

On listening to your body



Writer and sound healer J Wortham discusses embracing vulnerability, managing the voice of their inner critic, and trusting the timing of their life.

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As told to Colleen Hamilton, 2655 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Sound](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#), [Failure](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Health](#), [Mental health](#).

When you receive an assignment or start developing a story with your editor, how do you begin your reporting process? Do you have a pattern you follow for each piece?

There's always a period of really intense research for me. I usually read three to five books for a story. For this [survivalism piece](#), I actually read seven post-apocalyptic novels by women because I was fascinated by how different cultures, both locally and globally, think about the end times. I probably watched three movies and maybe 20 hours of TV. In the end, all of this might just amount to a single paragraph in the story. It's not something tangible, but I think it lives in my body. It puts me in that headspace. It helps me really inhabit what I'm trying to write about to experience it in a full way before I even begin. It's almost like a premeditation before I actually get into the writing. I want to move into that space and be immersed in it so that when I finally sit down, it doesn't feel like I've just landed in another country with no idea how to say hello or thank you. I'm already there.

How do you edit your own work?

Honestly, I wouldn't be half the writer I am without editors. But I am trying to become more self-sufficient, both because I want to be able to do more and because I'm trying to trust myself more. I want to allow myself to be imperfect in public, which is really hard for me. I'm such a perfectionist. I instinctively see imperfection as a weakness. But I know that's not true. Letting people see you in process, in progress, is a gift. But it's also something that isn't often afforded to Black people. I get why I feel guarded about it. But I'm also trying to release that—just to be a little more real in all ways.

In what other ways has that desire for "more" been coming up in your life?

I'm trying to do so much right now. I'm trying to write a TV pilot. I'm also trying to finish this science-fiction short story. And I really want to write a rom-com, like a full book.

I'm working on this big queer waterways film project. Next month, I'm heading to Duke for a month-long film fellowship. The people in this program are actual filmmakers. And then there's me. I mean, I have made short films, but only in a class I took a few years ago. It's worlds apart. So now I'm adapting this body of work, these oral histories I've collected about queer waterways and how they come into being. It's such an interesting project, and it feels so right for me.

What does the map of your brain look like while you're working on all of these different projects?

It is really just beautiful, organized chaos. One of my really good friends is the writer and artist [Tamara Santibañez](#), who has an incredible [newsletter](#) that everyone should read. Once, when I lived in my old apartment in

Bed Stuy, they called me in the middle of the day during pandemic times and I was cooking during a break from recording my podcast. The TV was on in the background, playing something I was watching. I had music on in another room. I was watercoloring in between. I was soaking beans for the weekend, meal prepping. They were cracking up. And I was like, "No, I'm in my bag." I love doing a lot of things at once.

And honestly, getting diagnosed with ADHD earlier this year was a relief but also really hard to accept. There are so many pop-cultural narratives about what it means to have ADHD. And I was afraid of the stigma—of wanting a certain kind of stimulant or medication, or the fear of being perceived as lazy or incompetent I spend a lot of time trying to figure out where my brain is at and what state it's in. If it's not in a writing moment, maybe it's a mood-boarding moment for the podcast, or maybe it's time to go take a walk and try to untangle this part of the essay I can't finish, or maybe I should dive into my book revisions. A lot of it is about listening to my brain—what it wants to do and what I'm feeling excited by, which feels like a real luxury at this point in my career.

How do you talk to yourself when you're starting or working on a project?

I'm laughing because the beginning of a project is no problem. At first it's all, "Anything's possible! You're a beast! You're so smart! Go for it!" And then the second a project is greenlit or a book is sold I'm like, "What the fuck was I thinking? There's no way I'm competent enough to do this." And that continues, for the most part, until the end. But what I've learned in the process of making books—which I love; I want to make books forever—is that the book world offers a kind of freedom I don't get anywhere else. The ability to experiment with form and genre feels so liberating to me.

That said, working on bigger, messier projects like books has pushed me to collaborate with people in ways I wouldn't normally. When you're writing a quick-turnaround story, you're mostly on your own. But with books, I've had the chance to talk to writers I admire most—just straight up asking, "How do you get this done? How do you actually do this?"

How have you been doing it?

Little by little. And honestly, it's not that different from recovery—it's truly one day at a time, or one sentence at a time. Knowing that other people are figuring it out too has been huge for me. And understanding that the voice—that inner critic—is something I need to manage, not obey. That voice doesn't just show up in writing. It can attack every part of my life. But I've come to see it as a protector. It doesn't want me to experience the grief of failure. Except that most things that don't work out aren't failures. They're just transitions. Shifting my perspective has been huge. A book will definitely teach you that. The thing about writing a book is that there's no relief. Usually, you push, push, push, and then you publish—and you get the dopamine hit of feedback. But with books, there's none of that for a long time.

If I'm spiraling, I don't fight it. I just distract myself. If I'm thinking, "I feel stupid, I feel not good enough," I'll stop and ask, "Okay, do you need a nap? Do you need to eat something? Go for a walk? Dance around?" And that has really helped. Usually, after I do something that nourishes a different part of me, I feel better.

How do you balance rest and creative ambition? How do you think about those two things for yourself?

It's hard. I have friends who wake up at 6 AM and start writing. That's not me. In the summer, I am usually up early because I want to get my work done so I can go swim at the beach for a bit. But overall, I've had to accept that my body has very specific needs right now, and I can't ignore them. At the same time, I'm entering a really ambitious period in my life. I don't feel like I've done my best work yet. I don't feel like I've created the work I really want to create. And it's not coming from a place of anxiety or panic—it's more about figuring out how to push myself.

I want to do more big investigative pieces. I want to write about the anti-trans backlash in the U.S. I want to write about incarceration. I want to write about issues that aren't necessarily seen as part of my purview as a cultural critic. I want to have impact in this treacherous moment we're living through and I want to do it in new

ways. So every now and then, I take a moment to assess. Where am I? What am I doing? Does this align with my bigger goals? For a long time—and I think New York really encourages this—I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. And then suddenly, I'd look up, and it was September, and I'd think, "Where did the year go?"

In the announcement for your book, you wrote, "About existing almost entirely in this space between my eyes and hairline, and the journey to relocate and remember the self since then." When did *Work of Body* start murmuring inside of you, and how has the book-writing process brought you back to your body, if at all?

There was a period around 2015 when I decided I wanted to pursue creative nonfiction, not just be a reporter. I wanted to write for myself. So I started taking creative writing classes. I started applying for residencies and workshops and I got into most of them. That was a huge boost. It made me feel like people believed in me, that my work had promise. That was also when I started realizing how dissociative I was—how hard I was working to not feel my feelings, to adapt to a high-pressure job and a high-pressure lifestyle. And once I started articulating that to myself, the writing just flowed. At first, it was journaling. But as a reporter, I also have a kind of spidey sense, that gut feeling when you know you're onto something. And when I started writing about my dissociation, I felt that buzz. I knew I needed to dig deeper.

I ended up taking a sabbatical and leaving New York for a while. I really struggle to feel my body here. I'm working on it now because I do live here, but at the time, I just felt more embodied in nature, in water, by the water. I started realizing that this other self I wanted to channel—this other history I wanted to tap into—was something I needed to be attached to. Being detached wouldn't serve the work. And that was terrifying because it meant real lifestyle changes. It's part of why I stopped drinking. I felt like drinking was getting in the way, like it was blocking me from myself. I'm not someone who comes by vulnerability easily. Being seen is mortifying to me. I have a friend who used to say, "I know it's hard to be looked at, but I love what I see." And that always made me so emotional because that's the fear, right? The fear that people will really see you and reject you. That beneath all the persona—the makeup, the hair, the gold jewelry, the performance—you're actually ugly or unlovable. And I think that's why I wanted to write this book. It was really a push to accept myself as a writer and as a person.

What are some of the other ways you feel sobriety has impacted your creative practice?

Those big life transformations that so many people made during the pandemic weren't available to me. I released a book. I sold a book. I made two or three seasons of the podcast. I worked nonstop, and then I went to Minneapolis, had a complete emotional burnout and breakdown, and realized, *I am in danger of losing myself entirely if I don't change my lifestyle completely.* I was also coming out of a relationship. I just needed a reset.

I was invited by Hawaiians to stay [there], and was given housing. It's not a place I ever thought I would visit because of colonialism, and because I always wanted to be respectful of the land and the needs of Hawaiians who live there. For the first time, I felt like I was in right relationship with the land. Like I could actually give something back in a way that felt nourishing, not extractive. I had my birthday there, and then it was Thankstaking. The day after the holiday, a bunch of people were in town visiting family, so my hosts and a few others decided to have a big karaoke night. We were all excited because people were bringing alcohol from the mainland—we were like, "Oh, they're bringing natural wine and mezcal!" Because in Hawaii, drinking is so expensive. By that point, I had already experienced feeling better without alcohol. I was doing recovery work around being an adult child of an alcoholic—my dad was a drinker—so I was already in this space of emotional sobriety. But I wasn't thinking, "This is the time I'll stop drinking." It was more like, "This just isn't the most important thing to me right now."

And I had started noticing something: I was experiencing a freedom of mind that I had never had before. I didn't realize how much I was using substances to numb anxiety, and then using other substances to crank myself back up. I was so attuned to the experience of waking up groggy, or a little hungover, or under-slept, and then just chugging a cold brew—constantly trying to hack my body into some kind of functionality. Once I stopped doing that, I realized, "Oh. There's actually a natural rhythm here that I've been suppressing and ignoring." I was really excited for this boozy karaoke night. But then it didn't hold the thrill I thought it would. I had this real moment of, "What am I doing?" And I just knew that was my last drink. I tried not to overthink it. I wasn't

like, "How am I going to feel in ten years?" I just focused on that day, and tomorrow.

Has your writing changed?

It's a lot freer, a lot less inhibited. I don't think I realized how much I drank to deal with my fear of "not enoughness." My fear of inadequacy. Without those crutches, I had to actually look at those feelings and face them. I saw this TikTok where someone was asked, "What's the hardest substance you've ever done?" and they just said, "Reality."

Every morning, I make a gratitude list to start my day, and sobriety is always the first thing on there. Honestly, it's easier than when I was drinking because when I was drinking, I was obsessing about it. Was I drinking too much? Did I say something weird? Did I embarrass myself?

I trust the timing of my life, but I do think about what I might have already accomplished if I hadn't been hungover for a decade. The biggest shift is that I just don't have the same self-doubt. Back then, I don't think I was fully inhabiting the time I was living through. Now I'm like, "The life I'm living is beyond my wildest dreams." I always wanted to be a writer. I always wanted to be in conversation with other writers, in New York, seeing art, seeing fashion, traveling for work and for pleasure. And these are things I never could have imagined as a little kid growing up the way I did in Virginia. No way. Sobriety allows me to appreciate that. To show up with gratitude, not entitlement. I don't feel entitled to this life. It feels precious. And it can be gone in a moment. With drinking, I think I was just too numbed out to actually feel any of that.

J Wortham recommends five things for getting creatively unstuck:

[Black Women Writers At Work](#)

[Alexander Chee's bibliomancy exercise](#)

Watercoloring with [Kuretake Gansai Tambi](#) pans

Swimming, of any kind

Long phone conversations with friends

Name

J Wortham

Vocation

writer, sound healer

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