



# CULTURE | PULSE

## POETRY WAS NOT MY DREAM GROWING UP By Terisa Siagatuno

Poetry was not my dream growing up.

But poetry is the mentor who came to me at a time when I didn't know I needed it, and taught me how to dream. Not 'dream' in the sense of getting lost in a fantasy tailored to my own individual desires; 'dream' as in: when I use my voice or write until I reach the bone, I am now in a better, more hopeful position

to believe that art has the transformative power to change things. That I'm capable of dreaming so vividly and wildly that it nurtures the truth that art can change culture, values, belief systems, people.

Poetry teaches me this. Art aches for the world to know this. And I've been focused and purposeful because of it.

I've always been at peace with not remembering as a child what I wanted to be when I grew up. Or how I wanted to be in the world once I was old enough to take responsibility for it. Doctor, lawyer, teacher were all things I remember saying, but never really taking the academic steps towards it as future. What I do

know, though, is that I never wanted to be an artist, let alone a poet. During our poetry unit in fifth grade, I scrambled to throw together whatever the poem assignments were into a book that would count as our final grade for the unit, and in my hasty efforts to just get the assignment done, I accidentally bound the book upside down and backwards. That's how much I cared about poetry.

**“The reason it took so long for me to own that I'm supposed to be an artist is cliché, but it really was just fear.”**

But somewhere between my parents' immigrant dreams of me ending up with a PhD (in anything, didn't matter what) and my uncertainty of what my dreams actually were: I

wrote my first spoken word poem. I was 18 and in my first year at UC Santa Cruz, trying to write from the inspirational high that I was on from having just watched my first spoken word poetry performance on campus. I can't quite describe the freedom I felt that day, but I can say, 14 years later, that as a full-time poet/writer, that I now know what it means to have a dream of my own. That as a first generation, queer, indigenous, Samoan woman of color artist, I now understand what I'm made for.



The reason it took so long for me to own that I'm supposed to be an artist is cliché, but it really was just fear. Fear of failing—my parents, my community, myself—always pulled me away from the quiet desire of going full time with my writing, and instead kept me on the academic route to someone else's dream. It took three career changes, two college degrees, leaving my life and clients as a therapist, and thousands of dollars in student loan debt for me to realize that I will never stop being afraid of failing at being an artist. That I may always question whether or not I made the right decision to leave academia and finally choose myself. That I would rather feel free and afraid of what I may fail at, than secure myself to a life that asks me to exist, but doesn't demand for me to live. To dream. Even if it means doing it scared. Such is the duty of the artist, anyways. To reflect the times and to tell the truth about us, as both Nina Simone and James Baldwin have instructed so many of us to do.

In the wake of a brand new year with the same climate crisis anxiety we carry, it's poetry that helps me reckon with my indigenous Sāmoan roots as they ground not only my desire to now language climate crisis in my writing, but also my responsibility to take action on it in my life, both on and off stage. Both in the poem and with my people. Both when I create and when I organize.

Thanks to experiences like performing in Paris at the UN Conference on Climate Change and at both Climate Woke convenings through The Center for Cultural Power, I realize that now more than ever is the time for bold, urgent, risk taking narrative shifts on 'how' we talk about this crisis in all its complex layers. As an artist, the hope is that creative control remains in our hands when we're putting art out into the world. But sometimes there are things that happen in the

world that pivots us into a new direction. I didn't know my artistry would bring me onto international stages and to critical climate change gatherings until it did. Until someone convinced me that a poet needed to be in the room. While in the room though, it all made sense.

I experienced how inaccessible an important issue—be it climate change, white supremacy, rape culture, transphobia, or any other issue we've yet to figure out how to combat effectively enough to cease the suffering—can be when you're in a room full of brilliant people from numerous fields of

knowledge, and no one knows how to even talk about it. And if attending all of these climate change conferences, summits, and gatherings is teaching me anything these past few years: it's that no one can translate this climate devastation in a way that

can reach the rest of the world while inspiring folks to take action better than artists. The leaders who will say "we need bold ideas on how to address \_\_\_\_" are the same ones who have zero artists on their decision-making teams, and who are actually too afraid of what sacrifices they may have to make in order to birth those bold ideas they say they want. The environmental science community can supply the research findings all they want so that it reaches every corner of the world, but if no one can understand what it's saying, then what are we really talking about? And if indigenous, black and brown people worldwide continue to be ignored and minimized at climate change convenings that say we need to work together to address this, then we need to be honest about who we're talking about when we say 'we'.

When I say 'we': I mean the entire village that held each and every one of us. When I write: all of us are free. I melt away the prison bars, the detention centers at our borders, the political

**I create/write with other artists who drastically shift culture and influence narratives, who are willing to take the big risks with me...**



party divides and suddenly, we need each other, more than we need politicians. We need to protect each other, more than we need the police. At the risk of being labeled anti-American, even the notion of that crumbles when I write, as I remember that the ancestral duty that calls me to be an artist on this stolen occupied land that is America in 2020 is the one that makes my work urgent enough to believe that when created in community with other artists, it has the incredible power to change the hearts and minds of people worldwide, faster and more effectively than any nation's government has ever been able to change laws, policies, or the Constitution.

This is what 14 years of watching a dream chase me down has taught me: that to be an artist in this world is to be both the biggest threat and the greatest hope we have.

The urgency in my work used to operate from a timeframe that assumed that we had the luxury of time to create with. But I know this is no longer true. I've seen the way the ocean levels with the land on my island. I've panicked around a silent phone with my family, waiting for my grandpa to call and tell us that the tsunami spared him. I've seen the death sentence that poverty has reserved for the most vulnerable and undeserving among us. Since I refuse to wait, persuade, or believe that those in power will choose our collective humanity with us, I create/write with other artists who drastically shift culture and influence narratives, who are willing to take the big risks with me, and have settled with us having to create while afraid, because we simply can't afford not to. If they won't choose our collective humanity, we will.

Many things may make up who we are as a community, but I do believe that art is the soul of who we are. Our dances, our music, our drawings, our films, our photographs, our paintings, our poems, our books, our oral traditions, our instruments, our storytelling, our writings - all of it. It's how we've been able to pass down our histories and the truth of us for centuries. There is a resilience in our memory that art never lets us forget. The reason why we're able to dream in the first place. And I can't

think of anything else that we need to do now more than that. We've tried many things-- some, for decades-- that are just not working. That are just not in the service of our collective liberation and justice.

The time has come to finally trust the artists. To allow us...to help us...to dream.



Terisa Siagatonu at Climate Woke Artist Convening, October 2019