On the shared experience of poetr

An interview with poet J Jennifer Espinoza

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2561 words.

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Can you talk us through your writing process?

I keep thinking about the word “process.” It’s interesting to me because I’ve dealt with a lot of mental health and emotional issues throughout my life, and the word “process,” in this context, is used to mean processing your feelings, accepting your emotions, accepting what’s happened to you, guiding yourself away from being trapped in this uncomfortable, dissociative state. I think that’s totally linked to “process” in the artistic sense, the way artists guide themselves to create. So probably the most important part of my process is literally processing my emotions and my feelings.

How important is mental and physical health for creating the work?

It’s really important. It’s integral, I would say, but, also, it’s complicated because I feel like, in the past when I was writing, it was just sort of an unconscious thing that would happen. Before I started really working on my mental and emotional health, I was kind of a wreck all the time. I would sit down and this poetry would just pour out of me, like from my subconscious, basically. So that was just more of a process of survival, of letting all this stuff out of me so I could breathe and live.

As I’ve gotten better at processing, the process itself has become a bit more difficult because I have to be more intentional with it. I have to sit down and be like, “Okay, what am I feeling right now? Why am I feeling this? What do I want to say about it? What do I have to say? How can I do justice to this feeling?” When you think about this intentionally it’s more difficult, because you have to think about what you’re doing and be aware of what’s coming out of you. As I become more experienced as a writer, and as I become a more emotionally stable and responsible person, it becomes more difficult.

Do you think the writing is better now, even though it’s more difficult to do?

It’s hard for me to judge my own writing in that way. I can look at one poem one day and be like, “Oh, this is great” and then a day later I’m like, “This is crap. This is the worst thing I’ve ever written.” I do miss, and feel nostalgic for when it came more easily because it felt almost magical, like I was channeling something. And that’s a feeling that I want to recreate constantly, but trying to recreate it kind of negates the whole idea of it. So, yes, it’s a struggle.

How do you go about trying to recreate that sort of state?

By accepting that I can’t. That I just need to accept where I am, and what the process has become for me, and let myself grow into that. And kind of figure out the best way to be more intentional, and to not just hope the moment comes. But, instead, to sit down and really… I don’t want to overthink it, but to let myself feel. To try and grasp what I’m feeling.

How do you see your poetry and Twitter working together? Do you try out ideas or thoughts on Twitter that end up becoming something you can use later? Do you see it more as a way to take a break from writing poems? Or, for you, is everything connected?

I think it’s all of those things. I find that Twitter has been really helpful for putting big ideas into this succinct, small package, and I think that’s something that’s important for me in my poetry, to be able to distill these big ideas and overwhelming feelings into something that on some level is intelligible, and relatable, and understandable, so that’s part of it.

It is also beneficial as a form of practice for writing in general. Paying attention to how people respond to a tweet feels

like a kind of workshop that helps me get a better idea of what people are into. Not that I'm necessarily trying to create work to pander to other people, but I think a big part of my process is about overcoming this social anxiety/inability to connect and communicate with other people in a normal way. So when I'm thinking about it like that, I'm considering how people are responding to my words. I'm seeing it as a way of me being able to communicate with people, maybe in a way that isn't normally possible for me.

Social media can be a huge barrier to getting things done. How do you use it productively?

I don't use it productively much of the time. It *is* a huge barrier. I have this love/hate relationship with social media. Emphasis on the hate part. So, I'll take breaks. I'll take a day or two break from Twitter every now and then, and I find that it's really helpful. It's almost cleansing because it's really easy to stare at your feed, and space out, and scroll, and scroll, and scroll. It feels like it's just a waste of time, and really can drain your creative energy and leave you miserable.

**I read a tweet of yours: "Being a poet means feeling an irresistible pull towards creating work that will stand the test of time even though you're pretty sure all this shit is coming to an end soon." Do you view a tweet as something more ephemeral, and a poem as something that you can imagine someone still reading in 50 years?*

Definitely. And you know, I haven't really thought about it consciously in that way before, but I'm glad you put it that way because that perfectly describes the contrast between tweets and poems. Because a tweet, you know, you tweet it, and it has a lifespan of maybe a couple days at most, and then it's like poof, gone into the ether. But with poetry, I do feel this sort of urge to create work that people can read and appreciate long after I'm dead.

What do you do when you get creative blocks?

Despair for several days, and then try to tell myself that it's going to pass. That's one of the most difficult things for me because I've come to define myself so much by my creative output, whether that be poems, or tweets, or whatever. So when I hit a creative block, it can be really disheartening. I try to remind myself to focus back on my health, and on my wellbeing, and just try to take my mind off of this terrible pressure, this irresistible drive to create. And having that pressure and then not being able to do it is extremely frustrating. So that's something I'm constantly working on—being okay with creative silence.

Are you ever okay with abandoning a poem?

If I start writing a poem, I feel like I want to honor this poem. I see the poem as if it's my baby. I feel a responsibility to the poem to try and make it work, and to honor it. It takes a lot for me to actually erase a poem completely, and move on and forget about it.

How do you know when a poem's done?

That's more of an intuitive thing, at this point. I haven't really come to a place where I consciously decide if a piece is finished. I just let it breathe, and when I feel like it's alive in the right way, then it's ready.

Do you have other ways to nurture your creative side when you're not working, or you just kind of take a break entirely and say, "All right, I'm gonna let my mind rest"?

I mostly let my mind rest, and let things happen the way they're going to. I like going on walks, and being in nature, and just soaking in and appreciating the world. The goal is to clear my mind from this pressure to perform creatively, and to give that part of me space to exist freely.

Do you find you have any tendencies when you're writing? Things you have push against, or patterns you'll fall into?

That is always an issue for me because I'll start to get comfortable with certain themes or ideas, and then I'll get stuck and it'll start to feel like I'm writing the same poem over and over. I have to ask myself, "Why am I doing this? Why am I trying to write the same poem over and over? Why do I keep using the word "body"? Why do I keep talking about my body? What is it that I'm so obsessed about that I feel the need to keep doing this?" And I think when that starts to happen, I need to find the right poem to resolve this. Or the right series of poems, or whatever.

Have you written work that maybe you love and got no response from, or work that you weren't that interested in, or work that you thought was not your best, but then people really responded to it?

Both of those things can be really frustrating—if I write something I really love but people don't get it, or if it's something I think is mediocre but everyone seems to love it, it feels like a half-success to me. But at the same time, I would rather create work that is satisfying to me, and that I feel like helps me on some level, rather than it be popular. And it really depends on the context. Popular with who? I've had people tell me that my work around gender has helped them immensely come to terms with their gender identity. And even if it was a piece that I didn't necessarily love, that is 100% a success in my eyes. If I can help someone come to terms with who they are, or be more comfortable with themselves, or just find the courage within themselves to admit who they are, then that's amazing. That's the kind of thing that keeps me going when I start to doubt myself.

What drew you to poetry initially? What made you decide, "I can do this, I want to show this work to people, and I want to be a poet."

I didn't go to school for poetry. I've been writing pretty much since I had the ability to write, since I was really young. And that was something growing up that my parents really did right, was encouraging me to be creative, and to explore that. I started off writing short stories when I was younger. Then in middle school, I got introduced to poetry in a class, and it felt like something truly opened up for me. Like, I hadn't realized that this whole world of language was possible, that you could say these things in a poem, that you could sort of bypass the restrictions of not just prose, but of language and normative ideas in general.

Another big part of it was the internet. When I was starting high school, LiveJournal was a big thing, and then, eventually, MySpace. So I would post my poetry on these platforms in order to share myself with others. I just got used to processing my emotions in that way. It began to feel like a form of communication with people because, as I've mentioned, that was something I always had issues with. So it was one way that I could actually feel close to other people, and it became an important part of my daily life, and finally, it led me to where I am today.

Is it important for you, too, as a poet and as a writer, to be politically engaged?

This is something I have a complex relationship with. Apart from working on my mental health and attempting this communication with other people, the other biggest part of my process is… I guess I would say channeling this political rage within me—but it's difficult, because I don't feel like it's a choice. As a transgender woman living in this time period, it is inherently political for me to speak my truth. Often I feel like it sucks that it has to be this way. I'll start to wish I could just be a normal person, but then I have to consider the fact that to be a "normal person" and to be granted personhood in this world relies on someone else being designated not a person.

So that is what drives the political aspect of my poetry—the idea that the very things that make up this world, and that keep things the way they are, are wrong. I don't want reform, I don't want change. I want the world to be remade, I want a different world. So I don't know if I like using the world "political" to describe this line of thinking because I feel like it goes deeper. When I think about "political" poetry in the contemporary context I picture someone writing about Trump or electoral politics, or whatever. There is a place for this kind of work, but I don't necessarily feel drawn to write in this way, because I see those surface-level politics as being mere symptoms of the inherent institutional violence built into the system that guides our daily lives. So I do want be politically engaged, but I am drawn to thinking bigger because of the urgency of my position in the world. I feel like the political part of my work is something that's inherent in my identity and my experiences, and what I care about, and what I believe in, and I feel that ignoring that, and trying to be apolitical would be impossible.

As far as visibility, more people may see a tweet than a collection of poetry. Your tweets are often shared thousands of times. Is it stressful to have so many people responding to what you're saying, and feeling something based on what you're saying?

It can be incredibly stressful. As I become a more emotionally open and engaged person, I can start to fall into this dangerous position of taking on other's emotions and feelings. For instance, if something I write resonates emotionally with others and they respond to me from within their feelings, I can start to feel it myself. And this can be debilitating if I am not very careful and deliberate in what I decide to take on. I am grateful for it in the end, however, because it goes back to that whole idea of connecting with people and, specifically, especially, connecting with queer people, and trans women, and others who I have this shared experience with. Having the privilege to be able to speak with them on a wide scale like this is a really amazing thing that I am always grateful for.

J Jennifer Espinoza recommends:

Taking a break from Twitter for literally one day

Crying at least once a week

The Dialectical Behavior Therapy workbook

“Poem to the Reader” by Sharon Olds

“Every Single Night” by Fiona Apple

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Vocation
Poet