

On taking the riskier path



Writer Hanif Abdurraqib discusses the desire to be wrong, learning about yourself through your writing, and the ways in which finding a larger audience may or may not affect your work.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3208 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#).

While putting together *They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*, you were working as a columnist at MTV News and you're a Poetry Editor at *Muzzle Magazine*. I'm curious about finding the time to put together a book when you're working day jobs.

It was tough, to be fair. I think when the work is writing, or when your day job is also something that allows you to chase after language and think critically about language and the ways to extract stories and narrative from something as seemingly mundane as a pop song, it gets you to a place in your brain. My brain is always thinking of those things, but my brain was working overtime to think of those things because, thankfully, I didn't have a break from it. Especially in the making of this book, which happened during a really difficult year politically and personally for me, it served as a gateway out and into something potentially better.

The book includes some old pieces with new material. How did you decide on the shape of the book with the new material you wrote? I'm thinking of the recurring bits on Marvin Gaye that give it an overall narrative.

I began with the Marvin Gaye thing and then built outward. The Marvin Gaye piece, that was initially one piece in the book, and then Eric Obenauf at Two Dollar Radio agreed with me that it seemed better broken up over the course of the book. Once we broke it up, it was kind of easy to place seeds.

I am also a poet. My first book was a book of poems, and I think I'm very obsessed with building a book that has some kind of arc to it. I think if a book is good, it's good, right? You don't need to have all of that, but I am really interested in building an arc within a book so that a reader can feel like they are perhaps in a film, or listening to a really good album that takes them through peaks and valleys. I wanted to end the book with hope, and then kind of make a mess of it in the middle.

You are a poet, but this new book of prose is what's finding you a larger audience. What's that like—when you're poet, and it's your prose that has a crossover moment?

It's weird, right? It's also weird because there are things in the book that are definitely poetry. One of the pieces in the book is literally a poem. Though, I think folks would imagine it as an essay because of its length. You know, it's odd and it's something that I was unprepared for because you have very little control over how your work resonates with folks. For a long time, especially when working on this book, I felt like I was just writing to a small group of people who maybe felt the way I did about music and looked at music the way I did and looked for things in music like I did. And so, to have it touch the unexpected places is a blessing, but it's also pretty jarring. It makes me, perhaps, second guess what's happening in the book. Maybe it's cast too wide of a net and the emotional tether is being pulled from it. I don't know if that's true, but I think there's a way to second guess the work when it gets this appreciated—though I am thankful for it, of course.

Do you think of the next project in a different way? Your audience has grown from the course of publishing the book to having the book come out, and now there's gonna be more people focusing on what you do next.

Thankfully, I don't feel any pressure beyond the pressure that already exists for me. I'm working on *A Tribe Called Quest* book right now and I'm also working on my next poetry manuscript. I'm approaching those the same way I've always approached my work and not necessarily thinking about a world in which I have to live up to this thing that happened before. If anything, I want to do a different thing. I want to do the difficult, riskier thing. I always think about Fleetwood Mac and how they could have just made *Rumors* from 1977 'til whenever, but they made the decision to make an album like *Tusk*, which was weird and antagonizing in a way and pushed people to hear them differently. That's kind of what I'm thinking about. Now that I have people's attention, how can I push them to read differently? To look at language differently? To invest in a language that they might not have before? Now that I have people here with my prose, how can I trick them into reading some poems?

Your work pulls from pop culture, and while pieces may age differently because of references people won't get in 20 years, there's also a timelessness to the book. Do you think about timelessness?

Yeah, I think that if there is a trick, I imagine the trick is hitching your pop culture reference to something timeless. I'm not writing to Ric Flair, for example, as much as I'm writing through Ric Flair to talk about an idea of invincibility and immortality and fear. I'm using the pop culture.

The real work for readers is to read past the thing they think they're reading. To see that piece on, say, Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, and see that it is about them, but also about black people showing each other affection in public. And how that is a survival tactic.

I'm super interested in timelessness, because I will always be writing toward pop culture and the pop culture landscape shifts immensely. Right now I'm working on this project, I'm really deep into it, and I had to reference the *Source Magazine*, and so I'm in these archives of old *Source Magazine* covers. My brother got them and had them in the house when I was young, and I'm seeing all these covers from the mid- to late-90s and realizing how many of these people are still relevant in rap but have taken on such different roles.

I'm looking right now at the pop culture I loved when I was a kid, it's still present and touchable—so how do I make it immortal by tethering it to a feeling or tethering it to a moment or tethering it to something that people read and say, "I have been there myself, too"?

How influential is Ohio in your work and how important is Ohio in general in your world view and your creative process?

It's huge. I was gone for two and a half years. I lived in New Haven for two and a half years and I missed it greatly. I wrote most of the poetry book, which is largely about Columbus, long distance. I wrote it not living here and we created this thing where I got to imagine Columbus as a place without having to answer for the landscape, which was changing rapidly through the gentrification. I've been thinking a lot about writing about a place that's not as I have always remembered it, not as I've always loved it, and that is changing at a rate that is somewhat difficult. A place that is not without its complications.

I'm very interested in and excited about real actual stories from this part of the country and not this kind of watered-down imagination of the grand, monolithic Midwest. I feel like anytime there are stories about the Midwestern people who live here and the real living, breathing aspect of it, it does a little bit to push back against that monolithic idea, which has been built since... I feel like since post-election, that was the whole thing. There are different Midwesterns. Ohio is a different Midwest than Wisconsin. Ohio is a different Midwest than, like, Illinois. So, it's important for me to say, "Yes, I am a Midwesterner second, but definitely an Ohioan first." It's vital for me to track with and build stories around voices here, and people here, and struggles here that are not the struggles that make the news.

When you were growing up in part of punk rock and part of that world, did you ever think, "Okay, I want to be a musician"? Or did you always know that your talent was in writing?

I didn't really know. I wanted to be a musician at one point, but I knew I didn't have the talent for it. But I also didn't know that my talent was in writing. I largely had no idea. I had no idea what I could do or couldn't do. It was tough for me to understand...

At that point, I was just a fan, so it was hard for me to imagine being anything but a fan. I still am a fan, but it was hard for me to imagine parlaying that into language. You think you just love a thing and I didn't know how to articulate it. Learning to articulate my love for the thing is how I became effective as a writer—because especially in the way I grew up as a fan of music here, you are all in and you're invested in the narrative of a musician, the visuals of a musician, and everything that they're bringing to the table... the thing behind the package. I really got invested in this idea of writing about music as a fan talking to fans, this idea of writing about music the same way I talk about it in bars to my friends who are probably tired of hearing me talk about the same stories over and over.

In punk scenes, people are often contributing what they can—a zine, a show, music. Was that something that got you testing out and finding your talent? Or did it just come from age and wisdom?

It came through age, and it came through the idea that on the music scene, everyone earned their keep. On the scene, everyone brings whatever they can to the potluck. More than writing, I think my skill was archiving. What I like about the history of poetics is that before they were anything else, poets were essentially people who delivered news. So, in the villages they were people who delivered news to people they cared for. People relied on them to archive the day, and I feel like that was more my skill first starting out. I had moments at shows, moments in live music that I wanted to relive again and again, and I realized that the only way I could do that was by archiving them somewhere even it's just in a waffle house after the show. Like, speaking the memory of the show into the air is also an archiving. I think that is where I became first interested in the writing aspect of things.

Do you see *They Can't Kill Us* as an archive?

I do in some ways. I see it as an archive, but I also see it as a way for me to make sense of why I'm drawn to the things I'm drawn to... So, unraveling my own fandom as much as it is trying to be a rock for the fandoms I've lived through. The longest piece in the book is the essay on Fall Out Boy, which was mostly me writing my way into figuring out why I felt such a connection to this band. The entire work of that piece is not necessarily for the broad audience of the reader; it was written for me to figure out what connection I had with this band, and why I felt the way I did about them and how I could bring that to life. A lot of music writing, for me—the music writing I enjoy most—is music writing that is steeped in uncertainty.

The work of a critic at one point was—and maybe still is—to imagine themselves as a person who was certain enough to tell people what they should and shouldn't be listening to. I don't know if I have that desire anymore, and I don't know if I ever did. I have a desire to be wrong. I'm kind of governed by this desire to be wrong. My interest in writing isn't always to be right; it is to find a better path to figuring out where my wrongness stems from. I want to grow in my wrongness, and that doesn't always mean being right at the end of growing.

When you're working on multiple projects, are you just moving back and forth between all these different projects at the same time? How do you know when one's done or one needs more attention?

I move back and forth. The Tribe book is easier. I have a proposal and a plan for that, so it's easier to know when that's done because there's a hard end. There's a certain amount of chapters, and that whole thing. But poetry books, at least in my experience, those tell you when they're done. My first book told me when it was done. It told me when I had mined everything I could out of the emotional landscape I was trying to create, and it pointed me to an exit strategy. With poetry books, I have been lucky to have my poems do that. My poems tell me how they want to live in the world, when they want to live in the world, and when they're done being played with... Sometimes, it's over the course of a month with one poem, or sometimes it takes a little longer than that. I think the hard work is knowing when to pull yourself back so you don't overextend or let your projects blend together.

This is my first time working completely on two projects at once. When I was doing *They Can't Kill Us*, that was my focus and I didn't write much else. So, this is my first time juggling two projects at once and it's taught me a lot in terms of how meaningless genre is when you're approaching the work. When I sit down, I say, "I'm interested in beautiful language and how to make beautiful language work in the most effective way possible," but I don't know if that knows much of a genre boundary. When I started thinking of my work like that, I think I've become a better writer.

Do you have tricks for avoiding burning out? Or does it help that you have momentum in between these various projects? Like you were saying earlier, working at MTV News, your whole life becomes writing and you use that momentum to keep pushing forward.

I also have a full life outside. I work from home, but I travel a lot. Those two things mean I have to be very routine based, which sometimes means knowing when to stop writing. Every day, if I'm not done working by like five or six, I give myself a hard stop and I step away from my computer and usually don't return to it. I call it quits for the day and any emails can wait until the next day. For me, knowing when to stop writing was a problem a couple years ago. I would work late into the night. I was telling myself I did my best writing at half 'til midnight and then work deep until like 2am, and that wasn't really serving anything. I'm much more excited about the idea of waking up and getting to writing now. The fact that I can wake up and know that I can put words on a blank page is more exciting to me than feeling like I have to put words on a blank page in order to earn the right to sleep.

I'm good at knowing when to step away, and I've gotten good at knowing when to say something can wait until the next day. Part of this is because I'm really intense about deadlines. I take deadlines pretty seriously, much to the joy, I'm sure, of the editors who have to work with me. I view deadlines as getting stuff off my plate, so I can write a poem, read a poem, or read something else I love. That doesn't mean I rush through deadlines. I take great care in the stuff I work on, but I do take deadlines seriously because for me, getting something off my plate and doing it well allows for me to put something else on my plate that I might really love discovering. I might find something new or find something exciting that I can put on my plate.

Hanif Abdurraqib Recommends:

5 Things Useful to My Projects Now

A thing I'm finding useful to my project now is weird biographies of Nikola Tesla, *The Lost Journals of Nikola Tesla*. My poetry book is loosely based on, well, not based on... it's "pushed by" the film, *The Prestige*. And the book, *The Prestige*. The book's largely about heartbreak and loss and moving back to Ohio and all that, but it's through the lens of the film, *The Prestige*. So I went down this really weird hole of Nikola Tesla stuff.

A thing that's really important to my project, or important to my life through my projects is garlic salt. Three times a week, when I'm home, I go to the Peruvian sandwich spot down the street, because it's delicious, and, like, man hooks me up with a cilantro pasta salad. It's great, but it's a little bland, so I keep the garlic salt on my desk at all times. That's how I've been getting by.

Marvin Gaye's *Here, My Dear* album. Because again, like the Tesla thing, I'm writing a lot of poems in the voice of Marvin Gaye's ghost. But Marvin Gaye's ghost if we were to imagine Marvin Gaye's ghost living inside this album. So, *Here, My Dear* is super important to my process at the moment.

The videos of Q-Tip from a couple weeks ago angry about the Grammy snub. I was stunned by how hurt he was. Maybe it's because I'm immersed in the Tribe book, but I was heartbroken for him. I know the we can be, like, "The Grammys are stupid, the Grammys don't matter." Yeah, all that's true. But also, you know, he put so much into making that record. And to, like, go out and perform that record without Phife. So, to see him really hurt, that was... I was really hurt by that. Plus, it's a classic, one of the best rap albums I've heard in my life.

The fifth are two poetry books, *I'm So Fine*, by Khadijah Queen, and *Elsa*, by Angela Veronica Wong. I keep those at my desk at all times, and those are two of my favorite books of the year.

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Photo by Andrew Cenci (andrewcenci.com)