On working with and against constraints

Writer Maggie Nelson discusses giving a project the time and form it needs, not believing in your moods, and why failure is subjective.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2279 words.

Tags: Writing, Process.

When did you decide to write a book about freedom?

Well, I started the book right after I finished a book of mine about cruelty. I started it back around 20—I don't know, gosh, a long time ago. I was working on the book before I wrote *The Argonauts*, my last book. So, it was actually a matter of going back to my files after *The Argonauts* was written. So, I would say probably 2013, something like that.

Freedom is a broad concept, one that's recently associated in America with conservatism and protecting the status quo. Would you say this book was an attempt to reclaim freedom's more progressive or subversive allowances?

I'm a kind of thinker who tends to not trust simple reclamation gestures or like, "I'll take that back from you." I think it became not like, "Hey, that's bad liberation, here's good liberation over here. Let me tell you about it." Or, "We seem to have forgotten freedom's progressive or social justice value." I think that I wanted to consider, rather than partition. The book considers a more marbled version of freedom that could incorporate many different strands within it.

You make a distinction in the book's introduction between freedom as a future achievement rather than an ongoing present practice. Can you elaborate a little on what that means to you?

I think that it means that in any given moment, whether it's in a movement or in a pandemic, or in a relationship, in a sexual encounter, whatever it is, we have choices and we have constraints, and sometimes they're more dire in terms of their injustice than others. But, a practice of freedom to me involves a kind of active engagement with looking at what our choices and what our constraints are at any given instance and trying to flip the constraints that aren't working for our goals, that aren't working for us, and seeing how fixed some of them are and how stubborn and how moveable.

So, that's a little bit different than perseverating on a time and a place when we will be free. It's a more down-to-earth kind of practice. The two don't obviate each other. You can aspire towards future versions of more liberation while also having practices of freedom. It's not really an either-or, it's more that the book focuses on one over the other.

What does that ongoing present practice look like for you right now, and how do you imagine it might look in the future?

I hate to sound pedantic, but part of the point of the book or part of the notion of that negotiation is that it

doesn’t look the same in all places. So, I think it looks like ongoing negotiation. Yeah. I don’t know. It’s hard to say. Like I said, it really depends on the enterprise. I mean, some of it is affective, mood-related, like when we tend to tell ourselves things can’t ever change or they’re doomed. And sometimes it involves understanding that those are actually mental constraints that we put on ourselves, that serve psychic purposes but aren’t necessarily based in an empirical… doomed or not doomed is not necessarily an empirical reality judgment that all people would agree upon.

So, some of it’s affective labor, as we all have been doing in the pandemic under incredible constraints, trying to figure out the old classic, “What things can I control and have power over and what things can I not?” And some of it’s how to agitate for change: where I want to see it and how to also live with the limits of what I can do and find feelings of more freedom in places that otherwise feel completely constricted.

You began writing this book a long time ago. Did any of the events in the intervening years, including the pandemic, affect your process or your state of mind while writing it?

Oh, sure. I mean, how could they not? The pandemic hit after most of the book had been written, so thankfully I didn’t have to have the presence of mind to be doing all that scholarly labor and coming up with new thoughts in the middle of a really tense time. But I did edit the book in that time.

I began the book before Trump ever got on those stairs and announced his candidacy. But in the United States, as you’ve mentioned, [freedom] has been associated with repressive or autocratic forces. And that is absolutely not new, not at all. So, nothing about the book is like, “Wow, look at the last five years.” I wouldn’t say anything has been a surprise.

It was actually difficult, in a way, because the pandemic made certain concepts that I was trying to write about more fulsomely a little tinny. Things got reduced in the public discourse to a kind of hollering about obligation versus individual freedom. It was clarifying, but it was also distorting in the sense that any binary that begins to calcify and that you begin to see every day, it can shut down thought.

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Do you have any general advice that you would give to writers working on a long project or artists working on something that takes a long time to produce, during which time passes and their feelings on the topic are subject to change?

Fortitude. Yeah, fortitude. Also, one of my good friends and mentors gave me the best advice I’ve ever gotten about this. He said, “Remember, your feelings about the work don’t determine the value of the work.” You can feel frustrated, disgusted, agitated, hopeless, every day, on and off, but you can’t necessarily believe all your moods. You just have to keep on working.

Yeah, not believing in your moods. That’s a quote from Emerson, I might add. “Our moods do not believe in each other.” Which is one of my favorite quotes because when you feel despair, despair doesn’t believe in joy. And that can be very hard as a writer. If you feel like you open up your files and everything looks like shit and you’re upset, that mood is going to make you want to invalidate your whole project. You just have to get kind of Buddhist about it and recognize all that is weather.

The book has some references to a Buddhist thinker. That seems to be a through-line.

Yeah.

In the “Art Song” chapter, you suggest that a fear, be it paranoid or more valid, of shaming or of institutional censorship might affect the process of art-making, even unconsciously. What might we lose collectively when our art is affected by fear or paranoia, and what might we gain?

I think in general, every age and every moment has people self-censoring in different ways. You have people making art in times when they’d be burned at the stake. Like, in Spain, even still, you can’t paint certain things about

the king or whatever.

So, I think it's foolhardy to imagine a state of total freedom in which art persists. It can be a fine line between hyperventilating about a so-called censorious atmosphere in the way the rightwing gins up this phantom, while at the same time acknowledging that a lot of people… As a teacher, I find this in my students, and I find it in my friends, that a lot of people do feel concerned with what they might want to express, and worried about if it's wrong or if it's not perfect.

I think there's a lot to be gained. I think a lot of the reckoning happening with thinking about what we're making and putting different lenses of criticality onto it, can actually make for better art. At the same time, there's an idea that I think bled over from the academy. I say "from the academy" because I think a lot of times academic politicized writing tries to see things from all sides. If there's a painting or a show or a movie that focuses on one thing, the easy charge is, why didn't it focus on X, Y, or Z, as if a platonic work of art could be everything.

I think what you can lose is… If people feel put on the planet just to focus on art, and if they feel that there's something wrong with that… I think people should continue to do their work, while also bringing really hard, critical lenses to their impulses, which may be, like all impulses, less interesting under scrutiny than they originally might think. You may actually really get somewhere with being harder on what you thought was what you really wanted to emanate.

The book considers various ways in which art has historically engaged with, or currently engages with, taboo, and it considers why this aspect of art-making is worth protecting.

I do try to talk about art as a place for exploration of taboo, or images or things that might be unacceptable elsewhere. I think that there's value in that, and I think that makes for a certain risk, that art has to take a certain risk. Not all art, necessarily, in the same way, but I think if it doesn't take some of those risks, it is probably not living up to all it could be. And with risk comes failure. I think that is built into the process, and I think that's okay, even when it's appalling. Taken on a broad level, I think it has to be a part of the process.

Failure is also subjective. There occasionally can be works of art where everyone agrees it's terrible and worthless. But I learned a lot in working on *The Art of Cruelty* and talking to people at events and emailing with people. I really did learn that people have different needs and preferences about what they're going to art for. And this book tries to be explicit about what it might mean to honor that heterogeneity.

This books draws less from your own life than some of your earlier books, including *The Argonauts*. Was that a deliberate choice?

My books flip-flop all around in terms of ratio. They take up the idiom needed for that particular project, and sometimes that means it's a more lyrical or personal project, and sometimes it means otherwise. In this particular case, I didn't have a lot to say about my personal experiences of liberation, but I had lots to say about the things that it talks about.

The last chapter, "Riding the Blinds," does feel a bit more personal, though. Was it important to you to discuss your own life as it relates to climate change?

This book ended up involving a lot of thinking about freedom and its relationship to time. I think because climate change is a temporal problem, and because, like I say in that chapter, the figure of the child is easily used as a way of thinking about futurity. It felt natural to write about parenting around the climate. But I'm also very aware that it's a trope. Like, "what will we leave our children?"

You discuss throughout how restraints can be a form of freedom. Can you elaborate on that?

I think restraint is an undervalued form of freedom. It kind of relates to what we were saying before about impulse, in that, a lack of impulse control, whether it be addiction to substance or fossil fuels, is a certain kind of freedom, but it can often actually be a compulsion that doesn't actually lead to the state that we desire or the state that would cause less suffering and make us feel more free.

Again, not to be Buddhist-cheesy, but a lot of meditation practices have as a goal, learning how to insert periods of pause, even three seconds, in between impulse and action, so that one can not just act out of impulsive anger, impulsive aggression. To import in real time moments of miniature restraint that allow you to make decisions about what you want to do and not be ruled by instinct. So, I think, scaled up, that can mean being like, "Whoa, we really want to burn all our fuel in the ground?" Because when I'm running from my house in a wildfire and can't breathe, I don't feel very free.

It's difficult to talk about these forms of freedom as adult versus child freedom, this idea of the impulsive child who doesn't wait for the marshmallow or something like that. I'm not sure that's a good frame because it seems like it has shaming built into it. I think I'm less interested in being like, "We've got to grow up." That's why I prefer this frame of learning as a practice to insert delays. I think it's less judgmental, and it gives us more options, and it doesn't make us feel like we're graduating out of an immature state to a mature state.

It reminds us, again, that this is an ongoing practice and that certain forms of restraint are not constraint necessarily. Restraint usually is something that you perform to yourself as opposed to something put upon you by an external power. In that sense, it's a choice. Therefore, anything that feels like a choice and not an imposition tends to give us a feeling that we're in control of our freedom.

Selected works by Maggie Nelson:

Something Bright, Then Holes

Bluets

The Argonauts

The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning

Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions

Name
Maggie Nelson

Vocation
Writer

Harry Dodge