On the physicality of writing

Poet Natalie Diaz discusses the urgency of writing, why creativity can be a trap, and how collaboration gives you a third hand.

March 12, 2021 - Natalie Diaz is a Mojave American poet, activist, and educator. Before completing an MFA in poetry and fiction in 2006, she played professional basketball in Europe and Asia. She published *When My Brother Was an Aztec* in 2012.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1283 words.

Tags: Poetry, Process, Inspiration.

What do you do when you're stuck creatively?

I don't get stuck creatively. I was built to use and know my body—to trust its limits, only in that they can be broken. My mind works like an athlete's mind and body. I'm an ox on the page, yoked to some aching heaviness, grinding some mark of myself into the clay. If I'm ever frustrated or angry or bored, I use my body. To walk, to run, to make love, to touch.

When I get my heart rate up, I begin to wonder. I'm an animal or a machine or a miracle of wonders, most of which are impossible and ridiculous and involve all of my friends and beloveds, who are too many and require incredibly difficult journeys and jaguars and lots of bourbon and scotch and my mom and coyotes and Roger and Ada and Thomas and Solmaz and Rickey and lovers and there are just too many things to leap from or trip on or kick in or break down to be stuck on something like creativity. I think creativity is a trap. I tell my students, *Call it tension, not creativity*. Tension is easy in America, and in love.

You were a professional basketball player. A number of artists started as athletes; Matthew Barney comes to mind. How did sports affect the way you approach your writing, if at all?

Having been a professional athlete, I believe I have a different lexicon of the body. A specifically textured vocabulary that moves beyond the five or six senses we tend to limit ourselves to in Western thinking. This also comes from my Mojave culture. I don't only feel with my body, I think with it. Even text is a physical space for me—it is not merely ink or font or symbols. Writing for me is no different than playing basketball, it's my body moving among and pushing up against and being moved by other bodies of language and the energy of language.

Can you talk a bit more about text as a physical space?

Text is a way of voice, a speaking to the ear and to the eye. Letters were once bodies, are bodies now. They are not symbols, are not static. Nothing is static; nothing is unmoving. Not ink, not thread. Everything is energy. Text is a happening. In some moments, letters become an extension of my physical body: when I am writing them, or thinking them, or when I am pressing my eyes over their dark bodies on the page. A page, like a letter, has a sound. It speaks. It moves. Once spoken, once touched with the eye, it is loose—an energy from a cage to which it cannot be returned. It goes on forever and will outlast its maker.

***When My Brother Was an Aztec* came out in 2012. Are you working on anything new?**

I'm working on many things. I am patient. I like taking risks with language in terms of form and content and collaboration. Most of what I've been doing lately is collaborative and it is coming to poetry from around a corner down the street.

What do you mean by "coming to poetry from around a corner down the street"?

I believe I came to poetry from around the corner. From a cul-de-sac really. On a rez far from where poetry ever visited. The cavalry visited. The ARMY. The railroad. They all visited. Not poetry.

Maybe what I mean is that I need the rigor and radicalism of friendship to be a poet, to be anything, really. I have found those friendships in poetry, but I found them by letting poetry be a small part of them. Language is why I am at poetry. Anger is why I am at poetry. Architecture is why I am at poetry. Haptics is why I am at poetry. My brother is why I am at poetry. The field or cave beyond myself where I go when I touch my lover is why I am at poetry.

Poetry is a thing I do with the love and chaos I feel for my beloveds and this land and the energy in every living being. It is a room to enter. There are a thousands ways to enter that room. I want to try them all.

How does patience influence your writing?

I am mostly not patient. I am anxious for what I love. What I might mean is: I am urgent when I write. Language is urgent. Living is urgent. I must do them. Where I am patient is on the other side of the tension that is my work. By this, I mean I am patient on the publishing side, because I don't trust that side of art.

In the context of stability, this might seem strange—especially if you consider the tension I live in, which is also the tension from where my art leaps, an inconsistent space. It is consistent only in its unpredictability. This is also what makes it worth my devotion to it. This is what makes it mine. It is chaos, and wonder, and total unknowing.

But after the making, creating, building, and wondering, I become patient. I become weary and wary, until I find feeling. Feeling is hard to find in the publishing world, especially a publishing world that mimics typical American power structures. I mean, even the page is white.

I saw a statement of yours where you talked about finding truths through your writing: "I learned this not by any academic lesson, but within my family." Can you talk about this kind of non-academic learning?

Truth is a funny word in America. It is the thing I trust least (or maybe I trust "America" and "truth" equally, which is little). Truth is often what white people have used against brown people to explain and exercise and flaunt the power of their whiteness. What I know most about truth is that it is shifting, it occupies a space of power, it cannot be trusted, it is only one of a myriad of ways to tell a story. How else could I live in the many selves that I am: native, Mojave, Pima, athlete, Latina, catholic, queer… if I didn't have an expansive and troubled understanding of truth. How else can I love myself in an America built directly upon the destruction of indigenous peoples unless I question truth and demand from it all the things it continually denies me: love, strength, space, tenderness, success, freedom, health, etc.

How do you nourish your creative side when you aren't working?

I was built in a big family, so my brain is electric for conversation and fields of questions and wonders. I love collaborations because they create a third hand that now belongs to each person in the collaboration. I have my two hands, but I am gifted with a third when I collaborate. Imagine how much more you can hold and touch and build and move and reach for with a third hand. I can even touch myself better with three hands.

5 things from Natalie Diaz:

What if you think of your eyes as touching rather than seeing?

I know what it is like to lose a word forever.

In my desert you can see a storm coming from hours and hours away.

I know what it is like to know your body has reached a limit, and then to move beyond that limit, to a new body, one you didn't know you had.

Language is energy.

Name
Natalie Diaz

Vocation
Poet

Fact

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Obey

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