

## Place and Persistence: Hanif Abdurraqib and Matthew Angelo Harrison in Conversation

Conversation with Hanif Abdurraqib and Matthew Angelo  
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Hanif Abdurraqib, on left, and Matthew Angelo Harrison, on right. Abdurraqib portrait by Kate Sweeney. Image courtesy the artist. Harrison portrait by Claire Gatto. Image courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

*Earlier this week, it was announced that Matthew Angelo Harrison and Hanif Abdurraqib were among the 50 artists across creative disciplines that had been named USA Fellows by the non-profit United States Artists, all of whom are to receive an unrestricted purse of \$50,000. (Past recipients include the likes of Pope.L, Simone Leigh, Yvonne Rainer and a slew of other multi-hyphenate powerhouses.) Abdurraqib, a renowned poet and cultural critic, has published four books, with a fifth forthcoming in 2021. Blurring the lines between genres, Abdurraqib weaves history, autobiography and first-person narrative into cultural criticism with an unparalleled level of grace, swiftness and tenderness—not to mention an astonishing well of knowledge. Matthew Angelo Harrison, who has been profiled in this magazine, is a young artist making big waves. Best known for using cutting-edge technology to combine African artifacts with quasi-futuristic materials, Harrison’s sculpture stretches time, harking back to the past while hurtling towards the future. He was among those who stole the show at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, and in 2020 Kunsthalle Basel will host his first European solo show.*

*Here, the two talk about art making and sustainability, what it's like to live and work in the towns where they were raised and what home means to them.*

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**Cultured Magazine:** This award is location-specific in that it's the United States Artists Fellowship, and both of your work concerns itself really strongly with, and is rooted in, place. Hanif, your work has such a sense of the Midwest when you write about your own life, and when you write about the East Coast, I really feel the vibrations of that space. And Matthew, you're out of Detroit and your work is so industrial; I know you even worked for Ford at one point. So I want to just start there, talking about place, specificity of location and how it affects your practices, consciously or not.

**Hanif Abdurraqib:** I'm from Columbus, Ohio, so I think all the time about how limited the imagination of the rest of the country is when it comes to Black Midwesternness or the Black Midwestern experience, which in some ways is akin to the Black Southern experience due to the many migrations of our people.

I grew up in the '90s and what that meant for me was that I saw a lot of narrative, specifically Black male narrative, played out very coastally, particularly in film, be it *Boyz n the Hood* or *Juice* or *South Central*. I was looking at the conditions of the people around me and I was looking at the way we were living, the things we were getting into and the way that our environment was impacting our lives. I thought, "Well, surely there's a story in this that I could tell too." Of course I wasn't thinking that as a nine-year-old, I'm saying that as a 26-year-old sitting down to write a poem.

The thing that I am always interested in is the way that the hyper-specific becomes universal. And so my writing about a barber shop doesn't do much, but writing about *my* barbershop and the way my barber talks and the tricks that my barber does to pass time becomes universal. Then someone else can say, "Oh, I've got a story about my barber who does something adjacent to that." Not the same, but adjacent. And so I've been super interested in how the landscape and the way I was raised made me think a lot about neglect and who tells what stories and how I can do a good job of archiving.

**Matthew Angelo Harrison:** I grew up all over the place because my mom had me pretty young. When she was in college, we lived in Marquette, Michigan, where there was really nothing to do but play in snow, then we moved to Detroit after she graduated. My mom worked at a plant called American Axle which is actually down the street from my studio. I grew up staying home while she worked 16 hour shifts or so, because they used to pay really well in the '90s, and then I would just get off tinkering and doing computer science stuff or some hacking or whatever.

My location fed into my practice probably every way possible. My introduction to African sculptures is through my uncle—he used to collect them and he would gather them from jazz festivals and places like that. So seeing that and then going to visit my mom at work and seeing the crazy, dangerous machinery. And then she's there, just this really cute 5'7", 20-something year old woman.

Then I worked at Ford as a clay sculptor, we would do one-to-one scale prototypes of all the cars that are on the road in complete detail. It was really crazy.

**HA:** So many artists who I know from Michigan in general, but particularly from the Detroit area, have a tie to the automotive industry in some way. Every poet that I know from the area has some kind of connection, maybe their parents worked in the plant or they worked part-time, or their work is just by nature kind of muscular and automotive in the way that language or sculpture can be. It's unlike almost any other industry in any other American location that I can think of.

**MAH:** Even musicians here—people who make techno or electro or house—they get by with a plant job or have gotten by with a plant job and then they would go on tour. That singular industry model is so prevalent in so many of the Black people's lives here, so many of the people period. But it's specific to Black people because of very obvious reasons, it was a high paying job that was actually offered to Black people. But the payoff is your health—it's a very unhealthy job to have. It's stressful. It's dangerous. You get hurt, there's fumes.

**HA:** I always think about Black folks like my parents and grandparents, several of our ancestors in some way or another, that would make that trade off from a very early point, who had to make these decisions that were high stakes in a way that I just didn't have to make in my life. Building your survival for a moment but then shortening your survival for the long term.

**MAH:** Yeah. I could feel that. I think that I just embrace that sense of danger, because I decided to work with very dangerous materials and heavy machinery. I'm just like, "This is just how it is and this is what I know." I'm very careful; I'm very procedural and I take care of myself, but it's still an element of danger to making the work. I'm attracted to it because it's what I know. That's how I know how to achieve a result, from watching my family.

**Cultured Magazine:** Matthew, I've heard your practice described as sampling in the sense that you cite the provenance of the objects that you then juxtapose together. And Hanif, you're concerned with sampling in a few different ways; one is that you quite literally write about the history of sampling, the other, less literal way is the ways in which you braid narratives. I'm using the metaphor of sampling, but we can call it a juxtaposition, we can call it whatever we want.

**HA:** I'm really invested in writing as a sonic practice. I always tell people that I think editing specifically should be a sonic practice; I often read my poems out loud in the editing process to know what's working and what's not. And I think editing kind of plays into my obsession with sampling. I like something that has already lived being pushed beyond its limit of life. Sampling was really a bridge between the music my parents loved and the music I love, so I think there is something useful and lineage-building and ancestral about bringing something old to life in a new light. Writing affords many opportunities to do that, be it through citation or even through the remixing of your old work that you thought you were done with.

**MAH:** I actually grew up making music, making beats and making electro and techno, so that kind of thinking is very much in my energy. I just want to revisit things, or see something a certain way for the first time. So if you extract the energy from a source and then you kind of juxtapose that with something you're super familiar with, it appears to be alien or it's like you never saw it before.

Hanif, do you still live in Ohio?

**HA:** I still live in Columbus, Ohio and my hope is that I live here forever. I'm really invested in creating and making space in Columbus for younger artists to have opportunities to create. That's something I had when I was coming up, and using my resources to replicate that feels really useful. Are you still in Michigan?

**MAH:** Yeah, I'm still in Detroit. I can't really move from here because just the level of access I have—I can do really crazy shit here because I know all the nooks and crannies. I know everything about this place. If I uproot myself and move to New York, I wouldn't be as potent of an artist.

**HA:** Yeah. There's something that's been really exciting for me about committing myself to finding out how I can most effectively build a life that keeps me here in Columbus, in a place I love. In some ways, another privilege is just simply being from a place and still having affection for it. So many people have associations with their hometowns or where they're from that involve trauma or guilt or greed or any number of things that pull them away from it, emotionally and physically. My life in Columbus isn't perfect obviously, and I have a lot of complications with the place as I think many people have with any space that has been flooded by gentrification and all that comes with it. Especially a place named after Christopher Columbus. But I love what this city brings out of me creatively. And I feel like I'm also really able to pour myself back into the city, so it doesn't feel like a relationship that is just based on me taking and taking and taking.

**MAH:** Yeah, I identify with a lot of that. Just having the spirit to face the reality of where you're from and all those complications, and how that built your character growing up, then not running away from it. And just all the consequences of being from a city that has a really messed up history and you still see the result of it today is—it can be challenging.

**HA:** Do you have to travel a lot or are you pretty stationary?

**MAH:** Right now, stationary because I'm working on a show for this summer, but I've been traveling so much that it started to affect my health a little bit. I had to dial it back.

**HA:** I know that feeling. Last year was the first year where I traveled so much that I got sick. This year has been a year of learning how to stay in one place when I can. Though in all the travels, I learned to write really well on planes because I can zone out. I think the sound of it and the kind of isolation and being in the small seat help. I don't write well in a hotel room, but on a long flight I can get a lot done.

**Cultured Magazine:** Hanif, Matthew talked about how, in his practice, he takes old totems like African sculptures and brings them into the context of 3D printers and CNC routers and other very new materials and tools. I also think of you as someone who pushes the boundaries of your material in the sense that you take something like cultural criticism and you update it and make it very much your own. Among other things, you're often weaving in elements of autobiography and the first-person. You're both taking older structures and bringing the new to them.

**HA:** For me, the act of criticism has to have stakes. It shouldn't entirely center on myself; I could easily say, "Well, I like this or I don't like this" and move on with my day. But if I'm committing to spend time on writing about something, I want to ask myself questions about how that art moved me and how it took me from one place to another. If I began disliking it, then I'll ask how it carried me to a type of affection. If I began loving it, and then started to get tired of it, I ask how that happened. So much of the criticism that interests me is a discussion of journey rather than a discussion of absolutes. The stakes don't always have to be personal, but there has to be somethings other than, "I like this or I don't like it," because otherwise we could hash that out in a single sentence.

**MAH:** I agree with you. You have to be generous with what you sacrifice for your message—you have to put something on the line in order for others to be invested in what you're trying to communicate.