

On writing your way towards the unknown



Writer, translator, and editor Anna Moschovakis discusses what it means to work in a variety of genres, unpacking the complexities of middle age, and using your creative practice as a way to untangle unfamiliar ideas.

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As told to Ruby Brunton, 2265 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Anxiety](#).

You recently published your debut novel *Eleanor, Or, The Rejection of the Progress of Love*. This is the first novel you've written after many years of working in poetry. How was it to change the form you were working in, and did you make a conscious decision to do so, or did it happen more naturally?

In 2009 I wrote a short chapbook, which I started to write not thinking of it as fiction or poetry or anything. It was little prose fragments, narrative fragments, and it was the beginning of the character Eleanor. I was interested in this idea of how to write the aftermath of a feeling, or how to write a feeling that's the aftermath of an event, without telling the backstory—an anti-backstory kind of narrative fragment. I had that in my head because I was learning how to meditate, and I was trying to learn to sit with the “feeling” and not the “story.”

I had just translated four or five novels, and I felt a hankering to write fiction. So I went back to the character of Eleanor, and set out into a world. Translation and poetry have always been connected for me. For instance, once when I was writing what turned out to be my second book of poems, I was translating—for hire—a Georges Simenon novel. An interesting novel, but with a lot of objectification of women, which I had to contend with. I remember translating those scenes, having to create those sentences, and the excess feelings I had about it all made their way into the poems. So much of my translating life had already made its way into my poetry—maybe in a way translation also formed the bridge between poetry and fiction.

So while you were translating the Simenon novel, the misogyny coming through affected you philosophically and emotionally. There's not much you can do about that as a translator, as you have to stay more or less true to the text... so you put the spillover into your poetry?

Absolutely. It's not something I'd label simply as misogyny; it's an anti-fascist novel with a character who's persecuted for being a Jew, and also for being an anomaly, for not fitting in, for being an outsider. And part of that is that he's solitary, and a voyeur, and those were the scenes that were challenging to recreate.

Would you say you're very attached to the idea of genre?

I'm really not. The other day I was talking to [Adjua \[Gargi Nzinga Greaves\]](#) about whether we identify as poets, or just as writers. And we were like, “Gah.” Then we tried to figure out where this resistance to calling ourselves poets came from. She tends to call herself an artist because she also does visual art. And I tended to

call myself a writer rather than a poet, even before I had also published some fiction—that just felt more comfortable to me. But we were trying to figure out what that meant, given that we both identify strongly with the poetry communities we are part of. I think my identification as a poet is not so much about what the stuff I write looks like—it's more about the positions poets hold in the world.

I feel like if you say poet or writer people imagine you're in your room sitting at your computer writing all day. And it's like, "Don't tell anyone my greatest secret, that I'm not actually at my computer as much as I probably should be. I'm more often at rehearsals and doing workshop and things like that."

I have so many thoughts about this. I did do an MFA, but I really did not want to do an MFA in an English department for exactly the reasons you mention. I wanted to be an artist, and I knew that my main medium was going to be words, but I had also done other things that felt connected, like film and dance and theater, photography, etc. I went to an interdisciplinary MFA program [at Bard College] which treated us all as artists first. In a bio, I usually end up saying I'm a writer, translator, editor, and publisher, because the idea of there being multiple things feels important—it's accurate. Because who just sits and writes all day? I barely write. In fact, I almost never write. I'm almost never writing.

That makes me feel better.

They're doing an audio book of *Eleanor, Or*, and there was a question about whether or not I might be the one who reads it. And then the audio book publishers—who are really great, it's an independent company called Talking Book—said that they have found that it often takes a prohibitively long time to work with authors, so they needed to go with a professional. Which was great, especially because I liked the person they hired a lot. But it also made me laugh, because I realized that I actually have earned far more money from reading, from performing and at times recording, than I've ever earned from writing. So if I'm a professional anything, it's a reader of my own work.

I wanted to talk to you about Eleanor, the protagonist of your novel. She's a middle-aged writer, and she's at that stage of her life where the societal expectation is that you've had children, you have a family, you have some sense of capitalistic ownership to your name—like a house, or a proper job—and yet she's living with roommates and unsure of what she really wants to do and with this lover who takes off on his motorbike most of the time. It was such an interesting main character for me. I'm not her age yet, but there was a lot of relatability there. I was wondering how important it was for you to tell the story of this section of women who are more or less root-less in the traditional sense. There's more and more of us these days. But we're not represented as much in literature or film.

It was important to me to think about that age for a number of reasons. During the years between my early twenties and my turning 40, most of which I spent in New York, my life became, I think, more precarious. It just became so outlandishly expensive to live in the city. But it is also about the way in which it's possible to forget... it's possible to continue to live like you're in your twenties for much longer in certain kinds of environments, like New York City, or the way New York City was until recently, when almost no one can easily move there.

I was interested in the way in which the body is aging, even though your lifestyle maybe isn't, for a while. That's one kind of disconnect. And the other disconnect is one you can consciously reject, as much as is humanly possible (because we're all contaminated by it), but you can consciously reject what you're calling societal expectations, and sometimes they can still affect you. I'm interested in that.

Middle age alone is such a weird concept because it implies the assumption that you are probably going to live to be 70, which is a privileged expectation. That's not an assumption for lots of people in the world.

I liked Renee Gladman's wording in her blurb—she says something like "muddling into middle living." And I feel like middle living feels less about being in the middle of the number of years you're going to live, and more like you get to a point where you're no longer at the beginning.

There's a line in the book where Eleanor asks herself what, if anything, she can do in the time she has left. If you talk about middle age conventionally, in the bourgeois life, the cliché version of it is the moment when you accept that your days are numbered. You go out and buy the motorcycle or you buy the red sports car. You have the affair because you're like, "Oh my god, it's all going to end someday." That might happen for some people at the age of 10 and for some at 50. That's another disconnect which is far from universally timed: the changing relation to one's own mortality.

I think "middle living" is really good because there's a sense that she's at the precipice of wanting to change. She's almost looking for signs to guide her, like when her laptop is stolen and she's like, "Oh, I'm going to take off upstate and go find the guy who claims to know where it is." That's not really her purpose in going upstate. And later, she's on the community farm and she finds a book of Rimbaud's poetry and she decides to go to the horn of Africa, where he spent his last years.

For a while, I thought I was writing a book about passivity. And there is a way in which it is about passivity. But it's a very particular kind of passivity, which I feel is related to a fairly gendered thing—something like doing just enough to be acceptable, to not make anyone too mad, and to not do anything too horrible. A kind of living that's about deflecting responsibility, or sort of passing in a way. There's a kind of safety to Eleanor's malaise at the beginning. I think if there's a shift that she's looking for, it has to do with trying to do something, anything, and say, "I did this, I take responsibility for it. I wasn't just responding to conditions—I was actually doing something." Weirdly, it felt like it didn't really matter how arbitrary, how small or big or coherent or surprising that thing might be.

One thing that comes through in the book is that uncomfortable freedom of "middle living" as a single, childless person, is that you can literally do whatever you want (within limits), which can often make it really hard to decide what that "whatever" is.

And the clock that's ticking is the economic clock. Eleanor's living on borrowed time on a credit card. It's not a completed deal. She is living within a limitation that's a pretty strict one, though it's not spelled out; it looms.

She's just experienced this tragedy which you don't name: the thing that happened. You never explain what it was and for me, I could pretty much accept that because, as we were talking about before, it's like this universalization of experience. As a reader, I didn't feel like I need to know what this is, but I've encountered the attitude of, "Why doesn't the writer tell us? We want to know what it is" from some of your other readers. Where do you think that comes from, and why did you chose to obscure it?

I think stories are very powerful, and a stark and outlined story of a tragedy is especially compelling. On the radio the other day, Valentine's Day, they were talking about the Parkland shooting because it's the one-year anniversary. And there was a team of reporters who decided to look at all the other gun-related deaths that happened on that same day. It turns out there were 17 people killed at Parkland, and there were something like 126 other gun deaths that day. That's a much larger number of people, but you can't hold each of those stories easily in your head. Even this team of reporters only gave us five examples to represent those hundred-plus deaths. Somehow the easy-to-name, easy-to-account for single story of Parkland obliterated many "smaller" stories, which of course aren't small at all. I think partly I wanted to leave the thing that happened vague because I want it not to matter if it's a thing that lots of people would agree is worth remembering, or that's memorable. It's been life-changing for this character, that's all.

You had an interview with Renee Gladman in *The Believer* where you said, "The whole reason I write is because the world doesn't make sense." What is it about writing that helps you combat the fact that the world doesn't make sense?

I only write about things I don't know. Otherwise I would get bored. And would remain confused about the same things, instead of about new things!

That's the complete opposite of what creative writing professors tell you. I love it.

I don't mean that I write from identity positions I don't know or from experiences I don't know. It's more that I'm driven to write toward a question, toward an unknown, toward a knot that needs to be untangled. That's what makes me write—something uncomfortable or unresolved. With *Eleanor, Or*, one of the questions was what can be the response of a middle-class, educated, white, able-bodied cis woman who has her troubles and is also in some ways managing, living in a sort of late-capitalist, neoliberal, increasingly unfriendly capital city—what are the options for being something other than just swept along and numb and responding, when in some ways almost no amount of response feels like enough?

Anna Moschovakis Recommends:

Agnes Varda's films

Jackie Wang's Carceral Capitalism

Interference Archive

A) GLIMPSE) OF) (Athens-based cultural journal)

Soul Fire Farm

David Graeber's The Utopia of Rules

Plus a bonus: best not-too-expensive fountain pen I know of: the Pilot Metropolitan fine nib

Name

Anna Moschovakis

Vocation

Writer, Translator, Editor, Educator

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