

On learning to be yourself



Writer Isis Labeau-Cabera on writing about academic subjects with creativity, not forcing a particular path, growing through burnout, and sustaining your faith in your purpose.

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As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2818 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Process, Identity, Beginnings.

What is it that you do?

I'm a Martinican (French Caribbean) writer, podcaster, and independent researcher. My work focuses on the colonial and postcolonial history of the Caribbean, through the lens of gender, queerness, and resistance. My reflection is rooted in a diasporic, transatlantic framework, which means that it radiates towards Europe, West/Central Africa, South-Asia.

Both in my podcast and my upcoming historical novel, I strive to articulate historical and sociological reflections in a way that is digestible by/targeted at my communities of belonging—Caribbean people, French POC, Afro and POC women and queer. Popularization of academic work should not come at the expense of quality: to me, it does not mean "lowering" the rigor of my work, but rather being very intentional about making what I do accessible to people outside the little bubble of academia. There's a lot to say about the hegemony of Western academic institutions and the gate-keeping they perpetuate.

In my work, this effort of subversion manifests both in the topics I write about (history that is relevant to nowadays' struggles for emancipation and decolonization) and the formats that I choose. It demands to rethink what we deem "legitimate" sources of knowledge and supports for its dissemination. Especially as a Black woman thinker, writing from a postcolonial society, I believe it is inherently political to challenge the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. Writing about academic subjects, while allowing space for radical creativity, imagination, poetic sensibility and subjective perspectives.

What was your path and your background to getting to where you are now?

It's funny, because ever since I was a kid, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I was also so drawn to research. Of course, I didn't have a word for it at the time, but I was obsessed with collecting stories from the past and connecting them to the present. I would spend long afternoons at my grandmother's house, harassing her with questions about her youth, her family history, and life in colonial Martinique during the 1930's. I would take thorough notes, and even recorded her with my dad's old camera. I think I was made aware very early of the incredible value of "little people"'s stories within the "great," official History—what the adult Isis would nowadays refer to as the "history from below" of subaltern people. But although it was an early calling, it has been such a long road for me to reach a point where I can live it fully.

I left Martinique at 18 to pursue my undergraduate studies at Sciences Po Paris, a French university for political and social sciences. I also studied sociology of race and gender for a year at Columbia University in New York when I was 20. It was the most intellectually stimulating, freeing, and empowering time of my life, as well as a strong confirmation that, "Yes. That's what I'm meant to do."

However, when I went back to Paris and it was time to enroll in a PhD program, I backtracked. I was riddled by fear. The gloomy situation of French research, the economic precarity of doctoral students; the terrible lack of representation of POC women in French academia, as well as the general hostility of French universities towards discussions about race and gender (this was in 2011)... Plus a heavy dose of impostor syndrome.

I ended up going to Law school instead, and then worked for almost three years in a law firm that specialized in workplace anti-discrimination cases. As a young Black Caribbean woman granted with the privilege of elite higher education, I felt overwhelmed by the mountain of systemic injustices I had "the duty" to fight. I wanted to have "real" impact" and was crushed by the belief that "writing is not enough." I thought it would be a waste of all the opportunities in front of me, which very few people who looked like me had access to. So for me, my late twenties have been a journey of learning that it's not because I "can" that I "have to." It's been about deconstructing my notion of what "impact" can look like, and convincing myself of the radical potential of my purpose: the radical potential of ideas and stories.

I also had to come to terms with the fact that I don't need to be a superhero. That's actually an ego thing. But the truth is: I don't "have" to do anything. I just have to be myself. Not save the world, but save myself. And that's already an enormous challenge! And that's the magic of it, truly: only by being the most radical version of myself, can I actually offer my best contribution to the collective.

But I always say: "the simplest things in life are often the least easy." I think being yourself is much more about birthing yourself. For me, it has been such a long, sometimes painful process. At 30 years old, I am finally seeing my first book getting published, even though this has been my ultimate life goal ever since I was 8. Sometimes, I think: "Oh, how much time I lost!" If it hadn't been for all those doubts and "deviations," maybe I would have written my first book 10 years ago. But deep down, I know this is bullshit. Thoreau said: "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live." And it's true: all the experiences I went through during my twenties shaped the person, and the writer, I am today. The doubts, the pain, the joys, the growth, the deviations: I am so proud of it all. I have a deep faith in the timing of my life.

How did you reconnect to your purpose?

By resting. And above all, by failing. Failure—my ultimate fear for so long, the very thing I had spent my youth avoiding at all costs—ended up being the biggest blessing in my life. And it came through the form of severe burnout at age 27. Until then, I worked long, excruciating hours in this Parisian anti-discrimination law firm, and I was utterly miserable. My boss at the time would constantly compliment me on how good a writer I was, on how knowledgeable and eloquent I was about history, race, gender, philosophy (which we liked to talk about during work breaks). When I confided in her that I wanted to take a sabbatical at some point to dedicate myself to writing, she replied: "Oh, you will have plenty of time to do that when you retire." This felt like a knife straight to my heart.

A few weeks after that, my brain and my body shut down. I quit and spent an entire year of doing nothing. The guilt and shame were crushing. For a year, I read books for pleasure, I cooked, I went on strolls, I walked barefoot in the grass, I did moon rituals and got into astrology. I treated my body like a soft, precious thing.

A year later, a big transformation had happened: I had decided not to go back to law. In 2019, I signed up for a Ph.D. program in colonial history in Paris, thinking I was finally ready to achieve my life-long dream. But it was too early. It was still the overachiever in command, the "straight-A student" who was terrified of "failing at life" if she continued to rest...Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, the timing and the conditions were not right. A few months into the program, COVID struck, and I found myself locked down for two months in my tiny Parisian studio, with no sunlight, the majority of my classes cancelled, heavily depressed, in an existential crisis, and with so much free time to contemplate what a disillusion my "dream" had turned out to be. Today, I know that this is what happens when my mind and my fears try to "force" things to happen, instead of surrendering to the organic, aligned timing of my life.

During lockdown, something incredible happened: instead of working on my dissertation, I found myself giving birth to a history podcast idea I had had for a long time. It's called La Griotte Vagabonde ("The Wandering

Griot”), and it explores African and Caribbean history “from below,” while also telling tales of my own creation, reconstituting historical scenes with sound effects, and showcasing musical folklore and literature. The union of academic knowledge and artistic creativity that I had found so lacking in academia.

I was 28 years old then, and this was the very first time in my life that I birthed something that felt so soulful and authentic to who I am. The process was so playful and full of joy. To my shock, the podcast quickly grew its audience: thousands of listeners subscribed in the first few months, and I received hundreds of comment praising the originality and rigorous quality of my work, how pedagogical it was, how entertaining and poetic. That’s when it all clicked for me. Maybe I didn’t need yet another stamp of external validation, in the form of an academic title. Maybe I was ready just the way I was.

So shortly after that, in disbelief of what a crazy move I was about to do, I quit my program and left France—where I had lived for almost a decade—to go back to Martinique. It was a critical time of healing and gestation for me: I needed to be home. There, for the very first time in my life, I made the oath that I would take my identity as a writer seriously.

Less than a year later, I was approached by a well-established Parisian publisher who was in love with my podcast. They were looking for “fresh,” strong emerging voices in French literature, and wanted to know if I had works of historical fiction I wanted to submit. I didn’t yet, but they gave me a book deal for me to write it.

So, everything connected.

Exactly, and that’s why it’s so fundamental, during the dry spells, to sustain your faith in your purpose. To cling as strongly as possible to the conviction that the universe will eventually reward your courage and authenticity, even if everything feels so uncertain and risky at the moment.

One thing that I find beautiful—a feeling of things coming full circle—is that my first published book will be a work of fiction. Not a social or political theory essay, as I had thought in my early twenties. But a Young Adult novel. Something so unapologetically creative and artistic. However, it’s a historical novel: a story that actually illustrates political concepts—decolonization, history of resistance in the Caribbean, ecofeminism, indigenous wisdoms, gender and queer history all woven into an Afrofuturistic tale with a plot of time travel and a magical storyline of sorority between four young witches.

I actually think it is in itself a revolutionary act to make Martinican Black and indigenous people the protagonists of fantastical fiction, especially in the French literary world that has still such a long way to go in terms of diversifying imagination. When I was a teenager devouring fantastic novels, I never would have dared to dream that one day, there would be epic stories like this, whose heroines would look like me and come from where I come from. I think stories are healing, and my work is oriented towards that: collective healing. So, it really feels like everything is finally connecting.

I’m finally at peace with the fact that I can’t be confined to a single box. I can’t be confined to being an academic historian. I’m also a novelist, I’m also a poet, I’m also an activist, I’m also a radical dreamer...I’m all those things, and they are all necessary threads in the complex tapestry that is my singular voice. I’m ultimately someone who build bridges, someone who connects dots. I think you should not feel defective for not being able to confine yourself to an unidimensional path: I actually think this makes you an *avant-gardiste*, because this deconstruction of categories and dichotomies is precisely what our future will increasingly look like.

Could you elaborate more on how you purposely integrate subjectivity into your work?

I think this divide between objectivity and subjectivity is deeply rooted into a colonial and patriarchal cosmology. So-called “objectivity” is actually a political weapon, and is used to discard the perspectives and ways of knowing of those who are not white, straight, cis-men. Objectivity is actually a myth. We are all subjective beings. The closest one can come to objectivity, is actually to confront very frankly one’s subjectivity. The paradox is: the more you try to deny and repress your subjectivity, the less objective you end up being. So, to

me, real objectivity is found in the thorough process of asking yourself: From where do I speak? What is the specific shape of my own subjectivity, and how does that inform my perspective?

Currently I'm reading an essay called "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Native-American biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. She talks about her ambiguous position as an Indigenous woman in academia, and how her career has been devoted to reconciling Western science with the Indigenous ways of knowing. In the same regard, what I find fascinating is how knowledge and imagination, intellect and intuition—concepts deemed mutually exclusive in the Western paradigm—have always been intertwined in non-Western epistemological traditions. A good example of that is the West-African ancestral tradition of Griots – those are oral historians who keep records of a lineage through storytelling, singing and music. I also think of the archetype of the Hindu goddess Saraswati. I have a picture of her just on my wall here. She's the patroness of both artistic pursuits and scholarly knowledge. And I think that's very telling, because in the Indian way of seeing the world, there is no contradiction between being a thinker and an artist, on the contrary. Right brain, left brain. We're made of both.

To me, embracing subjectivity as a thinker is also an effort of rehabilitating those whose voice has been consistently silenced throughout history. So yeah, I think that's an epistemological question that is central to any de-colonial work. It's not only about what types of subjects you tackle in your research, but also about the *manner* in which you proceed with that research. I'm so inspired by Gayatri Spivak's 1985 essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" Really, how, as a writer and an historian, can I revive the experiences and perspectives of those who were reduced to the condition of otherized object in someone else's story?

I think using our imagination and own sensitivities is a powerful tool to fill the gaps of the colonial archive. I really like this quote by E.L. Doctorow: "The historian will tell you what happened and the novelist will tell you what it felt like." I would add: the novelist will tell you what the historian could never know. I love working at the intersection of these two crafts.

I was wondering if you ever felt nervous about filling in the gaps? Thinking you might get it wrong? Or end up not being sensitive enough?

Of course, in the process of writing my historical novel, extensive research came first. And it's on that solid foundation that I was able let my imagination fill the remaining gaps. But as writers, and also as historians, I think our entire craft is guided by the paradoxical idea that human experience is both contingent and cyclic. It's a never-ending, repetitive story of power, oppression, accumulation, but also of resistance, creativity, transgression and unexpected solidarity. Maybe human history is not that different from folklore tales, after all: the same patterns, archetypes and themes, unfolding in different settings with different characters.

But to me, that's what's so beautiful about it: in a way, through your own hardships, dreams, joys and fears, you can connect to someone who lived hundreds of years before you.

Isis Labeau-Caberia Recommends:

Intuitive, crazy dance morning sessions, for your animal body is a wise being. I like to let loose on Amadou & Mariam's "Bara" (remix by Joaquin's Sacred Rhythm Dance).

Women Who Run with the Wolves by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, for the times when the crush of the mundane world is too heavy and you need a little help in remembering the sacred value of your creative purpose.

Herbal tea in the morning (Caribbean lemon grass tea for me), English breakfast with a cloud of oat milk in the afternoon.

Mid-week river baths and rooting your bare feet in the soil.

Anne with an E on Netflix, a delicious, poetic tale for creative, neurotypical women who love big words and have big dreams.

Name

Isis Labeau-Caberia

Vocation

writer

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Frederic Rejaudry