On telling your story

Writer Matt Mitchell and musician Meg Duffy (Hand Habits) discuss identity, writing with honesty and anger, creating the thing you want to see in the world, and the importance of place.

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As told to Meg Duffy, 4053 words.

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Meg Duffy: For some reason, after reading your book, I assumed that you lived in Los Angeles.

Matt Mitchell: My first book I wrote was about California which, in the moment, I was like, "Yeah, this is cool." And then, afterwards, I'm like, "I feel like a fucking fraud." I've only been to California once, but what inspired [*The Neon Hollywood Cowboy*] was I studied in California for almost a month in college and I felt, weirdly, more at home there than I had in Ohio—when it came to what I was going through at the time. It felt like a jumping-off point and then, when I was writing [*Vampire Burrito*], I was like, "I've gotta go home. I need to start excavating some stuff from where I grew up instead of trying to romanticize a place I don't live in."

Meg Duffy: It reminded me, though, of, when I was young and learning about California—it's such a fantasy world. And especially it being, for white settlers, the "final frontier." I think California represents something better to a lot of people, especially people on the East Coast from small towns. I really related to that. You can project a lot onto something you don't understand, too. It's always easier to imagine the grass being greener, or even better—even though it's not here. I was curious about that relationship, if you hadn't spent a lot of time in California and what it represented to you when you were writing your first and your second book, too—because it appears in the second book, too.

Matt Mitchell: Yeah, I wanted to have a continuity in it where I acknowledged it for people who had read [*The Neon Hollywood Cowboy*], so they could see that it's a story that is connected in a way. But also, I didn't want to get so elaborate with the Easter eggs if someone was reading this book for the first time without knowing anything else I've ever written, so they could not have to piece together something. They could just be like, "Oh, well, this book is starting where he's on a flight back from California. This makes sense, he's going home."

I think, subconsciously, at the time—and it's become more known to me now—I was really interested in Hollywood, in particular, because I was really frustrated with representation for intersex people in movies and TV. My only frame of reference—I have two sides of the spectrum. There's the episode of *Friends* where the whole show is dedicated to one joke about a hermaphrodite person. And then, on the other side, there's one episode of *Freaks and Geeks* where Judd Apatow and Paul Feig do this super thoughtful and empathetic portrayal of an intersex person.

Meg Duffy: Do they use the word "intersex" [in *Freaks and Geeks*]?

Matt Mitchell: They don't use it in the episode, no. They don't use the term "hermaphrodite," either. It felt like a very innocent way of showing exactly how two high school kids would talk about it. It's framed as "When I was born, I had both sets of genitalia and my parents made a decision."

There’s a line in that episode that inspired a couple of images in my poetry, where James Franco, Seth Rogen, and Jason Segel are together and Rogen says “She was born with the gun and the holster.” It’s a line that stuck out to me, and I tried to play around with it in a few poems. You never hear the word “intersex” and you never hear the word “hermaphrodite,” you don’t hear any of these buzzwords. It’s just high schoolers trying to figure out a different way of explaining things. And by the end, Rogen’s character is like, “I don’t care. I love you, I want to be with you.”

For me, obviously, it’s not the most perfect representation of that story, but, when I was growing up, my parents never let me watch that episode. It was the only episode of the show they would never put on for me. And I never knew why. Then, when I grew up and watched it and was told by a doctor that I’m intersex, I put the pieces together. And, obviously, my mom was like, “It wasn’t intentional, we didn’t know. We just weren’t sure how we should present those ideas to a child.”

Meg Duffy: They were aware of the episode?

Matt Mitchell: Yeah, they love that show and passed it down to me when I was eight or nine.

Meg Duffy: Do you think it was subconscious of them to introduce you to the show and then not the episode?

Matt Mitchell: Well, there were two episodes they didn’t show me. There’s one before that where a main character almost dies from an allergic reaction to peanuts—and I was allergic to peanuts, so they were like, “I don’t want to show him, I don’t want him to get freaked out.” That, I get. But the problem is, my intersex identity is not the kind of intersex identity that was portrayed in *Freaks and Geeks*. Mine is genetic and chromosomal, so I don’t even know if, consciously or subconsciously, it was a decision. I think I believe my mom, that it was a heavy thing they didn’t know how to broach with a child. But that episode, as imperfect as it can be, was the only reference I ever had—and still have—on television or movies that ends with something kind.

And going back all the way to the beginning of our talk, a lot of my motivations for making the setting in Hollywood were because I had this idea of trying to build my life into a cinematic experience, because no one else was doing that. I’ve always maintained this idea—which I’m less adamant about now, just from moving intro perspectives and growing up—that, if no one’s gonna make a movie about me, I might as well do it myself. How long can you wait until you feel an obligation to write the story yourself and share that with people? Everybody has had some sort of representation on the screen, but I’ve always felt cheapened, because it’s always intersex people who are treated like shit. Hollywood is becoming more open to having queer characters, and I think about how, in *BoJack Horseman*, Todd is an ace person. That felt revolutionary to me. I’m just waiting for intersex people to get a similar treatment where we’re getting empathetically written into things.

Meg Duffy: It probably also takes people who identify as intersex publicly in those writing rooms and spaces. Have you ever considered writing a script?

Matt Mitchell: My dream is to write a Netflix show where that identity is at the forefront. Being intersex definitely gets people intrigued, which I had using that as a jumping-off point. But, sometimes, I can’t even get my foot in the door in conversations unless people are compelled by curiosity.

Meg Duffy: I would definitely watch that show. I remember, too, with curiosity, that it can be dangerous, because people romanticize what they don’t understand. But also, more often than not, especially right now, people are afraid of what they don’t understand and immediately put it into the threat category.

I’m interested to see what happens in the next 20 years in the media with representation of intersex people, trans people, non-binary people—especially because we’re so under scrutiny and attack. I don’t feel as under attack as people who are a little bit less digestible, in terms of white supremacy and heteronormative ideals. I feel like, once you start to unravel the question of why there’s not representation, at least for me, it feels defeating—because most publications or corporations, big businesses that have a lot of money that fund these places where representation happens in the media, aren’t willing to be scrutinized.

I don't think that most people, including myself, know how to have fair and accurate representation without scrutinizing the powers that kept them out of those places in the first place. And that becomes this onion, right? I'm curious about how you feel about how the intersection of capitalism is always this volcanic thing and how you grapple with that when you are trying to express yourself.

Reading *Vampire Burrito*, there's a lot of anger and frustration, which I definitely share—not in the same way, but in a similar way. How does that affect you when you sit down to write something like this?

Matt Mitchell: I benefit greatly from this "shock factor" narrative. It sucks, because capitalism has driven us to sensationalize the more sought-after "narratives." Cis-het consumers and, notably, white cis-het consumers, are very interested in fetishizing the stories of minority identities in a lot of ways. I've benefited from that because I know that I can write the story and present it the way it is and people who don't share that identity are gonna see it as a more desirable thing to consume than just a run-of-the-mill love poem that a straight guy in rural America wrote. But I also hate that, too, because I don't want who I am to be just a selling point. There's this double-edged sword of "Well, how am I supposed to live if that doesn't happen?" It's like, when can we get to a place where I can just live my life and tell my story and I don't have to constantly be under the blade of someone else's expectations.

Vampire Burrito is angry, and I feel like *The Neon Hollywood Cowboy* before it was even angrier. When I wrote it, I didn't think that I was that angry, but when I look back I see it. I tried to not make *Vampire Burrito* so brutal but, at the same time, it's hard to not look at that kind of grief and see it in any other light. We're on this call right now and I can feel my body going through withdrawal from hormones, because I need a shot tonight. That's an ongoing thing with this life, where it doesn't just stop. I don't have a stomach covered in welts anymore, but I still feel all of these wounds. I think people want that to exist only on the page. They want me to go back to my regular life where I'm normal and having a good time. But I close out of a Google doc and I feel like shit. I'm just always dealing with that in some way or another, and capitalism plays a huge factor in it. There's probably a subconscious part of my brain where I'm like, "I gotta be brutal in these poems, because, I guess, brutal sells."

Meg Duffy: There's that line in [*Vampire Burrito*] about not being able to look you in the eye and say the word "intersex," and everybody's dancing around that word. It's very interesting to think about how, when you walk away from the interview and when you walk away from these experiences on the page, you're still living in that reality. As an intersex person, too, the philosophical conversation comes to mind about choice, how so much of an identity can be reduced to somebody choosing to identify in some way or it being spiritual—or, in an intersex case such as yourself, your body made a choice for you.

Spiritually, you choose how to live in relationship with your body and your identity, and I feel that way as a trans person, too. There's part of it that doesn't feel like a choice. Part of it just feels like the physical aspect of taking hormones or choosing to live more in-line with how I feel on the inside. You surrender a lot of privilege and a lot of comforts and a lot of safety. I think you are surrendering a lot of comforts and privilege by choosing to even just publicly identity as intersex. I think it's violent to not, to yourself. Either way, there's violence on either side. And I think it's really brave and I also think it's complicated. I wonder what your relationship is to choices.

Matt Mitchell: I think about it a lot because, in some aspects, I don't think I've ever been happier since I started publicly identifying in this way. In doing that, you take control over your personhood, but, at the same time, you are losing autonomy in a lot of public spaces. I feel good most of the time, because hormones have, in a lot of ways, saved my life. But, outside of my own being, people are going to hear that I'm on hormone therapy and they're going to take it whichever way they want. I just don't have any control over that and that's where a lot of that violence comes in, too, that, beyond my immediate grasp, I have no control over where that goes. It's kind of devastating, too. But, ever since coming out five years ago, or whatever, I haven't been able to meet a lot of intersex people—because a lot of intersex people don't even know that they're intersex, which is a whole different conversation of privilege.

That first book I wrote, I filled it with pop culture references. And that's what people latched onto. Non-trans

and non-intersex people who were interviewing me about that book were really hammering home the pop culture part. I get it, that's something that was maybe more in their wheelhouse than identity poetics, but I wanted to strip [*Vampire Burrito*] down as far away from pop culture as possible so people would be forced to examine the intersex part of the book. They can't hide behind pop culture buzzwords and zeitgeist references. I just wanted people to see me as who I am, and there were times where, with the press around that first book, I wasn't being seen in the way I set out to be.

It was weird, too, because I think [*Vampire Burrito*] has alienated some people. It hasn't caught on as well as the first book did, and that's such a weird thing to deal with. I was like, "Well, I think this book is better." In retrospect, I feel there are parts of that first book where I wasn't really doing the work that I had thought I was doing. I wanted to rectify that on this new thing, and I feel like I did. I don't know if it's just the downfall of media, with Twitter collapsing and algorithms getting fucked up, but it's been weird having to figure out who to get this book in front of people—especially when you want to fight hard for what you've made, especially when it's a personal thing.

Meg Duffy: Your book, it gives me hope—because it's an accurate representation of working class people and how you move as an intersex person within those spheres. The whole poem ["Building a Bird"] about selling a farm to build a development, I'm interested in those struggles, too, because I have a blue-collar chip on my shoulder.

Matt Mitchell: A big factor in not writing about California and continuing the story from the first book to the second one was because it really wasn't me. I'm a first-generation college grad on my dad's side of the family. My dad's side comes from the rural, middle-of-nowhere, Central West Virginia region. My Papaw didn't even finish high school. My Mamaw had to do all of the document work because my Papaw could barely write. He had horrible handwriting and quit school to help his family. It took me four or five years to write my first book, and then it took me only a year to write the second one—because I knew how to zero in, immediately, on what story needed to be told. And that was me needing to go home. I needed to consider what it means to be an intersex person with Appalachian heritage, who also must confront intergenerational trauma and toxic masculinity. How do you exist as this kind of person in a town of 3,000 people? I don't need to go to New York or California to tell this story. I knew I had to stay home and stay in Ohio and go back to Grafton to illustrate the story—because no one else is doing that.

Some of the most compelling poetry I've ever read by trans poets is where it's blue-collar, Southern trans writing. It's so necessary beyond belief. And that's another thing where capitalism comes into play, because capitalism has pushed so many gay, trans, and intersex people to the coasts—because that's where the Promised Land is supposed to be and that's where you're going to survive. I always think about, "Well, what about our community? What about our brothers and sisters who don't have the luxury of leaving their towns? I'm always thinking about "How can I service these people?" And that was something I really struggled with after the first book came out, because I had felt like I'd done a really important service to my intersex community. Then I went back and re-visited it while writing *Vampire Burrito* and I realized I didn't.

I was trying to fantisize a life of acceptance. There's a line at the end of [*The Neon Hollywood Cowboy*], where I talk about dreaming of living in a decade where no one knows what to call me and I wondered what kind of bliss would come with that. Then, I realized that it's actually harmful to imagine not having to carry this weight anymore.

Meg Duffy: I understand that, when you give something a name then you can control it and you can politicize it and you can punish it and you can kill it. I think about that a lot, just with queerness in general, how, now that we all have a word for queer, now the government can say "Oh, that's what that is. That's where we can take away the rights." Angela Davis talks about this a lot, how, as soon as you can identify something, then it can be controlled. I understand that yearning for a nameless existence.

I felt that a lot with *Placeholder*, my second record, how you can queer relationships and keep them ambiguous—because, if they're ambiguous, then you can't define them and place them into this box of something that has a context within society and within class and within what you deserve, how a person should if they're this kind of person or that kind of person. I don't think it's always from a vista of violence or a position of violence. I

think that, as humans, it's very natural for us to just want to name something so we can understand it. That's why we have language, so we can relate to it and have a relationship with it. But I definitely relate to that longing, of going back to a time when there weren't words—because the words then get taken very far away from us. They can be weaponized.

And you see that a lot with BLM. We saw it with the War on Drugs. As soon as there was a scapegoat for problems, white supremacy is going to be like, "Oh, that thing that we don't really understand." That's definitely the issue with our fundamentals, because they can say it's threatening the stability of our country. It's all just erasure, too. I don't know how to express this image I'm having, but there's a beauty in being erased, too, but we don't want to be erased.

Matt Mitchell: It made me want to explore reclamation in a lot of ways in *Vampire Burrito*, because I've seen how gay people are taking back the F-slur and lesbians are taking back the D-slur. I was thinking about how hermaphrodite has become a slur and I wanted to take that name and play around with it. I've enjoyed watching other communities under the queer umbrella fight to take back these terms and make it their own in the face of how it's been weaponized against them for decades. The hard part about all of it is how complex it is. And, sometimes, you wake up in the morning and you just don't have the energy to wade through that and the conversations around class and how trans people of color are being targeted so much more than any other intersection of identity.

It's hard, sometimes, to wake up and prepare yourself to examine and acknowledge all of that. But, at the same time, you have to fight through that exhaustion. I think, from my own perspective, there's such little resources out there for intersex people that I just can't help but fight. That's why I wanted to be really direct in *Vampire Burrito* and be very upfront about being intersex and do it in an relentless way. I wanted to imagine a place where I was asking "Hey, what if I have a child and they're intersex?" Let's bring another intersex person into the fold, let's add another voice to the world. I've always wrestled with whether or not it's safe to bring a child into this world with climate change and the US government stripping back rights every fucking week. I keep having the internal discussion about whether or not it's ethical or unethical to bring a child into this world right now. But, for this book, I loved the idea of having another intersex person in my world and wondering what that would look like. That's such a small fight that meant everything to me. There's a lot of loneliness that comes with being intersex, but it's not so lonely to consider one more person who's like you.

matt mitchell recommends:

Listen to your favorite band from when you were 7 years old: There's nothing quite like remembering what you loved 20, 30 years ago. I used to draw myself with devil horns and a schoolboy suit like Angus Young from AC/DC. Lately I've been revisiting those Bon Scott years more and more. It's not necessarily bathtub material, but I'll light up a candle for "Love Hungry Man" any day.

Read *Crapalachia* by Scott McClanahan: Perhaps you are from West Virginia or perhaps you are not, but *Vampire Burrito* wouldn't exist without Scott's fact-bending memoir. For Appalachians and beyond, it's a deft, intimate way of subverting our preconceptions of how folklore and heirlooms can intersect with each other.

Don't center kickbacks around food: I've found that, in my time as a chronically ill human being with a major food allergy, it's become hard to quantify just how blissful it is to hang with some good people without the expectation of buying and eating a meal. It's a part of the modern-day social contract that doesn't interest me much, mainly because I struggle with eating in front of other people. Go bowling and have a Coke or nurse a free water at the back of a gig across town. It's a much more pleasant evening when your stomach doesn't have to be the star of the show.

Buy that useless thing at the store that you're trying to convince yourself you don't need: Life is too short. Rack up credit card debt, those scores are pointless anyway. If the climate falls apart and the Earth can longer house us, are you going to still feel good about that $5 tchotchke you left behind for somebody else? Buy it, display it, love it for the rest of your days—until it gets lost in a move or stolen by an ex.

Treat even the smallest trips like a vacation: Even going from one city to another for a day or less can be a romantic, needed escape. Go to a new store or meet up with an old pal. Find a mural you've never awed at or memorize the downtown streets. There's a reason that Cleveland is the Paris of the Midwest—when I make the two-

hour drive to the North Coast, I am off the grid and unavailable indefinitely. Don’t email me, my heart belongs to Lake Erie.

Name

Matt Mitchell and Meg Duffy