like, are you okay? I'm not depressed. I'm not walking around with this huge weight of existential dread. I just read this quote by Joan Didion, where she says, "Everyday is all there is." I am so aware that every day is all that we have and that I am not promised tomorrow. And so while I am here, I have work to do. There are things that I would like to accomplish. There are sentences and stories that I would like to get on the page before it's my time. Sometimes that pressure can be a lot and I need to be easy on myself and allow myself to rest and recuperate. There's this American idea that we are endless and that we are going to remain young forever and that we'll just keep going but I am very aware of my own mortality, and it informs my everyday life.

When I read Claude McKay, I'm able to visit Harlem in the 1920s. Or when I read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, I'm able to be in London in the 1910s and 1920s. My dream is that in 100 years (if we have a literary society, if people are still reading books) that people will be able to see how some people lived in the Bronx 100 years ago.

This goes back to your origin story. How you wrote all those pages for your history class. You're contributing to the history of time. What advice do you have for other writers who can't seem to stick to a writing routine?

My primary piece of advice is that it's really important to not romanticize the writing process. Writing can be very magical and it can be very spiritually fulfilling, but when I am creating my writing routine, I am grounded in the fact that this is my work in the world. And just as I used to show up from nine to five for my organizing jobs, how I used to show up after work hours for a community meeting, I need to treat my writing work as practically as possible, so that I can build a writing life. That means that you have to get really practical figuring out, what times do I write best? How long can I write? That was a really important question for me. When I was figuring out my process. It was really important for me to figure out that the first hour is usually horrible, the second hour is okay, and then if I'm able to make it a third hour, which I'm not always able to make a third hour, but if I'm able to make a third and fourth hour, that's when the good stuff really happens. And then after that, it just goes to shit again. But that was really important for me to figure out, and you can only figure that out by experimenting, trying new things and getting very, very practical about your writing process.

Why is it important to get serious about your art?

The world could care less if I write or not. The world will not be moved if I don't write another book. It's fine, but I am here in the world to write. If it is my calling in life, which I believe it is, the thing that gives my life the most meaning, then I have to say no to distractions. We are living in a time where one of the most important commodities is our attention, and people are making a lot of money out of grabbing our attention. Not only social media companies, but also our government throws a slew of things at us every single day to keep us distracted from the things that we are meant to pay attention to.

How can we avoid distractions in a world that profits off our time?

On a very practical level, turning off your phone is really helpful. I know that we like to be available to

people all the time, and we like to be connected all the time, but we don't have to be. Sometimes, turning off my phone for like, two or three hours and putting it somewhere is the best thing that I can do for my mind. I was talking to some students last year, and they were telling me, "We have a hard time getting off social media, even though we know that it's really bad for us, it makes us really anxious, because we want to keep up with the news. We want to keep up with what's going on. It feels like the ethical thing to do, to be connected all the time." I hope that individually and collectively, we are able to one day divorce what we believe is our ethical responsibility to the community from being online or reading the news, especially national news, every single day.

We're not meant to consume this much information.

It's paralyzing. I asked my students, what would your life look like if, instead of being on social media and reading the news every day and engaging with that all the time, what if you turned off your phone a couple days a week and used that time to volunteer somewhere locally? How would your relationship to yourself and your relationship to this responsibility that you have for collective engagement be different at the speed of a human life? This is always what I go back to. I am interested in living at the speed of a single human life, and anything that demands that I move at the speed of an influencer, at the speed of being everywhere all the time, that's just not for me. I can't do it.

Back in the day when novels first came out, people thought that they were addicting and distracting.

The difference between a book and a phone is that you engage with a book, but the book does not change. You change. You can come back to a book 100 times and read it differently and feel differently about it 100 times, but the book is not modifying itself to capture your attention, versus the phone. Technology is constantly being upgraded and changed to capture your attention, manipulate your taste and manipulate the way that you think, how you think, and how much time you spend on these things. It's just a different beast.

Technology is also homogenizing. It makes us all these stereotypical, algorithmic versions of whoever we're supposed to be.

It's boring. I feel like there's more group think now than people are willing to accept. Everybody wants to think that they are thinking bigger and better than the next person. But if you're on these platforms, and most of us are, you're probably getting your information from the algorithm and falling into these niches and thinking the way that other people are thinking.

I do believe that my single job as a writer is to make up my own mind about things. And so that means that it is my responsibility to try to disengage with the group and encourage others to do so by reading about characters that they may not have encountered in their daily lives.

Alejandro Heredia recommends:

Blueberry cheesecake ice cream from NYC's Sugar Hill Creamery

The film *You Won't Be Alone*

Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*

Offering some of your hours in service to someone else

Logging off social media twice a week

Name

Alejandro Heredia

Vocation

writer

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