

Dan Bustillo and Johanna Hedva in conversation about *On Hell*

written by Guest Contributor | February 14, 2018



[On Hell is out on Sator Press, February 14, 2018.](#)

Johanna Hedva: Dan! I'm so happy we get to do this together for *On Hell*. You've been privy to the long ride of its coming into the world: I started writing it in 2013, when you and I were in the same class as grad students at CalArts; in 2014, X-TRA and the Armory Center for the Arts [supported a residency](#) for me to work on it, which included a panel discussion with you, me, Chandler McWilliams, and Willem Henri Lucas; we converged again through [at land's edge](#), in 2015, you as an invited speaker and me as a fellow, when I was finishing it. There are lots of overlaps in your work and mine, and I've always learned a lot from your research. Let's dig in!

Dan Bustillo: Hi!! I am so honored you thought of me for this. I have long been a fanboy of your work, going as far back as being driven around in a Honda Odyssey through streets of Echo Park I never knew to be so winding for your play, [Odyssey Odyssey](#), a fabulous and forceful somatic adaptation of episode 5 of Homer's *Odyssey*. What I mean by somatic is I was literally slammed into the car, into my seat, into perhaps the most active viewership I have ever felt in a play. The Vons parking lot where part of the play took place still holds traces for me of a witchy Calypso clawing at the van's window. It has been a few years since then, and I am interested in how your work has consistently dealt with myth, knowledge, and bodies, specifically across the lines of power and transformation.

It seems all of this coalesces once more in *On Hell*, where you thread power, knowledge, and embodiment together in a compelling resistance to gravity.

In *On Hell*, gravity seems to function as a regime. Alongside government authority that the main character Rafael specifically sets out to dismantle through the hack that lands Rafael in jail to begin with, is the persistent resistance to gravity itself. It's as if after the CIA hack, the most important thing to undo is the one thing that holds us down: a force of physics that regulates bodies at such a core level that we take it for granted and that we all accept as true, but that Rafael knows to refute. What is your interest in gravity?

JH: I love that you call gravity a regime—yes, that's exactly it. I have furious feelings about gravity. As a disabled person and a person with chronic pain, gravity is a kind of tyranny for me. I understand that it's a force that ultimately connects, but I find it insufferable most of the time.

I think all of my work—whether it's performance or writing—is trying to cope with how different regimes of power are embodied, how they soak into our cells and invade our bodies and become part of our materiality, usually without our permission. As much as it can feel like an oppressive force coming from the outside, I also see it like a horror movie where an evil outside force infects you and controls you from the inside out.

For Rafael, gravity functions as more than just his material condition, it's also a symbolic index for the different kinds of burdens attached to him, keeping him bound to various oppressions: He's a so-called ex-con or rather, a victim of the prison-industrial complex; he's the first-generation child of undocumented immigrants; he's not white; and he's not straight. Gravity in this way is a drag—drag as both the weight of the thing that requires a lot of labor to carry, and the performance of that labor.

DB: Rafael offers such a powerful way to dismantle oppressive systems of power! So often power is perceived to be external to ourselves, to our bodies, when what you are pointing out is how much we've internalized, which might be why Rafael goes from hacking the CIA to hacking the body. Rafael seems to grasp this fundamental bodily relationship with oppression and therefore knows to hack the body to finally undo these regimes, that is, the very gravity and time of power.

On the question of time, it seems time also operates as a force of oppression. I am thinking here of something like what Elizabeth Freeman calls "chrononormativity," the idea that time is an instrument of governance that structures lives into units of measurement that can be monitored and assessed in relation to productivity (schedules, calendars, time zones). I wonder what kind of time Rafael operates within or moves toward, is it queer time, what kind of time is it?

JH: *On Hell* is my attempt at a 21st-century version of Icarus, from a crip perspective. I tried to take on Icarus' themes of ambition, courage, failure, and gravity through the lens of "crip time." Crip time is a concept within crip theory, very saliently explicated by [Taraneh Fazeli](#), that relates to Freeman's chromonormativity, and is time both queered and disabled, so yes, you're definitely aligned.

Fazeli writes: "Dragging on, circling back, with no regard for the stricture of the work week or compulsory able-bodiedness, sick time is an amalgam of queer and crip times. Sick time is non-compliant. It refuses a fantasy of normalcy... and hints at how we might begin to tell capitalism to back the fuck off and keep its hands to itself."

I wrote *On Hell* before I started my project on disability and ableism within capitalism, [This Earth, Our Hospital](#), but I see the two in close dialogue, even though one is fiction and the other isn't. Both of them are trying to deal with crip time, or time that isn't productive, successful, or counted as valuable in a commercial market sense. When time is not regulated by capitalism, and more than that, is actively fucking up such "regularity," we have to ask different questions about meaning and value.

If one is ill, or incarcerated, or not heteronormatively reproducing, how do we understand that life, in terms of the time it has here, and how that time is passed? It's always been curious to me that we say that we "spend" time, like we "spend" money. But we don't say we "kill" money in the way that we say we have "time to kill."

DB: I think about how time relates to the journalist, Motherfuck, who notes Rafael's pauses, keeping time so to speak? What is Rafael's relationship with Motherfuck?

JH: As much as Rafael is the main character of *On Hell*, the book is told from Motherfuck's perspective. Structurally, she could be said to be the antagonist to his hero, or vice versa, and this was an ambiguity I wanted to play with. Whose story are we really hearing? Are they in cahoots, helping each other, or are they using each other? Can it be both?

This was because I wanted to play around with the trope from prison and punishment novels of the morally judging interlocutor. So Motherfuck functions as a form of Rafael's conscience, as it were, but also as the creator of the novel's moral universe.

I also wanted to write about nursing and care, the body, illness, and vulnerability—all things that are yoked to femininity, or are constructed as feminizing if one participates in them, and which are typically positioned as the opposite of more masculine-coded things like ambition, courage, and rage. Motherfuck is a kind of nurse to Rafael at times, and performs maternal care toward him, or holds space like a benevolent therapist might, but I see both characters as being bonded to each other through the practice of care.

Without saying too much, I tried to complicate this dynamic: we do see Motherfuck's own visions and ambitions and desires and rages, just as much as we see Rafael's gestures and acts of care, both toward her and toward himself.

DB: Rafael also defects from labor-time scheduled by a white heteronormative ruling class ("wine-tasting housewives" and "white guys in baby-dick-blue shirts") by hacking the systems that control, order, and monitor the way groups of people live, act, speak.

JH: Here is where I feel the book is my big attack on the prison-industrial complex, which I see as deeply intertwined with the medical-industrial complex, an institution I have intimate experience with. Both are systems of control and punishment, housing people away from the market, but still exploiting their labor, bodies, and time within it. I think any good critique of capitalism has to deal with this, which is to say, that any good critique of capitalism has to include, even foreground, disability justice and prison abolitionism. (I want to note [this fabulous recent interview with Mariame Kaba.](#))

In some way, *On Hell* is my messing around in the genre of the insurrectionary pamphlet. While writing it, I thought, how to crip that genre? Working with the publisher on the design of the book, we used the samizdat as a reference. Like a little incendiary screed that could be smuggled into places it wasn't supposed to be. Often when one is involuntarily hospitalized in the U.S., books are not allowed, at least that was my experience.

Let me point out that in astrology, hospitals and prisons are categorized under the same umbrella—the 12th house—which is traditionally considered the house of purgatory and the afterlife (I've a lot of 12th house placements in my natal chart). It's a place that's not on earth, not anywhere, and so outside of time. I wrote from this perspective, that Rafael is not entirely on earth, and really never has been—not ever really a full U.S. citizen, not when he was in prison, and not now, in his flying project—and so he's always outside of time.

DB: I imagine this is why there are multiple framing temporalities. At one point, Rafael speaks of an "Up there" where there is no chrononormativity, an "Up there" rid of the labor of folks of color for white upkeep: "no goddamn unfollowing no goddamn nothing being on fleek stolen from the quote unquote real world where dark poor people sweat they blood out on the fields fucking factories with housewives' wine-tasting parties built on they backs no goddamn groups of white guys in baby-dick-blue shirts and sicked-on khaki pants uniform of the zombie army on their fatherfucking lunchbreak no goddamn socialsuck netfucking profile pic timeline liked fucksick..."

I am interested in how Rafael defects through perversion, by introducing an eroticized time ("fields fucking factories," "baby-dick-blue shirts," "fatherfucking lunchbreak," "socialsuck netfucking," "fucksick"). Could it be thought of in that way, as eroticized time?

JH: I like that. Eroticized time as a kind of protest, totally, and that erotics can be one of the most corporal kinds of time, in such a way that it is a mode of resistance simply by staying put, slowing down.

Erotics as a measure of time has been a recurring theme for me; in 2010, I did a performance called [Everything Is Erotic Therefore Everything Is Exhausting](#). And in the performance you mention, one of the characters has a long monologue, based on [that Kleist piece](#) on the marionette theater, about how erotics is just gravity.

And yes to defection through perversion. Yes, yes, yes. I believe that kink

is care and care is kink, and if I were to pick the main thing the novel's about, it would be that.

It's happening in several ways, but mainly in the language, how Rafael distorts and shreds and kinks language. In that regard, I have to give a nod to a big inspiration for the book, which was LulzSec, the hacker pranksters who were active in 2011, and particularly their "spokesman," Jake Davis, who went by the handle Topiary. Topiary ran the LulzSec Twitter; he famously did a live radio debate with the Westboro Baptist Church. He was 16, 17, 18 at the time of LulzSec, living alone on the Shetland Islands. Part of my research for *On Hell* involved looking at the work of LulzSec, including some of their chat and SMS logs that were leaked online. I was obsessed with how Topiary used language, this freewheeling chatroom-speak that had no punctuation, no rules—no gravity, in a way.

Printed in Parmy Olson's book [We Are Anonymous](#) is [his "last message,"](#) which he typed out and mailed to her via a USB stick, because he was banned from the internet at the time. That document was the instigator for *On Hell*. I read it and the fire lit. The name "Motherfuck" is my little offering in homage to it.

DB: It is fascinating to think of how this gravity-less language of chatroom-speak you draw from sits alongside and actively refutes the state's language grooming. At one point, Rafael speaks of words the government has flagged as suspicious, such as "Artichoke with a capital A," "Unix toad fish," "big-N Nerd," and "little-f fangs," and Rafael calls the government "poets" and "word hunters." Of course the flagging and banning of words (as with Trump's recent list for the Center for Disease Control, including words like "diversity," "fetus," and "transgender") is ongoing; yet Rafael has found a way to reroute resistance through the body, by "hacking at it" to achieve flight.

JH: Yes. For me, language is always embodied; it's material. As much as oppression invades the body, so does the language used to perpetrate it. Like, when Rafael says, "If we gonna tear this shit down we gotta start with they symbols where they store their power and remember power doesn't weigh a thing which is how come they symbols is everywhere."

I started writing *On Hell* in August 2013, right after [the list of words that the NSA was flagging in email surveillance](#) was leaked. It was just hilarious and spectacular and horrifying that words like "garbage" and "speedbump" and "siliconpimp" were on the list, meaning that if you used them in an email, you were flagged as a potential terrorist.

DB: I am super into your use of "drag" to think through Rafael's deviance from the model they are to emulate: that of a white, straight, cis, productive, normative citizen. Perhaps this model is a gravity, a deep centering force that is meant to orchestrate life, and yet Rafael works around it, trying to defy it. To think of gravity as a drag, as you put, both in terms of weight and performance, might also invite us to think of the conditions and effects of Rafael's performance in the novel. Does Rafael address this drag through a counter identification (like those articulated by

José Esteban Muñoz) of how a Latinx masculine person might be expected to act, behave, and talk, in a body thought to be governed by passion? Perhaps Rafael is overperforming difference to a white, cis, het norm, doing it in drag, so as to expose the artifice of its construct and the way in which such constructs are also tools for bodily governance? It almost felt like Rafael was yelling the whole time. Does that rage factor into Rafael's drag of gravity?

JH: Yes, definitely. There are several different ways I wrote Rafael to be in drag and doing drag. The most apparent is the hyper-performance of his ethnicity and the language and vulgarity that's expected of it, which you talk about here. Rafael is very aware of the assumptions and expectations put on him, as a Latinx immigrant from a poor background, and how he's supposed to talk and behave in that kind of marked body. The entire novel is an evisceration of that. It's code-switching—what could be said to be the code of “the street” or “the hood”—and also fucking with the expectations of *who* should be doing the “switching.” I'm trying to suggest that the listener or reader—Rafael's audience—has to be accountable for how *they* hear and read *him*.

There's also the framing of him as this deviant genius that the state has to suppress, which plays into the stereotype of the Latinx subject governed by, as you point out, this “savage passion,” too wild to be contained. So the operatic-ness of his language, the rage and the zeal, is playing against that. Douglas Kearney was my mentor at CalArts, when I worked on the manuscript in its earliest forms, and he got me thinking about opera as a pliable and expressive form, and one that can be transgressive depending on who's using it.

I totally think of Rafael as yelling all the time too! Some of it is ironic, but some of it is a genuine expression of how he feels, which is always the trick of drag, that it's both ironic and sincere.

Rafael is a trickster, and he's playing the long game of the confidence trick, but he's also really yearning for a *confidante*. He wants someone to hear him and understand him, and he starts to hope for that in Motherfuck. But he also views her, at first, through the presumptions of her identity of an Asian-American woman, and he approaches her that way.

This is the other kind of drag I tried to write: at its heart *On Hell* is two poc talking shop about the drag of their identities. Like, here's what I got, what did you get? What do you do with yours? How do you deal? What's your trick? It's very much like how I talk with friends, or even how I make friends with strangers. Like, we lock eyes in the room, see we are some of the only poc there, and approach each other with both trepidation but this automatic solidarity. It's also important that Motherfuck is Asian-American and Rafael is Latin-American; they're both “others” but different from each other, and meeting at the edge between.

DB: I love that there is inter-minoritarian solidarity and I love that in the novel it occurs through drag. It is just something I want more of in the world; that is, more inter-minoritarian solidarity and more drag!! Which

leads me to another aspect of the novel: gender. No one's gender is expressly stated and there seems to be a fluidity in the way eroticized time impacts bodies. How do you see gender in the novel, in relation to both characters?

JH: Yes forever to more drag!

Gender, as usual, was one of the main things on my mind. Like gravity, I see it as a tyranny. But I tried to write about it from a position of fluidity, fugitivity, hopefully a generative confusion. You're right that no one's gender is expressly stated (I identify as gender nonbinary), and although their pronouns are "he" and "she," I imagine that they are always written with scare quotes.

That being said, I wanted to write about rage and fury—again, which is so often associated with masculinity—but a kind of rage that would not involve violence toward other people, or exerting power over others. What would crip rage look like? What would femme rage be? (I'd argue it's different from the more traditional category of "female" rage that so often comes bound up in misogyny.)

I also wanted to insist that fury cannot happen without care, justice cannot happen without healing. I thought a lot about the Erinyes, the Greek chthonic goddesses of vengeance (who were called the Furies by the Romans), who transform into bird-like creatures with blood shooting out of their eyes when a grave injustice has happened. Once the perpetrator is brought to justice, they then transform into mourning old women. So, their bodily transformations are the way they express their rage, and their sorrow, at injustice.

This book is not about utopia, but I tried to propose possible choreographies for how we might have different relationships to tyrannical regimes. I think it's going to require equal parts care and fury.



Johanna Hedva is the author of the novel *On Hell* (Sator Press, 2018). Their fiction, essays, and poems have appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *DREGINALD*, [Entropy](#), *Mask Magazine*, *3:AM*, and *Triple Canopy*. Their performances and visual work have been shown at Machine Project, Human Resources LA, the Getty's 2013 Pacific Standard Time, the LA Architecture and Design Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art on the Moon.



Dan Bustillo is a writer and artist interested in deviance and surveillance culture. Along with their collaborator, Joey Cannizzaro, they run The Best Friends Learning Gang, a pedagogical experiment in collective, embodied, and expertless learning. Bustillo has written for viralnet.net, ICP Perspectives, N-o-nS...e;nSI/c::::a_L, contemptorary, and Temporary Art Review. They are currently a PhD student in the Visual Studies program at University of California, Irvine.