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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2487 words.

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# On the liberation of starting over

Writer, journalist, and radio producer Daniel Alarcón discusses juggling multiple creative pursuits, and how it feels when you need to abandon a bad draft and start from scratch.

**You have written journalistic pieces, short stories, novels, a graphic novel, and you also produce and host a podcast. How do you decide which format best suits each story?**

I don't see them as being that different. I know that sounds odd considering all the different ways people can consume things and the different languages and genres. But everything I've done essentially begins from a deep curiosity about people, the way they live, and the way they view the world. I did a lot of reporting in my novels, and there's a lot of creativity or creative thinking in the way I plan a reporting trip. It isn't that different.

Sometimes we think of the borders between different genres as less fluid than they actually are. For example, when I'm reporting a piece, whether it is for print or for radio, I always feel like I'm trying to get to a place where I'm just able to observe people the way they are and understand the things they are telling me without words. I've often found myself in places standing with my back against the wall while a scene is happening in front of me and just taking notes furiously, trying to understand the power dynamics between people and whatever they're doing.

It's not that different from what I would do when I'm writing a novel, honestly. As a novelist, I've entered a fictional space and I'm standing in the corner with my back against the wall, watching people. It's just those people are in my head and they're made up. But it's essentially the same process.

**How does your writing process change between writing fiction, a radio script or a journalistic piece?**

I think it doesn't. If I'm writing a script for a radio piece, I'm often interacting with the tape. I start thinking about, "What's the kind of tape that I want? What scenes do I need to see? Who are the kind of characters I need to meet? What do I need to ask them in order to get the response that I want?" And then I go into this prepared. And then the characters will respond in ways that are surprising to me.

Then I go home and transcribe the tape, I start listening to it, then I hear parts that popped out at me, and I make those as my sort of moments. Then I put them in an order that makes sense. Finally, I start writing connective tissue. And that's very different from any other type of writing. Even though there is a lot of the same observing and thinking creatively, and analyzing power. It's a unique process that I never encountered before I started working with radio.

Pieces of fiction can begin anywhere. They can begin with a gesture, with a palette of colors, with someone's turn of phrase. And in those situations, it's just a flight of fancy. And just following characters wherever they want to go and doing a lot of listening. These days, when I do print journalism where I'm consciously not carrying around a recorder, I find it to be so liberating because I'm not worried about getting quality sound. I'm worrying about looking at people in the eyes as I ask them questions and observe their gestures. It almost feels like flying compared to wearing headphones and holding a mic.

**It took you seven years to finish your book *At Night We Walk in Circles*. What were some of the creative obstacles that you encountered in that process?**

The primary obstacle with that novel was that it was boring. I kept writing sections of the book and each individual section was good, but together there was not enough movement to sustain interest. And if it wasn't sustaining my interest, it wasn't going to sustain anyone else's interest. So I finished a draft at the end of 2010 and I showed it to some friends. They read it and they confirmed to me my worst fears: that it was a bad and boring book.

Then I had two choices: I could either try to fix it or I could throw it out and try to start over. I decided to throw it out and start over. It took so long because I wrote two novels, a bad one and a good one.

**You also published a graphic novel and created the podcast *Radio Ambulante*. What motivated you to start a new project in a new medium?**

Those projects emerged around the time of the failure of that novel. It's a very sad and difficult moment of vulnerability when you realize that you've been working on a piece for however long and it sucks. It's very, very humbling. But it's also at those moments of vulnerability that you're open to any and all solutions. And I was really open to the idea of tinkering with a new medium and a new genre, and learning a new language. Partially because I was so down on my own abilities as a storyteller in my "chosen medium" because I had just finished a bad novel.

There was something incredibly liberating about being in my mid-thirties and starting over, learning a new language and a new skill set. There's something absolutely mesmerizing about cutting tape. I'm a frustrated musician, I wish I could sing, I wish I could play any instrument. And I really can't. But cutting tape has its own sort of seduction. I really enjoyed that. There were aspects of it that were creative—but in different ways from writing fiction—that allowed me to make progress without banging my head against the same wall. And that was incredibly liberating.

**You have a whole team at Radio Ambulante. How was the transition between working as a writer, which is often solitary work, and working with a team?**

Working alone and working with a team are both wonderful and challenging. Many people touch every piece of Radio Ambulante. We often write our interviews collectively. Everyone sort of helps refine the idea along the way. Different people will edit a piece. An editor or producer will often write a version of the line that I'll then narrate. Other times, I'll write pieces of scripts for people that they end up saying, so it's very collaborative. At the end of the day, you don't really know which parts of the story were yours and which parts of the story are other peoples'. And that's part of the beauty of it. It's different from writing a novel where you're responsible for most of it. Editors help, obviously, but it's a totally different experience. It's freeing. You also have to learn to give up control. In some ways it's less responsibility because you're not in charge of generating every last word of it. I like that.

**Your team lives in different countries. Do you find that challenging?**

With Radio Ambulante we've learned how to work remotely by necessity because being multinational is just in the DNA of the project. We have people in eight different cities, and by virtue of that, we've had to develop systems to make it work. Whether it's different digital tools like Slack, Trello, DropBox to share huge files, or using Google Docs to work on scripts together. These digital tools that didn't exist a decade ago make a project like this viable. Without it, it wouldn't work at all.

**You mentioned that working with a team was liberating because you had to give up control. Did you have any trouble in learning how to do that?**

I had a number of problems. I think I was just so starved for it because the novel I mentioned was such a hard novel to write. I nearly died writing that book. And then to go from writing that book to being surrounded by a hand-picked team of brilliant people, one of whom is my wife, was liberating. We're able to work on stuff together that's not all my responsibility. Obviously I'm a valuable member of the team, but there are different people who are good at different things and they bring certain skills to the table. I can say, "Oh, hey, I need this. Can you help me with this? Can I talk to you about this idea?" And then people do the same thing to me. And it's a completely different kind of conversation that you don't have when you're writing a novel.

Even with the most involved editor in a literary project, you might talk about structure, you might talk about shading characters this way or that way. But they're not going to write a sentence for you. And in this particular kind of journalistic enterprise, I might write part of the script for a producer, and one of my editors might write part of my script for me. And in the course of an edit, there might be three or four people on the same Google Doc making suggestions. And that's a totally different way of writing for me.

**What defines a perfect creative partner?**

Generosity. I think a lot about the relationship between a writer and an editor. I've been edited by literary editors, I've been edited by print magazines, journalistic editors, and by radio editors. I edit student work, Radio Ambulante work, and I've edited fiction. I've helped edit my friends' novels and scripts. I've done a lot. What I like about editing is helping other people find out what's great about the story they're trying to tell. And what I like about being edited is that, when you have a good editor, you feel there's someone else who is as invested in the success of your piece as you are. And that's a very generous act. In a good editorial relationship, you feel super supported by someone who's invested in your success, and that's just an amazing feeling.

**Have you ever started a new project that didn't work out or that you had to abandon?**

A generous interpretation of my failures would be that I just don't have enough time. I really think that to get good at anything, you have to fail a lot at it. Maybe this is not out of arrogance, this is more about the fact that curiosity can take you a long way. And I'm genuinely curious about a lot of things. If I had more time, I would like to do all of them.

**You're involved in so many things. How do you prioritize your time for your projects?**

With Radio Ambulante there are a number of systems in place to make the show come out on time. A lot of it involves workflows that we've created and specific people on the team whose job is to make sure that we're

running on schedule.

I really enjoy teaching. I want to be good at it because the students invested time and money to be there. And if I'm not fully engaged, then I'm ripping them off. During the semester, it's really easy to prioritize the students because they're the ones who are right in front of you. And that's where the remote-work situation becomes a real challenge. Because the students are knocking on your door, but our peers at Radio Ambulante are sending you Slacks. So who am I going to respond to first? Obviously the one who's like, "Hello, professor?" They're the ones I respond to, the people who are right there. What I end up doing is working until two in the morning, every night. Essentially my solution is not a solution. My solution is to work until I'm dead.

I don't write much fiction anymore. If I want to write fiction, I need to plan six or eight months ahead of time and say, "Okay, in January I'm going to take two weeks and borrow a house from somebody, and sit there and write a story." I haven't been able to figure out how to do that. I finished my last novel the night before my five year old was born. And then my last story, which was basically a novella, was the last story in my most recent collection of stories. And I finished it at a friend's house two summers ago. The only way I was able to do that was by going to this guy's house for two weeks and sitting there to write it. That was the story I was working on for eight years. And that's just one story. So patience, I guess.

**What's one working habit that you always have to fight against, and how do you do it?**

I used to say that the productive part of the day ends the moment you check your email. Which is counterintuitive since so much of what we think of as "work" is just responding to emails. But that was certainly true when I was writing fiction every morning. I was getting up and writing fiction from 5:00 to 7:00 in the morning. And it's true, as soon as you check your email, then the work of that day has gone to hell. Any time I'm trying to do anything that's creative in any way I have to shut off email, Slack, Twitter, everything.

**Are you able to find some free time to nourish your creativity with your busy schedule?**

Most of my work, thankfully, is about nourishing my creative side, or nourishing other people's creativity. There are things that I do for myself that are more balancing psychologically. I play soccer two or three times a week. What I like about that is that it's not intellectual. It's creative, but the creativity is expressed physically. I don't have time to play in a league, so I just play pick-up. You never know who's going to be on your team and most of the times you don't know the people's names or where they come from. They just show up and start playing.

In every game what you're creating is a culture. It's a social contract that you make with strangers. And there's the game itself which you can win or lose. There's individual performance where you can play well or play poorly. But there is also the very interesting relationship between these strangers where you can either gel or not gel. And that's always fascinating to me.

Daniel Alarcón recommends:

Streams of thought, Vol 1 EP by Black Thought

Film: A Prophet by Jacques Audiard

Book: The Idiot by Elif Batuman

Book: Anarchy's Brief Summer: The Life and Death of Buenaventura Durruti by Hans Magnus Enzensberger

Joseph's Machine's Twitter Account

Name

Daniel Alarcón

Vocation

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Fact



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