

On the importance of having a strategy



Writer and translator Carina del Valle Schorske discusses reporting as curiosity in action, resisting dependency on institutions, and how rejection reminds you that you're putting in the work.

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As told to Sara Tardiff, 2525 words.

Tags: [Journalism](#), [Translation](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Day jobs](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

In your September cover story for *The New York Times Magazine*, you wrote, "Journalism and social dance have always seemed linked to me—forms of structured improvisation for stepping out into a world full of potentially hostile strangers." What do you find on the other side of that potential hostility that makes you want to write and makes you want to dance?

I feel like it took a lot for me to get to that analogy between journalism and dancing—and in a way, the analogy alone was enough for me. But a lot of what journalism and dancing both manage is uncertainty. We don't actually know what's on the other side of that potential hostility: most of the time, neither our fantasies nor our fears turn out to be true. I guess for me it's important to have a strategy for approaching the intensity of the world even before it's important to anticipate what that intensity might give me. The similarities are also just very literal: like, how should I approach somebody I don't know? How do I initiate a relationship with a stranger? I don't want to be subject to the alienation that both the digital world and capitalism impose on all of us. I have a pretty strong desire to break through and make contact: for me, both journalism and dancing are about finding a form for that desire.

You mention strategy. Can you walk through what your reporting strategy looked like with this story in particular?

It was more reporting than I'd ever done—and maybe most people don't even consider what I was doing real reporting! I actually have kind of a vexed relationship with reporting because I wasn't trained that way; I was basically trained as a poet and scholar. I'm learning how to report on the fly and it obviously helps that I've had a brilliant editor [Sasha Weiss]. But I've only recently gotten comfortable with calling [what I do] "reporting" as opposed to "research." I guess the distinction between reporting and research—beyond, like, professional dialect—has a lot to do with how we think about time. Journalism places the emphasis on the present, and research places the emphasis on the past. But I don't relate to that segregation.

Aesthetically, a lot of the writing I love best experiments with our relation to time—weird books like [Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red*](#), [Times Square Blue](#) or Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*. I want my writing to meet you in whatever present we might share but scramble our sense of what the present might be made of. Before I started writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, I did sometimes record conversations, and I've always kept careful "field notes" or whatever. Even when I'm writing so-called "criticism" or something more archival, I always try to be attentive to the writing process as it transpires in real time. But the particular form of reporting that story required—approaching strangers in the moment—was pretty new to me, and the story now stands as a record of the way I felt my way through that experience. Reporting from a club or from a party...

Not crying in the club, reporting from the club.

Why not both? I've done both. It's obviously a fool's errand to try to interview people at the club. I was out with my little notebook, scribbling down truly random stuff in the dark, like "purple camouflage pants"... "Estamos Bien for funerals"... "secret g-spots in the sky"... When I was reporting from the Tony Touch set on the Coney Island boardwalk, I saw a beautiful woman improvising with a series of strangers—she was maybe in her fifties, and her versatility was incredible. With one partner she was fluid and yogic, with another she was all salsa, sazón. At one point I tried to gesture her away from the action, and I flashed my notebook as if that might mean something. But verbal desires are really hard to communicate nonverbally—all gestures on the dancefloor end up looking like dancing—so she thought I wanted to dance, and we did! We never ended up speaking. Encounters like that happened so many times.

It was impossible to record anybody on the dance floor, so I set up interviews with people after the fact, usually within a week, and we would talk on the phone about what they remembered—we'd begin with that night, but very quickly the conversations kind of tunneled back into childhood. Tap-dancing in the shower for the slapping sound, that kind of thing. I discovered people were really hungry to discuss those memories, stored in the body, that usually go unspoken. I think I interviewed 12 people on the record—substantial conversations, most of them lasted over an hour. I wasn't able to quote all of them in the final version of the story, which was honestly devastating—on some level, it felt wrong. I guess that's journalism, you're never going to get everything in. But you should still consider—and mourn—all the directions the story didn't go, the histories you didn't tell, and the points of view that you didn't take into account. I ended up spending a couple of weeks working on an email for my extremely infrequently used [TinyLetter](#), following up on those dropped beats. I'm not sure how helpful that was, but I felt accountable to the generosity of strangers. The details they'd shared with me were too precious.

What would you say is your biggest draw to reported personal essays?

I guess I'm always thinking about the kinds of experiences I want to have in life. It was February [2021] when I pitched that story: I knew I wanted to make my attempt to pursue the joy we had been missing in Season One of the pandemic. The assignment gave me the infrastructure and accountability I needed to guarantee the experience. And in the very privileged case of writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, it also gave me the budget: I took Lyfts back from every party, I didn't have to worry about tickets, and that enabled all kinds of adventures that wouldn't have been possible for me otherwise. But even when I'm on my own dime, I only want to write stories that I also want to live. Of course that's not always about seeking pleasure. But it is about *seeking*.

Speaking of thinking about how you want to live—how do you want to work? What are your ideal working or writing conditions.

Wow, you're asking me to think about ideal conditions in *this* economy? I definitely stay chasing that! Even though I know that dependence is the nature of things and we shouldn't be pursuing total self-sufficiency, I really prefer not to *belong* to specific institutions. Ideally, I don't want anybody—any institution or person—to have a monopoly on my time. I want to feel like *I* am the nexus of my time. The question is really about how to preserve that "independence," while also somehow securing necessary benefits like health care—and oh my god, time off.

I'm at a crossroads right now. I was dependent on the institution of Columbia University for the past six, seven years. The Ph.D. program gave me the baseline security I needed to develop a creative practice that could sustain me financially on the other side of it. I'm about to cross over into life as a full-time freelancer, and I feel proud that I've been able to engineer that transition somehow. But I'm also a little apprehensive about the risks. At the end of the day, I know that the true balance sheet is in the moment. If I'm not experiencing some level of freedom and fulfillment in how I spend my time and how I spend my energy, then what am I really pursuing?

How has family or community played a role in your development as a writer and an artist?

It's hard to imagine how I would have become an artist outside of the context of the artistry that I observed growing up. Back in the '70s, my mother was a performer in the Nuyorican scene and she curated events downtown. She did all kinds of things: she sang, she danced, she DJ'd, she participated in multimedia experiments. She had

a government grant from CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act], which funded artists for two years at a time—an actual living wage, with healthcare! She wasn't a "working artist" when I was growing up, but I definitely experienced her that way. She exposed me to so much—Brazilian music, movies like *Daughters of the Dust*, watercolors, PBS documentaries about people like Joni Mitchell and Martha Graham. Cassandra Wilson. Gregorian chants. Little dance demos: the mashed potatoes. My grandma was also a singer and had two radio shows in Puerto Rico when she was in her early twenties, before she migrated. In Washington Heights, she worked grocery checkout at the local market, but that bohemian sensibility has always been very active in our line. I should also say that they—we—come from a culture in which art is understood in a more communal way. I don't want to essentialize, but there's definitely a more participatory thing going on in Puerto Rican culture. There's music in the air and we all sing along.

Let's talk a little bit about your translation work. You once wrote, "Even if your relationship with another language is strained, translation can transform your anxieties into the virtues of an artist." How do you lean into those anxieties for the benefit of the work?

I think anxiety can, and perhaps should, provoke you to ask more questions. If you understand it as a natural part of the process, it can drive you deeper into the work. In translation, I also think anxiety signals that a real border is being crossed, even when you "belong" to the culture you're translating from. Having certain fears about the risks involved in that traversal is healthy; it can cultivate respect. Sometimes the anxiety is telling you that you're not the right person to translate a particular text—and that's always worth considering as well. I understand it's hard to learn to trust yourself, but I think letting some of those anxieties in can be ethically productive.

How have you managed your time and energy working on multiple demanding projects at one time?

I mostly don't work on them at the same time. I try to parcel out my time in weeks or months, rather than parts of days, you know? But while I'm here in Puerto Rico, my dissertation is due soon and I have a draft of a short story [for the* New York Times Magazine*] due at the end of the month. So I'm thinking about both of them, I'm reading, I'm taking notes, I'm talking with my friend Elisa [Gonzalez] who's here with me. Sometimes the cross-pollination can be generative: Freud might show up in an essay about R&B. But my book and my dissertation have taken a long time to incubate because I'm not a machine. It's been three years since I sold my book proposal—it was just a proposal, so I hadn't actually drafted any chapters at that point. It's also been three years since I proposed my dissertation. In recent years I've been writing freelance, I've been translating, I've edited a bilingual anthology of Puerto Rican poetry with my friends Raquel Salas Rivera, Ricardo Maldonado, and Erica Mena. There's been a lot going on, and it hasn't been possible to integrate all of it into some kind of seamless production line. It's not my preference to have as many projects going as I do right now: these last two years have involved an unsustainable intensity. I'm trying to trust that this work is leading somewhere that I want to be. At the same time, I've had to remind myself: If I don't like how it is right now, if the day-to-day is too punishing, then that's a sign that it's not worth it anymore. It has to be worth it. Creative work shouldn't just be about a future reward, because the future isn't promised. It should also be rewarding in the present.

Tell me about a recent rejection that ultimately course-corrected you towards something better.

Oh, there are so many that it's hard to pick one! I guess I was recently rejected from the Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant for the second time—a lot of great people got grants this year, so I'm not mad. In some ways, [rejections] are just a reminder that you're in the game. You are living the life you say that you're trying to live. But any application process is conditioned by so many social, political micro-factors. Rejections—and wins, for that matter!—are always an opportunity to observe where the rubber meets the road, and where our idealizations about the creative process interact with the world of authorizing and credentialing and funding. To some extent, you are being evaluated on your capacity to perform yourself as a creative product. We shouldn't be too innocent about that.

You mentioned "performing yourself as a creative product." How do you negotiate that performance on a day-to-day basis?

Sometimes I think of that Joan Riviere essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" from 1929! Social media didn't invent anything, but obviously it's specifically designed to prey on the stresses produced by pre-existing social conditions. There's so much toxicity there, so I try to take a lot of walks, to see my friends IRL. But I'm single and I live alone, so my moment-to-moment life is very quiet and interior—and sometimes the making of the day wants a witness. Not because I'm lonely, really, but because sometimes life asks to be shared. Or I admire something that I've made—and by that I mean a particularly custard-y scrambled egg—and the beauty seems to somehow exceed the capacity of the moment to carry it. That's when I find myself turning to Instagram. There's this passage from Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, which is delivered in the voice of this old white candy magnate, a very flawed character: "At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. It is enough. No record of it needs to be kept and you don't need someone to share it with or tell it to." Those words seem wise to me. But I'm not there yet.

Carina del Valle Schorske Recommend:

Gal Costa (barefoot in a sequined evening gown) singing "Volta" live in 1973.

A Feather on the Breath of God by Sigrid Nunez, a nonfiction novel in the tradition of *Sleepless Nights*.

Eugenio Ballou's archival collage of Puerto Rican clippings from the first half of the 20th century, *La antologia del olvido*.

In the Mirror of Maya Deren, a documentary about the avant-garde filmmaker, dancer, & anthropologist.

Collecting vegetable peels & scraps in a big ziploc in the freezer til there's enough to make broth.

Name

Carina del Valle Schorske

Vocation

writer and translator

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Mara Corsino