

On the differences between creativity and productivity



Writer and critic Yanyi on the realities of leaving your day job, the complicated relationship between being creative and being truly productive, and the value of sometimes changing your mind.

October 31, 2019 -

As told to Kristen Felicetti, 2971 words.

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I heard you recently quit your full-time office day job in tech. How's that been going?

Well, what a fun question to start with. Because I think it's like every working artist's dream to leave their full-time job and do the thing that they really care about. The shortest answer is that I'm very, very happy that I did it. I had a lot of other considerations that I had to think about, like I have monthly medications and stuff, so healthcare was a big thing. But I also happen to be in a master's program right now, so that made it easier. Yeah, there are all these practical things that go into it. We could talk about the spreadsheets and the planning and the thinking about this that happened months before I even actually quit.

But after I quit, my anecdote is that the day after I left my job I went immediately to the library and just started working. Then I went home, woke up the next day, and worked from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. That was my pace for maybe a week. Then I kind of slowed down and was just trying to feel balanced. For my work I do a lot of reading, but then I'm like, "Am I writing enough?" I really struggled with adjusting to a schedule that was not one that was given to me or dictated to me. What's going on? Blah, blah, blah, blah.

So, I didn't have to do 9:00 to 5:00 or 10:00 to 6:00 or whatever the usual hours are nowadays, but all of my creative routines were kind of centered around that. I used to wake up early, work on stuff until around 9:00, and then go to work and get there by 10:00. And then get home around 7:00, and if I had some energy I'd read or I'd do something else. Usually, I'm going out or seeing people because I'm a human. Most of my creative schedule was based on my job, so once the job wasn't there anymore, it was just like, "What am I going to do?" You face the existential crisis of being responsible for your own fate. There's no excuse that you can put out there saying, "Well, I'm too busy with my job right now to work on my art." Or like, "Oh, I'm not able to wake up early to work, and I wish I could..." All those excuses that we usually have: goodbye. So I really had to rethink, "How is it that I want to work? What matters to me?" Because I come from tech, I started out by using Pivotal to track my progress.

But that did not turn out to be a good thing for me because I realized that creativity is not in the business of being productive. I had to ixnay that because I was getting really stressed out by, "Oh, I've only done like six points this week when I said I could do 12. What's going to happen?" The answer is nothing. Nothing's going to happen because I don't need to read 12 books a week, which is where I was at. If it's not really serving the work, then what's the point? So I stopped doing that.

Then I went on a residency for a month and had a whole other schedule. You know, when you leave your life, or when you go on vacation, you can do whatever you want. I discovered that it takes about two weeks to settle into

something.

On a residency?

Yeah. At a residency but also anywhere, if you're starting somewhere new, but your life changes in some way. That happened and then I had family visiting and all this other stuff. I feel like I'm finally getting into it now, because it's the beginning of the school year, so I have to think about my classes and fellowship stuff and where I need to be this fall.

Your Instagram bio says, "Reader, editor, critic, writer." I have a feeling that the order of those things is deliberate. I know that you like being precise. Do you want to speak to that at all?

Sure. It's funny that you noticed that. I love people who close read my social media. [laughs] It matters to me because, first of all, that's the chronological order of how I became a writer, but also the cycle that I go through. I really believe that reading is—now I'm thinking about *Paris is Burning*—but reading is fundamental. But also just the idea that there's no way that you can have something to say or you can really think something without having encountered something in the world.

To think and to say something for other people to understand, I think it's a different enterprise than reading or writing just for yourself. I can write in my diary and say whatever the hell I want, but there's something about the sense of responsibility that I feel towards what I create and put out into the world, which means that I'm okay with changing my mind. I'm okay with thinking for a long time, if not indefinitely.

That's how I see the rest of my life going. If I want to live only once or whatever, live life to the maximum, I do feel as though thinking and making sure that I am being thoughtful around the historical consciousness that I want to cultivate, or the aesthetic sensibility attached to that consciousness and how it may come apart or come together in different ways, is interesting to me. That's how you end up being a critic. I haven't written that many articles critically, but I do see myself as a critic because it's constantly something that I'm doing.

One thing I liked about your first book, *The Year of Blue Water*, was that it didn't simply take all your greatest poetry hits and compile them into one collection. Like a novel, there are narrative elements linked together. There's also a lot of white space, a lot of room to breathe. I think that there's sometimes a temptation for writers, especially with their first book, whether it's poetry or fiction or essays, to be like, "Wow, this is my opportunity. I have to cram every thought I've ever had in here." I don't think that always creates the strongest book. In my opinion, leaving some stuff out can really give focus. I don't know if that's anything that you fought against, but I was curious as to how you crafted your book to get the focus that it clearly has.

It was a process. I started in November 2016 and the last version that I sent out was in May 2018. I actually had another book draft that I put together in 2015 that was not any of the material for this book. All of the stuff for this book was written in 2016, but I did the exciting thing that writers do, which is put all of their poems on the ground and order them. It was an exhilarating experience, but something about the book didn't feel right. Something about it felt incomplete. I didn't feel as though I was saying quite what I wanted to say. Frankly, I realized that I had finished this book when I felt as though I wanted to read my own book over and over again.

Not to admire my own face in my reflection, I mean, which I do enjoy looking at from time to time, but because I think it's hard to let go of all the other voices that are encroaching upon you and telling you what your art should be or look like. To make something that's genuinely special to you and that matters to you in a way where you're also thinking about the reader. I think that there are collections of poetry that can suffer from, "I only wrote this for myself," and it's sometimes hard to enter those books as readers.

I really believe in honoring the person's attention, a reader's attention, so that is what went into the editing of the book. Like, I wrote 339 of these, or 349, or 359, I forget at this point. [I asked myself], "What in these are the important things that are not just revelations for me?" A lot of it was by feeling, and it took me a couple times reading over the text to be like, "No, this really should not be in here," and I would have to take it out.

It really was me sitting at home on the couch with a giant thing of stuff printed and then going through and being like, "This is where I want to start, and then what do I want now? What poem should go after this?" And then looking for it and putting it in and doing that very slowly. Then once I had a manuscript, figuring out, "Is there more work that can actually fit in here? Are there more places where more resonances or themes or thoughts can fold in nicely?" It's like cooking.

I've been to some of your readings and public events before, so I wanted to know what you think are some qualities that make a good reading?

Having gone to poetry events, I find that many of them can be quite boring, but in the same way that one summer for SummerStage I went to see The xx in concert, and I was really upset because The xx sounds exactly like they do in concert as they do on the recordings. I felt bereft of some grain of the voice that I was expecting, and I feel that way about some poetry readings. There are many reasons why a person comes to hear you read your poetry. Sometimes they don't know your work. Sometimes a friend told them to go or whatever, but for the people who really have read it, enjoyed it, thought about it, they're interested in what you have to say and what you think.

The first part of a good reading is the author's trust in the fact that the thing that they wrote (or the thing that they made) is special, and the honor that they've given to how they created that thing. The fact that they've thought honestly about, "Well, what could this mean?" "What does this mean?" "Why did I write this?" Sometimes authors don't think about that, which I find kind of surprising, but it's something that I try to do in my own work. If I don't, then I try to make amends in some way or change my mind.

What about for a reading event where you have control over the whole vibe? Like a book release, how do you go about making that the best event it could be?

Well, food—first thing, being Chinese... I like remembering that writers and readers have bodies, so I think it's really important that spaces are accessible. I think it's important that, if you can and you have money to, to provide food so that people don't come hungry and have to sit through your reading hungry. Because first of all, it doesn't make them very good listeners, and second of all, that sucks.

Then, for me, a lot of it is atmosphere. So during my book launch, since it was *The Year of Blue Water*, I sent a package of decorations for a gender-reveal party for boys that was all blue stuff, and I was just like, "This is going to be the decorations for this party." There are all these blue balloons and all that stuff around, which was very cute. Then the rest of it is all just intellectual preparation. Are you going to get interviewed? If you're going to get interviewed, who's going to interview you? Who do I want to ask to be in this reading with me? I tried to pick people who either I considered their work very interesting and that I wanted to use my platform to showcase it, or they were mentors of mine, an intellectual or poet who I admired and who I wanted other people to also appreciate.

I think in general it's just important to think about: when you are asking people to take time, especially in New York City, to come to something, hopefully they'll have a good time, but in what way will they have a good time?

Is there a dream question that you have wanted to be asked? I know that you're someone who likes writer and artist interviews, so you probably have thought about that kind of stuff before.

I'm rifling through all the questions that I have been asked. I mean, I guess I don't know if this is a dream question, but this is a question that I feel like I'm often answering to stave off feelings of self-doubt about the work, which is: in what ways is this work actually radical? How is it political? How is it important? Why does it matter?

So, how would you answer that question?

[Laughs] Okay, to answer my own question, this is just me thinking. Because I do think that there's a lot of self-doubt that goes into publishing at all. This is not a direct quote, but the writer Robin Coste Lewis once

said in an interview, "Thousands of trees are going to die for this thing that I'm going to put out into the world, and it better be worth the trees." I feel the same way about it.

For the work that I wrote, first of all, it was important to me, and that in itself is radical because I'm someone who has not been socialized to think that anything about me is valuable. Being trans or being queer, I've been systematically told that the ways that I think, or the things that I think, are not only not valuable, but are harmful to society, especially growing up.

That in itself is fine, but I often want more than that, because there are definitely queer people who support Trump or have said bad things in the past, so I can't really say that just because you have a certain identity that your politics are necessarily good.

Basically, what this question tends to do is make me say: but why or what more? Beyond identity, aesthetically I think the book is radical because it is about my exploration of free thinking, and thinking without expectation or without looking towards production. In some cases it is a reaction or a response to how I've been asked to educate or talk about certain types of things.

I think one of the most amusing responses I've seen online from reviews has been, "I read this book, and I expected to see what it was like to live as a queer and trans and Asian person in America, but it's just about the old stuff like love and friends and stuff." The fact that the writing that I'm supposed to produce cannot or should not include those things, or that those things are the boring things about me (the facts that make me or help me become conscious of my own humanity), I think is very telling.

I've been researching fascism and totalitarianism thought, and the thing that fascism or totalitarianism is very good at is that it empties you of the want or ability to think freely. It doesn't matter where on the political spectrum you exist in. It's very easy, and I say this from my own personal experience too, to get caught up in being like: these are my politics and these things really matter to me. But something about the dialogue or the discourse that we're having around it is starting to feel very harmful, and not nuanced, which leads me to the next thing—I started becoming very interested in what would it mean to not finish my thoughts, to not necessarily think only one thing about something.

In the book, I kind of do these circles around things that I'm constantly thinking about, or I'm going through these thoughts about queerness or transness, but I'm not necessarily saying it is one way or the other. And I'm trying to speak honestly and very vulnerably about what it means to be me, a Chinese person, or a Chinese American person, who had to deal with different kinds of stigma just within my family and to speak about it as if it was just between me and my family and not have it be a representation of all Chinese families ever. That's what I've been thinking about with that.

I agree. I feel like if you're a writer from an underrepresented identity, people will often pick up your book with the expectation that it will say "important" things to help them "understand what it's like to be _____ identity." That's not fair to the writer. They should have the freedom to explore whatever they want to explore.

Yeah. I'm very much opposed to the idea that you can pick up a book instead of talking to someone and in fact, talking to more than one person. And getting to know them on an intimate level, and what it means to live their life.

Yanyi Recommends:

Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

"On Style" by Susan Sontag

Hannah Arendt Zur Person Interview

"Gunpower (w/ Patrick Blanchfield)"

Taking a long, candle-lit scented bath with an astrology podcast and Restored by the Fords in the middle of

winter

Name

Yanyi

Vocation

Writer, Critic

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