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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2563 words.

Tags: Poetry, Day jobs, Inspiration, Process, Politics, Success.

On how creative work reminds us we're alive

Poet Melissa Lozada-Oliva discusses making what you believe in, art and connection, and utilizing humor and horror to reveal beauty. What is poetry? How do you define it and has the definition changed with time?

For a while, I was like, so is anything poetry? And I still am leaning towards yes. Sometimes people will say things to me and I'm like, "Did you know that that is so beautiful?" I was in Temecula for my friend's bachelorette party. There was a fire way in the distance and it made the sunset look really beautiful. And someone was like, "No one ever talks about how the apocalypse is so beautiful." And I was like, "You're not a poet and you just said something so gorgeous."

My mom is an aesthetician and has very much dedicated her life to beauty and making people feel beautiful with facials, waxing, nails. And I feel like that is kind of what I'm doing with my life. I think poetry is about, for me, remembering the beauty of the world. I have the capacity to do it endlessly. Sometimes I'm like, is that fucked up? Should I just be, like, this sucks. Everything fucking blows. But I feel like poetry's job is for beauty. And I think that is important. I think it keeps us human. I don't think it saves the world. I think that's impossible.

I really love how you said that you don't think it saves the world. Poetry is beautiful, film is beautiful, art is beautiful, but they're not creating vaccines.

They're not creating vaccines. They're not plugging up all of the oil rigs. But it does matter. I think it's one of the last things that reminds us that we're alive. But I'm not a social justice worker, you know?

Because art is so devalued in modern society and seen so transactionally, I feel like sometimes artists, myself included, try to validate our work by making it seem more precious or more valiant than it is. I don't think that's necessary.

Yeah, it's not necessary. Maybe it's even more moving to know that it doesn't matter, you know?

Right, exactly.

We're very small.

Have you always felt that way?

No.

When did that change?

I'm 29 and when I came up in this scene, I was 22 and I was like, "I am going to change the world!" And then I was like, actually, I don't actually want to do that. I want attention. I want to be seen.

In the last two years, the stakes have changed. Every passing moment feels very, very precious. And I also feel smaller and smaller and I'm humbled at the expanse that's before me.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. You started off with these very big intentions that were really maybe just rooted in wanting attention. Do you still use your art as a way to be seen by others?

Oh yeah, definitely! It's like this weird double entendre because I'm like, I really want to be seen. But what happens if someone's looking too closely?

Art is, I think, all about connection. And I feel very moved that I get to do that.

I'd love to talk about the themes of fandom and obsession in your upcoming book. How did those topics become the focus? Was it intuitive? Did you start writing poems and with time realize there was a recurring theme or was it intentional?

I think that came with time. I kept writing these poems about Selena and I also kept writing these love poems. I kept thinking about what the you in a poem is. How it can be a beloved or it can be elegiac. And I was just really thinking about how in both ways, when you have a crush on someone and when you're a fan of somebody, you dehumanize them. You're not seeing the dirtiest parts of them, the parts that would be like, "Oh, I don't want to hear that." You know? When the rose colored glasses come off. So, I think that started to really fascinate me.

And then a bunch of people were getting canceled. People still get canceled...What if I was like "this is my rampage against cancel culture?" [laughs] But I was just really fascinated by what happens when we're so obsessed with somebody and they disappoint us. And then we still listen to their music because it still invokes something inside of us. What happens when you just love a person and then they do something horrible?

Did you feel like you were able to work out some of those questions through writing the book? Or are you still confused about those questions?

I think I'm still exploring that. I wrote this book and I feel like I extracted a demon in myself. Now, I'm working on these short stories and they are all kind of about women who are encountering uncomfortable truths. I love living in that space. Something like, I don't know, figuring out that your best friend is a serial killer. That's actually not a subject in my story, but what if that happened?

Yeah, I know what you mean. This phrase just came to my mind: a purgatory of connection, this middle space where you're witnessing someone in a different way and you can't turn back.

Wow, yeah.

How does your own experience of being a fan and having fans impact your view of writing and being an artist of the internet?

Oh my god. I feel like, as a Virgo, I get very obsessive and I go down these holes. I'm such a fan. And I think it's important to be a fan of people and to just stay in that realm and not cross it, you know? And not suddenly become like a friend, because that's when things get complicated. I've had such a funny experience with this. I have gained internet followers over the course of six years. I started getting scared and anxious about saying things. And then, my Twitter no longer was like a diary. I don't really have that much anxiety about getting canceled anymore. But I would just see it happen and would be like, "Oh my god." Like, it's like a horrible feeling.

I really love everyone who reads my work. I can't believe people read my stuff. People come up to me and they're like, "I have been watching you since high school." And then I'm like, "That's crazy and makes me feel old." But yeah, I don't know. I feel very lucky, but I'm also always grappling with like, okay, I kind of want to shut everything off and then move into a remote location.

I kind of want to talk about that. So, in poetry and the literary scene in general, there's a sort of preciousness around everything, that every word needs to be the best word ever and needs to be so profound. Everything has to be so serious. Something I really love about your work is though there's seriousness to it, you're also making fun of yourself and making fun of the perceived seriousness about making art. I'm wondering how you started viewing and making work like that.

I think that's just always been my thing. I feel like that was a strength of mine going into spoken word. Like, all of my poems were a little funny. I think I go into a comedy space a lot. I can't ever be like TikTok earnest. I'm just so like, "No, what? None of this is real." I don't know.

But I always think about how my comedian friends have a lot of trouble being sincere, and they'll just rag on each other. And then, only a few drinks in, will they start saying serious shit. But then, my poet friends right away they're like, "I don't know, something is really heavy for me right now, I'm processing so much." And then it's like, "Okay, both of you guys, it's okay to be sincere and it's okay to make fun of yourself"

There are various terms that get thrown around to describe the current wave of writing and writers—internet writers and millennial fiction and all that. Do you identify with categories like that? And what do you think about them generally?

Yeah, I think so. I'm like a child of the internet. I came up in a time where I knew no internet, and then I turned 12 and then had access to things. And I've seen it evolve. I think I'm very much a millennial. I feel okay with that too. I really was caught up in being like, I want to be long lasting and classic and I

want people to look back at my stuff and relate to it still. And I think I'm kind of okay with that not happening. And I am okay with being of a moment. And of course, I am, you know? I came up when 911 happened, you know? I grew up during a period of wartime and a very fast, horribly changing world and I don't know what my future is going to look like. I'll be 30 next year and I thought my life would be a lot different when I was a teenager. And now it's like, everything has kind of been shaken. The great unknown is in front of me. And in a way, that wasn't in front of many people my age in the '90s or the '80s, or maybe it was, who knows? But I don't know, I hope I can capture this moment. And I think I'm okay with being, with something not lasting.

I also feel like, because I'm being so specific to myself, specificity for some reason always lasts. I was just reading Virginia Woolf's "A Room Of One's Own." And she's talking about hanging out with a bunch of people after the war. And I was like, "Okay, this is exactly how it felt hanging out with people after quarantine," you know? It's like the same feeling. And I feel like things don't last, and then they do.

Yeah, that's so beautiful. I think a lot of artists, or even just people in general, whether making art or not, are trying to build a legacy of themselves, or trying to make an empire of who they are and have an everlasting presence on the world. And that's very limiting in a way, because you get so caught up in wanting to be classic or make a legacy, instead of focusing on the present.

Yeah, exactly. I don't want that. I feel like I'm not trying to carry my seed, you know? What people should be concerned about is [when what they're doing] is too tied into what is sellable in the moment and what is best capitalized on, because that's when cheugyness happens and that's when cringe happens. I'm not trying to write tote bag poetry.

Right! That goes really smoothly into my next question, because I was wondering how you manage the capitalistic stress and pressures of being a writer, being a millennial, all the things.

I mean, it's so stressful. I feel like in order to be an artist, you have to be a little stupid. You find a way to make it work and you're not thinking practically. You're like, all right, I'm going to sell these chapbooks. And then, for some reason, it has always worked out for me. Maybe I'm just a lucky bitch, but I mean, when I was starting out, I was working 40 hours a week at a bookstore. And then I started getting these college gigs and that was paying me really well. And then I was like, "Okay, I don't have to work at a bookstore anymore." Then I moved to New York to get my MFA and I was just like, paying rent with these college gigs. I had two every month, but that lags sometimes.

And being a freelance writer is amazing. I'm a horrible employee, I'm not at the whim of anybody but myself. But because of that, there's inconsistent income and it can get very scary. Now that I've been doing it for a while, I've found a way to make it work. The worst things I've ever written are because I'm just thinking that they'll sell well.

When I was trying to get an agent to look at my manuscript for *Dreaming of You*, I was like, "Yeah, this is kind of about Latinidad, whatever that means." And then they were like, "We really thought this would be more political, but you're talking about your love and sex life." I was so mad about that. Now I have the language to be like, love and sex is political.

It's also like, white writers can write whatever they want. Their work doesn't have to be under this political guise.

Sally Rooney only writes about sex and love.

White people don't have to write manifestos about everything. But when it comes to POC writers, the publishing, literary, and media industries act like we have this honor that we have to defend, which is so fucked up.

Yeah, exactly. Why is there so much at stake?

How have your goals and desires for making art changed since finishing this book? This isn't a what's next question, but more like, how has this book changed you and your view of making art?

I think even while approaching this book, there was just a genre shift in my life, where I was just like, "I want to be freaky." And this book allowed me to do that. Now I'm kind of like a genre-adjacent writer. Like, the stories I'm working on are all scary and I love it. I live there. Humor and sincerity coexist in this very push and pull kind of way, I think in the middle of that horror comes in. And I think that horror is the best use of metaphor a lot of times. So, I'm having a lot of fun with the stories I'm writing. I'm trying to envision *Dreaming of You* as a screenplay. I've been writing a bunch of freaky poems. I worked on this

How does it feel to have a book?

Dude, I mean, I had a chap book before, but that was really different. The amount of labor I put into this. The fact that I wrote it on this laptop that I'm speaking to you on right now, and on the other side you're holding it, is so insane. [When I saw the galley for the first time], I had just broken up with my boyfriend and I came home from visiting my family. And I just had this *Little Women* moment where I was just like, "Oh my god, it's my book." And my name is on it and... I made this freaky little thing happen. Dude, it feels amazing. I want everyone to feel that way about something.

Melissa Lozada-Oliva Recommends:

Taking supplements with a full meal at the beginning of the day

"Kill Me" - Indigo De Souza

Unexplained

Therapy and not having a white woman as a therapist

Making your bed every day

Name


Melissa Lozada-Oliva

Vocation

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