

On getting clear about your vision



Writer and filmmaker Harmony Holiday discusses maintaining artistic integrity, when art becomes industry, and how play is as crucial as praxis

November 4, 2025 -

As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 3178 words.

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Was there a moment you first realized the true power words can have?

There's necessarily one isolated moment of sudden epiphany, but I was deeply influenced by growing up with a father who was a songwriter, and people marveling over his, sometimes, very simple lyrics, coming up to us and singing back songs. So, it was more ingrained in my subconscious through music than words. And I did love reading when I was really young but I never had some mystical, "Oh, my god, words are portals moment," until much later, reading poetry. [Saul Williams](#) was one of those poets. I was in high school around the time he was blowing up. I was editing *Pen Strokes*, the Culver City High Literary magazine, and the poetry I liked was always a lot more unruly than very neat stanza poetry. And so, before spoken word became gimmicky and really commercial (before Common was doing SLAM poems on Sprite ads), we were right in that precipice where the most experimental avant-garde stuff was happening. There was a relatively new anthology archiving poets from the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe in New York, which was one of my first stops on my first trip there a couple years later.

[Amiri Baraka](#) was probably the first in college when I really started creating my own side curriculum because he was able to write on the page in a way that some of the spoken word people at that time were doing orally. They were the permission to be who I wanted to be grammatically and in sound on the page. Also, when I was at Berkeley [June Jordan](#) was teaching this famous class called Poetry for the People. I read her work, but I never took her class unfortunately. But there was a sense that poetics could be a bigger part of social movements or aesthetic movements and had more significance than just this thing that introverts do in their bedrooms.

Around that time, there was a more assertive place for poetry in society that was opening again before it became an industry. There was this period of time, almost like a utopian, mini-renaissance of what poetry could be in the world and why it mattered to create different patterning with words than a linear sentence, like how I'm speaking now versus the lyricism that I could leap into reciting poems that would allow me to transcend the mundane patterns that are too basic to change anything.

What is the potential of poetry, and where do you think even the most poetic words can fall short?

In the hyper-modernized technocratic world, the absurdity of the language we see, this hegemony of certain phrases and slang travels very quickly via memes, social media, commercials, television, radio, film, and it's now deracinated ... who made this up? What is it? Anyone can be in what they call digital blackface, and there's just a lot of weird stuff going on linguistically, and poetry is one of the only spaces that can make sense of that by bringing those phrases back to you in a way that shows how crazy they are. Poetics is able to ask, without explicitly asking about a current moment, "What are we saying?"

Recently, Gen Z is calling people that they're dating "fine shyT," S-H-Y-T when it's written. Literally, "fine shyT" will be what you call your intimate partner, and that's weird. Not indecent, just casually vulgar weirdness that speaks to the devolution of the human personality in the West. Let's see how dehumanizing it gets compared to the classic pet names. And without being too didactic, you can write a poem about that, showing without scolding in a sense. That's something that poetry can do or should be doing to grieve language as it cedes to "ultra-processed."

Does poetry help words regenerate and transcend even if society is degenerating through unproductive behaviors?

I'm not super delusional about its transcendent power, like poetry can save the world type thing, but I think there's some infinity to it, a way it outlasts all of the soul-diluting forces. There's a recombinant DNA in language that poetry taps into. You can create endless and renewable species of sensation. That and in a less serious pitch, playing with language is as important as any other kind of play. Some of it's just about pleasure and delight in a very hedonistic base sense too, because language is sometimes too functional, too utilitarian.

Even if it might not be the key to saving the universe, why do you seek the written word?

I think James Baldwin's adage of bearing witness becomes really integral because, at the end of the day, all you can do, especially if you're a born writer and take up the responsibility of telling stories that otherwise wouldn't be told, finding narratives where others just see timelines—to talk about events in a way that records them so that they don't become expendable detritus. I guess that's why I write.

Have you faced things that are too uncomfortable to write about?

Usually, those are the things that I force myself to write about. That's my territory and everything I try to write about is somewhere within it. Sometimes, it's not necessarily an event or a topic, but the question, "Why is this style uncomfortable, why is this truth awkward to divulge?" And it might be because it's taking up more space than I'm comfortable with, more confrontational, easier to dissemble forever. So, I really like making sure that I tend toward those regions of thought, emotion. Sometimes, depending on who you're writing for, that gets more difficult, which is increasingly something I consider in this world—speaking out about things like Palestine while being signed to contracts that tacitly seem to request neutrality. It doesn't censor me to think about these things, but there are real factors that are starting to change the face of publishing and creative freedom for writers, passively or otherwise.

With the rise of AI and other technologies that might devalue the role of the writer or put language even firmer in the grips of corporations, how do you strike a balance and continue to write the words that matter?

I don't really fixate on it too much is one of the ways. I'm tenacious in ways that have benefited me, even though it's obviously laborious, to be brave about what and how you say things, but I think it's helped me. It's clear who I am and what I'm about. It's going to be harder to tame me using an AI system, my speech and language glitches them. So, if someone's looking for an AI-type voice, they'll go elsewhere, and I'm fine with that. But more and more people are looking for what feels authentic I think, so it's actually benefitted me to be candid. People respect that more. I respect myself more, most importantly. If you're doing something innovative, it's rarer and rarer because of the way it's being trained into people to sound like machines, a new tense, machine perfect. And so there is a way to maintain integrity by just being yourself, if you do it doggedly.

How do you keep the courage to continue down that path and blazing forward?

I haven't really paid attention to walls, which could be my own issue, but I don't get too caught up in what's impossible or what seems far-fetched because all the writers I respect who are long gone were like that—Toni Morrison or Baldwin or Baraka or Zora, doing seemingly impossible things and making them feel and seem effortless. I think one helpful habit or anti-habit is not complaining. I do get frustrated when people in the arts who are lucky enough to have more access, being in positions that other people might long to be in, waste a lot of time complaining. I see a lot of writers talking about writing being hard. I'm like, "I don't know. It's

harder not to write, in my opinion." So, if I'm getting the opportunity to write and be paid for it, you'll rarely see me complaining that it's hard. I might complain about other things, but definitely not that the writing itself is a hard thing to do because it's what I dreamed of. If I had to do something else, something less creative and generative, that might be hard.

You're coaxing forward endless species of sensation.

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

In your book *Maafa*, you wrote, "Black beauty is the most powerful currency in the world." Can you talk a bit about that?

When I talk about the language being traded on the internet and trafficked through memes and stuff, it's pretty much all a function of black beauty or black aesthetics being universalized and codified into something that everyone can access and use as a life force. It's a thing that the American personality runs on without really acknowledging it. I firmly believe that is the case, from the music to the dominant social and spiritual attitudes, to the way people stand, everything that people aspire to look and act like has some root in black aesthetics. I want to write about Joni Mitchell, in part because of her comments where she says, "I'm the only black Man in the room." This is [Joni Mitchell, white from Canada](#). She starts her autobiography saying that. So there's a black muse, whether it's for white folk music or weird pockets of the internet where people are talking about dating, using black slang. It's the last bastion of Americanism before we run out of all native capital, and it's not even native to here, but that's another story.

There's somewhere in the collective subconscious, a tacit theory that the more suffering you cause black people, the better they get at art and life. Let's test it out on black people because they're going to make it fly. They're going to make this trauma into some new ... they're going to get better at basketball or something if we try new poison on them, new medical testing, or they'll possess the immortal cell like [Henrietta Lacks](#), and maybe there's going to be one black cell line that turns into the new sentient digital currency.

Some twisted shit.

Yeah.

You have engaged with the archive in such powerful ways. Why is it important for you to explore the past and pass it forward?

I was studying poetry formally in graduate school when I started digging in archives and thinking about the idea that people should create independent, sovereign archives and populate them with the things that we want collected and catalogued so that it wasn't always up to institutions and bureaucracies. I was realizing that some of the stuff I wanted to read was not collected in anthologies. Erasure was very subtle and based on the willingness or ability that people have to make their own archives. So, I started collecting out-of-print books and albums, poems or rare jazz, and I grew obsessed with it, or attached to it as part of my creative practice.

And then, YouTube arrived, and I think everyone got obsessed with digital digging for art, sound, weird, more esoteric stuff, because it became easier. It almost felt like a period of catching up on all the esoteric jazz that we were never going to find in record stores anymore, maybe because of hip-hop producers and their acolytes buying it all up. You could just be on YouTube or Blogspot all night, finding anything from James Baldwin interviews to Black Panther archives. So, when it became a cosmic slop on the internet I realized it needs to be worked with in real life, en media res, and also that it's just as quickly probably going to disappear. And now you see, already a decade later, stuff is taken down that used to be there. And it's so ephemeral if you don't create some kind of archive of that archive. That sparked my interest in trying to [make work](#) that incorporates it and riffs with it.

With the infinite noise out there, what kind of space do you seek to actually do your writing?

I've definitely become a member of that cliché group, writers who really value our alone time. I work through isolation intentionally and I think that helps because it keeps you in your own energy. When I'm working on something big, the closest people to me might not even see me. I can quickly silo. Writing to the finish line of something, like a book-length thing, requires that for me. If I don't do it, I feel like I'm doing something wrong, betraying the subject, cheating. It's like method-acting for me.

Otherwise, I don't get that overwhelmed because a lot of social engagement seems satirically ridiculous at this point, phony and performative. So, I can locate the absurdity in most things, and not take them so seriously, now that I find the typical register of privileged liberal life nauseating and indulgent. The conversations at fancy dinners or galleries about like, "Oh, my God, everything's so bad," when nothing has really come for our bubble in the way that it's bad for people around the world or even in other parts of the city we live in.

I don't even know about protest poems anymore. I think I'm coming out of a stupor that was indoctrinated into us during the Obama era that we should turn everything into trauma and then turn that into our work, especially as black writers or artists. People started to appropriate grief that wasn't real and stopped writing about real things. At a certain point, I started thinking about how crazed all of art had been during those eight to 10 years. And I was like, "I don't know that any of it was that real." People were just saying stuff, catchphrases, sloganized political action. So, I'm trying to renovate a lot of that and be more vulnerable because I think it's very easy to write five Trayvon poems having lived through that. And that was terrible, but I don't think the world needs every writer to write a Trayvon poem. I think people need a poem about my own brother or something. You know what I mean? People started to try to have this universal moralizing thing that has negatively affected a lot of art, in my opinion. I think we should be creating more beauty and feel less need to have a response to every injustice immediately for cultural capital or clout.

We are fortunate where we're sitting in Los Angeles, a city that's under siege in many ways but also a city with blooming flowers, sunshine, creative community, and access to music. When you sit down at the page is that pleasure and delight something of a driver?

Absolutely. Yes. It's the number one driver, at least when I think about the material element of language. It's what you can do. The *play* with language is important. I think that good style with anything, but specifically with writing, will contain the good ideas in a way. If you develop a style and you're able to play in your own idiosyncratic way, your ideas will evolve and get more meaningful. Whereas shying away from that and trying to be overly serious and posture as some pundit, kills a lot of style and potential depth.

I don't think it's trivial and I think some of that style is inhabiting the space of, "I am not personally under siege at this moment. I'm looking at trees. I'm about to go take a walk and relax." Don't appropriate the style of someone who's currently going through oppression. Think about those things, but don't appropriate them as a style, as yours, then you don't have any personal style. It's like trying to steal someone's unique fingerprint. There's a cross-section of the things we've all been through, and not everyone needs to posture as if they're having the same political or physical experience. I think that it was a weird period where that started happening, and I don't know that we're fully out of it—rage bait and outrage bait, and I fell into it a bit. I think it's over, or I've got to evolve out of it somehow.

And what do you think is next? Is there a vision materializing on the horizon?

Definitely something more honest, not that I was ever prone to dishonesty, but just more precision. Really just stepping into more fearlessness with what I should personally be doing, feeling, and not what the climate says I should be doing. Yeah, I feel more grounded in a just-be-yourself mode, which is actually making the things I choose to write about more interesting.

And I'm sure that transmits and translates to everyone else.

Yeah, which is the point. You want people to feel you ... to get a vantage that you might have that they haven't seen or been able to access. Great art puts you in its trance, its world. Great writing does that. You don't put the book down because you're like, "What the hell? How did they hit this stride or this rhythm?" It's usually

about everything lining up, but not necessarily about an ideology. And I think that is what I was starting to forget that I now am clear on. Things can't be ideological first because your ideology is going to show up in how you line things up. At least that's what I've been working through.

Harmony Holiday recommends five healing haunts:

D'Angelo's "The Line," and all poems and songs and lives with real stakes. I think we should raise the stakes most of the time, of everything we do, and that song, more haunting now that he's gone, is about that intention and how it flickers in moments both deranged and inspired and needs watering.

Dove, what my grandfather called my grandmother, the dove as the symbol and stark feathered-flesh of peace that exceeds and inflects the forms we take on earth— and brings to mind a Rahsaan Roland Kirk aphorism that's never not on my mind— in that we all know that there will never be peace, and like to say brightmoments and joy through the universe. The dove promises those moments.

Solo Piano, and solo piano albums, Herbie Hancock's, Joe Bonner's, Bill Evans', Mary Lou Williams, D'Angelo soloing backstage, Alice Coltrane's solo set for Marianne McPartland, Bill Evans, Mingus Plays Piano, Cecil Taylor's "Choral of Voice (Elision)," Ellington's solo version of "Solitude," Mal Waldon in Grenoble, Monk at home and rehearsal breaking the instrument into tongues.

Yerba Maté out of a gourd with a bombilla as daily ritual preceding a morning stretch and session on my vibration Plate.

The light in September, the light in April

Name

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Vocation

writer, dancer, archivist, filmmaker

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