



Artists as Writers

LIVING AND SUSTAINING A CREATIVE LIFE

Edited by
Seph Rodney
Steven G Fullwood

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INTRODUCTION

Seph Rodney and Steven G Fullwood

IF YOU PICKED up this book, then we're sure it's for you. If the last half century of self-help books flooding the market has told us anything, it is that people are interested in step-by-step instructions about how people become writers. Well, this isn't exactly that kind of book. It's better. Who needs a recipe when you can have rich stories from writers who *write* and accounts of what sustains them as writers?

Every budding writer wants to know about the journey to becoming a REAL writer, what decisions were made, which paths were taken, rejected, charted, and why. What magic keeps a writer writing? Maybe how many rejections did they receive from publications before that one life-affirming *yes*.

Follow, if you will, 32 stories about the circuitous roads that each individual took to earn the title "writer." Some you'll notice don't call themselves writers, yet. Telling someone you're a writer is often met with, "so, what have you written?" Many of the contributors in this book have wrestled with this and similar questions. What makes someone a writer and how do they sustain a living to make it happen?

The work of gathering a group of writers into this anthology who could answer this question began when Sharon Loudon, editor for the Living and Sustaining a Creative Life series, reached out to us via email in 2019. It was her query that started the process: Would we like to solicit, organize, and write for an anthology that would continue the series, with a focus on writers? Now we only vaguely remember all the chats, meetings,

invitations, follow-up messages, reminders, edits, revisions, and collegial arguments that make up the guts of this book. All of what is written here is a result of all of the above—which you will never see. This is very much the nature of professional writing, whether literary, analytical, poetic, expository, experimental, diaristic, or critical: The reader comes to it as a finished piece of craft. The reader doesn't see the discarded bits and pieces left on the workshop floor, the beveling of edges to make the joints true. There is a lot of sawdust we've swept away and machinery we've put back in their cubbies to present this varied and beautiful collection of stories. But here in our introduction we want to let you in on the nitty gritty of how we did it.

We created a formal invitation and started sending that out in the winter of 2019. In between that initial invitation and now, like much of the world, our call for submissions and writer deadlines were caught in the nettles of the "Great Pause": the COVID-19 pandemic. While the world set about trying to right itself through lockdowns, vaccines, and shutdowns, we too paused with the rest of the world. We had no choice.

But, in the middle of this, trying to find our way to fulfilling the mandate of this project we had phone calls, Zoom meetings, in-person lunches, and figured out how we wanted this anthology to look and feel. Rather than solely showcase the works of poets, fiction, and non-fiction writers, we deliberately solicited contributions from writers from lesser-known or explored categories in terms of writing genres.

When we got back on track, Seph, in his role as an editor at *Hyperallergic*, one of the key art publications in North America, used his access to reach out to curators, critics, and arts journalists. (Since then he has moved on from the publication to become an independent art critic and curator.) There are two of Seph's former colleagues from *Hyperallergic* included here. There is *Hyperallergic's* editor-in-chief, **Hrag Vartanian**, an Armenian art and culture historian and writer, born in Syria, coming of age in Toronto and then settling in New York where he founded the magazine with his husband. And we feature *Hyperallergic's* current senior editor, **Hakim Bishara**, a Palestinian expatriate who has had more and more varied jobs than most people we know. *Hyperallergic* also led us to freelance writers within the art scene such as **Kealey Boyd** who became a full-time arts writer based in Denver after almost a decade in the financial industry. And it led us

to **Anna Mikaela Ekstrand**, a Swedish arts writer and part-time curator who founded her own online magazine *Cultbytes*, which she now operates as its editor-in-chief. Seph got connected to her by working with her on an essay published in *Hyperallergic*. **Sofia Ciel** also contributed to *Hyperallergic*. She is a Polish curator, lecturer, and writer who talks eloquently of the precarity of her educational and working life.

Also, embedded in the art scene is Seph's colleague **Glenn Adamson**, a former director of the Museum of Arts and Design, and an independent curator well known in the disciplines of design and craft, who met Seph at a gallery dinner in Chelsea several years ago. At a conversation at a Brooklyn art gallery in 2018, Seph met the younger writer **Elifete Paz** who writes about art and culture and how he sees himself navigating these shifting and demanding terrains.

Some writers featured here are adjacent to the art scene, including **Angharad Coates** who works in marketing, public relations, and institutional communications. **Dylan Klempner**, a former journalist and now a researcher into the clinical uses of art as therapy, talks about using art as a healing tool. **Ross Berger**, who has written plays, television drama, and short fiction, was linked to us through his partner who is a visual artist. Similarly, **David Unger**, who is a novelist, poet, and translator originally from Guatemala, also runs a program on publishing at CUNY in New York City and is married to a visual artist. He connected us to the novelist **Maaza Mengiste**, an Ethiopian-American who writes about the intersection of European colonialism and liberatory projects on the African continent.

Almost everyone Steven reached out to contribute to the collection he knew from his past life as a journalist, editor, and publisher. Most of those who answered his call were poets, activists, culture keepers, researchers, or academics. There are writers who thrive in the academy, such as professor-poet **Bettina Judd** and administrator-professor **Chiké Frankie Edozien**, and some comfortably outside of it such as multimedia poet, writer, collaborative artist, educator, and arts administrator **Samiya Bashir**, lawyer-poet **Travis Montez**, and the prolific journalist **Max S. Gordon**.

Some are wildflowers like journalist **Khadija Goding**, who created a zine while in her teens, filmmaker and activist **Odu Adamu**, and diarist-teacher **Carla Whyte** growing wherever possible, their spores able to ride the wind to their next gig as a

filmmaker, performer, teacher, or freelance writer documenting their experiences for work, posterity, or their health. Many are polymaths.

The assortment of writers featured here was curated to stimulate possibilities for folks like you: individuals/writers about to take on the enormous responsibility of calling themselves a writer. “Write” is a verb, a truth revealed as you read how each writer in these pages forged a unique path to becoming a writer or a *person who writes*—and learns. The evidence is there in words of lawyer-turned-judge and poet **JP Howard** and Harlem historian **Karen Taborn**.

We wanted speechwriters such as **John Brady**, and science writers such as **Ann Finkbeiner**, and those who teach writing such as **Kristine Kerr**. We were gratified to have the work of **Samuel R. Delany**, an award-winning science fiction (sci-fi) writer with over 30 books to his name who is still writing. Among the most compelling accounts are those written by people who literally use writing to emotionally survive such as another sci-fi author **Alicia McCalla** who shares her heartbreaking story and the glimpses of light that sustain her through the written word.

Narratives of lifelong friends poet-writer **Alexis De Veaux** and poet-teacher **Kathy Engel**, both of whom have been writing for nearly half a century, appear in this collection, each offering supple and gorgeous renderings of their way with and *in* the word.

Because **C. Travis Webb** is such a careful and compelling speaker and thinker and someone who we’ve known for years through the podcast *The American Age*, we also invited him to contribute.

Because we sought distinct, unique voices, you will also find a range of racial identities, sexualities, professions, personal histories, and nationalities. Though many have settled in the United States, we have writers from Ethiopia, Guatemala, Nigeria, Palestine, Poland, and Sweden, as well as several who live all over the United States, California, Colorado, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington. We weren’t prescriptive about where writers hailed from, we just wanted to offer a platform to share the enchantment of learning how they found their way to lives they continue to want to lead.

As editors and readers, we were moved by the stories in this volume. One common thread linking each contribution is that these writers continue to write to meet deadlines, through grief,

losing jobs, changing careers, breakups, moving, teaching, or simply the exigencies of making it to the next day. There are writers whose prose will immediately catch your eye and others that do not spark interest ... yet.

We suggest that you give everyone a chance. Anthologies are designed so one can read it cover to cover, or here and there as the mood strikes. Again, this is not a prescriptive treatise, so we imagine that you will open the book to any entry and be engaged by the tools, strategies, and raw inspiration propelling each writer to share their poignant stories with us, with you.

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LIVING AND SUSTAINING A CREATIVE LIFE

Part of the Living and Sustaining a Creative Life series of books, edited by Sharon Loudon, *Artists as Writers* offers first-person narratives that explore the day-to-day lives of individuals who use writing as both a creative practice and a means of sustaining their daily lives.

This collection features thirty-two chapters where writers share their insights, offering pathways for others to follow. They delve into how they balance multiple roles, the choices they made, the challenges they faced, and the successes they achieved.

Contributors include writers from Ethiopia, Jamaica, Guatemala, Nigeria, Palestine, Poland, Sweden, and the United States, who vividly recount the circuitous journeys that brought them to where they are today. Through richly detailed stories, they reveal how writing became a central force in

their lives and how it continues to sustain them emotionally, creatively, and financially.

Seph Rodney, PhD, is a former editor at *Hyperallergic* and now regularly contributes to the *New York Times*. His book *The Personalization of the Museum Visit* was published in 2019, and he co-curated *Get in the Game* at SF MoMA in 2024.

Steven G Fullwood has co-edited *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam's Call* (2014) and *Carry the Word: A Bibliography of Black LGBTQ Books* (2007), and was the founder and editor of Vintage Entity Press, 2004–15.