

# FORMER STRIPPER, PART- TIME VISIONARY

---

ISMATU GWENDOLYN





# CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>THE STRIP CLUB DID INDEED MAKE ME BONKERS</i>  | v   |
| 1. I kinda wanna fuck Excellence  | 1   |
| 2. There is no safety in being Beautiful: reflections from a life spent On Display  | 13  |
| 3. Musings from my porch in Chicago that ask: am I good at hosting happiness? Am I the right shape to hold onto the life that I want? What noise do I make when I get knocked around? | 35  |
| 4. A brief moment once titled, "how do I love myself?" (but I didn't know what I meant by "love," so first i sound it out)  | 39  |
| 5. Dinner with a Capitalist in Amsterdam, \$115k, and Other Things that Changed My Life   | 43  |
| 6. Archival as a love-making longer than me: the making of @ismatu.gwendolyn  | 53  |
| 7. Therapists Are Also the Police: Sex Work, Social Work, and the Politics of Deservingness   | 69  |
| 8. Revolutionary Love costs you something.  | 89  |
| 9. Drugs are fucking everywhere (and we are all addicted to comfort)  | 99  |
| 10. There is no Revolution without Madness.   | 111 |
| 11. Revolution, then, is a faith-based practice.  | 127 |
| CONCLUSIONS   | 135 |
| <i>Bonus Essay!</i>   | 139 |
| <i>About the Author</i>   | 149 |





# THE STRIP CLUB DID INDEED MAKE ME BONKERS

## (AN INTRODUCTION)

Every time I do something ostensibly... *odd* in terms of personal finances, there appears, with the sing-song persistence of a greek chorus, feedback inquiring about the strength of my sanity. Participants of the social internet (who I never know personally) kindly ask me if I am experiencing a bout of mania, if I have slept properly, if I am *sureeeee* about whatever decision I am making. Many cite Western-style therapists (or tell me they themselves are therapists)— which, I suppose, grants them the authority to deem me absolutely off my rocker. For the record: I do not necessarily *disagree* with their conclusions. It seems to me that we gaze at the same nutcase (hi!) with two wildly distinct realities.

To begin: the concepts of “sane” and “insane” in this iteration of the world (that we all keep choosing to live in) are designed to keep us coloring within the prescribed lines of thought (Bruce 2021). Hello to you reading, by the way. I hope you are having a lovely morning, or whatever time of day it is. The majority of us engaging this essay adhere, generally, to the rules of the capitalist socioeconomic system (wherein the exercise of our imaginations exists for the sole purpose of creating better, more efficient, and more comfortable coping mecha-

nisms to bolster the production demands of capital, and our actions reinforce that set of beliefs). The borders of the mind are the *knowable* and the *safe* (thus, the *sane*) and the **unknowable, unsafe, uncharted deviance from compliance (insane)**. I know this to be true because I, too, trained as a clinical therapist from an elite colonial school in the (so-called) United States. I remember how many small steps towards radicalization I took while filling out my client notes after session. My clients were low-income, often using Medicaid to cover the insurance bill on their sessions with me. Almost all of them had enough basis for me to diagnose them with generalized anxiety and depressive episodes, and all of them told me of moderate to extreme amounts of overwork. Maladies really only become problems when they interfere with one's ability to perform their daily job. Should your woes or depressions or your bursts of creative energy or the councils you hold with the voices in your head make it so that you want to (a) stop producing capital or (b) stop the habits that allow for said production, I am *clinically trained* to hit the small red button under my desk marked, "*Insanity!! Intervention necessary!!*" In the best case scenario, we plan for you some sort of realignment so that you may orient yourself to the mission of capital production. In the worst case scenario, you are disappeared into the realm of unHuman (also known as institutionalization).

Reality *is* whatever we collectively witness. If you are in a reality where everything comes second to avoiding capitalist disaster—becoming jailed/imprisoned, homeless, hospitalized incarceration due to lack of sanity, unable to get enough money to keep yourself from starving—there are a great many ways to die and even more ways to become subhuman such that your bloodfuel does not grate on the consciousness of the masses. If keeping yourself safe acts as your primary motivation, then someone risking imprisonment, homelessness, hunger, or being deemed mentally unstable *would* feel unthinkable. You might automatically move to correct them—it *would* make them crazy (defined here as without a grip on reality).

I am writing this essay about money to say: yes! Your assessments of me prove correct: I do *not* have a strong grip on the reality of capital-

ism! Thank you for noticingggg ♥ I actually just got in the habit of waking up each day and doing a little jig, such that I might shimmy and shake capitalism's grip up off of me. *This* reality of capitalism is but one reality out of an infinite and ever-expanding range of possibilities, and *this* reality reaffirms itself as *real* only because we all choose to believe in it, and we solidify those beliefs with our repeated actions.

"But ismatu," you might be saying, "the social order exists whether I want it to or not. If you don't pay your bills, you will die. Why would you want to be unsafe?"

Yes, I agree. I agree with all of the above. I do subject myself to increased risk of premature death by noncompliance... I have just a few thoughts to add to this very reasonable sense of panic. For one, I do not think reality is a monolithic situation. Multiple realities can exist at once. So this manic, delusional, precarious world I skip and jump in is only manic, delusional or precarious if your primary lens roots itself in the capitalist (or aspiring capitalist) reality. From my point of view, I am having an amazing time.

Then: I don't think *this* iteration of reality, this capitalism game we keep playing, is very safe at all. It runs on blood. There's lots of child sacrifice and manufactured suffering and also, the numbers don't make sense for the stakes. The game of capitalism lives and dies by the figures we made up on the screens that *we* invented and not the numbers that rule the natural world. Basically, we are *literally* dying for *figurative* ideas, instead of the literal and non-negotiable rules outside of our control as humans: like the number of trees. Or like lifespan of a human animal. Or the rates at which our babies die. Or our global crop yield over the next three hundred years. If we made up a different game where wealth was measured by how many people over 80 years old and under 10 lived in harmoniously without disease, I think we would all have a better time. But that's just *one* idea. There are endless.

Finally: we who want desperately to be safe, in any world, oftentimes imagine being made unhuman under capitalism as this... instantaneous death. That's where the objections come from—the idea that sanity (adherence at any cost) begets safety and insanity (deviance)

means instant death. Let me go ahead and affirm for you— *you do not always just die*. There is often pain, often suffering. The process of realizing you are expendable bloodfuel slated for slavery or slaughter brings about pain in and of itself. Many of us do not survive, and indeed, many of us *do not die*. Sometimes, in your liminal space between Human and mortal, you do not perish. You live to see all these different kinds of ways of life, all these in-between worlds you never would have known existed unless you fell down out from the gilded, VIP-only Garden of Eden down into the lowcountry swamps.

Now, the idea that we made up money (in terms of US Dollars) is not a revolutionary concept. I had *known* this for a long while, but that didn't stop me from being physically compelled by the lack of it, or the need for it, or physically salivating at the sight of stacks of bills. When I felt in my *body*, in my literal flesh, that money is entirely made up, that's when I changed my actions. That's when I stopped feeling motivated by money.

I can tell you the exact moment it happened: I was looking up at Eden from my place as a bottom-feeder, drunk off champagne, upside down. My ankles, coated in shiny fake leather, had no trouble holding onto a pole spinning my body around. *God*, I loved those shoes. The ceiling was low at this club I'd ended up in that new year— it was 2022, according to the Gregorian calendar— so you could literally see dollars floating up in the rafters. Blue-banded notes fell from the sky in flurries; *everybody's* rent glittered in the air and curled up, languid, like a snow globe. Like cigar smoke. Many different iterations of Adams in suits had left their Eves at home to come patron their local Lilith for a few hours. Before this particular moment, I didn't mind this prolonged in-between place of Human and mortal. I mean, I had my *gripes*. But I also had *grips*, if you feel me. Copious amounts of cash made self-medication easy to maintain, which meant I could stave off the growling, unnameable disillusion indefinitely. Any time I almost saw my aching desires in their nakedness (*I am enraged. I am so angry all the time. Fuck grad school fuck the debt it's shackled me to fuck this job that keeps me up all night. I haven't slept in 27 hours, literally. I am counting. I feel like I would be good at leading riots*), I would mentally make a note to check in

with my therapist about internalized violence and proportionally increase my comforts in the meantime. Am I angry or do I just need a chai latte with a double shot? Haha! Ha. I felt no need (or want) to look my questionings in the eye until they invaded me, the guards of my mind too sloshed to turn them away at the gate.

Picture: me, tits out, downright glittering, flowing through a stage set with my Prettiest Girl in the World <sup>TM</sup> costume fused to my skin on some random Tuesday night (or was it Thursday? whatever), looking at a hollow place within myself where pleasure usually resides. The club is up because *I* am on stage and *I* am drunk off champagne, which means I pulled a room already. It's a good money night. Where is my pleasure? Where is the rush?

Conclusions burned a tiny hearth in the center of my chest cavity: *oh. I... don't know that I care. I don't care about this anymore. This is fake. Money is fake. All of this is made up and the rules can change at any time. Idk if I'm just drunk? Maybe I'm just crossed. This is why you don't smoke at work, ismatu, now your brain can't stop moving. But that shit looks like monopoly money. It literally might as well be. None of this actually matters.*

I had a realization like this before, years ago. The first time I had ever forgotten I was reading, I remember hearing my name called for dinner and thinking that I had, for a moment, been so suspended in a different world I forgot my own name. The book was *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke and the accompanying thought train gave me shivers. I forgot, having dissolved so thoroughly into the story, that *Inkheart* wasn't *real*. Some lady named Cornelia just made it up! And I, for at least a few hours, lived inside of it. You can make up worlds. Again and again and again, you can make up a world.

Back to the strip club: I'm spinning and spinning, trying to keep track of my mind. I remember tabling this moment, putting my money away in my locker, wrangling my meandering mind and putting it in my locker (to be reinstalled at the end of my shift). I recall my thoughts feeling like molasses in a whiskey cocktail on the drive home, the tendrils congealing together, far more visible to my sober self. *The money is fake. If the money is fake, maybe I do not need to be ruled by it. This*

*world does not **need** to be real. Maybe I am fake. Some weirdo genocidares just made all this nonsense up and I am choosing to be living in it. Maybe I am a separate entity from this world. Or, if I am not right now, maybe I could be. The rules can change at any time. Meaning: there is a world, a canvas under this painting that still exists. **The** world is malleable. **The** world will bend to our asking, if we only know how to ask. How do I ask? What would I ask for?*

*How do you ask, that world... **the** world... to make a new thing?*

Welcome to our first essay! It's entitled,

**EVERY WEIRD THING I BELIEVE ABOUT MONEY CAME FROM THE STRIP CLUB**

**The Mechanics of Thought**

Thought comes first. I repeat that small phrase to myself all the time: thought comes first. The primary place of production exists within the mind and what we see in our material world happens in response to our ideations. Is this counter to dialectical materialism? I'm really not sure, because I know that my thoughts are shaped by my material world. I would not have been praying for money coming in large quantities from wealthy men in sensible athleisure suits if my material circumstances as a stripper had not introduced me to the possibility of *that* specific outcome. I just think, from my entirely circumstantial and anecdotal experience, that human animals are thought-based creatures. What becomes in our minds *becomes* our material realities—sometimes, rather quickly. The actions that we take reinforce the beliefs we have in our mind, which then creates a positive feedback loop: it is and so you act like it is and so it is and so you act like it is and onward.

If you wish to change your actions, you must first change your mind. Humans don't like to waste time on anything we fundamentally believe is impossible. So then: if you are moving towards something that feels... if not impossible, then deeply improbable— like making \$3,000 in cash on a Thursday night. Or like mobilizing your neighbors to unseat and replace a local council member. Or like unionizing your workplace— if you want that which feels insurmountable, you must

move towards those boundary points of insanity with a peaceful and persistent curiosity. You must inquire as to why you ever thought it was impossible in the first place. Who told you that? Why? What stake did that person have in making sure that you never ventured over *there*, where your mind meets its limit? Are you sure? Are you *sure* that's all you got?

We do not waste time on what we believe is impossible. Which means, if you are working on something lofty, like getting way more money than you think you can, or like sustained community sovereignty within a hostile nation state apparatus, you must first align yourself with the belief that what's coming is not just *possible*, but *inevitable*.

### **The Necessity of Dreaming**

Success (however you choose to define it) does not and cannot exist without a dream, and dreams can (and should) be intentionally constructed. The strip club may as well be a bootcamp for manifestation. Making large amounts of cash is a pretty improbable outcome on top of this particular job being a verifiably a waste of money. Why pay hundreds (sometimes thousands) to look but barely touch? Who does that help?

You must (you literally must) become a tinge unhinged. *Well... me, I thought to myself doing my eyeliner. It helps me. And I love help. I help other people with that help. I totally think it's reasonable to hand over \$900 for an hour of my time. Why would you not? I am so gorgeous. I am literally the prettiest girl you'll ever meet, and I want nothing more than to gaze at you. Basically I'm blessing you, and you're helping me do that so I can be good to others too. This is actually the best money you'll spend all week.*

Of course it sounds silly. You know why I do not care? Because it *works*. Step one is believing those things about yourself, however self-ingratiating you might sound. You could literally never be a waste of money because you are a walking blessing (duh). Step two is believing that someone really is going to walk through the club doors and agree with you. And then you have to fill in the gap with actions that bolster your belief. Which means: no matter the day you had, or the way you feel about your personality or your body, or whatever is stressing you

out, you have gone through the ritual. You have filled your head with simple beliefs to get straight forward outcomes. You have put your brain in a jar and the jar in your locker. You have really amazing lip gloss on. You, even if just for the next few hours, are the prettiest girl in the world, without exaggeration. You are the exact right person to give a thousand dollars in cash to just because.

This logic is transferrable to anything that feels even mildly impossible. You are the exact right person to unseat the current governor of California (shade intended). You are precisely the being needed to upgrade the water pipelines in your municipality so that we can survive the next few hundred years. You *are* exactly the right person to do your dishes before bed so that you wake up really pleased about having a clean kitchen. Of course you can learn Mandarin! Of course you can secure housing for your family! The dream, once undeniable, is addictive, and human people like to participate in the making of a new thing. This is how you present the world with a reality you want to call down.

### **Money is something different than Dollars.**

Again: this idea made itself clear intellectually, but took a while to internalize physically and metaphysically. Money is a method of materializing the energy of exchange, so that our means of exchange can be faster, more efficient, and more honest. Money predates capitalism. In many parts of the world, money will subsist after capitalism finally stops its thrashing and violent death. God, wouldn't it be thrilling? To see that day? Isn't it lovely, how close all that feels? I digress. I have no idea whether I want moneyless societies or not. I cannot tell how much of that longing is because I genuinely desire to see what is possible, and how much of that desire stems from trauma relating to US Dollar bills (which are only valuable because of the blood they are soaked in). Money doesn't need all the blood sacrifice. Money was designed as a peaceful medium of exchange.

Ever since I heard of indigenous communities (like the Mayans) that utilized seeds as money (Phi 2021), I have always thought of it as something with a shelf life. Money expires. How will you plant it



before it rots? And, ever since the strip club, I have thought about money in *this* world-making as something addictive. No drug I have ever tried compares to the feeling of watching it rain thousands *because of you*. Money is drug, I am telling you. It feels so good that you're tempted to excuse all the blood on it. How do I use this drug responsibly while I make a new world?

**Wealth, for me, is measured in time.**

Money and wealth are not the same thing. Money is the amount of energy you have to exchange at any given point in time for whatever outcome you desire. Wealth is the conduction of that energy into systems that create for you *sovereignty over your time*. Which means that I personally (me, ismatu), do not care how much paper or digital money I garner in this life. I know that I can do without material human comforts (even the ones that make a dignified Human existence in this particular word). What feels imperative to me is that I never, ever return to the state of **time poverty** I was in. I did not own myself in waking or in dreaming. My mind was relegated to dreaming only of survival, and that within itself is a death. To create is to channel the divine; when your material circumstances box your mind into only thinking of how to survive them, you create nothing. You accept the world as given. That, in and of itself, is a death.

Time poverty degraded me did not sleep; I had no *time to sleep*. There would be stretches—one or two days—where I literally did not have time to go to bed. I would watch two sunrises in a row without an hour of unconscious rest in between. I will never, *ever*, work like that ever again. I do not care how much precarity defaulting on the payments of the capitalism world brings; I want time. I like to be with my family. I want time to spend in my home. I want time to eat ripe fruit with such slow reverence it looks downright sexual. *Time*.

Time does not *intrinsically* “cost” money. Time’s mediums of exchange require effort, connections, focus, planning, foresight, and diligence. In *this* world of capitalism, many of these concentrations can be purchased with money, so that someone else creates for you more space to exercise your ability to bend time to your liking. That’s a

better way to describe wealth: **the ability to bend time to your liking.** However, there are many ways we can seize back our time. I believe this bit was the most radicalizing thing about working in the strip club: learning that nothing was more important to me than sovereignty over the way I spent my time. When we have time to think, new realities occur to us. When we have time to think persistent, recurring thoughts about potential new realities, we can begin to act upon them.

Time freedom, time *sovereignty*, goes beyond spending it on loved ones or pleasures (though: I am Venusian through and through. Life without loved ones and sensate pleasures feels like a moot point). In terms of first priority, I am in need of time to pray. Do you see the feedback loop? I get time; I gift it to my imagination. We sit in contemplative prayer and focused acquisition of our greater desires. The focus, in return, brings us to actions which more *time*. I do this because I believe that it works and because I believe it works, I move like it does. Time falls into my hands. I gift my imaginings. My imagination leads me to new actions which produce more time. Repeat. Ordering my thoughts allows for me to pull my desires out from their germination space in the ether and make them material. The life I live now comes from ordained, ordered thought and consistent prayer, and then the shaping of my actions to concretize those beliefs, bolstered and fueled by the love and kindness of quasi-strangers, who love participating in a different dream. That's why people love the strip club; it feels like a liminal space, like purgatory, where you can see Eden and damnation with a side of truffle fries. That's why people like these parts of my life I share online; I fundamentally feel like this method of living is contagious. I believe if you ask the earth to show you her wildest beauties, she will bless you with fruit. She will direct you to her children.

\* \* \*

Anyways— the *odd* thing I did that spurred on this essay (and this book!) was that I upended my systems of money to build a library in Sierra Leone. Ostensibly... nuts! *What do you mean you emptied your savings, your checking account balance, your financial sense of certainty and*

*your systems of cashflow to do something as non-urgent as a children's library? Why would you do that?*

Because... I felt like I should. When I became a stripper, my methodology was the exact same. I had this eerily inexplicable, haunting belief that I was just... *supposed* to shake my ass for rent money and that everything would work out. I spent every penny I had except for what I needed to live for the next forty days or so. I bought a 2007 Toyota in cash and drove it across the country in a sure faithfulness of a job I literally did not have yet. I said, aloud, many times, "I fundamentally believe this will work." If it didn't work, I have no clue what I would have done. But it *did* work, so... :)

Same loop of thought in a different iteration of time: I watched myself become too attached to a life smaller than what I am capable of. Whenever that happens, I *feel* what I am holding onto drained out from underneath me. I did something radical because the Godvoice in my head told me to, and because action and belief are in a positive feedback loop with one another in my life. Radical change requires radical action. I don't know that this is true of everyone, but my feedback loop requires expansion. After two years of deciding to work for free, I *finally* yielded enough to be sufficient for my everyday circumstance and to take care of my family. I finally made it to a place of comfort. Then I had to fuck around and want bigger, wider things slated to live a lot longer than me. You might say to yourself, *using your food money on a pipe dream is crazy*. I would respond: is it not marvelous? To want the world you see in your head more than you want the food here on the ground? I didn't know it was possible to want a dream more than I could want food. What an incredible, stupendous turn of events.

I pray to sell 50,000 copies of this book in about a month (because if you purchased a physical copy of this book, that's all the time it will be available for purchase). Maybe that *is* crazy! Probably! I am alright with that, I think. I don't mind the insanity anymore. I am made *real* in the dreaming and in the wanting. Here's one more maxim about money that the club taught me: wealth occurs in the moment of production. No matter what your material circumstances appear to be in the moment, time is not linear. The moment you decide that some-

thing must move is the same moment a version of you in a different loop of time receives your dream in hand. The process of ideation and longing keeps me tethered to this breathing body. What would life be without expansion? Without dreams that stretch longer and farther than you? I am doing exactly what I am supposed to be doing. Thank you for doing it with me.

The following series of essays focuses on the expansion of my thought. Every bit of writing has to do with the state of my mind and what I thought was possible at the time that I wrote it. I originally thought this would be a random collection of essays that I wrote for my internet public, but as I was selecting ones I truly loved, an obvious theme emerged (LMAO). I spent a little less than three years as a stripper before I tumbled out of the club and into a life of being a full-time nutcase. I did not realize how much of my thought processes, methodologies, social skillset, and risk calculation came directly from the time I spent as *\*insert stripper name here.\** I placed them in chronological order so that you can see the slow expansion of my thoughts over time.

The “part-time visionary” bit comes from the fact that the radicalizing I was doing— getting into political education, spearheading farming initiatives for my tribe in Sierra Leone, writing more political essays, working on a donation-based model— all those breaks from our common systems happens in between the lines of what I *actually* considered my life. I did not wake up one day and go, “I want to be known as a revolutionary force.” I took teeny, daily steps towards what I felt in my bones was the right answer for the time. I would not be half as grounded in the systematic improvement material circumstances if I had not become a materialistic at my local strippery.

In terms of titles, I could not think of anything more accurate. I was, most definitely, a full-blown stripper in real and physical life, and that line of work set me on a path that forced me to deviate from sanity. The more I felt out a new method of living, the more I *did* stuff that reinforced the reality that I *saw* (rather than the one that’s constantly being sold to me). My chapters in sex work fundamentally shaped my person for the better; I am a more self-aware, more compassionate, a

more strategic, kinder and disciplined individual. The (allegedly) revolutionary stuff I do really occurs as a byproduct of my reorientations—in other terms, it's the work I do part-time. I wrote about it so I can build a library (or two. Hopefully, two).

Thank you for reading. I hope the work of your day passes through your hands with ease.

(or, simpler said: peace)

ig

### **Works Cited**

Bruce, La Marr Jurelle. "Chapter One: Mad Is a Place." *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness at Black Radical Creativity*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2021.

Phi, Nila. "2-Minute History of Money & Seeds." *SEEDS Library*, Seeds Collaboratoy DAO, 13 July 2021, [seedslibrary.earth/2-minute-history-of-money-and-seeds/](https://seedslibrary.earth/2-minute-history-of-money-and-seeds/).

## I KINDA WANNA FUCK EXCELLENCE (STILL DO.)

**H**ello from a Tuesday in September. I want to welcome you to The Garden Space, a newsletter and podcast where me and all my internet friends explore the planting and blooming of human connection. I invite you to be easy. I invite you to move slowly with me. It is well into the afternoon and I am still in my robe. I am having a cup of carrot cake tea (*yes*, you heard me right and it is exactly as magical as it sounds) and I am drawing this kettle out I am taking blissful, indulgent, measured, easy sips I am licking my glossy lips along the way. I am reading you an essay I wrote, entitled "...I kinda wanna fuck Excellence" and I know what I said. I know what I just said. I ask you to pause.

Lmao. So.

I am submitting to you all, my Internet Friends, my first "okay... so hear me out" essay. Yes I know the title sounds click-bait! Yes, I know the majority of you all clicked on this and went "Truly, what on God's green earth could this episode consist of." I also recognize in talking openly about sex or sexual desire, even sexual desire for my own self, I ruffle some feathers. It's always uncomfortable, at least in the onset. I promise you I am not pimping out your knee-jerk reactions just for

engagement. I want to make clear the reasons that I share the following ideas with you all. Two big things:

**One: love, of any kind, is not theoretical.**

In this online space we are set out to explore a whole lot of love theory. Many peoples across millennia have been thinking of, talking about, tasting, touching, theorizing on love in its many forms. I am no different. I am, like you, a philosopher, trying to ascertain the how and the why of the way my insides turn themselves out in the name of loving. Alexander Pope in 1711 very famously said, “To err is human; to forgive divine.” I would like to figure out where love measures on that scale. What measure of love is human? How much of love is divine?

Theory is designed to be a guiding light, a North Star wrapped in words, of sorts. Even if we might momentarily float above ourselves to look at our positions in this world with a bird’s eye view, theory is not supposed to leave your body behind forever. Sometimes I feel like we can get so turned around in what is theoretical, what is supposed to be, that we forget that the business of loving is literal. It is human. It is in our day to day. Love lives in our bodies and our actions and our peoples. As much as we theorize, there is nothing theoretical about love.

**Two: love, of many kinds, is explicit.**

I again blame the West for this— this clinical, puritanical, cut and dry image we have of love. There are *so* many different kinds of love. I had a video circulate on TikTok about how the ways I feel love for a person, where I drew out platonic, romantic, and sexual emotion on a bar graph. We like things easy and measurable in this world-making. Folks *love* a graph and we flip for a cute and succinct sixty second idea. We love the *feeling* of learning; it brings about this seductive allure of productivity and I am *not* knocking that. I love all that too! And if that’s the video that brought you here (or if any of my videos brought you here), then I love that too. Welcome.





Bar graph hand-drawn by ismatu in a viral TikTok video

However. **Bar graphs are clinical.** Me talking about my intense desire to be bent over by the concept of Excellence? *Visceral.* The feeling of love is visceral. Love is not a metaphor; it is an action to do, a habit to commit to, a desire to indulge, a sensation to succumb to. Love is something I *feel*. Sometimes those feelings are sexual— even when there is not a literal object to covet. I am not attempting to make you squirm in talking about sexual feelings or attractions. I am trying to embody the feelings of love I feel and be honest in doing so. And, honest to goodness, when I think about Excellence, I physically get goosebumps. I would like to explore that phenomenon with you, as I learn in real time.

Sex love in the Western world gets a bad rap. We treat it like it doesn't exist or like it's the pinnacle of the human experience.. Sure, there's romantic love, which we are obsessive over. There's platonic love, which is easy for us to grasp. There is communal love, or empathy, or love for humanity. It is easier for us to understand the love for people that we don't know than the love we can feel internally or externally in sex. I almost feel like we treat sex like there is no love to be found there if it isn't coupled with something else.

That's an entirely different podcast essay, it is. And we will get there. But today, I would like to discuss the feelings before I discuss the

theory, since this is literal, and for me, this business of loving is visceral. So yeah. I kinda wanna fuck Excellence.

I ask you again: hear me out. I feel like by the end of things you will understand where I am with all this.

*I kinda wanna fuck Excellence.*

Two rather obvious follow-up questions:

- (1) who or what is Excellence? And further,
- (2) how exactly does one have sexual intent towards a metaphysical idea?

**Let's begin.**

I've been chewing on this topic like toughened Double Bubble. I have had a contentious, strained relationship with Excellence my whole life. By dictionary definitions, or maybe by common understandings:

Excellence is the state, quality, or condition of excelling. A state of superiority.

Herein lies my first big gripe: **superior to what? Excelling over what bar, by whose metric?** It's hard not to taste capitalism forming the word in my mouth. Excellence, by definition, implies comparison, which grates on my spirit. *My word.* I will be honest with you at the risk of sounding conceited: I did not have many peers growing up. K-12 education was spent around white kids that, for the most part, only ever performed *as well* as I did, which was always pretty... deeply unimpressive to me since I had half the resources they had and I knew that. I was regularly the standard of my craft (which has always, always been writing). My pen moves and the world does with it. Writing feels like breathing. I have always been excellent in that regard.

The problem with comparison is that kids are *vicious*— especially white kids that feel like they deserve an A more than you. Comparison was always isolating at best; it's a rather lonely fate, becoming the benchmark of someone else's success. At worst, the constant game of

comparison (which happened to me regardless of whether I participated or not) was punishing. *Incredibly punishing*. I always think of Excellence in terms of the high jump, an apparatus that I was quite good at in the brief season of life I ran track. I happily competed in high jump until I learned the bar could paralyze you. I cannot imagine a better visualization for the way that Excellence shows up in my life. It's really a poet's wet dream. I set my own standards of Excellence, meaning I erect my own bar of "good enough" and fracture myself trying to clear it. The *shame* of landing on the bar is intense too— you run for it, you leap for it, you turn yourself in the air and feel the small of your back connect with your own disqualification. And then you spend the whole fall wondering if you'll land and lose your ability to walk. Excellence always felt to me like a losing game— either I pass with flying colors and I have no friends, and see the bar raised immediately after with no time to celebrate your victory. Or I fail to clear the bar. I meet my own standards with metal to bone and I crack.

**Brutal. Brutal and unsustainable.**

By the time I got to college, I'd really married myself to the idea of "just good enough." Do as much as necessary to get what you want. You don't have to be *Excellent*, you only have to be *Enough*.

Which was, for all its intents, a wonderful idea. Enough meant well and does well, sincerely. For the period of time where I was navigating imposter syndrome, or dealing with the discomfort of class mobility, or simply questioning my own worth, Enough was a valuable lesson. Enough was a relief. It was healing. Where Excellence had to be earned, Enough was freely given. The task of being grand, being great, being excellent was completely unattainable for where I was: seventeen, at college, floating, untethered, still fractured. Still learning to walk again where before I could sprint. It was a lot gentler, a lot sweeter. Enough feels round and soft in my mouth, easier thing to hold onto; swallowing on something filling and soft, like fresh bread.

How to be Enough was a simple study of self and puts one on an entirely different journey than the pursuit of Excellence does. Enough was the place I learned to be friends with myself again. The process of

rebuilding my intrapersonal platonic affection deserves an essay on its own— *that* narrative arch was clear and beautiful. I began to like my own company. I could *create* without fear of critique. Ugh, and it was stunning. I really thought I had solved my problems.

And then! And then. I got... bored.

I began to look around. I still had... very few peers, honestly. Nothing was interesting enough to hold my attention. So I looked up, like I used to do. Like I hadn't done in years. Excellence was still swinging above my head, just out of my reach, taunting me. Infuriating. Still, as always, a losing game. My desires for Excellence, at that point, sincerely felt like a cruel joke from the universe. I did not have the focus, or the skill, or the brain chemical balance, or the work ethic, or the *something*. Something. The pursuit of Excellence appeared perpetually punishing and inauthentic.

I settled into my skin more, waded through the journey, and ate my Enough bread to keep me going. When arriving very bitterly at the end of that predetermined storyline, the one where I began to grow want for a fuller meal, I did not investigate my next step. I refused to move forward. I still held fast to the lower, easier bread of Enough. Even when it began to be boring. Even when the bread started to mold.

**Enter: effective mediocrity. A slow decay of tempering myself.**

*I began to rot.*

In the literal world, my work was rotting. I was writing, but never really in public. Not in competitions, not for publications, not for anything that would propel my life forward. Sure, it was enough to just work on my craft, for a while. I went into a quiet, dark place where no one could judge me and let myself loose and it was (and is) lovely. The secret places I keep for myself and my creation are still gorgeous.

But my pen is *powerful*. My words are weighted. I had such incredible opportunities given to me I let slip and crack on the ground because I could not let myself into the light. Pushing myself to perform would have meant running again, running and leaping under the bright blue sun and sky, jumping for the bar of Excellence— the one I had

not cleared in years. I have not written publicly all this time (*years* of my life), despite my parents, my teachers, my professors, my comment section begging me to because I understood there was a *before* and an *after* I expose my mind like this. It is vulnerable. It feels exactly like being naked in a room where everyone else is clothed and gawking at you (ask me how I know). But the terror— it doesn't make me want myself any less. I missed the thill of high jump. When you are good, when you are great— *excellent*— it feels like you're flying. Do you know what it is to fly, even if for a moment? What a defining life experience. There is a before and an after you find and do something that makes you fly. And I want to. Fly, I mean. But failing costs me a lot. And it's not just failure— it's public failure, which is daunting.

...I suppose.

Though. *If I am really honest*: being witnessed does raises my heart rate, but not necessarily in a bad way. If anything, as I see other people seeing me and wanting me with open, raw, unconcealed desire, unwrapped jealousy as they realize they do not compare, or simple admiration, I feel alive. Now suddenly, there are stakes. Witnessing me requires the witnessing of my own standard. I am reminded of the old-school daredevil, riding a motorcycle over a bit of alligators. The audience on the edge of their seat: *can he do it? Surely not! But, what other choice is there than to succeed?* The communal, taunt, near ritualistic experience of watching someone risk themselves for a moment of glory. I think about it and am slick with want for myself. I only want myself *up there* more.

Impressing other people was never the problem. I can actually usually accomplish that with just my Enough. So many people are so impressed by some damn bread. For myself, I am not.

This is Excellence: to impress myself. I am only able to do this when I have enough conditioning, enough nourishment, enough skill, stamina, speed, and strength to clear the bar I have set for myself. It is a hard feat. I had not done so in years. Not because I was suddenly worse. Because as I learned and grew, I understood more about what

was possible with art. And because I was in life circumstances that made me too tired to run and train like I should.

But that did not stop me from the work of wanting. I want to impress myself. *That* is Excellence. I am my own peer, I am my own standard. I can only look up at this bar I have made.

Can I tell you a secret (that *must* be obvious by now)?

### **I love the high jump.**

This is the way I want explicit, sticky, rippling intimacy with Excellence. Soaring through the air is an out of body experience. It's something I've tasted but not yet embodied, despite the want, despite the years of deep and endless want that have all coiled in my gut and cemented into ashy resentment. I hated my Good Enough bar because I could never clear it. What an easy narrative. I know what I am about to say sounds very workaholic, hustle harder, get-it-girl culture of me, but... I don't actually think my bar was the issue.

First of all, I had no business trying for Excellence when I wasn't even convinced I was Enough. **Of course I hurt myself.** Excellence is a space *for* work and, for much of the last season of my life, I needed to be in the healing space of learning how to be self satisfactory. I do not turn to the high jump apparatus to find self-satisfaction. I run for it to *impress* myself. For that, I need to be well enough to do the work.

Secondly, my hitting the bar does not mean I need to lower the standards I have set for myself. It means that I need to train harder. I am, among many people, an expert in myself. I am certain of my own capacities. I can trust myself to give myself the flowers I deserve when I earn them, and it's not actually a bad thing for to **earn** them. Yes, I have a high bar. Why wouldn't I? I am thoroughly convinced of my own genius. *Yes*, I am hard to impress. **Of course I am. I'm that bitch.** What do I look like being easily impressed? I know the difference between good and great work as it passes through my hands, including my own. Especially my own. And I know the difference between great and Excellent work.

When I think about who I want to be, when I envision myself taking up the space I know I am designed to, when I see myself, my body, the slight of my hand, the curve of my neck positioned to receive all the good things I am stewing I am beside myself with lust. I, in this life, in real life (metaphors aside), am never more turned on than looking at my own naked body, so it makes sense I am also overcome with desire envisioning my future self's successes. I have deep self attraction and that actually one of my favorite things about myself. **Seeing the harvests of ismatu tomorrow openly makes me horny.** *That's what it is.*

I have all this sexual tension with the literal concept of Excellence and I simply don't know how else to explain it. I can see myself in the future, darker and riper and sweeter, an overgrown berry, bending the whole plant just begging to be in somebody's mouth. What else is that? When I look to the self I wish to become, the body I want to live in, the work that passes through my hands with ease I pant. I feel goosebumps. I harden. I open. I still. My tongue runs across the ridges of my teeth I flex my toes I close my eyes before I even realize it. It's me lightyears away, ten years away, two moments away, tomorrow, today. I see myself sailing over my bar again and again, with ease. I am flying. I roll in the sky, limbs outstretched, palms relaxed. I hook myself on the bar and spin. My breasts are free and falling off me. I know *exactly* what that feels like. I can see myself on the other side of the stage, now in the audience, watching me dance, seeing me glide, bearing witness to flight. Body dark and ripe and free. What else is that but sex? It's unmistakably sex, the way I float. I am in a space in my life where Excellence no longer feels punishing— *perfection* does, and I conflated the two for a long time. Perfection is punishing by design because of its true impossibility. Excellence understands my only metric of comparison is me. I am my own standard and so Excellence is, by definition, attainable. She tastes sweet and tart. Bright. He makes me pucker my plump lips. I can see myself up there flying and embodying Excellence and he is ethereal. Simply dripping. What else is that? I can see the self I am going to bring down to earth and I am overcome with open, naked desire—the same sizzling energy of a live wire. My fingerprints are electric; I am collected and eclectic twirling against a

bright blue sky over a track field soaring! Just... *soaring*. Sailing over the bar into the sun.

When I clear my bar like this I am Excellence personified. Every breath is warm and beating— what else is that but sex? This way that I love him, that I love the future self that hang glides above me like a heavy rain breeze— how else can I name that want but call it lust? *Yes*, I want me. *Yes*, I want it like that. I want to sail until I am smooth. I want to ripen until I fall. I want to soak in sun and gain sticky, lip-smacking weight until I bend the whole plant to show my deep and gleaming body. I look at myself and drool. I want a taste. What is that skill like? That precision? That level of faith in myself? I am going to taste or die trying. I did not know I could find work worth risking the paralysis, but if I am real with myself, I feel paralyzed on the ground, afraid of flying.

Enough is a wonderful, life making place to be but it's only... just *enough*. Enough is like manna. It is nourishing. It falls from the sky, an open gift from the divine that I do nothing to earn but ask. I am fed and it is sufficient, and I will keep going. But that was in the desert. That was in a season of wandering and questioning, of healing. I have returned to myself and I want the body made of milk and honey. I am salivating for it. What else is that but sex, when sex loving makes me fly, when pole work makes me fly? I see myself up there flying. What else? What else can I call that? I want to fuck Excellence and so of course I was mad as all sin down here, wanting and wanting something that hung just above my head, perpetually out of reach. I felt hot embarrassment for even looking Excellence's way. By no means did I feel good enough for that much richness when even leavened bread felt too much in my belly. And that's real — how often do we see resentment take the place of sexual envy? How long did I hate what was sexually liberated because I still had all this binding? Of course I hated Excellence. Of *course* I labeled her the enemy. It was the only way I could live with myself wanting something I did not feel like I deserved *that badly*. I could not even bring myself to try pursuit. But now. But now. I am fed. I am rested. I know how it feels to fly like that, to ripen like that, to hang out nude



like that in the middle of sky as the sun sets, not in a hurry, sweet as the day is long. Slick with sex. I have tasted what it is to be skilled enough to trust that whatever my body and mind combine to do with themselves, it will be beautiful. I know how it feels to get out of my own way. I know how my body feels through the sweltering pleasure of a job well done. Yes I want to fuck Excellence and I make no apologies. You would too, if you saw me up there.

And when there is this much pleasure. Imagine the shivers I will feel when I land, full and safe, and I gaze up at my Good Enough bar. And *raise it*.

ISMATU



## THERE IS NO SAFETY IN BEING BEAUTIFUL: REFLECTIONS FROM A LIFE SPENT ON DISPLAY

**An essay that was previously published as “Being Ugly is a sin I am happy to commit.”**

**H**ello. It's a Friday in April and I am here to admit that I have lied to you all (again). I am here outside my favorite coffee shop with my stomach out for the first time in eons. I used to have a terminal addiction to crop tops and now here I am, hyper-aware that my *midriff* is exposed. For the better part of a year now, I have taken a break from being On Display. I've been out of the club. I've been campaigning on TikTok to buy my tribe some farm equipment, which is very different work than making a video of me looking cute so that hundreds of strangers comment and ask me if they know how gorgeous I am. This is the longest time I have gone without my nails done, or my hair done, or a facial since I became someone always very Beautiful sometime in my teenage years. I am breathing differently now. I am here feeling like a feather floating back down to the body I left here on earth. It's taken me months to balance out the reality of being naked and drunk for money with the reality of my straight-lace life as a content creator and a mental health professional

— and lots of that balance has come with being honest about why that level of exposure felt so easy and natural for me.

Dancing didn't feel odd at all... and that is the unusual part, right? Because if I am honest (which I am trying to be with you all these days), it's because being semi-clothed for money wasn't all that much different from the life I've been living since I was a child. The life I am still living. Content creation and dancing and modeling and public speaking have had all this instantaneous success for me because, in no small part, I am Beautiful. Truly. I didn't really have much of an awkward phase becoming a stripper because so many things felt just like my first day of work— the gendered, racial, youthful performance of Beautiful Black Girlhood. The first time I walked a runway (12 years old); the first time I was on camera for the public (23 years old); or speaking on panels in college (19 years old); even interviewing for scholarships as a teenager (17 years old) making sure I was as Beautiful as possible. I have never been Ugly; I've never even been close. The one consistent parenting lesson I received from my mother (also dark-skinned, also disarmingly Beautiful) was how to always be the exception to the rule.

Last year, I released this essay with its original title: "Being Ugly is a sin I am happy to commit." That's a fucking lie— not because I am unhappy with the Ugly things about me. I cherish them. The title tells a lie because I am so, so far from Ugliness structurally. The reason I cherish the ways my body is not Desirable is because Undesirability is a relief. I have been desired since I was a literal child. Now, 24 years old, is the first time I have physical traits that could come under any structural critique; my breasts wrinkle like my mother always warned me they would if I didn't soul-tie myself to bras (and then I started swinging from a pole topless for a living, lol). They sag and swing and don't sit directly under my chin and it's relieving. Maybe (maybe) that means I might be left alone a little bit more. The relationship I have to bits of me that are Ugly are tender and kind because the world still bends at my touch. I am disarmingly Beautiful and I know that. My survival has, at times, hinged upon me knowing that and using it well.

I have no genuine conception of what it is like to be regarded as “less than” in this world because of the body that I move in. “Being Ugly is a sin I am happy to commit...” a cute title and a cute idea but it’s not... *actually* like I have the choice. None of us have the *choice*. The use of the word “sin” implies the intentional decision to deviate from what is good, what is righteous, what is holy— and while that is an accurate way to talk about the cult religion of Beauty in this society, short of intentionally disfiguring myself... I don’t really have the *option* to deviate. I am stuck in this place, up here as the exception to the rule (and, simultaneously, the shining, shimmering proof of the rule itself).

In Threadings., the newsletter and podcast where we explore Black feminism and Love studies and other things that hold me together, we’re spending some time conducting a strong inventory of the self. I told you all this essay would cover the self that is my physical person, and that led me back to this essay. The first iterations of love I have for my body were uncomplicated because I have always had a body that did what I asked. I was not interested in being Beautiful (at all) until I understood just how much opportunity was available to me should I commit to marketing myself. I remember distinctly the teenage years of constant and honest appraisal: watching my body change because of puberty, because of sports, because of food insecurity, because of self-harm or willful neglect, and noting without emotion how I slid up and down the ladder of Beauty with the changes. I dedicated at least twenty minutes of mirror time a day studying myself and playing to my strengths or intentionally punishing myself. I had so much self-loathing and such a strong death wish as a pre-teen that I intentionally stopped brushing my teeth because I knew it would make me Uglier. I thought I deserved that. Relatedly, I was also getting breasts at the time — big, ripe breasts jutting out of my chest that I did not want. There’s no PG way to talk about how visceral and traumatizing it is being a child walking around like that. Being catcalled and working the catwalk for the first time both occurred at twelve years old. Of course I hated my breasts. I think I also found some relief in having something to repel the new way people looked at me. Gazed at me, now. I was already making negotiations about what parts of Beautiful Girlhood I

would participate in and what parts were too much to reconcile as a child. I have not stopped negotiating. I'm sitting here as an adult recalling how white strangers would reach out to touch me as a little girl, how visibly awed they were at me and my mother and sister for being so unambiguously Black and so undeniably gorgeous.

The top of the Beauty hierarchy is not bliss; it is not aspirational; it is the farce of pretending that being chosen stands in for the loneliness of being a status symbol. I return to the text "In The Name of Beauty" from Tressie McMillan Cottom to explore my body— this time rewritten with more honesty about what I am and where I fall.

Even if you've already engaged with the bulk of this essay, I more than encourage you to give it another read: not just for the things that have changed or been added, but because reading and re-reading is so crucial to learning. Learn slowly and with repetition.

Let's begin.

### **Studying the internal self requires the study of the body.**

My first assertion is that I believe in my own consciousness with the same tangible surety that I have in my Body. I think contemporary philosophy, especially Western contemporary philosophy, likes to imagine the Body as a secondary characteristic to the almighty mind, or the poetic soul, or whatever light of consciousness you have buzzing inside your meat sack. The idea here is that you are the thing that inhabits your human form, and I... think that is a load of fresh horse shit. Steaming, fresh on the barn floor, horse shit. How am I more of my mind than I am my body? Who decides those rules? Who benefit from us thinking we are, somehow, better than or divorced from or higher than our bodies? Why is it so common to hear that our bodies are "flesh prisons?" What does it say about the world we live in if we think in carceral terms about our physical manifestations of self?

I fundamentally reject this. I think I am as much my body as I am my mind. I assert this with a couple background identities: as a therapist, as an avid reader, as a mind who is sharpened by my soft and sinewed

body, and as a body who is compelled and collected by my mind's expansion. This essay seeks to explore the human connection I have with myself: the union (or dis-union) of the presence of my Mind wrapped up neatly in my Body.

***The Body (n):** the physical self which respirates. The flesh and bone that houses every thought an omnipotent narrator could never find the words to say. The method we first interact with the world: our bodies in same space. Skin to skin contact. The physical thing which feels through being touched and seen and held, being cast aside or hit or isolated. (self-defined)*

I argue that I am as much my body as I am my metaphysical mind, my floating soul, my otherwise packaged and perfect ideas of self. Whatever I think about myself, The Body been here, breathing. Long before my mind ever learned to grow and keep growing, before my mind knew anything at all, there was the Body, respirating for us. Communicating for me. The first self that ever was (and likely the last self I will ever be) is my Body. My mind will have withered and been gone and my Body will be here, breathing. If that's the case, I believe I would do well to study the physical nature of human connection, and I would like to take you all with me as I try to wrap my mind around the fact that my Body does not need me to think all these self-important musings of what I am or am not. I am someone who imagines that I am in community with myself. How do you talk about the intimacy of the self without The Body? About feelings, which live in the body? About sex and the politics that sex comes wrapped in? How do we begin with the mind when The Body is the one that held us first?

I have a couple questions for us at the start of things.

(1) how does the internal self co-exist with the Body? In what ways do they inform each other? Are they ever completely separate? Is that even possible? And if it is possible... do I want that? What do I gain from conceiving of the mind and the body as independent forces? And if I do not stand to gain... who does?

(2) How does my Body inform conception of self, internal and external? How does my body exist and interact with world systems? How

can I create safe spaces for my body, both personally and within community? What does that safety necessitate?

I am going to attempt to answer those questions by reading, writing and talking. I will be learning in real time; if you need to orient yourself to this online space, or you need more clarification on what that means for me as someone who makes art on the internet, I recommend listening to or reading the essay “The Garden Space: an Introduction.” But this I will say at the top of every unit, so we can all be on the same page about what to expect from one another.

I am engaging in the vulnerable process of learning in real time, and that means I must be in conversation with three entities: myself, my peers, and my teachers.

**I will introduce myself:**

My name is ismatu gwendolyn and I am committed to learning and feeling through the sticky nature of human connection— the study of love, or the lack thereof. I have scholastic dedication to African-American studies, global health, clinical social work and poetry, and I have academic histories and roots at Northwestern University and The University of Chicago. I am an information anarchist and I act on that politic by learning, growing, and sharing what I learn, both on my TikTok where I do personal + political education, and most especially here with you all, at our shared plot in my Garden Space.

**I will address my community:**

True learning attunes new lessons to the beat of oneself and one’s community, which is why that learning in public bit is important. If you are here, week in and week out, I consider us to be in community with one another as we learn. Grab a chair. Bring your friends. You are free to ask me any questions or leave me any comments, if not on the Threadings. comment feature, then with replies to the email newsletter or comments on the podcast. Thinking in isolation is only cute for rich white men geniuses: I need to knitted in the thoughts of others like a quilt. Please: don’t make this a one way conversation.

**I will express gratitude and invitations for my teachers:**



Theory is a guiding light for me in the constant wade and waves of the world, so I'm picking up some handfuls of North Star direction from a couple impeccable scholars: Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom with essays from her book *Thick: And Other Essays*, which we will be discussing at length today (and for a separate podcast episode, Dr. Sabrina Strings with her work *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, excerpts from Dr. Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* and Da'Shaun L. Harrison's seminal text *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*). Thank you all for helping me give words to the feelings I have about this body that makes a fool of me for trying to make sense of it.

### *Notes from "In The Name of Beauty"*

#### **Section One: "I am Unattractive."**

Tressie McMillan Cottom is not the first writer to postulate on Beauty as a whole, however she is the first to imprint her words on my person. After I read *Thick: And Other Essays*, I felt like I had gotten a tattoo. I was in my final year of undergrad unceremoniously wading into the "real world" (the world which collapsed around me both personally and politically, since I graduated in June of 2020). Sitting in a swivel chair of a too-cold classroom, I found Dr. McMillan Cottom to be impressive— not in that she has a resumé or writing prowess that I found formidable (though that is also the case); I mean that she, through her work, was able to touch me and leave a mark. Her thoughts, her pen, her deep understandings of the conditions we were navigating and most especially, the apologies she did and does not make stuck themselves into my brain and pressed. I am changed and I am grateful.

McMillan Cottom opens her essay "In The Name of Beauty" by revisiting words she wrote that made Black women angry. She got some deep hearty church girl mmm's out of me, reading the entry into the analysis; if I did not relate to those sentiments then, I most definitely feel the weight of the wrong people angry at you the way I am on the

internet now. The essay recounts, reflects, then re-convicts the reader about multiple assertions, however I think the boiled-down thesis that people took the most issue with was:

**I, Tressie McMillan Cottom, am unattractive.**

This is a paraphrase, but that's the summation of things. She used the word *unattractive* here, but unattractive and Capital 'U' Ugly (that which is structurally undesirable) mean the exact same thing (Mingus, 2011). What is not Pretty is Ugly, and there is really not in between. And hoes were *mad*. Hoes across racial, economic, generational, and gender signifiers were *mad* mad. A simple statement (I am Ugly) provokes equally simple but uncomfortable follow up questions:

Why?

And, a bit further:

If you are... then what am I?

Ah! *Now* we're talking.

The question of the standard (who makes the standard, or what makes the standard) is pretty easily digested: white landowning men created means of measurement for what makes a marketable and effective wife to continue and expand an imperialist white ethno-state. A racist and genocidal Beauty standard follows suit.

Standards of Beauty are visual and visceral. Outright stating "I am ugly" acts as sacrilege against the holy and rigid performance of wielding and coveting Beauty. It is swiftly corrected. The charges brought up against the author for breaking the Beauty Rules include but are not limited to: attention seeking, fishing for compliments, self-hatred, and misunderstanding the intentions of benevolent white people when they reach out to touch you, a stranger, as if you are a very soft, rabies-free pet monkey. Look at the manner those reprimands minimize and individualize the claim. Dr. McMillan Cottom made no assertions about her personal self-esteem, or her ability to date, or what others must think about her. She stated a structural fact: I am outside the flowing cornucopia of marketable Beauty. To be

unPretty, to be a Have Not, is to be unattractive. Ugly. That is a neutral and evidenced sentiment at worst.

A common counterargument usually crops up at this time— the but all. “But,” a long haired, doe-eyed darling will sigh with one single tear clumping on their bottom lashes, “but... don’t we *all* suffer under these rigid and punitive beauty standards?” Yes, beloved, we do. See McMillan Cottom on the fifth page of this essay: “That is the violence of gender happens to all of us in slightly different ways. I am talking about a kind of capital.”

Stay with me here. From the same page:

**Beauty isn’t actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order. What is beautiful is whatever will keep weekend lake parties safe from strange darker people. (McMillan Cottom 2019)**

All capital is world-making. Beauty is access to that world (but it does not necessarily mean you hold onto that capital). Beauty is a kind of capital that exists as a ticket into the door of a paradise— a picture perfect pool party filled with the best liquor, the most gorgeous swimsuits, ringing laughter floating above the most beautiful people you know like beach balls. It’s perpetually golden hour. It smells like sunscreen and sleek, perfumed, oiled bodies brushing up on one another, and fruit trees blooming, and you are standing outside the wooden gate perpetually looking in. And you are meant to. That is the designated place of the Have Nots. In fact, the most you will ever be if you are an aspiring Have Not is an exception to the rule.

**Beauty is the tool of whiteness. And what is that? What is whiteness again?**

*Whiteness is a violent sociocultural regime legitimized by property to always make clear who is black by fastidiously delineating who is officially white (McMillan Cottom, 6).*

It makes sense then that such an amorphous party of people would need tools able to shape-shift alongside them. Whiteness constantly cannibalizes new groups to maintain their power. Beauty is the perfect

weapon. The nebulous nature of what could be considered Beautiful means that you can convince people of happenstance. You can sell them the plastic lies of individual preferences, of coincidental trends. You can make the brainwashing incredibly easy to swallow—tasty even. Beauty in white supremacist world-making is directly tied to worth. If the task is to convince a public of pre-defined Haves and Have Nots that participating in this compulsory beauty pageant for basic societal safety is a worthwhile task, you do need to convince them they could win. This essay, as well as our text from Dr. McMillan Cottom, speaks to this exact paradox: these two ideas, unique blessing and earned reward, are antithetical to one another (14).

This is where I have to stop and insert myself. I, the author of today's podcast essay, have never known life outside the pool party. I owe you that honesty: I am writing this from the shade of a wide-brimmed hat and oversized sunglasses, sipping the champagne leftover from the stack I just made letting a middle aged man breathe hard at the sight of my bare chest. I am writing to you from the reality of being favored and being exploited by the people that let me in here. I am only here if I am okay to be oiled up and topless—and what is okay to a twenty-two year old mountain girl trying to survive by herself in the Big City? What is okay if these same men ogle me anyways, at my university, at the dentist's office, off the street?

I do my best to pretend there is a choice. I sip my champagne and decide I do not mind.

**“If I knew to be cautious of men, I did not learn early enough to be cautious of white women.”**

Definitionally, Black women are not Beautiful except for any whiteness that may be in, on, or around them (and the anointing marks whiteness can include but do not limit themselves to: wealth, slim features on the face and body, smoothness of flesh and hair and color, lightness in the eyes or in the skin's complexion, blondness). And white women need it to be that way, to convince themselves the work of Beauty is worth it. Desirability is a language that changes in between cultures and circum-

stances and you (the Beautiful, or the Wanna-Be Beautiful) are expected to always be fluent. In fact, it is vital that you are always fluent. Much of your safety depends on you ensuring your body is the right kind of body for the space— or if it is the wrong kind forever, that it is restrained and punished in the correct way and publicly. If you are Ugly you are expected to be sad about it, and loudly. How do we know who the winners are if the losers aren't weeping, like the end of Mario Kart? The performance of Ugly shame is so delicious to Pretty People that they [we] might reward you for it; it is almost the same sweet precarity as actually being marketable. That performance, the "it's so sad and awful to be an ugly loser" thing that we expect Black people, Fat people, kinky-coiled hair people, disabled people (etc.) to do— it's necessary in the game of Beauty to validate the winners. It assures them [us, we at the top] that the restriction and the suffering that comes emptying out your guts (literally and metaphorically) to win this game is worth avoiding the shame of being Ugly. And what do you win from being at the top? The pursuit of Beauty transforms the Body in its breathing entirety into an echoey status symbol. And the constant apology, along with the public spectacle of it all, acts as an eternal and internal whipping post. It means that even down to the littlest basic human actions— finding seating, eating a meal, dressing in warm weather, existing outside— The Ugly are meant to flog themselves. You are meant punish yourself for being visible while Ugly (or others will do so for you). Beautiful people can then say, "...well. At least I can trade my suffering for money and validation."

God help us.

And that's the game! We all suffer and some of us get a pool party. It must be that way, or at least be thought of that way— democratic and able to be earned. You cannot break the rules of Beauty Charades by just stating the obvious, like Dr. McMillan Cottom did. Otherwise... game over. Beauty instantaneously becomes revealed a commodity— and not just a commodity but a lottery, distributed unequally and at random. "If you did not earn beauty, never had the real power to reject it, then you are as much a vulnerable subject as I am in your own way." (12-13)

Fuck. Exactly. Let's keep going.

## Section Two: The Exception

Here is that same long-hair doe-eye song. "But Lupita! But Naomi!"

Yes, darling. I know you see them. The glittering dark-skin swimming like flies in milk among the rest of the shining Beautiful people. I'm there, waving at you, pretending to be having a good time. Or maybe the pool party you covet access to looks different entirely. Maybe it smells like edge control and wet juicy couture felt and a fire hydrant raining down fresh summertime relief. Maybe there's a criminal amount of bass. There is most definitely a criminal amount of ass. And even here, still—Bodies. Laughter floating above the most Beautiful people you've ever seen, half of them with golden teeth.

Enter Beauty's younger sister, cut with baking soda: Desirability.

Indulge me in a short passage.

*I am dark, physically and culturally. My complexion is not close to whiteness and my family roots reflect the economic realities of generations of dark-complexioned black people. We are rural, even when we move to cities. Our mobility is modest. Our out-marriage rates to nonblack men are negligible. Our social networks do not connect to elite black social institutions. When we move around in the world, we brush up against the criminal justice system. I am not located at the top of hip-hop's attenuated beauty hierarchy. I am, at best, in the middle. As Michael Jackson once sang, when you're too high to get over it and too low to get under it, you are stuck in the middle and the pain is thunder (12).*

Look at where Beauty is located here: not just in physicality. Not just in or on the body. Beauty is located in proximity to wealth—which we all know is proximity to whiteness within a white supremacist, capitalist world-making. To the *right* kind of whiteness. There is nothing marketable about being Black and rural, unless you constantly apologize for it (which Dr. McMillan Cottom, for all the accusations of low self-esteem lobbed at her, *never* does).

I am here in this text too: rural, poor, and generationally + personally + spiritually From The Mountains. I will be honest again in telling you all that the party I always longed to be at is this one, where I am desired by men I might actually like to fuck (or at least like the performance of fucking). This was the first few morsels of my twenties, relishing this invite to the After Party. I spent a good while here pretending this kind of Beauty Capital was Different (™) and *better* and was something fun. Picture me: a tie on, too small triangle bikini and shorts with the ass out, still in my iridescent chunky-gemstone Pleasers, letting somebody with a whole row of golds talk me outta the drawls I'm already not wearing (and I will tell you for free: it's *not* a long conversation). I keep spilling Hennessy on my titties. I keep pretending like it's fun, the unflinching desire. I only like being desired like that when it's naked and out in the open, like a live wire, instead of white men telling me in a hushed tone they've never touched a Black girl before (which I have only ever tolerated for a cash payment at the end of the hour). I only like being desired *like that* by Black men with stacks in their back pocket and a steady, consuming gaze at me. I like that when I am drunk, even if I don't really like Hennessy. Money makes me horny. It's why I always did so much better in "those kinds" of clubs. It's why I had to stop drinking— to realize how much I only liked that shit when I was good and far from clear-minded.

We examine the Beauty of whiteness: featurism, hair color and texture, skin coloring, sure. Of course, those. But also: *wealth* (the *right kind* of wealth); assorted means in capital; social upstanding; the correct type of upward mobility; the "right" company, which varies depending on the culture; the appropriate accolades: enough to be impressive but not competitive. Those will all get you social capital, a different kind of Beauty, to be exchanged for the correct kind of attention, and rewarded with pedestals and a plexiglass cage where folks can ooh and ahh at you as... a status symbol. Where white folks will have my Black ass in a zoo, Black men of means keep me on an invisible leash, two paces behind them. As a Have Not, you are meant to assume that being desired is better than the shame and isolation of complete, sneering rejection. A plexiglass cage is meant to be more appealing than dreary iron bars and shackles. If the best you can be is Desirable, is it a noble

or understandable jail to want? Beauty and Desirability are not necessarily synonymous, but they do hinge on and produce the same sort of swinging, strange fruit.

I want to note our differences here, between me (the author of this essay) and Dr. McMillan Cottom (the author of the text we're soaking in): I am pretty near the top of hip-hop's attenuated Beauty hierarchy. I know so because I am constantly in professions where I make money of the way my face and body looks. I know this because I routinely made double the money when men of particular demographics come into my club. If I am showing up to shake my ass and go home, Soldier by Destiny's Child is a wonderful rubric for me. What do the Black women in that music video look like? The ones with shining bodies, the stars of the show, the ones we are clearly supposed to be looking and looking at? What building blocks of Beauty do they have? Yes they are not white, but of course they're not— are they attempting to be palatable to the regular-degular white folk? Who do they want licking their lips?

Black aesthetics are still able to garner and secure capital, specifically off the labor of Black women's Beauty Work. McMillan Cottom notes that too— not to be left out, we are ingenious. We reinvent and redefine and work and work and work to make space for ourselves to be considered Beautiful, and yet the people that lick their lips and sign the checks are still... the men.

### ***Oh, the men.***

Beauty must appear to be democratic for two reasons— firstly, to convince the well-meaning but ill-informed voters that “their vote matters” (lol). McMillan Cottom already stressed this point when considering why white women are so enraged by her calling her own Black self unattractive, as if she cannot taste the water we swim in. The holiness of the vote is also enforced by the Black women that are *mad* mad at her because they have no desire to be Ugly By Association. This is the cis, thin, straight plight of the Black women: the “why can't we just expand Beauty standards?” Those of us that are close to the top of the pyramid hope we can be the exception, still desired by all. We ask,



“Well, why can’t we be included in the standard?” and never *why* there is a standard issue of the way a body should be *at all*.

The theatrics allow us to keep the veil between worlds up; one where we know what we are and are not, and one can pretend they [or we] can earn Beauty (thus: earn access, worth, and safety) if we simply try hard enough. And that feeling of deservedness is powerful. It’s the grease that allows you to capitalize and weaponize the Beauty that you know is rotten and stinking. When you are able to say, “I earned this,” with your money, in the gym, by your makeup skill, via the man that chose you, whatever—it’s all the easier to cast aside those who cannot or choose not to do the work. You get to do that and pretend you are not making some ugly negotiations. I want us to be so fr.

### Section Three: Addendums

In my original publishing of this essay, I say a quick “ah, but I digress” and move on. But I want to be honest. Those of us Black girls (or Black raised-as-girls) that had a chance of being *the* exception? We go through intense training on how best to market. Someone who loves you and knows longer than you do trains on poise, thought, presentation, perception of self so unflinchingly honest that the process of appraisal becomes rote. We are taught the rules of the game and given the license to abide by or break the rules of Beauty based on what we want in this world. I remember my mother constantly giving me feedback on my outfits, my cultural markers, my makeup (or lack thereof, because I have never worn makeup or earrings on a regular basis and it makes her so mad). I thought these lessons were useless and dated, the relic of her growing up in times where a woman could not have a bank account without a husband. She had me on this ticking clock for marriage at 25 that I tuned the fuck out... I just. In truth, her Beauty lessons felt useless until I started interviewing for college. Until there were full-ride scholarships to some of the best schools in the country on the table. When I had to sit pretty and seventeen in front of white men that were often-times obviously disarmed that I was pretty, the marketing started to matter. When I realized how much power I had in being a young, classically intelligent, well-spoken, *pretty* Black girl. There is a certain amount of Beauty capital available to Black girls that

read, write and speak. White folks will always cut a check for the next Morrison; we're the beating heart of art and academy and they know it. But don't let you be pretty. You read and you're pretty? Oh my word.

So this is what I'm saying: I don't *get* to *just digress*. I am telling you that I started making negotiations between what I knew to be fair and the life that I wanted when I was seventeen and plotting a way out of bumblefuck-nowhere-recently-gentrified-into-suburbia. These kinds of white suburbs have gilded surfaces and deep tissue sufferings. Families live in copy paste housing and passive cooperating with one another because the moms have wine and the kids have weed pens. *Everybody* medicated. Suicide was common enough such that I knew one person who died by their own hand and scores more with attempts or ideations. I almost did not graduate high school from how much poverty-induced absence I incurred. Those bitches wanted to lock me up for juvenile truancy! I was about to *not* graduate high school and get stuck going to Walmart for fun for the rest of my life. Girl, *yes* that is when I stared perfecting my eyeliner. That's when I figured out how to do Disney Princess makeup and how to slow down when I speak, how to pick dresses that made white folks with money, with recommendation letters, and with opportunities overlook the stench of poverty. The only reason I was able to graduate high school and go to college was because my principal (who knew me as a sweet, pretty, church girl spelling bee champ) called the school district on my behalf and told them to lay off. It was because my very Beautiful mother stayed bribing the attendance ladies with her insanely good meat patties. I didn't even have to go to trial. I fundamentally don't know that it would have went down like that if I were some kind of structurally Ugly— if I was a fat Black girl that reads. If I was a disabled Black girl that reads. But I have no clue. I was a very pretty Black girl that reads and so I made it to elite college and kept negotiating.

We are still negotiating, me and this body that breathes. We've been doing this dance for so long, I can't always tell what's a choice and what's not. I don't have any judgements to make of myself. For a lot of

us here, *near* the top but not quite, we feel like our hands are tied. What choice do we have? It don't make it right. It's never gonna be *right*— what it did was make sure I lived to adulthood. Beauty is precarious; it keeps me alive while also keeping me drugged. It took me... \*checks watch\* like five months in the club circuit before I started Doing Drugs (allegedly). I am so happy my Depressed So I'm Doing Drugs phase happened in graduate school and in places where cameras were not allowed. That's why I get to say "allegedly." Beauty bought me a ticket out of drugs for survival and into a life of doing drugs with millionaires. True class mobility.

Okay, now. *Now*, I digress. I want to be honest about the ways I benefit from Beauty capital, but it's a double-edged sword for me. The other group that benefits from the performance of choice are the world-makers here: the men. The people that cut the check. We vote and we walk in the Beauty pageant so that the oligarchs in charge can look fairly and judiciously elected. And then— then! When "reworked" or "more inclusive" Beauty standards emerge, it's just a coincidence that they happen to have their subject in swimsuits, drinking liquor, laughing, belly up for the men who lick their lips. It is still marketable at finest, and if not marketable, desirable. Consumer ready. Safe to eat right out of the packaging. There's a reason I only like it when I'm drunk.

And so: we giggle at the grills and float, happy and full of mind-numbers, and we never think about the position of status symbol: void of true power, only being loved with possessive conditions attached. We're not quite rendered speechless; of course, you can make a couple statements with your fabrics and your patterns. But you are, in large effect, a purse. Fungible items. Raw materials to be used in the dreams of the powerful. Your weighted creation doesn't stretch further than what the checks think is Beautiful, and you might even be content because at least you are not outside the party, standing there, sweltering, sniveling. Ice cream melting. Alone. That's what I can say, right? That at least men want me.

Actually! I forgot myself. We on this inside of this party will never *say* that. Never out loud, anyways. Because then what— I'm hot, you're

not, game over? Where is the *longing* in that? We are meant to think that silently and smile to ourselves and then continue on in the charade. Of course, the Haves are not in paradise, they are allowed access into the paradise of the people that made the world for them—but at least they are inside! We take up a chorus of “self-love” and “inner peace” as the people that chose us create conditional safetys and kisses on the forehead. Material and emotional reassurance for us, “self-love” and “beautiful inside out” marketing for the Have Nots. Yes, it is all marketing, even still. You simply cannot be Beautiful and openly mean-spirited or out of balance; in all things, you must be something to admire to. We shimmer louder so that “inner glow” gets added to the worksheet called Ways to Apologize for Yourself. The most stunning thing you can do as a lady of leisure is give the Have Nots some work to do.

This is also the social theory behind why “I can take your man if I want to” is an insult, by the way. I am calling you broke in Beauty capital. Just like a pumpkin only turns to a carriage under the right benevolent wand, Beauty only turns to *capital* under the right kind of attention—the attention of the folks in charge. Catering to the powerful, the most resourced, the most visible gives world-makers the ability to decide what is and what is not pleasing overall. It makes sure the same people are throwing the same exclusive pool parties. The dance of standards will never be equitable: the reason you establish a norm in the first place is to ascertain who or what is deviant. Even more terrifying is considering what the menfolk who made up or modified the standards in place want from Beauty.

What’s pleasing to them is power. They make the pinnacle of Beauty conveniently synonymous with what helps them concretize their world-building power. They will cannibalize you over it. The Blackness we Pretty Black Girls have in common with the men that lick their lips means so little. Whatever power we get from being desired is still not ours to wield. Power never belongs to the status symbol, it belongs to the person wearing it.

Naming that you are on the outside of these pool parties, that you are trapped in a Desirability Zoo to have the right kind of attention gawk

and throw dollars at you, that is not self-hatred. Dr. McMillan Cottom does not internally hate herself by stating what is obvious to her. That is an honest assessment of self position. Self-hatred in the context of Beauty is looking at a Body, any of our breathing Bodies, and thinking, "We must have a standard with which to measure them by." Why would we ever need this? What compels us to create a norm for something that was here before we thought up cages for ourselves and our neighbors? Who benefits from us thinking our bodies are subordinate to our minds and that our mind's preferences are always pure? How easily might it be to brainwash a populace that is convinced they alone are too smart to be duped?

Beauty is not "good" capital, as stated in "In the Name of Beauty." (No capital is good, but that's an entirely different essay). The fruits of your labor, your Beauty work, always result in violence— for yourself, for someone else, for both. To climb up higher and safer in the Beauty tree you eventually have to kick the chair out from someone else to scramble up. Yes, you do! There is no getting around it. We might not always have a choice, but I want us (the Pretty Black Girls) to be honest about the conditions we're in. In investing in Beauty, you will always be negotiating with the death machines that chew up the Undesirables. And the best, the best, the best you will get from that plexiglass chamber is being desired by people that would kill you if they didn't want to fuck you so bad. We were one flat nose, one wrong family tie, one degree, one cup or jean size away from swinging down there with the rest of them. You didn't earn shit. The game of Beauty is always a negotiation and you will always, always end up at the end of someone's beating stick. And maybe you like that. Maybe you have a kink for pain— I do, too. I'm not here to judge and I'm not here to change your mind. *I'm* just tryna call a spade a spade. I want us to be honest about what all of this costs of you, what it costs of me, how much it costs us.

Let's return to the initial questions.

**(1) how does the internal self co-exist with the Body?**

Politically. There is not getting around that. The Body that breaths is a site of politic being enacted on or around or about you. Sex and gender politics occur in many ways— why do we always think reproductive rights? Why do we never think about Beauty, the politics of Desirability, of resource allotment an acquisition?

**(1a) In what ways do they inform each other? Are they ever completely separate?**

In my opinion, no separation exists. The Body and the Mind aren't separate or distinct; the Body thinks and the Mind respirates too. I don't think it's truly possible to separate them. I do think our conceptions of self have been shaped by the world systems that swear to us there's a difference. I don't have anything to gain from the idea that I am more of a mind than I am a body— in fact, I think I make that distinction because it makes it easier for me to swallow how much Beauty rules my life.

And pretending I am a mind and not a body makes it easier to pretend I deserve this life I have. These life-changing opportunities that have been given to me, in no small part, because of Beautiful packaging. The sad reality that my body that breathes is reduced to being pretty tissue paper in this world. I don't have anything to gain from ignoring that that's the reality of things.

**(2) How does my Body inform conception of self, internal and external? How does my body exist and interact with world systems? How can I create safe spaces for my body, both personally and within community? What does that safety necessitate?**

The capital 'b' Body? My body reminds me that I will not always be under the thumb of Beauty. Previous to this year [year 24], I never dreamed of being old— mostly because I spent my childhood understanding I was unlikely to survive my teenage years. I have only recently begun to realize I do have a Rest Of My Life. My body's unending desire to survive has made me understand the freedom that lies in aging. Like I said, my breasts sag a bit now and I breathe honest sighs of relief. They're still desirable— my body (still) drips in sex and that's what people see when they see me, whether I wear my crop-tops

or not. Beauty and sex and supple skin and gold highlight. Fine. But the promise of old age is sweet in that I will one day be old and be able to fully belong to myself. Oh, to be cloaked in wrinkles and wisdom. To have aged past desirability.

There is no safety in Beauty. There is no safety for me; not while I look like this; that's not a complaint, it's a fact. None of us are safe here. It feels good to be honest about that, that every interaction I have is colored by people liking me, or being predisposed to love me or find me valuable or revile me because I Look Like This. There's no safety in that. And more than that, I can't really ever be the one to create safety for others who are punished because of their body. I am regarded as Beautiful everywhere I go. I am Beautiful "despite" the unambiguous Blackness. I can't spread any safety in the position of being the exception to the rule. It's freeing being honest about that.

What I can do is disrupt the game of Beauty by reminding everyone that sees me, loudly, that there is no deservingness in this game. I can ruin the fun of the victors that see their estheticians twice a month and still post bullshit like "it's what's on the inside that counts." I can talk openly about the negotiations, the vulnerability, the isolation that comes with the biting "blessings" of Beauty. Unless, of course, we're discussing blessing in the original etymology of the word, which means to be washed in blood.

As for me: I will wait with hopeful expectation for the day I am old enough to see the Beauty melt off me like hot butter. I'll have made my rounds and borne my children and hung up my heels. My breasts will hang down to my knees. I will look like my grandmother and rejoice. One day I will be free.

ISMATU GWENDOLYN.

WORKS CITED

Cottom, T. M. (2019). *Thick: And other essays. In the Name of Beauty.* The New Press.

Mingus, M. (2011, August 21). *Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability.* Femmes of Color Symposium Keynote Speech, Oakland, California, United States of America. <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/>



**MUSINGS FROM MY PORCH IN  
CHICAGO THAT ASK: AM I GOOD AT  
HOSTING HAPPINESS? AM I THE  
RIGHT SHAPE TO HOLD ONTO THE  
LIFE THAT I WANT? WHAT NOISE DO I  
MAKE WHEN I GET KNOCKED  
AROUND?**

RECORDED AUGUST 2022 | CIRCULATED  
APRIL 2023

**I** smatu, after a long pull from the medicine in hand, rumbles into their phone speaker: I will tell you what I want: I want a life that resonates with me.

*[The following musings were taken via audio clip, synthesized into central thesis statements, and then transcribed for safekeeping.]*

- I don't wanna feel out of place or out of touch or out of my own body or out of my mind. I have felt *so out of my mind*. I want a life that reverberates like a tuning fork— every time I get knocked by something, I just hum middle c and am back to myself. I want to live a life where if I am knocked by something, I can ground myself and other people with the noise I make. I want to hold onto goodness. I want a life that holds onto goodness and wellness and happiness well.
- I have a habit (in my teenage years) of holding onto things that had died because they were once alive, and because I missed them, someone I love gave it to me, it's still important to me.
  - You cannot hold onto dead things inside of you and expect happiness to want to stay around.

- Am I a good steward of happiness? Certainly not with all these dead things I insist on holding onto. Happiness is a guest you invite over, not a permanent state of being. Would *you* want to stay in a rotting house?
- If I am thinking about a life that reverberates, that means I have to be able to host things that make good noise.
  - If I want a life that reverberates, I have to be open to hosting good air and good space or I have to be filled solid with stuff that will hum together.
- I have historically been good at hollowing myself out and having good space. It's always easier for me to shape my desires than it is my discipline— the difference between honing myself so I only hold onto things that are good for me vs. shaping my will so that I reject things that are bad for me, even when I want them.
- This worked for me when I was in high school and college because I had so little autonomy. It makes sense that *hollowed out with good space to reverberate* was my reverberation of choice. I didn't have the building materials or the sovereignty to build myself how I pleased.
  - the task of that life (being like a washed out gourd, able to make a good and grounding sound) is *constantly* washing yourself out to make sure that you're not holding onto dead things in your reverberating space. You have to empty yourself out *constantly*. I got to a point where there was so much death and dying in my life; I wasn't sober enough; I was constantly off kilter; I desperately wanted to keep some things, even if they are dead; I was just plain exhausted. And sick of always wanting the "right" thing. What if I wanted the wrong thing? For once? For twice? For old times sake?
- Okay so: the two ways that you have something bounce off of you— something come and knock you, when life comes and *conks* you (and it will)— if you get conked, how do you make good noise?

- the first way is to be a washed out gourd. but that requires you to not be stagnant, it requires you to constantly expel things that don't belong, and it requires you to never let anything rotting into your gourd
    - Gourds also thrive in creative space. Gourds are drums. Gourds are for dancing.
  - or, you can be something solid, like a tuning fork, so when it gets knocked it all hums together. So you can't be full of things that don't reverberate together; you have to be solid all the way through.
  - if I'm translating one mode of life to another (because I *had* to, because I wasn't sober, because I was tired, because I was grieving and *exhausted* and out of time and energy)... when I forgave myself for those circumstances it became a lot easier to become solid.
- 
- When I think of myself less like someone who is made up of right and wrong decisions, and more as someone who forges on in their story, it becomes a lot easier to understand that right and wrong don't do shit for me except distract me from the narrative.
  - I don't think there's a right answer between gourd and tuning fork. I think you might be called to different kinds of grounding sounds depending on where you are in life. Maybe one day I'll meet the hybrid of myself and be in awe.
  - There is a difference in the discipline (the excellence) it takes to get out of a circumstance and the discipline it takes to create a life of excellence when it wouldn't cost you anything to be mediocre.
    - What feels like settling? What feels like peace? I guess that's what the growing up is for, to come to a place of knowing because I tried.

I HOPE the work of your day passes through your hands with ease. I  
hope your peace is unconditional, despite it all.

Still thinking of Jordan Neely.

ismatu gwendolyn

**Jazz of the episode:**

*Why, Buzzardman, Why?* x Alabaster Plume

*The Jordan River Song* x Emahoy Tsege Mariam Gebru

*Lena's Song* x The Sweet Enoughs

*You Go To My Head* x Billie Holiday

*Exit* x Sebastian Mikael

A BRIEF MOMENT ONCE TITLED,  
“HOW DO I LOVE MYSELF?” (BUT I  
DIDN’T KNOW WHAT I MEANT BY  
“LOVE,” SO FIRST I SOUND IT OUT)

WRITTEN AND EDITED: APRIL 2023

**B**y which I mean: **love is the feeling that compels you to action *and* the action itself.** Love is both the urge taking hold in your corporeal body and in your metaphysical psyche that moves you toward somebody’s highest good. Love is also then the results of that inclination; love is the feeling that compels you to act and love is the act itself. To be in the feeling love and remain inactive is to bathe in the warm waters of communion, soak there, and then refuse to get out. You will never really get the full effect of the baptism if you don’t get up.

The business of loving is personal; it is practical; it is an element of the present that reaches to the past and future seamlessly. We cannot talk about love and be unchanged. If I am to be a student, a disciple of love, I have to first start with a strong inventory of self. I find it so much easier to love what it is that I know.

Love for myself is what I feel on the grand scale, the “I want you to bud and flourish” scale, the *dust the world with pollen!* scale, the ♪♪ **bitch. Get it together, bitch.** ♪ scale (Sullivan 2021). Love is what I felt at 23, when I would inhale my aura flickering in yellowing decay, billow out something wearable for the day (like maybe a pastel

blue) and see my seven year old self blinking back in pride. That absolute love, that ever-present love, the love that will make any excuse to keep on loving (like only a child can do for the person that caretakes them) The love that compelled me to action was (then, at 23) peace-seeking, and self-saving, and entertaining the idea that we might live until old age for the very first time.

I am here now (24, really twenty-four-and-a-half) with smaller kinds of love— the kinds that do the dishes before bed at night because then we'll wake up smiling, and I sigh in delight when we smile like that. I have stronger ideas about what I owe to the teeny me(s) that brought me here. Each day has a Love that is less about the grandiose hero work of saving my own life and more about the little kindnesses and stewardships I can create of my day. I love small and I love more often. I love myself enough to run to my journal again— archival remains one of my most favorite love languages.

Most especially and because it must be said, I write in public (after many years of writing in private) because I am publishing what fifteen year old me wished we were reading about. She would have wanted to learn from an adult person who was honest about what they did and did not know. My life is in flux and in forward momentum so here is (briefly) what I know. (1) I have begun to relish my own company again. (2) I like myself. (3) It is easy to love myself when I like myself. (4) The stretch and stress of 22 and 23 were, respectively: do you know yourself well enough to be justified in your self loathing? (and) can you love yourself in servitude even if you do not *like* yourself in your current state?

*POST-SCRIPT from the future (or past, depending on when and how one chooses to read this)*

hello, you. It is you from the (purported) “future.” You are having trouble with this same question in the opposite direction. You will be 27 in... a blink or so. Two and a half slow, foggy blinks and you'll be there, so now we have new inquires and conundrums associated with the *late* twenties (eep!). Get this: you now like yourself *so* much that

you have been *refusing to change*. Ain't that a bitch! No one warned you of such a fate! *This is the issue* with the grandness of life, of having to get up and call down your annoyingly mountainous, rain-making dreamings: you keep growing *past* your points of comfort. Every single thing you want has a trajectory. You set sail for the stars in the sky and then barrel right past them. What, did you think that you would spend all your time orbiting a sun of another sky? You yourself are the sun, hurtling through the galaxies. You have only ever longed to be among what you are.

The moment you finally feel like you know what's going on *is* the very moment you change *drastically* and *necessarily*. I here (the me that is nearly-almost, we-could-totally-round-up-to-twenty-seven years old) pretty much *always* have to change before I am 100% ready! I am beginning to suspect there *is* no such thing as 100% ready! *Can you imagine!!* This is such a silly, lovely problem to have, but like: you know when you put on the Girl Suit and your makeup is *amazing*, but then the day ends before you were really *done* wearing it?

It's like that. I really, really like the life I constructed for myself. And then, one day, some bit of me that I swear is only like 2% of who I am quietly whispered:

*This is not enough.*

I summarize months of piddling indecision and stubborn discomfort in four sentences and a fragment: I ignored. I shushed. I bullied myself into submission, called myself ungrateful, unappreciative, undeserving, unhuman. I gestured to all the moments of this life I bloom with gratitude for.

And yet.

*This is not enough.*

I wish I had some grand conclusion to this, but I am still in the middle of the narrative myself. How about: to love someone up close is to consent to the ways they change you. In living into adulthood, *way*

past when I expected to die and even further past the mountains I was raised in, I find new questions of love and adoration. (1) Do I love the me of the purported “future” me up close and not just as some distant, meandering wish? (2) Do I love the versions of me that I cannot quite see and touch enough to *change* the ways I love myself right now? (2a) Even (especially) when there is grief involved? (3) Do I love myself as the sun? As the sun of my sky? Or am I only ever wanting to be in the orbit of something grander than me? (4) Do I understand myself as my own grandest thing?

I don’t know, I don’t know. I shall wear my apple-bottomed jeans rolled (Elliot 1922).

I’ll see you in another handful of years, when we forgot what we wrote down in this silly fundraiser book and take great joy in rereading.

ig

#### WORKS CITED

Sullivan, Jazmine. “Bodies.” *Heaux Tales*, 2021.

Eliot, T. S. (1964). *The Waste Land* 1922. New York, NY, USA: Grolier Club.



## DINNER WITH A CAPITALIST IN AMSTERDAM, \$115K, AND OTHER THINGS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED IN APRIL 2023 |  
UPDATED IN APRIL 2025

**I**smatu Gwendolyn, within full view of their constituency, hereby promises that they will *never* think this small again. We are here with an essay once entitled, “Hope keeps and collects me.”

HELLO. It is a Wednesday in March. I have emerged from moving apartments in Los Angeles, graduating from The University Chicago, then slamming face-first into the comatose resting that working like a dog inspires. I have for you some reflections on the end of a three-month campaign to feed my family, the Limba Tribe of Sierra Leone.

### **First, the big one:**

*We got the tractor!!* I could scream. I’ve wept multiple times. Oh Lord, the peace I feel. Thank you, God. Thank you God!!! And (as I am always in the habit of publicly thanking my teachers), thank you to my ancestors that have gone behind and before me. Thank you for counseling me and encouraging me and mobilizing on my behalf. I am so glad I didn’t die as a teenager like I wanted to.

Thank you to the past me, the self that existed in October 2022 when my dad called me and asked for \$50,000. Because that's really how this happened. I was sitting in my car, dreading going inside my parent's in-between house (we were evicted by rent raise and staying with a lady from church), eating my \$2 emotional support fries from In-N-Out, thinking about how much sobriety sucks and how bad I wanna go back to the club. And that man called me on some casual shit like, *I really need a tractor. Can you get me one?* As if I can just do any fuckin thing. *Write a grant*, he said. Like he was asking me to pick up milk on my way home. Once you go to college, African parents think you learned the ability to make money rain down from the heavens. They think you personally were given the keys to the money orchards. *Absurd*. I said, "...I mean, maybe."

I decided to test the waters with crowdsourcing. I was so desperately broke. I just left my very lucrative job as a dancer to help my family avoid complete and total homelessness and *not* because I wanted to be done yet. I had a degree to get and I needed about seven thousand dollars. I had recently been inspired by a mutual of mine on TikTok asking for help and receiving it in full. It warmed my heart. I decided I would make one video asking for aid with my degree so I could at least begin to get a "real job."

And then I received \$17,000. *Seventeen thousand dollars* from people sending me one, two, three dollars. I had no idea that you all liked me enough to care significantly about my well-being. I don't have words to tell you how deep I felt that— seen and loved and cared for. I called my dad. I was like, "I... think I actually can get this money. You said \$50,000?" And he said, "aaaaaaactually we need rice combination harvesters as well so... more like \$100,000? That cool?" I'm like, oh yeah sure no problem. Easy fuckin peasy. Just like a nigga to keep you stressed for no reason.

It was at that time I made my first "Hey soooo telling poor people they shouldn't have kids is literally eugenics" video and that got... such *interesting* internet attention. (*A post-script: interesting, as my therapist notes, is a filler word. I do not feel it's appropriate to call [redacted] weird ass, noodle goose, propaganda-sucking ditzzy [redacted] in physical, printed*

*ink, so we'll leave it at that*). I called my dad to complain at least twice in the same week. It was some “*and another thing!!*” type shit. I will say: it's one thing to get wild shit from unidentified ass internet hoes—I have a special anger reserved for people that have an audience predisposed to agree with their opinion toting irresponsible and malinformed views. I was *so mad*. I remember calling my dad to complain. I said to him, “Daddy, everyone is telling me I don't know what I'm talking about because I grew up poor in the United States. You grew up in the countries these people are talking about.”

Him: Yes.

Me: You grew up with no electricity, no running water—

Him: Not even shoes.

Me: Yes!! At any point in time were you like, “I'm so poor I wish I wasn't alive?”

Him: Not until I came to America.

Me: Wow.

[We sit in silence for a moment]

Me: Do they realize how many people would die if they got the world they think they want?

Him: Not a clue. You know they don't know what they're doing.

I was gonna leave it alone. I really was!! I have this masochistic urge to make the internet as hostile to me as possible and I just. I wanted peace. But I said all that to him and he was like, “...So you're... *not* gonna write an essay?”

I said... well. maybe *one* essay.

Here we are three months, six podcast essays, and twenty-two videos later. **One hundred and fifteen thousand, four hundred eighty three dollars and twenty one cents later.** Abundance in full. Ordained, blissful steps toward sovereignty. This is the rest of my life. I did not realize just how much good I can do. I did I not realize how much hope

I can sow. I am on my hands and knees, planting the world I wish to see. Sailing towards the horizon. A new world is coming like the dawn.

I expected this grand moment of triumph. When I was planning for this, preparing for this, I expected these moments where I felt the weight of my labor and was satisfied. I thought I would feel my success like the way my bag is full at the farmer's market— heavy and bursting with the fruits of someone's thoughts, plannings, prayers and actions. I was so wrong. Success is not a feeling. Gratefulness is.

I posted the first fundraiser video on Instagram in December of 2022, unknowingly launching myself into Instagram virality. Ballooning from two thousand to fifty thousand followers in a handful of weeks was... nuts (\*obligatory LOL to soften the mood\*). I wrote this sentence in a caption: "This is the beginning of my life's work." Negro, from your mouth to God's ears. At the time, I didn't (and could not have) realized how true the statement was— and how foolish anticipating some great, big, *I did it!!* moment really is when there's so much to be done. That's what it felt like, realizing we hit the goal: gratefulness for what's been delivered to me and broader, clearer, steadier eyes on what comes next. I have taken my first step towards something marvelous and frightening: a life of forward movement; a life spent in public; a life of active, living hope in the face of oppressive evils. Public service as a social media mini celebrity is arguably one of the most difficult paths I could choose for myself in my youth.

I just didn't know that anger and hope bloom in me the same way. I am angry and I am hopeful and in this world; they cannot exist without one another. We do not have to train ourselves to walk on like chickens to slaughter while the elite destroy tomorrow for today's bread.

If grief is the grease that has kept me burning alive, anger was the match to start the fire. And hope— hope is the cool salve that burns just the same in its healing. Hope preserves me to become new and burn again.

Let me tell you about this conversation I had that changed my life.

On February 7th, 2023 I was walking back to my hotel in the middle of the night, wandering through Amsterdam off an edible I made at a workshop earlier that day.

I had flown to Amsterdam in the *middle* of writing my thesis (which at that point in time felt more like my last will and fucking testament) to look at, document, and purchase a tractor for my tribe. But because I *will* enjoy myself, I arranged an outing for myself in which I made edibles with Amsterdam's famous "legal" weed (which, side note: that workshop was actually so informative on the illegal and legal legs of cannabis trade and import in the Netherlands. Nation states are making a grip on keeping us casually high and hell and fining people for it, but that's an entirely different essay). My partner for the workshop was called Oscar and he was from Mexico. He was such an easy person to work with! We grabbed an impromptu dinner after the workshop and had the most heavenly Turkish food I have ever experienced. I also had a quarter of a reasonably strong (allegedly) THC-laced dessert because I am a child and I literally cannot stop myself from eating a warm brownie, even if I had no business being high. We walked together to this Turkish restaurant, eat a phenomenal array of bread and vegetables, and proceed to have a conversation that will stick with me forever.

Oscar, I hope you see this one day. You asked me questions that really made me think about why I believe what I believe. You made me want sit and listen to you in full knowing I would never return to the ideas capitalism has you believe. Speaking to someone different than me after all these years studying more radical politics helped me realize just how badly I want this world that I dream of. You helped me realize how much my understandings of money and fair payment, of economic retribution and justice have changed as I bloom into adulthood. You made me certain that there is no real choice under capitalism when the choices are *participate* or *endure genocidal warfare from the state*. Most importantly, you really helped me understand why I do what I do. (side note: *this* is why I loved the strip club so much! You learn so much just from getting to talk to people I never would have otherwise, even if you never agree).

So we end up talking about identity, Oscar and I. I found that the topic came up as a natural set of follow-up questions when I told people why I traveled to Amsterdam (apparently it's atypical to come in search of heavy agricultural machinery). We discussed climate change and economic policy and the economic blockade on Cuba, on what veneration of elders could look like without capitalism, on how many different kinds of ways we could (and should) compensate people for their labor. After an hour or two of talking, we ended up at a turn of phrase I am frustratingly familiar with. He said something like, *you have great ideas, I just don't think they're likely to happen*. And I gave a great, big, Negro sigh.

Oscar: It's not that I don't hear you. I do. The thing is, why do *I* have to care?

Me: What do you mean?

Oscar: Like, sure I can see that this system has terrible roots. Many bad things happen and people still suffer. But *I* didn't do any of that. I didn't make this up. I am just trying to survive and provide for my family. And if this system allows me to do that, why can't I support it?

Me: Well, because I believe there are systems where you can support your family and it *doesn't* have to come at anyone's detriment.

Oscar: But I'll go crazy trying to think of something like that. Like, you! You have all this responsibility for problems that you didn't create—

Me: Yup.

Oscar: —and ones you can't fix by yourself—

Me: That's correct.

Oscar: How do you bring yourself to sleep at night?

Me: Oh, I don't.

[We laugh. I dip my bread in oil.]

Oscar: You are a young person! You deserve peace.

Me: That's the thing. I am young. So even if I did not care and I thought I couldn't do anything and that everything was hopeless, I *still* would not sleep well. The problems that we have are here either way and I will live to inherit them.

[We talk about individual solutions. *Why can't you just be wealthy and use your money to fix problems?* I say, "I plan to and that's still not enough." Oscar works for TikTok, hilariously. He agrees that I will be good and famous one day.]

Me: Just... really think about this with me. I don't know that I care at this point about what I deserve. I know I deserve goodness and peace and stuff like that, but (1) so does everyone and (2) there are some hell-bent on providing themselves endless abundance at the cost of another's peace. Deserving is so slippery. So like, where do we go from there? What do we owe each other, you and me? And then past that, I was born to communities I really do *owe* something to. I know not everyone feels that way, but I do. So few of us [Sierra Leoneans] make it to the world's stage— there are so few of us in general. This world we live in tries to kill us all the time. How do I not bend the world's stage to bless them? When I feel like I was sent down the Nile, like Moses on the river for safekeeping? I just... can't focus small. I don't think I can save *the* world— I just think I can save *my* world. And I think I can encourage other people to do what they can with what's in front of them. *And* I don't actually need you to agree with me, because my winning only makes your life better! All I need you to do is stay out of my way. Right? Can you agree to that?

[He nods.]

Me: Would you really feel all that differently if you were me?

Oscar: If I was you? No. I'm me, so I won't ever feel that way. But if I was you, I'm certain I would think the same thing.

### **On not really being human after all**

Today (the day I am writing this) is March 20th. It's the first day of spring. I went to the farmer's market and spent like \$20 on a pound of

these outrageously lovely mushrooms— they're orange and delicious and they only come when it rains like this. I miss the sun, but I too am in a season of drinking up the water. Abundance is everywhere.

This podcast is called *Threadings* because I often return to, meditate on, think and write and talk about what it is holding me together. The process of taking inventory of what binds me, what keeps me, and what collects me is fundamentally good for me. Review, study, and gratefulness of what's *got* me allows me to survive this world. Up until this place in my life (my adult years), I have been focused on learning how to not die. So it's... rather odd liking life. Not just loving it, not just being grateful... *liking* my life. I am no longer bound by a persistent, reluctant call to endurance. The will to live used to permeate me like a fever I just could not break. I was angry enough with whatever was keeping me alive to just... keep going. I am still angry; I find myself balanced and soothed by the peace hope brings these days. I always get what I pray for. I know I will win; I won this round and I've won every day I stepped up to this plate.

I'm going to spoil the ending of this grand beginning for you: we buy the tractor. We build infrastructure for money making and keeping with principles laid out by Marcus Garvey and by the indigenous communities we came from. We invest on the continent; we make it a place of home-going and homecoming and home-staying. We begin tomato farming. We lay the foundations for more economic growth, using colonizer's money to build bridges to a world beyond what we can quantify in a bank. What we sell belongs to the people and what we make belongs to the people as well. I believe I will live to see a day when the diamonds of Sierra Leone are not known for the people that killed for them, but the world we used them to build. Today, we learn to grow and sell rice. Tomorrow, tomatoes.

All this time, I have been searching for something I will never be: this elusive, perplexing idea of humanity. I have never felt "human," not ever. My whole life was cycles of resentment in self-inventory, pricked by the way others often see me— how fast people seem to be to pedestalize me, how far I fall from expectations, the demonization of not being who anyone wants me to be, the raising me back up onto the



post. How can people, loved ones, *intimate* people convince themselves of my grandeur and then be disappointed when I am, in fact, finite? How do I stop feeling owned by the hopes and dreams and expectations of others? I have spent my *whole life* wanting to be small enough to curl up inside of my own chest. I never wanted notoriety or attention from the masses. I just wanted to be good enough. I have only ever wanted to be like everyone else, because I *knew* I was. I am an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstance. Why couldn't anyone else see that?

I am here in the beginning of the rest of my life understanding how doomed I was in these desires. I wanted an existence that was never meant for me in the first place. Because what truly did I want? Who is "everyone else?" A non-existent conglomerate of "normal" people that feel more peace in this society than I do? Okay, then what is normal? And how does *normal* even serve me in a society founded on slow and fast genocides? What even is human?

Well. What is humanity if not the want to search for something?<sup>1</sup>

I am here in the spring and I am searching for a life where we all sit in a sweet breeze and thank heaven and earth we're still alive. I am searching for a world where hope does not grow stubbornly up through cracks in the asphalt, but it blooms unmitigated, everywhere, dropping fruit on our heads, easily ripe. Sweet like the breeze. When I find what I am looking for, we will be living in a new world. I will gaze on at my hands and feet from a place of rest and respite and realize that I was never only "human." We were never meant to be so small.

I am now in the spring of my life. I am threaded together by hope.

ismatu gwendolyn

### **Jazz of the episode:**

Send In The Clowns x Pat Martino

On the Sunny Side of the Street x Johnny Hodges

---

1. Said by my friend, Cameryn Foster.

For All We Know x Ahmad Jamal

Lilacs in the Rain x Junior Mance

Dat Dere (Theme) x Bobby Timmons Trio

The Summer Knows x Bucky Pizzarelli

Down and Out x Joel Lyssarides

Tangerine x George Van Eps

Inflight x Lennie Tristan's, Lenny Popkin

Golden Earrings x Jan Lundgren Trio

Land of Dreams x Ahmad Jamal

Gungala Serenata x Luigi Malatesta, Franco Bitcoin, Sandro Brugnolini

Blue and Sentimental x Oscar Peterson

My Wish x Hank Jones

---

## ARCHIVAL AS A LOVE-MAKING LONGER THAN ME: THE MAKING OF @ISMATU.GWENDOLYN

WRITTEN JULY 2024 | EDITED MAY 2025

**T**he first time you experience a stranger recognizing from videos that you make on the internet, you are at a porn convention.

We're gonna zoom in on that moment, because *what* a once in a lifetime experience this is. You are at a work event, crop topped and busty, see-through bedazzled mini skirt stretched over a bright pink thong, standing sure on seven-inch chrome Pleasers *and* an *iconic* bright pink mini afro (to match the thong, obviously). And you are freezing. Like, yes, it *is* cold in the convention center when you're wearing this little clothing, but I mean *deer in the headlights, this cannot be be happening* freezing while knocking back your third (work-sanctioned) shot of the evening. Maaaaaaybe you're wrong. Maybe you're just intoxicated! Maybe you totally did not just hear someone gasp and say "Oh my gosh, are you on TikTok?" to the back of your head. To the version of you in your stripper costume.

I'm not being a very helpful narrator— you and I both know that's all just wishful thinking LMAO you are in DANGER. The question is: *now* what? You've been on TikTok for like... a month tops. TikTok

notoriety still feels like a fun party trick. A fever dream. *No one* prepared you for the crashing together of your lives so soon. Being recognized is for *famous* people!! Which you definitely are not!! Right? Do you think of a lie? You cannot just stand there omg **think!** *Think of a lie!!* You're draining the shot awkwardly and now you're... swishing that Casamigos around on your tongue? Oh my days now you are *grimacing*. ***Do something.***

Okay. You're breathing out. That's good!! You're swallowing the shot. Great momentum. You are turning around on some newly found liquid courage and move to open your brilliant mouth and then, just before you respond, a voice comes from the back of your skull to the central focus of your mind, all bright and toothy: *Everyone can see you. Already. How did you manage to imagine this social media thing would never **really** affect your life? You can officially never go backwards.*

I have for us an essay that used to be called, "On being surprised I bloomed sunflowers." Throughout, I talk through the pendulum swing between having anonymity and agency to disappear and becoming very intensely *visible* over different periods in my life. I consider the concept of self-ownership, what it truly meant for me to "sell myself," and the orbit of performance arenas that keep managing to find me. I present first the following thesis: one of the best ways, the kindest ways, the most lasting ways I can love myself is through archival. Constant self-perseveration— not only "self-preservation" as in survival, but as in preserving my record of life— keeps me afloat. Because I love myself as a stitch in a quilt, a part of a whole, some of my archival truly *does* belong to the people that see me, even where I wish to belong to myself and me alone.

Let's begin.

## **Act I: Germination**

My first era of life was spent in the lovingkindness of anonymity.

Such is life in the mountains. Earth that's stacked toward heaven like that is *hard* to get acquainted with; she slow to like and longer to love.

Mountains and the commitments you find there press on you in ways that renegotiate time. They *impress* upon you the necessity of timelessness. I appreciate how slow I move from being brought up there, you know? The terrain forces you get to know your neighbors because you need each other to survive well. The mountains I was raised in (the “Colorado” Rockies) were kind to me in their various reminders: that I was teeny and always will be; that clean, good air and clean tap water is an undeniable blessing; that I am lucky to be so small and yet held so gingerly by mighty Mama Earth. “*We ourselves are only her fingertips, her eyelashes,*” they chorus. “*How big she is; how gentle all the same for choosing to hold your hand every day.*”

Mountains also remind you of how little you’ll ever know and it makes you breathe a sigh of relief. This world exudes stress in its constant quest to become larger than life; I was always content as a finite little being because of the mountains that made me. For me, life was about as long and thick as a tree— and I wasn’t dealt an easy life necessarily, but it had the *character* of ease, if that makes sense. There is only so much you allow yourself to be rushed when you can hear trees and what they say to you. They talk so low and so slow.

I had a childhood where I felt the rise and fall of every day. I never, never woke up and thought, *my goodness I can’t wait to be an adult.*

“Colorado,” specifically the land of the Tsésthó’e, began my first love (here defined as: how much are you willing to give without asking? How much affection can you receive and recognize?). I had a family with love in it. I had friends, cousins, hobbies sliding into obsessions. Yet, my child body did not feel love *and* name it as such until I watched the winter sky bruise periwinkle with planets and stars that hung glittering over the peaks, a cosmic sleepover stretching out their last giggling moments together. I did not feel and recognize the affection of the land until the sun set over the mountains at 10pm while I had my first honeysuckle. To this day, the breeze is sweet and I say, “*Oh. This is love.*”

I mean this next bit literally: I learned to journal in the cradle of the trees. All my important conversations with myself and with God

Creator happened at least twenty feet off the ground (as a security measure). The trees kept all my secrets, and I kept theirs. It was this one day in a garden when I was thirteen that they revealed to me I had their roots inside my chest cavity. That paper could keep me and my secrets just like they do. That I could belong to myself just as much as I belonged to everyone else— even more than that. That I was someone *worth* belonging to in the first place.

I had my own self dangling from the end of my pen and tasted love for the second time. I didn't know I'd been hiding from myself until I called my own name and heard an answer within me. I was thirteen, wondering about growing up and dreaming of what selfhood could feel like if the only person that owned me was me. Thirteen and looking at raspberries bend their whole plant because they've grown up to be thick and ripe and on display; thirteen and thinking of what it could feel like to be all ripe and ready for the world. This is the blessing of self-discovery in anonymity: no one *talks* to a little Black girl up in a tree! No one asked me any probing inquiries. No one took much interest in the minutiae of my day, not even my parents. Most days, no one even saw me— not many people think to look up when they walk outside. By the time I picked a pen and found myself, I had the freedom of zero follow-up questions and no curfew. Blessed, sweet *privacy*. No one in my family ever attempted to read what I wrote down— I truly don't think my parents even thought about it. Invaluably, I was alone with myself feeling through my own desire for my body and my time and my own sovereignty. I had my own self dangling from the end of my pen and tasted love for the second time. I didn't know I'd been hiding from myself until I called my own name and heard an answer within me. I don't know that I've ever wanted anything worse than I wanted myself in my own entirety. Raspberries ended up tasting just like me. I opened up pages and gobbled myself down.

## **Act II: Stolen Blooms**

Thus began a love affair between myself and the concept of being mine exactly, mine precisely, and mine exclusively. I realized even then those

desires were very teenage and born from fear of being changed by loving other people up close; I did not care. I was okay being selfish. For one matter, I was dying pretty rapidly— as I said: it was a life with ease of *character*, not ease of circumstance. My *circumstances* were, point blank, going to kill me (or I was going to put myself out of my own misery). The reasons why are for another essay, but for the purposes of this one: Death breathed and heaved over me like July storm clouds, just thick and delicious and promising to come cool and all at once. Dying young seemed like a neutral fact of life, like falling to sleep on Christmas Eve even while you try and fight it. Death was a matter of when, not if. Then, for another: I did not even trust myself with me. How could I trust anyone else?

A relationship with myself that could last (like, truly *last*, like a marriage, or a well-made coffin) could only ever thrive in balance, with true agency and reciprocity. Love, even love of self, outgrows ownership eventually. I needed an internal accord where I chose myself and my body chose me back and my mind blessed the union. Not *ownership*, but a giving set of habits and beliefs, the daily practices of kindness and cooperation— the *space* to allow for growth and its various discomforts. I made the incredibly teenage mistake of committing to myself as the person I was *right then* rather than the person that would continue to exist, which meant that I only knew how to love myself as someone peacefully preparing for death by suicide who also felt extraordinarily possessive with her personhood. I felt others would use love to try and own me, or manipulate me, as I had (unfortunately) experienced in formative years. If that was the case about relationships, I would own my own damn self and have that be enough.

That's... quite an intense outlook on the world. The curse of youth is that your eyes are new and see only high contrast because of that fact. Gray scale colors in with time. I had some vague awareness that I was rushing into things with someone I had quite literally just met, but I was teeny. When you are young like I was (and like I am), the world has a way of convincing you that everything you'll ever be is right in front of your eyes.

I will tell you this because I am endeavoring to be honest with you all: life is fundamentally different when you spend any amount of your formative years certain you will not live to see adulthood. I was right, actually, about believing I would not be able to survive the pain and weights of certain griefs. The bits about life that I then assumed would blister me beyond repair ended up being a pretty accurately appraisal of my current circumstance. There are parts of me that did not survive. There were two major aspects of growing up that I failed to consider, or did not think were possible: (1) I did not, at the time, comprehend or believe that I would be stronger and more capable to manage pain now than I was then, and (2) I had (and still have) a remarkable ability to assess how terrible something might be accurately, an inability to appraise how phenomenally wonderful things might end up— so every time I consented to the future, I could only move by how much suffering I thought I could handle. I had no idea the joys I might find.

Enter: my relationship with The Stage, my arena of performance.

At the time of all this breathing and dying, words began to find their way out of me in a public manner. Somebody saw my incessant journaling and decided to hand me a mic. I could tell you who, in fact: it was my youth pastor (how uncool). I was a child (fourteen! alive! still deeply wary of the world!) and so I could not see that I was silly for thinking I could have my own secrets. I hadn't yet understood that other people saw things in and on me that I hadn't developed the eyes for. I also have one of the **loudest** dispositions I have ever seen radiate off a person; my thoughts flash across my face with the strength and clarity of a gospel choir soprano. Obviously (to others, not to me) I had a way with words. I found myself speaking semi-regularly at my church, sharing poetry.

A series of lessons made plain in hindsight: I could not own my own soils any more than I could own the sovereign earth underfoot. I am made in the image of the land that raised me: slow to like, long to love, visible for miles and miles around. At that time, the most frequent examples I had of love was one rooted in possession and ownership, just like our relationship to sovereign land within the current economic model. In person and in place: you cannot own a sovereign thing. I did



not know that then. I did not know how to exist in community with myself— I did not even know that was possible. And I did not know that some people are really just made to exist in such a way where everyone can see them. Imagine having a chest full of trees and deluding yourself into thinking that no one can see the branches but you.

Even in speaking, in learning to navigate a mic and a stage and a spotlight, it wasn't *really* for me, to my knowledge. It was for "sharing my God-given talents with the world." Sharing heartfelt, soul-wringing poetry also proved myself useful to the white adults who applauded me while I died little, performable deaths in front of them. I was so eager to please. I placed my agonies on display in my poetry and they applauded. *I am dying in front of you*, I would rumble into the mic. *I can't stop cutting my skin. I keep bleeding. This is not metaphoric. I am dying.* Stunned silence. A collective breath. Smattering applause crescendoing into something I could hear with my in-ear still connected. Those declarations would always be followed up with a bigger mic, a larger stage, and more applause. Here lies the first time I ever heard that honest, toothy voice, bright in your mind voice from back to front: *Hey. Hey. Everyone can see you. Are you certain you want to be seen like this?*

I think, after all this, I became a recluse. I was too young to **love** the stage— I didn't have the wherewithal to make that choice. When you start existing in that kind of emotional nudity at fourteen, and when you do so for survival, or because you feel like you "should," you don't really have time to think about your relationship to performance. I didn't love or like the stage, or think any harder about its uses than I did about a hammer. Eventually, there was the loose warmth of something familiar and not altogether unpleasant. As neutral as Death himself. I got in the practice of using the stages I had access to for my personal benefit. *I am dying*, I wrote and was handed a scholarship. *We are dying*, I penned and was handed research money. More stages. More money. Bigger mics. Nothing to ever fix the problems making all the death and dying in the first place.

Sometime in college, while I lost both teeth and family to poverty and stress, and while Ebola was still a case study in my Global Health courses, I had to wade in between this life and those deaths to find the cadence of every day. My undergraduate career brought forth the realization I did not *own* my works. That's not really the academic model — you work to *sell* the fruits of your mind, not to *own* them. I am about to sound very tragically American but: going home to Sierra Leone pivoted my life. It gave me eyes to see how brilliant pain is and why it's so lucrative. How... ritualistic all of this was, the studying of the death of my loved ones, the pains of survivor's guilt, being rewarded academically and financially for talking so poetically about all the death and dying. This was the iteration of time where I began to comprehend, bone deep, the violence on all our global currencies. I went back to Sierra Leone for the first time, for the second time and realized how much *blood* capitalism requires. How much they (the audience, waiting bated-breath) is willing to pay for my blood. *Diamonds*, I wrote to myself. There are no worthwhile trees to climb in Chicago, so I sat on the lakefront barefoot and journaled. *I want it back in diamonds, since I am so sacred to the ritual of this world order. These people are going to pay for my blood in diamonds.*

I remembered the fears I had of being tricked into ownership via the promise of love: misplaced, perhaps, for some of the people in my life, but a very apt fear for navigating academic and professional institutions. Academy does not love. It does not feel. It does not wish to save you from your circumstances as a pauper out of altruism or desire for your safety, but to secure a loyal and generative return on its investment. Once I realized the precarity of my place, that the love of institution came with deliberate strings attached, I came to a screeching halt. I was a senior in college and I blamed it on burn out, blamed it on my mother beginning to die, but the Great Ceasing was so much more than just exhaustion. It was repulsion at coming to understand that I had *sold* my *mind*, my *fertile earth*, to the academy without even realizing. That this life of mine was built on turning my thoughts into some tangible, supple thing that bleeds so I could tack it with some words and publish it— for what? Pieces of flesh stitched together with someone else's humanity, immortalized on the page for the glory of...

publication? Of a better mic and a bigger stage and no material change? This university paid for my health insurance and new laptops in exchange for my *fertile earth*. Never before was I so distinctly aware of this sense of violation and never again did I ever invite it back into my life. Oftentimes, when I mention sex work, someone uses the phrase “selling yourself.” I have never felt that about my time as a stripper. I have, however, felt that way about academia, art-production, and the process of turning stories into property.

These pages with the private college insignia were not the gifts of the trees that held high regard for me. These pages were contracts and I was a laborer, nothing more. This was love made real only in ownership. There is no freedom, no liberation in the academy. I had pimped my mind out to a new age plantation and they wanted me to pretend like I liked it.

Graduate school began to knock and I was celebrated. Finally, I received the prize for all my scholastic excellence: *more hard work*. I shut my mind off. My *days*, we had seen enough. Nothing in my purse but lipgloss, a MacBook and a change of hell.

What was coming next was not safe for us; I didn’t know how to keep our secrets anymore, me and my private places. How could I have ended up here? I didn’t even trust myself. I kissed my pen and put her in the pocket between one rib and another. I graduated college; I did not publish my thesis; I began my master’s program; I laid us all to rest.

### **Act III: What I Owe to the Sun**

I don’t have much to say in public about my time as a dancer, only about the person I turned into because of it. I appreciated the club for its audacity. There was no delusion or pretense to the job— your body is on display and you are paid accordingly. The strip club is a place where you *must* have honesty with yourself because there are some bits of you cannot come into work; there is no money at the club waiting for you if you are not capable of a precise, thorough self inventory. I came to enjoy the ritual. I shed what I need to when I take off

my sweats. My brain gets put in a jar, and the jar in my locker. I anoint myself with oils and go float through the next eight hours as the Prettiest Girl in the World. This process was very rinse and repeat with me. Beauty rituals require brutal self appraisal as a daily practice of sanctification. I never really surprise myself with the parts of me that make it out of the locker room— I have been performing my whole life.

We flash forward a handful of years in a montage of black lights and white lingerie and morning-after alcohol. This is really why I don't talk much about the club— one part discretion and three parts because I would run out of things to say five minutes into an essay. It was, more or less, uneventful. Sure, every now and again Something Happens, but most days, it's just Tuesday. Every day is a Tuesday. My life tumbles forward. I renegotiate myself at the start of every day on what I am and what I would like to keep.

Except! Except— here is our final *and then*. **And then:** after I'd been in the ring for a while, long enough to know better than what I was doing, I started swinging myself around on the pole. Just to try it. Just to see if I could. Because I was too fucked up to say, *no, maybe it isn't a stellar idea to try flips for the first time with an audience and a stomach full of cucumbers, hummus, and champagne*. Because I was sick with envy that other girls were better dancers than me. Because I didn't realize I still had this unrealized dream of dancing on the world's stage, where everyone could see me. I am not pristine enough for the world's stage, and I am too much of a perfectionist to embarrass myself, but this... this was most certainly not an audience of everyone. This was a very private stage, in fact. No phones allowed. No one even knows my real name. And I, so, so intoxicated, flipped myself over and started flying. I don't think I've hit the ground yet.

The first night I ever pole-danced (as in, *really fucking did that shit* pole danced), I pulled an inversion I've only ever seen me do in my dreams. I was fucked up and in new heels because mine broke on me during my last stage set, and I wasn't about to go home! I had my prettiest lingerie on. Because I was miles from sober, the recollections come in flashes that fade to black: I remember hearing Bossy by Kellis play overhead (that was my first stage song). I being aware that night of the

blood money; the lights were red that night. I remembered what these people owe to me. *Diamonds. These people are going to pay for my blood in diamonds.* I remember thinking to myself, in a manner of declaration: *this stage is going to be soaked by the time I'm done.* And my body found its way into spinning, upside down, arms in front of me, grabbing my back leg, gliding through the air like a ballerina in a music box. Like I was moving through honey. And money rained and rained and rained down.

Here is that bright and toothy voice, who speaks all these inconvenient truths: *It's a shame everyone can't see you do this. You are a star. You love the stage. You were born a dancer. Remember? Don't you remember?*

***Oh. I... do. I do love the stage. I think I missed the stage.***

Maybe I make a narrative of things in hindsight, but I cannot help but notice the synchronicities. Year two in the club was also a stage in life where I was passively dying. As much as the job saved me financially, I was only ever *so* attached— here enough to function and to drink and little more. Remember where we are in this season of life: gone past the mountains *years* ago, fooling folks into thinking I'm a true blue city bitch, stuffing the trees in my chest into tasteful ceramic pots to go with the high-rise concrete and asphalt life, and hiding because I'm scared to be owned. Hiding my brilliance from graduate school so the university cannot take myself from me again. Hiding my real identities and signifiers at work so I don't accidentally catch a rich and powerful stalker. Hiding my work from my family because I'm not sure whether they'll disown me or not. Somehow never hiding from myself because I needed an honest self inventory to survive all this.

A secret that radiated off me: I was not doing a great job at surviving all this. I felt those familiar, cool, delicious storm clouds swirling above me and thought, not at all startled, *"Those clouds are so low I can't see my hands in front of me."* I remembered the last time I couldn't see anything past my current age. I was fifteen. That was the year I tried to kill myself and failed.

I was there at 23, watching me drink bottle after bottle of work-sponsored top shelf liquor and thinking somewhere distant, *maybe I should*

*save myself*. I followed up with a revision quickly, because that “saving” business felt like too grand a task: *maybe I should save bits of myself somewhere. Just in case I survive this. I know better now than to think death is certain. I am addled by alcohol and nicotine and all of it— my memory has been rendered untrustworthy. I will want to know what happened to me.* So I did two things. I kept one notebook over three years (a record low but it was better than nothing). And I picked up TikTok, at least in part, to have a means of documentation of myself in spite of my hiding. Again, maybe that’s just me making a story out of things— but never in my life had I, ismatu, on my own accord, really felt like I had things to say to the public until then, in this season of death and recollection.

One last bit of crucial honesty before we get back to the plot: writing and keeping record of myself and my circumstances was crucial to my survival as a teenager. I am going to talk about this openly because I think a decent amount of teenagers engage with my work, and because I am a mental health professional, and because I would have loved it if more adults were honest with me about suicidal thoughts and tendencies. There was a time *after* my attempts (concentrated around age fifteen) where I did not magically find the will to live, I *lacked* the will to die. That gray space lasted for a few years while my brain kept developing. Death is a **commitment** in a way the shuffle of every day life is not; just because I did not actively want to die anymore does not mean I suddenly *wanted to stay*. Thus began a day to day that I characterize as the Chicago winter impressing itself on the skyline: every day is gray. Some days, the fog is lower than others.

We (me and my chorus of selves) went on like that until my brain clicked into place at almost 24. This sounds corny but I am so serious. You can trust me to be honest to the best of my ability and so I am telling you: life really does get better when your brain is done growing! At least do yourself the favor of making fully-informed decisions.

Anyways. I am there, breaths from a new stage of life that I do not know is coming yet, a couple years into the club, a couple years into graduate school, having made a full revolution (defined here as, “gone on a big journey and made it all the way back to start”). We’re here, around the ten year anniversary of me answering a notebook’s call and

deeming myself worth writing down. I made a TikTok (just one video) because I was attempting to pretend it wasn't that deep. And then I immediately went viral.

*This is our last "and then," forget what I said earlier: I remember a few things. I made a video before a session one evening and then turned off TikTok until my next scheduled social media consumption day. And then my best friend texted me a cheeky, babes. You're going viral. And then I was... someone people could see. A growing number of everyone. Videos in the one, two, three million views. The incalculable happens so casually in this day and etherspace. The bright voice is back: Look at you, foolish! You called The Stage and she came running. What did you think would happen? And you look good on the stage. There's the truth. You look like the mountains and always have. You are supposed to be something that everyone can see.*

We've caught up with the plot. Remember where you are: unfreezing, tipsy for a shift later this evening, realizing that your life is collapsing in on itself in a manner most unexpected. You are managing to find your words. You're trying to pretend like it's super normal to hit six figure follower counts in as many weeks. You are also pretending like this is totally not the first time you're being recognized from the internet in your physical life. You cannot think of a lie so you just smile and confirm it *is* you that she saw on TikTok. You two talk! She's kind! In fact, she says, "It makes you cooler, knowing that you do this." *This*, reader, being the ongoing porn convention. "That you are, like, a really full person off screen." Leaving you wondering what it would be like if everyone on the internet knew. If your family knew. If one day your life was not so dissected and pinned apart and you didn't have to pretend like you were ashamed of yourself. You have no idea what it's like to be ashamed of yourself. Maybe the mess belongs on stage just as much as you do.

We (the ismatu acting in the story and the ismatu writing it all down) are here now on a stage with significantly more agency. Not 100% ownership, not yet—but certainly more than before, at the in-between steps. We have more freedom to expand and contract and so many kind people watching you. *People are watching us. People are taking inspi-*

*ration and joy from us when you yourself could not give yourself those things easily.* Instead of constant dying and constant public spectacle, we balance the hardness of things. I have always been one to wear my hardships on my wrists and now here I am having folks assume I had a rich kid life with healthy attachments to my parents, you manage to present joy so well. Befuddling. Amazing. Look how fast you found yourself, sharing us in moments, in morsels of time you found lovely. Then... just like that. Self-documenting. Archival. I cannot help but love myself, even when I do not like myself. And what better love than the love of being kept, collected, considered?

**a brief letter to me on my 23rd birthday entitled, “forgive me for spoiling the ending.”**

*Image description: ismatu leans into a car in a champagne dress, beaming. Direct sunlight hits their body and illuminates their shoulders. They hold a bouquet of bright yellow sunflowers. The caption reads: Taken by my best friend on my 23rd birthday.*

At the time this picture was taken, you have only just begun to understand how vast you are and how *pointless* it is to try and underperform. You were raised up by the mountains and cemented in the sun. *You, a Leo!* You thought you could run and hide when you got scared. Imagine thinking you’d be raspberries your whole life. You are a grown-up now. You have made it to adulthood and you are surprised your flowers changed and bloomed. How sweet. Welcome to your era of sunflowers.

I am an amalgamation of the people that built me and if I am good and honest, I have been built in part by the public eye. I have been pieced together by and under the center spotlight. Fourteen was such a *tender* age to take the stage; there are some ways I will never unsee my bodymind as opportunity; it was what it is. I can never go backwards— and me hiding wasn’t backwards like I thought it was. Hiding was just a different point in the same orbit, within a necessary revolution. When I speak, it feels like branches are shooting out of my chest. I am most rooted when I feel my voice carry on the sun



rays. People from all over the world listen in on your lives, on your podcast, quite literally on your musings and this reality solidifies what I already knew: the reason we prohibited social media in our life as a teenager is because we *knew* what would happen to me if the internet saw us speak. How *hilarious* it is that I thought I could run! I was always going to be up here. You were concretized in and by the sun; you owe those rays you soaked up a second chance at shining.

Well, beloved, you survive. You survive your next big heartbreak and your freak outs about graduate school and your *wild* ass landlords. You survive the pilgrimage home and back to yourself, night after night. Era after era. So much gumption! My stars, you amaze me. I will spoil this ending for you, which is just the middle of my own block. I am still here, making notes in the margins for us. I have new questions of love to consider; they are as follows.

How do I love myself best in public? What is self love when a part of me always belongs to the people?

I haven't reread the notebook you kept loosely during this time but I cannot wait.

love and love,

@ismatu.gwendolyn, one year in

**Final thoughts: archival is not only a study of self. it is a declaration of love.** I love myself and so I want to remember. I am enthralled with the smallest bits of this life seeding and sprouting years later, when I have the fertile earth to hold onto them. I surprise myself with what I grow, even still, after all this time. I expected to look back and see the wildflowers of my youth littered everywhere the wind blows. I am shocked, ten years later, to see what fourteen year old planted in their left hand as she wrote to me with her right: there, blooming up from the margins: stocky, bright, thick-stemmed flowers turning their face up to the sun. I keep myself and in doing so, I declare me worth keeping. And this time, I open up my garden heart to the people that see and see me, that have found ways to love me in sincerity with even the

smallest glimpses of my life. I spare a seed where I am able. I know I am in a temporary space and I am flying all the same.

I am telling you all this because the parts of me that belong to the public hope the work of your day passes through your hands with ease. I hope you have something left over to say to your future self at the end of the day.

warmest regards,

ismatu g.

## THERAPISTS ARE ALSO THE POLICE: SEX WORK, SOCIAL WORK, AND THE POLITICS OF DESERVINGNESS

WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED IN MAY OF 2023

**T**o begin: I think licensure does more to protect the clinician than it does the client. Let it be known that this essay can be alternatively titled, “Reasons I Have No Desire to Get Licensure as a Clinical Therapist.” I cannot, in good conscience, become an agent of the state.

If you’re here, you’ve probably already seen this viral video where I come out as a stripper and state plainly that I don’t want licensure (or maybe you’ve been here and hip to things for a while (because truly *none* of that was a secret). Either way, welcome! Threadings. is a newsletter and podcast where I explore Black feminism, love studies, and other things that hold me together— this essay happens to rest easy in all three aforementioned categories.

**Because I need to say this clearly: I don’t think licensure makes you a “bad” or unfit clinician. I *do* think licensure is a contract with the state that many of us are coerced into signing.** It is not an accident that we’re trained to attach legitimacy, expertise, and other metrics of worthiness to whether the state can account for us or not. It’s also not an accident that we tout the ability to report a licensed professional as a positive when most of our clients don’t know how to do that

anyways. I want us (social workers and those impacted by social work) to think critically about where and by what mechanism we (social workers) swear our allegiances. I want to provide an alternate story for social work students who are told for the entirety of their education and careers that licensure is the most correct path forward; I do so with the understanding that the vast majority of social work positions available are locked behind state licensure requirements; I ask us to resist this infrastructure anyhow. **It is not an accident.**

This essay will analyze a mix of academic + long-form texts and personal experiences. It has the following thesis:

**All forms of policing carry unnecessary violence and social workers are under the umbrella of police.** I understand policing as the coercive hands that use the threat of physical or metaphysical consequence and overhanging fear to compel the actions of the masses *away* from communal sovereignty and *towards* supporting racial capitalism (against our own interests). **In shorter terms: policing happens through policy, not just a white man with a badge and gun.** Because social work was founded with the desire to limit resources to those considered “Deserving,” I commit my work to those of us in the “Undeserving” category—especially as a Black queer sex worker. I am personally wary of the surveillance that comes with soft policing and work to caution us (the public) into presuming benevolence of those of us working for (or in contract with) the state.

Let’s begin.

## **I. The Origins of Policing and Social Work**

In the panel “No Soft Police!” put on by Interrupting Criminalization, Mariame Kaba takes her time speaking to shed light on the history of capitalistic governance that highlights the connection between police and policy formation. She says it better than I will, so I’ve transcribed her words below (all bolding and emphasis my own).

**“...Law enforcement are not the only kind of police, actually.** Right? So, this goes back to the point we were making in the graphic about

when police comes into being— the notion and the word “police” comes into being. That policing has a deeper history than most people acknowledge. Because the term was first used in the 15th century as part of an elite discussion concerning how **the rising states of Europe could promote commerce and encourage people to work for the wage instead of living a life of subsistence. This is when the term police comes into being...** because people talk a lot about police and capitalism and those things coming together. But you have to understand: the discussion of what they were terming at the time “**police science,**” was one of the **primary ways that the work of administering a government was talked about** until the early nineteenth century. And during this time, **police meant what you and I now understand as policy. We call policy “police.”** That’s what that connection is here. **So, police encompassed various things: administrative science. Public health. Urban planning.** And much of social policy today still carries the basis of that old police science. You see the connection there? Soft police isn’t something we just invented in 1996. Right? It’s actually co-constitutive of the rise of the notion of police— in Europe, at the very least.

“So, the **abiding concern really was the protection of private property.** It was the creation of markets. It was the regulation of poverty. It was the **separation of the worthy and deserving poor from the “undeserving criminal” element.** This is why so many people’s experiences with for example, sometimes public education, sometimes social welfare agencies, can feel so oppressive. Because **social policy is not designed to help all people equally— it’s actually a police project to fabricate order and pacify the population.**” (Kaba, 2023)

There’s a couple points worth zooming in on. The first thing that you need to know is that the *system* of policing stretches *far past* active policemen. Policing existed before the construction of the United States, so the functions of police work exceed slave-catching or the creation of prisoners meant for free labor (although these components are major pieces of contemporary policing in the US). The *global* system of policing designed to change the world order from one where people worked together for local, communal goods and services to one where

people traded *labor* for *wages*— a system with a profit margin that enriched the elite *way* faster than subsistence feudalism ever could. In order to market such a fundamental paradigm shift, every single facet of society was regulated with a mask of benevolence. The centralized state told us all that regulation in all forms was a good thing; that they alone could ensure that our standards of health, wealth, sanitation, resources, education (etc.) were up to snuff; that without regulatory forces (*\*eyeing armed policeman\** ... heavy on the force) we would fall into senseless *murder* and *fires* and *starvation* and *anarchy*!! Ahhh!!

**Note here: the capital “f” Fear which comes into play when thinking of policy and policing.** The idea that we cannot possibly and should not attempt to regulate our own selves shows up in mental health spaces all the time. This is not to say that people skilled in healing are unnecessary— I actually think community healers engage in deeply crucial work. I am saying that in my field, the private practice arena, the gold standard for *healer* is a professional person trained in formal academic colleges and registered with the state. The ideal we are taught is **not** an unlicensed community worker and *certainly* not a *\*gasp\** ... *life coach*. This is where we get that outsourcing of skilled work; healing comes from people that have been trained with state-standardized measures and that’s it.

Under the state’s regulatory systems, both the healer and the person seeking healing are subjected to surveillance, scrutiny, and punishment if they do not comply with the wants of the state. In the case of the healer, licensure makes you a mandated reporter: meaning if the particulars of the intent to harm oneself or someone else (or anything involving the harm of children) come to surface, a mandated reporter is required to contact whatever authority is most appropriate. Harm is a bendable idea and can expand to whatsoever the state deems *harmful* to its constituents, whether or not the patient agrees. [Post-script: In the last few years, healthcare professionals have seen *harm* come to include: abortion and gender-affirming care (especially in the case of minors). There are an increasing number of reports that state-licensed practitioners suffer threats, lawsuits, and jail time for violating the rules of the state (Simmons-Duffin, 2022; Depeau-Wilson, 2024; Herbst,

2025; Davis, 2024). Licensure, in this way, can be utilized as a means of coercion to enforce the state's desires within the healing sector, regardless of the desires of the patient.]

What *constitutes* as harm is also, then, up to the reporting professional — which can be terrifying and murky for the care seeker. If you (the licensed professional) fail to report, you stand to risk your licensure (read: the ability to work in your field), as well as your current employment, fines, and imprisonment. In the case of the person seeking treatment, you (the patient) are required to trade personal information\*\* (documentation of your symptoms and diagnoses going on file) for the listening ear of someone who may or may not be able to help you long-term.

*\*\*Unless you can pay out of pocket to avoid involvement of insurance, of course. Privacy, as most things, is a class privilege.*

In both cases, the argument is the same: that nothing less than regulation by the state is safe; that outsourcing expertise is always a better option than whatever care our communities can provide; that the power imbalances of that person being able to report you, document you, or institutionalize you are nothing to fear to long as you have nothing to hide. Therapists absolutely are part of the regulatory network of police science.

I cannot recommend reading the book *No More Police!* enough. If you're nervous to read a whole book, consider just the chapter cited in this essay. Or buy it for yourself and a friend from an independent bookstore.

## **II. The Benevolent, The Deserving, and The Whore: Social Work's Origins and its Attitude Towards Sex Workers**

Social work in the United States is a doozy.

**A quick and dirty on the establishment of the field:** contemporary social work in US settings began with the Christian evangelical church providing aid to impoverished communities in major metropolitan areas. Cities across the United States (particularly New York and

Chicago) wanted to attract capitalist business tycoons and their heavy-swinging pockets, so they had little tax policies and even less tax enforcement. This completely guts social welfare services (funded, of course, by taxes). Big Money Tycoons also do not give two flying fucks about the welfare of the people they extract labor from, so child labor was common, easy and cheap. Upper-class Christian white women that felt compelled by their religion rise up to fix the problems of 20th century American society (so I am told). They took a sweeping gaze around at the desolation of the country's impoverished and dawned their Wonder Woman Belt of Righteousness... or whatever; forgive me for having no stars in my eyes for these retellings. These people were as racist, homophobic, and whorephobic as the day is long. I am sparing you the boring details, but if you would like them you can go on ahead and scroll down to the resources list at the bottom of the essay.

So here is our first important note: **resources and aid distribution** operate under that **same police science of Deservingness**, and in **social work** the **qualifications of Deserving pass through the lens of white, Christian wives**. *Wife* here denotes a woman that is a direct beneficiary of the patriarchy (even if they are against male tyranny on paper). They focused heavily on class-based oppression (aid to the poor) and gender-based oppression (aid to women, often women in the societal role of wife or mother— almost always women in the societal role of “white”). Jane Addams wins a Nobel Peace Prize for her work advocating for child labor protections; children are regularly seen as the most Deserving people group around. They (remarkably) did not focus on race-based oppression, or what happens when race-based oppression overlaps with the other kinds of oppressions (gender, sexuality, occupation, etc.).

**The Politic of Deservingness follows us everywhere:** it's the foundation of capitalism, the bedrock of meritocracy, and the justification behind unequal distribution of resources, aid, and assistance. It's one of the reasons that still (to this day) the people groups that benefit the most from public assistance programs are white women (Delaney & Edwards-Levy, 2018). It's why the face of a white girl child is always



front and center for advertisements about sex trafficking, despite the majority of sex trafficking victims in the US and worldwide being impoverished Black, Brown, and Indigenous girls and women (Pachelli, 2019). You know, the people that are not (not ever) *Deserving* of a society turning everything upside for their absence.

One of the foundational tenants of social work policy in the United States was the eradication of sex work, which was seen as a blight upon citadels and a smear upon the moral conscience of this great nation. *Constant* fear-mongering centralizing on the existence of sex work took place; white woman social workers touted the idea that because the demand for sex work existed, this meant that young women would be kidnapped into sex slavery. They were terrified that sex work would become a way to enslave white women. And, in a reality that academic articles are loathe to cite, *their husbands* were the patrons of the people they were trying to eradicate (University of Toronto 2023; Davies 2021)

Thus, the making of the *whore*: a woman wearing a scarlet red *A* on her bosom. Less of a person, more of a metaphysical concept: a problem to be solved, a floating, disembodied pussy to be fucked, a mission to save and serve, a nothing to murder. Melissa Gira Grant says it best in *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*.

To produce a prostitute where before there had been only a woman is the purpose of such policing. It is a socially acceptable way to discipline women, fueled by a lust for law and order that is at the core of what I call the “prostitute imaginary”—the ways in which we conceptualize and make arguments about prostitution. The prostitution imaginary compels those who seek to control, abolish, or otherwise profit from prostitution, and is also the rhetorical product of their effort. It is driven by both fantasies and fears about sex and the value of human life. (Grant, in chapter “The Police”)

In the role of Prostitute, the worker that clocks in and clocks out of their job becomes unable to remove the costume of *whore*. And *whore* is a standing in society that is decidedly, perpetu-

ally Undeserving. She is conveniently always mute. She does not speak and can only scream for help. The only *whore* deserving of aid is one that desperately wishes to leave the sex trade, one that performs the proper amount of shame and penance for her soliciting and desires to re-assimilate into respectable community life. Social workers still, to this day, lock aid to sex workers behind isolating them from their sex working communities and forcing them to leave the sex trade. We call this *rehabilitation*.

Why is this underbelly of targeting sex workers important to the system of social work? **Because you can always tell the ethics of an organization based on the way they treat the people in the shadows.** Where sex workers call for decriminalization and means of self-regulation, policy makers (policeman) usurp their ability to work safely (Flynn, 2021). No matter how chronic the mask of benevolence is, your politic is most exposed with your actions towards those that no one will go out of their way to defend. In my personal experiences, some of the people that have been the quickest to disregard the needs of sex workers have been licensed clinical social workers. The combination of Blackness, sex work, poverty, and abolitionist praxis have fully informed my decision to forgo state licensure and upgrade my societal status to skilled, licensed tradesman.

### III. Therapist's Role in Policing (Yes, Even Therapists)

**When I say that I am an abolitionist, that absolutely and without a doubt includes social work. And yes, it includes therapy as we know and understand it today.** There is a perceived benevolence when it comes to therapists— that mask of benevolence I referenced earlier— that crucially benefits the police state. We as therapists are taught to internalize this benevolence without firm question. *We are a net good for society and for our clients; seeing us will make people better or facilitate their healing; even if therapy can't be a catch-all solution for everyone, there is some nobility to be found in trying.*

I think assuming our own benevolence as practitioners is a danger to ourselves and our communities. Many of us are skilled, compassion-

ate, justice-oriented clinicians who strive to do their best by their clients. For every single one of those people I met in graduate school, there were three more that I winced (and I do mean physically, facially cringed) at the thought of them with any sort of state-sanctioned authority. Thinking that we are “one of the good ones” is not an honest enough assessment of the field. **Individual intent does not surpass structural effect. The reality is: we monitor you.** Those of us contracted with the state become mandated reporters, meaning there are certain things you cannot tell us without us having to contact authorities or be at risk the consequences. We do ourselves and our communities a disservice by ignoring the power imbalances that come with state backing. More than that, we often allow our own elitism to convince us that the system of therapy we have in place currently is a good thing—that we are a good thing. The fact that we live in societies where community has been so fractured individual people have to trade money or privacy to call a stranger and find a way to cope with their societal stressors is *ass*. *Why are we pretending like this is not awful?*

I’m going to take a moment to peel back the veil (that mask of benevolence) on private practice therapy. When I trained as a student clinician in graduate school, I understood the function of private practice therapy as notating the ways one’s habits disrupt one’s productivity. This was oddly framed as “the process of healing” and not “surviving under capitalism.” I am always (always) skeptical of interpretations of the human experience that conveniently justify the current world order, and the positive spin given to the endless forward momentum we promote as *growth* most definitely falls under that category.

I also experienced the expectation to self-regulate and move on personally, when I endured graduate school during a time of intense grief. I lost so many family members to COVID, stress, poverty, or unfortunate combinations of the above that I don’t even wish to mention the number. I’ve stopped bothering to count; I always forget someone and have to start over. I was housing insecure or homeless on more than one occasions. My school knew about these hardships, as did my clinical supervisors. I was never offered any official bereavement time or any assistance outside of a short-term loan from my university (*on*

top of the student loans I already took out for the damn degree). I was told to just “work through the grief” by my supervisor in my first year. I was not allowed to just quit my second year after breaking down from a significant familial death, even though I had accumulated all the necessary hours I needed for graduation (also coincidentally, a place that chose to charge my clients for meeting with me halfway through the year but also refused to pay me). **How to be productive under duress is a central tenant of therapy today because we need to equip our constituents with the ability to endure the weight of this world. We are not trained to teach our constituents that a better world is possible.**

A quick soapbox: I think therapy would look a lot different if the goal was to eradicate the systems in place and not justify or survive under them. True justice, true resource allotment, true healing comes from moving away from policing, carcerality, and scarcity and towards reparations, communal living, and community accountability. True justice and healing would have us working a fuck ton less and equipping our own places of belonging with the skills we learn in academy. One’s freedom to heal would not be connected to their ability to work under capitalism. But then, most therapists have signed contracts with the state and are excited about the opportunity to do so... the outcomes don’t surprise me. I just wish to remind us all that a better world than this is possible.

Productive vs. unproductive was also framed as this means of moving away from the *sticky mess of morality* in therapeutic settings— those pesky Christian puritanical holdovers from the establishment of the field. Instead of behaviors being “good” or “bad,” I was trained to think of things in terms of whether it was *productive* or *unproductive* in the life of my client. I was to focus and teach on tools that were designed to give you mastery of your life in acute settings— you know, control the things within your control for better outcomes.

**Two things: (1) those tools come at the price of documentation.** You know how social media isn’t actually free, you’re paying for it with your data? That’s exactly how I feel about using insurance to pay for session. If someone was distressed to the point of tears, there is a box I

check to notate that. If someone's countenance changes from normal to lethargic or angry, there are boxes to check for that. There's a line you have to walk of writing down just enough to let my supervisor know what went on in my sessions but not so much that I would get my clients in any sort of trouble. Eventually I just started to pretend that everything was fine, sacrificing what could have been valuable instruction from my supervisor to ensure my clients had some semblance of real, actual privacy. As a therapist using insurance, I was also required to diagnose my clients from session one. I had 50 minutes to meet you, listen to you, and then decide what was wrong with you. What if I was wrong? Did you know that diagnoses can follow you from therapist to therapist, or even outside of that (Flaherty, 2021)? Did you know your therapist's notes can be subpoenaed if you ever stand trial? Also (just an aside) if you are seeing a therapist that is employed by your school or workplace, don't. Just do not do that.

**Thing two: mastery is a fucking lie.** It's such a farce. I think the allure of therapy and private practice is the illusion of control— that we have means to change our individual circumstances should we self-assess, plan, and execute accordingly. In this society, that's really only true for people with certain amounts of structural backing. Remember when I said this essay would be a mix of texts to draw from and personal experience? I'm going to tell you a story.

I will never (ever) forget my first session. My client (whom I still love, and pray for, and hope every day is doing well) was crying with me because she was navigating treatment of her child's speech delay. I am trying to keep my own self together because my kitchen exploded (???) and I cannot tell her that. She was living in old housing that still had lead in the paint, and because of that her children had higher amounts of lead in their system than what was recommended. I was living in an old house that had so much water damage in the kitchen the cabinetry fell from the wall.

Picture this. Her, the patient: crying with me because her children have lead poisoning and she feels like a terrible mother, when the fault of the situation was poverty (and thus, the world structures that insist poverty must exist). Me, the clinician: holding back tears because she

doesn't know how deep my empathy goes. Because I am living in a barely-legal apartment trying to afford the ability to work for free in order to get my master's degree. Because even though I know I am still wading through poverty now, I am on a track of life that will catapult me into the next kind working class—the licensed professional instead of the “unskilled” laborer. I will have money to solve my problems and she will continue to call me about the issues of poverty that show up in hers. And I will teach her tools about mind regulation and breathing and journaling. *And I will have had the money to solve my problems.*

In every piece of employment I've had, I experienced this movie-moment where the lightbulb went off. Where I zoom out and watch my life unfold like an audience member in a theater. Where I see myself say, “...oh. This is dystopian. I live in a dystopia.” This moment here, almost crying with my client, was mine in terms of therapy. I never recovered.

My training to give this woman “mastery of her life” is a farce. My *mastery* of my life was a fucking farce. I am not saying your mindset does not matter, I am saying *CBT does not fix lead paint in your house. DBT did not fix the fact that I could see a hole in my kitchen floor that led to outside. You know know what fixes the problems of poverty? Redistribution of resources on a mass scale.* Competent and long-lasting poverty eradication efforts could include: safe and affordable public housing as a guar; expanded welfare and Medicaid until we have universal healthcare coverage; eradication and abolishment of any sort of debt slavery (read: student loans); universal basic income such that everyone can self-guarantee the basics of life without a negotiation of dignity. After that session, I asked my supervisor if there are any resources I could connect her with; I knew from previous placements that I had that databases exclusive to Licensed Clinical Social Workers exist where you can search for public assistance programs (because of course centralizing these opportunities and making them available to the general public is far too easy). She said, “...yeah, we don't really do that.”

And do you know what? She was right. Resource connection truly is out of your job scope as a private practice clinician. You would

exhaust yourself and burn yourself out trying to connect each of your clients to possible fixes to their problems— because that's the thing about aid, it's not a guarantee and oftentimes a band-aid solution. I would fail out of school trying to give meaningful, substantive aid to my clients outside of coping mechanisms and conflict resolution. No, you cannot *conflict resolve* your way out of poverty, but it was truly all I could do. That's when the reality of the job fully sank in: we are the administrative police. We document you and we train you in regulating yourself so that you do not do anything rash. We teach you to moderate and, potentially, medicate your despairs such that you do not deviate from the prescribed path of sanity. We are ultimately in service of the state because that is who we pay to be licensed to. Here's that original thesis: licensure does more to protect the job security and the perceived legitimacy of the clinician than it protects the health or privacy of the client. Licensure cannot protect a clinician from saying a harmful thing about you or to you; it can only make sure that they (could) receive punitive measures for stepping out of line (and those lines, within the United States, are drawn by the state with some federal guidance). The only thing that protects clients in this industry is praxis, and we know for damn sure that praxis does not come from state-administered registration or tests.

We protect private property and the private property is you. You, the worker bee, the community member, the tired and frightened overgrown child, are the property of the oligarchs who we feed with our labor. Nothing has changed. We make sure that you are regulated enough to continue in the game of capitalism instead of encouraging you to aid in the struggles to eradicate it. Contemporary therapy and psychology focuses on promoting regulation, employing sustainable coping mechanisms, and staying productive. **Why would we not want to take away the problems that everyone has to keep coping with in the first place?** We, the trained-in-academy healer, give you to the tools to make sure you can keep working. Private practice therapists lack the equipment to help the people at the bottom of our socioeconomic hierarchies move the boulders out of their path. Because we cannot actually do that. If we did, we would work ourselves out of a job.

#### IV. Conclusions: Healing Individually is Overrated.

The way we go about mental health in the United States is still quite carceral. The only resale protections that come with seeing a licensed clinician is the idea that you can report them if they something wrong. So that's that same model of policing right? It doesn't stop harm from happening to you, it makes sure that you can call someone to punish them if that harm happen. In addition, "Go see a therapist!" as the height and depth of what healing looks like to the layperson and is *ass*. Just entirely inadequate! What's present is that **same structure of carcerality**: *someone else, out of sight, away from me until it can be productive again*. "Go to therapy already!" has become a Twitter retort for people behaving poorly. We treat therapeutic intervention like the grown up version of time-out.

Under capitalism, the idea of expertise is designed to destabilize community and community knowledge. This is not to say that experts of their craft are bad, not to be trusted, or shouldn't exist— I am very pro-expert. It *is* to say that there is far more than one way to be an expert. There are multiple ways of knowing. The "see a therapist" cry posits that we are not, cannot, should not be responsible for each other's well-being. I could not agree less. **Most of the wounds that I work on with clients happened in community**: in family systems, religious organizations, schooling, other governing bodies. Our individual problems reflect the issues we have as bodies of people. Knowing this, I am then of the opinion that seeing a therapist and healing individually, while helpful for understanding oneself and learning coping mechanisms that you really do need to survive this world, only go so far. The true test of healing occurs when you are placed back into settings designed to foster *love*, connection, intimacy and long-term affection. Healing must be measured not just by the absence of pain, but the ability to create new peace. Outsourcing your problems can't be the only way to get better if we are to make a world where we actually can rely on each other.

Thank you for reading. I leave us with some benedictions: I hope that we see the structures of policing in the truth of just how vast they are. I



hope that clear sight leads us away from panic, disillusionment or despair and towards the will to make friends that can help us pull the new world in from the floating horizon. I hope that you find a village to heal in better than the ones that harmed you. And, as always, I hope the work of your day passes through your hands with ease.

ismatu g.

### Hyperlinked Sources

Davies, N. (2021, October 25). Prostitution and trafficking – the anatomy of a moral panic. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/oct/20/trafficking-numbers-women-exaggerated?ref=ismatu.fm>

Delaney, A., & Edwards-Levy, A. (2018, February 5). Americans are mistaken about who gets welfare. *HuffPost*. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/americans-welfare-perceptions-survey\\_n\\_5a7880cde4b0d3df1d13f60b?ref=ismatu.fm](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/americans-welfare-perceptions-survey_n_5a7880cde4b0d3df1d13f60b?ref=ismatu.fm)

DePeau-Wilson, M. P. (2024, November 20). Texas has sued three doctors over youth Gender-Affirming care. *MedPage Today*. <https://www.medpagetoday.com/special-reports/features/113029>

Flaherty, C. (2022, February 10). *Harvard allegedly obtained student's outside therapy records*. Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/02/10/harvard-allegedly-obtained-students-outside-therapy-records?ref=ismatu.fm>

Flynn, M. F. (2021, December 16). *FOSTA-SESTA and its impact on sex workers*. AIDS United. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from <https://aidsunited.org/fosta-sesta-and-its-impact-on-sex-workers/?ref=ismatu.fm>

Gwendolyn, I. (n.d.). @ismatu.gwendolyn on Instagram: "On Not Taking Licensure". Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Crw3DjWAmFK/>.

Herbst, A. (2025, February 12). The Future of Gender-Affirming Care: Legal, Ethical, and Practical Considerations for Providers. *The National*

*Law Review*. <https://natlawreview.com/article/future-gender-affirming-care-legal-ethical-and-practical-considerations-providers>

Langford, J. & Keaton, C. (2022, October 3). *The history of social work in the United States*. Pressbooks. <https://uta.pressbooks.pub/introtosocialwork/chapter/the-history-of-social-work-in-the-united-states/?ref=ismatu.fm>

*Legislating the "White Slave Panic," 1885-1914 · Canada's oldest profession: sex work and Bawdy House Legislation · Exhibits*. (n.d.). University of Toronto Libraries. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from <https://exhibits.library.utoronto.ca/exhibits/show/bawdy/white-slave-trade?ref=ismatu.fm>

North America and Caribbean Regional Correspondent. (2016, July 14). *No Humans Involved Documentary Released*. NWSP. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from <https://www.nswp.org/news/no-humans-involved-documentary-released?ref=ismatu.fm>

Pachelli, N. P. (2019, December 19). "Nobody saw me": why are so many Native American women and girls trafficked? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/18/native-american-women-trafficked-searchlight-new-mexico?ref=ismatu.fm>

Pedersen, T. (2022, July 14). *What do therapists have to report?* Psych Central. <https://psychcentral.com/health/what-do-therapists-have-to-report?ref=ismatu.fm>

Simmons-Duffin, S. (2022, November 22). Doctors who would like to defy abortion laws say it's too risky. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/22/1138558392/doctors-who-would-like-to-defy-abortion-laws-say-its-too-risky>

### **LONG-FORM RESOURCES in this essay include:**

No Soft Police! Event Recording organized by Interrupting Criminalization

"No Soft Police," a chapter in *No More Police!* written by Andrea Ritchie and Mariame Kaba

*Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* by Melissa Gira Grant, journalist and former sex worker

Brown, Victoria Bissell. "Sex and the city: Jane Addams confronts prostitution." (2010).

Mendes, P. (2020). Tracing the origins of critical social work practice. In *Critical social work* (pp. 17-29). Routledge.



How do I say this without yelling? HOW do y'all not see me? How do we not see what this is bigger than me? I want us to circle bigger than our immediate fears. I know that's scary - to be reserved. I know that. And it doesn't change the fact that needs are needs. It's smaller to YOU, is that? Let the fear of failing at individualism move you to find collective solutions. What does it move when you confront? You, who has the ability to shape the world? What does it move?

— Everyone can see you — you don't have the option to play it safe.  
or. Or, I guess you do. you could settle. And then what? What moves when you reach for the power to save you and only you? You settle and the world turns on with all these teeth the new. asked for. What keeps you safe from the teeth that keep chewing up the world? What if you ride, making yourself even softer, even in the presence of fear and riot and gangs?

strong and weak are opposites. strong and soft are not.♡

WHAT WOULD IT COST YOU? // WHAT WOULD YOU BLOOM?

Adonai have mercy on us.  
keep my head steady and  
my gaze to the mountains  
so that I never dream of anything  
smaller than myself

adonai  
have mercy  
on me



## REVOLUTIONARY LOVE COSTS YOU SOMETHING.

NOTES ON REFUSING TO CHARGE FOR  
CLIENT SERVICES | JULY 2023

**H**ello, internet friends. It is a Saturday in July. I have, once again, made a video that fundamentally changed the course of my life. I am not charging for any of the care work I engage in. It looks impulsive (because I have mastered the In Real Time video format) but I have been chewing on this moment for months. Announcing this decision on socials solicited a flurry of comments meant to be constructive. *Can you just do a donation model? What about sliding scale? Surely there's some way you can be paid for the services you provide.*

Right! Fine and dandy. Let me tell you about my experience trying to be “reasonable.”

Every session, I would say, “Cost is not a barrier. If at any point in time you find difficulty paying or you need help, all you have to do is say so. The answer is already yes.” Every intake session, I would assert this. Every other week, I remind folks. I would do my best to check in with folks before I sent the invoices on the amounts we agreed on. I took forever to send out the first invoices. People fought to pay me. They would remind me that I have not charged them and I would pretend I did not see the text. If folks did not pay their invoice I would

assume it was on purpose and I would purposefully not remind them. It was already giving slip-n-slide!! I was already on a donation-based framework. Do you know what happened when I sent this email?

Good morning, all!

Now I know what you're thinking. "Ismatu, how will you possibly pay your rent?" I don't know! And (if I'm honest) I don't fucking care. Paying for community is just... entirely antithetical to what I want this to be. It doesn't make any sense. Everything in me screams, "I want to be doing this for free!" And so I will. There are no payments required for Allafia sessions from here on out. If I had the money to refund you, I would.

I am broke and I literally could not care less. If you still wanna break off a piece as like. A donation. That's cool and I would thank you because I definitely did just pay rent and it overdue my account and (*say it with me*) I do not care. I am just not motivated by money. I am motivated by community, so I'm going to find different ways to get this done.

Alright have a great week! Hoping the work of your day passes through your hands with ease.

Warmest regards,  
Ismatu G.

Ten texts within two hours. All with some effect of, "Oh my word. Thank you Ismatu. I didn't know how to tell you that I couldn't keep paying and so I had to stop coming."

This is how I found out that any associated cost is a barrier. Even on sliding scale! Even on a completely voluntary, please-do-not-worry-if-you-cannot-pay suggested donation model! Even with plenty of people that *can* pay! When I assured my constituents they should not skip if they could not find the funds, folks still grappled with not attending session *in secret* rather than just telling me they could not pay and coming anyways. People would cry to me after session about how bad they felt "getting my labor for free." I would go blind with rage. The degradation that capitalism instills within us— clearly, it's not just physical. Lack of access cannot only be structural; it surpasses just physical deprivations; the barriers aren't even exclusively financial. Because if finance *was* the barrier, asking for help when you know the answer is yes would be enough, right? And yet— no. The barriers manifest physically, psychologically, socially, even spiritually. We, collectively, are so afraid of needing help from one another that we would rather simply disappear.

*We are all brainwashed into attaching our own senses of worth to money. People weep* when I tell them they can come for free. They break down on the phone. There's a follow up text, a shaky voice note: *I just feel so bad. You deserve to be paid. It has to be bigger than that.* It has to. This is



why I push back against the politics of Deservingness so much, so frequently. "Deserving," this wibbly-wobbly assertion of relative worth, is an inconsistent North Star at best. At worst, it is easily corrupted by capitalistic gains. Hinging our ethical apparatuses on what we *deserve* allows us to exclude each other, to exploit one another to justify our comforts. *Deservingness* has us ensuring that access to healing services remains contingent on monetary access. How are we alright with this?

I have to remind folks over and over again that they, under no circumstances, should skip session because they cannot pay, and they do anyways from the psychological weight of having to ask for help. I cannot suffer like this anymore. Shit is intolerable. No matter how much I insist, no matter if I make the sliding scale ten dollars or one dollar or zero dollars, all these workarounds act as mere stepping stools to *overcome* the barrier. I find that insufficient; I wish to eradicate the barrier in the first place. Cost is a barrier; I am taking down the barrier. No more cost.

LOVINGKINDNESS CANNOT BE RELEGATED to what we "deserve." It is inconsistent. We crave *community* and that goes past "deservingness." What do I *owe* to you? How do we realize our highest good in tandem step?

Do we remember when I said, "every time you reach for power instead of love, you isolate yourself from your community?" Extrapolate with me.

My powers are as follows: I am young, public-facing, professional who was educated at elite, private universities. I have amassed wild amounts of social capital in a short time because I am a gifted orator with a really striking physical appearance. I am precisely and expansively trained in therapeutic services and community building, beginning that training at fifteen years old at my local church. Ten years of cumulative, concentrated development in leadership, speaking, small group leading, ethnography, motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, and confidentiality.

Alongside formalized avenues, I incurred experiential education in prison abolition, transformative justice, somatic intervention, and Black feminist world making from both college and the strip club. Absolutely it is easy to convince folks to pay me for the work of building community. No one would argue with me. The above combination concentrates so much power that folks feel horrible for *not* paying. Excuse, for a moment, the “shoulds” and the “deservings” of it all. What do I owe to you? To the masses, fledgling in our pursuits of revolutionary love? If I am of the people, to whom do my powers truly belong?

The model of counselor : counseled meant that I could never be a part of the spaces I am trying to serve. Reaching for the power of Legitimized, Impressive Professional isolates me from the very communities I am trying to build. There is no mutuality in that. Such hierarchy posits that I am above my clients, that *I* am the expert, that there really is no *us* because I am The Professional in Residence. I (and I alone in the space) can provide a service that you, community member, cannot. How do I demonstrate vulnerability and healing from on high? How, when humans learn best through mirroring, example, and storytelling? How do I ask people to risk real skin in the game when I am safe, up above, well-paid and never having to depend on the communities I create in the first place? I wanted the strength of mutual aid and there I was settling for a charity model. I refuse to continue to disappoint myself.

I am not clinical. Since rejecting licensure, I’m not allowed to practice clinical psychotherapy without catching a case, and anyways, I wouldn’t want to. I want to be in and among the love so that I know it’s good and built to last. I don’t want to be all alone. So why am I still doing it like the systems I came from? The private practice model says, you lean on me and I stand upright. How? How do you design community that gives people a love that you yourself never allowed to pass through your own body in the first place?

*[in the audio reading, there is a strong pause to sip tea here].*

Charging also fucked me up on the receiving end. I was constantly worried about whether the experience I was providing was life-changing enough. It gave me incentive to shy away from the sticky, awkward, unpleasant moments that are necessary for community-building, because I know folks don't enjoy paying to have an uncomfortable time. I had to worry about being marketable. I had to ratio paying folks to free participants to make sure I could make my bills. That felt unnerving and alarming; it worked nearly identical to the Disney Fast Pass system they use at amusement parks, where people who pay extra are let onto the ride first. This results in people that pay less waiting longer and longer to access what they came for, while people that can pay move quickly through the system. Icky! Even though I built a space outside of the private practice model, I was still operating as if insurance was tracking my progress. Are we moving fast enough for this to be worth it? Is this worth the money? Would I pay this money? Do I even want this money?

Maddening. It was not working. I am telling you, I could not sleep.

So I annexed cost before I had the financial infrastructure to do so<sup>3</sup>. Was it deranged and out of pocket? Yes. Am I at peace being completely out of my mind? Absofuckinlutely.

The sense of wellbeing that washed over me once I sent that email and settled into myself—that peace will carry me and touches me still. A peace that transcends time and mugs of tea. I hadn't slept in a week, on account of the screaming. There was a small one (girl child, eight years old) that screamed every time I sat down to collect payments. *Screaming*, honey. I met with my elders; all of the adults who care for me sincerely tried to counsel me into finding some peace with accepting payment. They stress self-sufficiency and autonomy and the reciprocal nature of things. I tell them of course. I try to be a reasonable, autonomous adult. I attempt to sleep; I am kept awake by a small internal self who screams and screams. I often say my politic is alive and she will kill me; she (my politic) is also eight years old and ruthless. Eight was the age when I realized there were many, many adults that would let you die if you could not pay. Eight years old was the first time I asked for medicine to aid with body pain and was denied

because I did not have the money to purchase ibuprofen, even though I could see it right there. We, the adults, have been desensitized to how batshit that is— that there can be a medicine sitting right there, a child who needs it, and an adult standing in between the two, demanding silly paper notes. Adult me resigns themselves to the brutality and the negotiations; eight year old me screams. Even last week, when I announced I would not be accepting any more payments, the tidal wave of well-intentioned just be reasonable messages came en masse.

Listen. Hear me in this part if no where else. **Settling for what's in front of us is exactly how nothing ever changes.** *Why* are people so hellbent I settle for what I can see? When we are tasked with creation? Where's the divinity in that— settling to be a servant in someone else's imaginings of the world? NO. NO! I tried to be reasonable; it turns out I have no interest in this iteration of reality. There is no way to build revolutionary community and charge folks to participate. I refuse to negotiate my dreams.

So I embark on my own flight. I pray that morning [*adonai, have mercy on me*] and collapse into community. I burn a bit in the process; it turns my skin molten; I prepare myself for a new body. A shedding. I realize I haven't eaten in...? some days...? because I still fast when I need something in my life to move. I get myself a smoothie with the credit card that wasn't yet affected by the negative thousand dollar balance in my bank account. I enjoy a body that hums with itself, pleased, resonating, finally aligned enough to yawn. I'd slept maybe twenty noncumulative hours over the previous seven days and felt no side effect until then. Safe enough within myself to feel sleepy. What a blessing.

I post the videos and turn my phone off and hope I get enough to pay rent.

It's not that I don't understand the precarity this put me in. I do. It's that (1) I personally would rather be bullied by the world than keep negotiating with my childhood self. She really learned to be bitch before she learned to be a woman. And (2) love which requires instability is the way of the life that I've always known. Revolutionary love

is precarious. Both revolutions: the revolutions of a journey that takes you back to your starting place changed and the revolution that calls for death so you can build something life-giving upon the grave. It *costs* you something. If I cannot trust myself to leap and fall into these communities that I built, why did I build them? If these communities I say that I cultivate cannot lean on each other instead of the false safety of individualism, why are they here? What do we do this for if not the risk of caring for one another well?

A thesis comes to light: if I do not have community that I can collapse into, I don't have community.

How can I build these spaces where I encourage interdependence, mutuality, vulnerability and then stand upright myself? How can I expect to move and shift culture with no skin in the game? Where the fuck is your courage, ismatu? Love that is actually good for us is precarious by design. Love which allows newness requires the trust to bloom and be fragile with that process of opening. Trust like that happens easiest in the absence of systems that surveil us with unblinking, fluorescent floodlights— we have to make something new where we keep one another safe. Blooming is uncomfortable! It's ugly and awkward for a good long while! Community requires space to unravel and be helpless. What happens when we regard one another sweetly in the presence of exhaustion? What kind of love would it take for you all to look at me disheveled and uncurated and not coach me toward sanity or regulation or self-reliance? What kind of love would it take from you all to look at me unraveled and feel honored rather than panicked?

You know what else I am? Frustrated that folks keep trying to move me towards individualism. There's your thesis. Stop that!! "But you have to take care of yourself—" shhusshh! Hush. Don't you see what's happening here? Do you not see me radicalizing in real time? I don't give a fuck about calls for autonomy and self-care if they're not followed up by HOW DO I CARE FOR YOU? HOW DO WE CARE FOR YOU? The ever-present beast of carceral thinking rears his big and shiny fangs: somewhere else, away from me. Ismatu you should be able to take care of yourself. Ismatu, why are you so unsightly in

public? Don't you think you should care for yourself? I am going to stab myself in the eyeballs. Do you know how good I am at caring for myself? It would not be hard to live a life where I only accepted money from paying clients, I made sure everyone paid, and I made myself a little individual safety nets from that money? *It wouldn't be hard.* Do you know how long I've been self-sufficient and how hard I worked to make myself enough for me? I moved out my parent's house when I was seventeen! I am so good at self-sufficiency; I love my own company; I am incredibly resourceful and I am great at making money. Yes, I am enough as I can be! I know I am enough! I want bigger than enough! I want excellence. I want excess. I want not enough to survive and take care of me, I want new systems that benefit masses of people I will never meet. I want communal sovereignty. Stop asking me to settle. I want feasts for us all; it feels like y'all are asking me to settle for manna because there is risk involved.

There's risk involved in depending on other people! Of course that's the case when it's skin in the game! Okay? Buck the fuck up! Do you have the courage to deal with the inevitability of getting hurt? Can you stand the idea of it being hard? Isn't it terrifying knowing that you could fall, that sometimes you *will* fall, and there will be no one to catch you even when you thought that people would? And then, aren't you frightened of the way people tire of the world? Aren't you scared and scarred by how much we pretend we're safe in our little individual caves? Do you feel safe? Do you feel safe on your lonesome? When you alone provide for you, do you feel safe to rest and cry and slow down and unravel? Doesn't everything come crashing down? Isn't that the nature of life? So when things inevitably fall, do you (those who move in self-sufficiency alone) not also risk the crashing back to the floor anyways because there was no one else to catch you?

Do you see how it's fear either way? *Put some goddamn skin in the game.*

I really did try not to yell but, also. While I'm here being honest as hell trying not to cuss y'all out and failing; the reason I was not scared about rent money is because I trust you all. The reason I keep asking and asking you to say hello to me or to engage with me evenly is because I am trying care for you and with you (yes, even through the

internet). There were many many folks that asked me to be reasonable — to find a workaround the barrier when I want the barrier gone. And then there were folks that CashApped me a dollar, two, or many so that I would not have to be precarious alone. Some people did both! Enough such that I paid my rent. Such that I have the money again to consider what it would be like to be housing secure. It's been a full year since I was housing secure. I forgot it was something I could ask for.

[an editor's note from the audio reading: I'm still not quite housing secure. I'm in an airbnb at the moment desperately trying to get my papers in order. But enough people sent a dollar or two that it reminded me like... "oh. Maybe I should ask for enough money to be housing secure. Maybe it's not enough for me to be precarious on my own, silently. Maybe the— the— the sadness and the anger that I feel at finding out that so many of my clients were struggling silently instead of asking for help— maybe that's how y'all feel about me. Maybe I'm not the only one yelling."]

Thank you for bolstering my ability to not negotiate with this silly, genocidal world. I cannot stress enough how much it means to me to have such agency to steward my life and space. I cannot tell you all how much I think and think of you. I'm on the phone with my folks all the time— *how do I say this in a way that makes sense? I'm teaching through this concept and I just don't feel like we're getting it. I didn't expect this question; how do I expand?* I have taught myself new ways of speaking, of writing, of teaching to be here with you all in vulnerability. I am now unfolding in ways which require me to acknowledge that I, in part, belong to the people. So I don't think of this as gambling. I think of this as trusting that this extended community of folks I asked to see me in lovingkindness would manage to catch me if I fell.

All of this— not negotiating, moving in a love which requires precarity, leaning in instead of staying upright, making community mutual— it reminds me why I have skin in the game. This is my calling in life and I am coming back to it. Healthcare should not have financial cost as a barrier. Of course it feels manic and uncured and wild. You all are watching me expand in real time. Do not witness me choose revolu-

tionary action and ask me to shrink. "But how are you caring for yourself? But you need to take care of you!"

My sweet friends. Maybe we do not have the same eyes on the world. If you can't look me up and down and see that this shit is so much bigger than me by now... my word. If I look crazed? I am. Accept that I am wild and untethered and insane. And then once you accept that, look again.

In all my delusion— how well am I loved and cared for? How well am I taken care of? For all my "failures" to care for myself?

And then: for all your sanity and your self-sufficiency. The upright, prim and proper balancing act of individualism. Are you frightened of the way people tire of the world? Are you happy on your tightrope, sane and alone?

I would never tell you to jump without building you a safety net. Because that's my job in this life, and I'm not going to shy away from that anymore. I am crazed and so I build one. Wait and see. I got some tricks up my sleeve.

I hope the work of your day passes through your hands with ease.

Ismatu g.



## DRUGS ARE FUCKING EVERYWHERE (AND WE ARE ALL ADDICTED TO COMFORT)

WRITTEN AND EDITED: OCTOBER 2024

**I** *want to be able to talk about drugs without fanfare, especially as it relates to revolutionary thought, intent, and action.*

Besides, I fucking love drugs. Threadings. is a newsletter and podcast about what keeps and collects me at the seams; a lot of days, I am kept and collected (read: ensuring I don't bust my motherfucking stuffing) by a blissful amount (incredibly legal!) cannabis rolled with my special herbal blend. I get the impression that you all think I'm, like... responsible? And that's fine. Sure. I am also here to be honest about that how close I am to losing my *shit* all the time— and further, honest about how ubiquitous drugs are in contemporary US-American society. Drugs are everywhere; they embed and/or broadcast themselves in every facet of day to day life. **What does the prevalence of mind-altering substances in the day to day United States mean for us as people with some of the most lucrative attention in the world? Why are we specifically so encouraged to *never* be sober?**

*Thesis one: drugs are everywhere.*

1. Drug: A chemical substance, such as a narcotic or hallucinogen<sup>1</sup>, that affects the central nervous system, causing changes in behavior and often addiction. (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition.)

a. In my own words: Drugs are substances that change the way you see and interact with the world and create a reaction from your physical body, which leads to changes in behavior and can often be habit-forming in their use

Surviving in the constant cognitive dissonance of living in the imperial core leads the vast majority of us to medicate in some way. We, as the US-American populace, medicate through exercising our creature comforts. We grab cute coffee to sip and take a walk on soils that haven't seen war from foreign hands since European colonizers *were* the foreign hands inciting the wars. I take extra long showers and forget about the many places in the world where water is a privilege you get in monthly budgets (*The Water Situation in Yemen*, 2022). I feel badly about the binges and abuses I make my body endure (re: my workaholism, this is me specific) and move to eat healthier... failing to realize how odd it is that we have fresh strawberries and kiwi in the wintertime, packed in plastic and ready to eat. Any time a luxury like that is so cheap and so commonplace that we (US-Americans) don't even notice, know that someone on the other side of the world quite literally, non-hyperbolically died for that shit<sup>2</sup>. We go through drive-throughs in our cars designed to maximize personal comforts and minimize thoughts about infrastructure, fuel, roadways, machine parts and their genocidal sources (Gross 2023)— we receive our instantaneous food and swipe our plastic money cards and our brains *ping! ping ping ping!* with delight. By design. We air-condition our homes and we filter our water and we nurse ourselves to sleep looking at the internet every night in the palm of our hands, gazing at people just like us (except maybe a little bit more glimmery), living lives where they boast comforts back and forth to one another over the ether and we all

aspire to be less lonely... somehow... and we then rise to do it again. By design. By design. We are addicted to comfort; it's everywhere; having a populace constantly under the influence of pleasures which undermine long-term thought and lasting resolution is absolutely and most definitely by design.

Contemporary US-American society runs on the assumption that you medicate yourself constantly. They're banking on it, in fact. The reason large corporations like Starbucks and McDonald's and Chik-Fil-A aren't fuckin scared of our two week, two month, drop in the bucket boycotts is because they're drugging us. And they know it. How many dealers you know scared about having loyal clientele? Lmfao. They laugh as we short-term organize and long-term disassociate. We are addicted to instant gratification as a populace, almost universally.

So then, what happens when a live-streamed genocide fucks up our ability to use the internet as a tool of escapism?

*Thesis two: horror, anger, and outrage are also drugs.*

Let's re-examine what a drug is in my own words. *Drugs are substances that change the way you see and interact with the world and (or because) they create a reaction from your physical body, which leads to changes in behavior and can often be habit-forming in their use.*

Voluntarily or involuntarily administered, mass killings live-televised fill us with stimulus that overtakes our central nervous systems. And the effects shows up most in the spike of actions and protest, indicating a difference in the way we observe and perceive the world. We then expend a lot of energy protesting, calling for change, then peter out over time.

Now. This is where I ask you to consider me critically. I anticipate a knee-jerk reaction to the statements above and what they imply, which essentially claim that protests, as we currently understand them, are a drug that shortens our long-term ability to focus. And... I do mean that. I am not saying that I'm not for resistance— I'm saying that we keep thinking in the short term and the short-form for liberatory

means (which is multiple generations across, in all directions). So long as we as a populace continue to be reactionary in our protesting, we're never going to quite get a handle on gaining sovereignty for the long-haul. I really like this video from my mutual Logan Grendel. The following quotation is taken from the hyper-linked speech.

**“Marching is not going to stop this. Voting is not going to stop this. And while it is great to see people around the world expressing love and solidarity, we have to think smarter. And think for the longer game. The reason this country ALLOWS US to protest is because they know that it dissipates our energy” (Grendel 2023).**

LET’S think about protests from the viewpoint of drugs— specifically, stimulants. The stimulant in question here is intense, heightened emotion (horror, grief, outrage, profound sadness), which changes our way of viewing the world and inspires an intense reaction from (stimulates) our centralized nervous system. How does your body feel when interacting with the news from Palestine? I’m not telling you to look away. I’m telling you, hey, pay attention to that. The vehicle for said all-encompassing grief is social media, which is habit-forming and addictive in and of itself with how much visceral, violent stimulus you are exposed to (alongside the advertising). I’m certain many of us have had the experience where we are locked in a doom scroll, minutes or hours passing amorphously, unable to place ourselves in our bodies except for the feeling the screen is giving us (which is... remarkably similar to how shroom trips can feel when they’re going poorly, interestingly enough).

Protests, vocal outrage, calling representatives: those are tools that would compel representatives if they cared about what we, the US populace, think. Or if they had any real onus, incentive, or methods of accountability compelling them to do right by the people they claim to represent. No such incentive nor accountability exists at the moment. We do not have representatives, we have an oligarchy. The following sequence mimics kids on a sugar high. We take to the streets (again). We call to boycott Starbucks (again). We are set up to exhaust

ourselves on the binging and releasing of the drug of horror cut with social media virality. We become exhausted. We call it a night. A new, generation-defining tragedy resurfaces (because none of the old ones went away, they just fester and resurface). Our emotions spike. Repeat.

Once more: United States contemporary life is saturated with stimulants and depressants that hijack our ability to focus on the long-term. We only know how to act on desires which root, bloom, and materialize instantaneously. At once, these habits distract us from the harrowing long-term effects on our bodies (individual, physical, collective, metaphysical bodies). So we expel all this drug-induced grief with protests that batter our bodies, exhaust us, and dishearten us—because street protests ultimately do not change the legislation or the funding that allows for genocide with impunity.

*Thesis three: This is not a call for abstinence. It's a call for informed, responsible drug usage.*

I like drugs. I think we should use drugs when they're beneficial. I think that the ways that drugs change my world view having interacted with them have been a net positive in my life. So including the outrage machines, including protest, including feeling what that broken-glass grief does when it moves through my body—I'm not saying that you shouldn't protest! Please protest! Just know that it is a drug. And the sneakiest drugs, the hardest ones to kick, are the drugs you did not realize were substances in the first place. I feel this way about teens signing onto nicotine addictions (Ducharme et al., 2019). I feel this way about my soul-tie with Oreos (Lenoir et al., 2007) when I was an adolescent. Identifying my daily/habitual drugs is one of the reasons I am fasting, which has this nasty knack for spotlighting my addictions and writing them out in an itemized list. **It makes boycotts easier, that's for sure.** Who has the capacity to give two fucks about Starbucks when I haven't had rice all day? I'm Sierra Leonean. Nobody is playing about rice.

It is imperative that we know what our addictions are so that we know where we're most likely to be exploited. I am a US-American and what

I see by default, what I choose to see, and what I do not see create greater ripple effects which shape the world order. Thus: it's important that I know what I am addicted to and why. I need to know where I am susceptible to being exploited so that I avoid falling victim to medicating to avoid of witnessing the world with clear vision. **Every United States citizen is addicted to pretending things are better than they are.** The drug of denial is the only way we can go about our day. I just spent too much money on vegan ice cream (that doesn't even taste good) because come sundown all I want to do is eat until I pass out on the couch. What did I just learn about myself? What does grief compel me to do and to buy? How do I stay vigilant of those desires so that they're not exploiting me into supporting genocide with my dollars? I am also seeing how much I am addicted to being helpful. How much I overload myself with work and trudge forward at maximum capacity all the time, out of...? Habit? Obligation?

*A SMALLER, braver voice in the back of my head: don't beat yourself up about the sugar, ismatu. Morality is useless in the face of addiction. What we want you to notice is the ringing satisfaction you get after completing a to-do list, ismatu. At receiving the applause of being useful, ismatu. Like the bell at the end of your mallet swing, lighting up the whole sky, alerting everyone of how hard you work. Your brain's reward system has been hijacked to value productivity above all things. Why are you working yourself this hard? Isn't this why you left private practice? How do you slow down? How do you come down?*

THE HARDEST PART of revolutionary thought, intent, and action is the fact that struggle is protracted.

There is rarely, if ever, any instant gratification to liberation. I will be studying and honing and acting and repeating for the rest of my life. **The ends are the means because the work never actually ends.** The first battle is in getting the foot of someone else off your fucking neck, and then *the work* of rehabilitation begins. Once they're out. Once the enemy is faded away. Once we gain our wildest dreams

that capitalism and the nation state and their slow and fast genocides are technologies of the past, we will still be dreaming. We have people to rehabilitate. Lands to rematriate. Soil to regenerate. The last couple hundred years of exploitation and theft cost us our worlds *in millennia*. There is no instant gratification to liberation because true liberation, where the land and seas and the people they birth are free free free—there is no arrival point. There is no cap on the dreaming or the building. Freedom is a dream that goes forever. Like summer. Like the horizon. There is no instant gratification of a free world for my children('s children's children).

Drugs are instantaneous. They teach your brain and body to crave and be obsessed with what is directly in front of you. Okay? We have to be cognizant. We have to be careful. And we have to be intentional about our drug use and honest about the ways our habits may impede our long-term usefulness. there is no part of modernity that is not manufactured, including the outrage we are allowed to feel. What happens when we witness the unspeakable and our speaking does nothing? Has it occurred to you that we are being drugged with that outrage? That the emotional payoff of rage really makes us *feel* like we have done... something?

PS. There's an entirely separate essay here on the crack cocaine epidemic being an intentional genocide, and how we don't talk about it? like it... wasn't the US killing people under their constituency because they were Black and had the nerve to maintain growing militancy. Then they employ the same genocidal land-grabbing tactics, just under the name "gentrification." New York City has radicalized me something fierce. Anyways.

*ISMATU GWENDOLYN and the drugs they definitely did not/do not use*

Every time I tell folks about my (alleged) previous "hard" drug use, it's like I lit a fucking confetti popper. People have *such a wide* range of emotion and it's so... odd for me, on the receiving end. Reactions include (and are certainly not limited to): immediate requests for stories, as if I am still employed on their dime as an entertainer; rather

invasive questions masquerading as “care for my health and safety”; shock, which is the most annoying one. Shock only comes with the mention of Drugs <sup>TM</sup>, as in something I had to snort up my nose; shock *never* comes when I fake-laugh about being addicted to sugar. For some reason, that one is cute...? As if it isn’t rotting my teeth, feeding my chronic candida, and shortening my lifespan.

I do drugs every video! *Grab your tea, I’m having a delicious, phenomenally-brewed dose of caffeine so I can concentrate for the rest of my day.* Nobody fucking bats an eye. You exchange stimulants that are socially acceptable with stimulants associated with criminality and *boom!* Everyone thinks you’re a party trick, or trickin, and/or the embodiment of a narrowly-missed car crash. Some even haphazardly wonder aloud why or how you’re “still so pretty.” You (if you were me) take a long sigh. You try not to roll a blunt. Some days you are successful; lately, you’ve been rather cross-eyed.

Now, the real tea: drug use can at once be a disability and the coping mechanism for other disability under the social disability model (and honestly, we would know this if we listened to more disability activists, speakers and organizers. But we don’t even wear masks consistently as a populace so. For now, this remains an entirely separate video essay, filed under *To Expand On When We Have The Range*).

Social media still feels like I do drugs for a living— and, in terms of the way social media impacts your brain’s decision making abilities, you could make that argument (Meshi et. al, 2019). In the month of August, I decreased my screen-time down to about 45 minutes a day on average (pretty much only to call a family member or use my GPS). I felt parts of my brain heal that I didn’t even know were broken. My attention was *long*. I read voraciously again. I could feel pleasure in small, minute things, like cleaning the dishes or taking deep breaths in the sun. Under normal circumstances, I call those things regulatory. I have to force myself to do them (*ismatu, slow down. ismatu, you’ll feel better when the kitchen is clean. ismatu, go sit in the sun. take deep breaths. slow down. slow down*). But by the end of August, I was *excited* to complete those tasks. Like when I was seven and was just pumped to



be playing in soapy water. Isn't that amazing? Doesn't that terrify you for what it implies?

I let go of abstinence only policies when it comes to drugs when I was a stripper and had to drink for a living. I come from a decent amount of alcoholism— honestly, it's surprising how well so much of my family manages their alcohol addictions considering (1) it's hereditary and (2) how much we have survived individually and collectively. Point is, I started drinking in family settings when I was fourteen and it was very straight-forward, educational, and no nonsense. I had a relationship with alcohol that liked one or two glasses of dry wine and then an early bedtime. College did not change this; graduate school by itself would have been unlikely to disrupt this pretty solid foundation. As a grad school baby stripper, I had no strong interest in regular alcohol consumption. I preferred to be a sober stripper. I just... didn't really have desires to make zero dollars and zero cents at the club refusing to drink night, and some nights I could not get away with making what I wanted to make *and* remaining sober.

AT THE STRIP CLUB, you are getting offered everything under the sun on more than one occasion. I refrain from criminalizing myself on paper. I will say that I understand why Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Black Panther Party veteran and co-founder of The Lincoln Detox Program in the Bronx, New York, referred to drug addicts as drug *victims* (Umoja, 2022). I cannot overstate how grateful I am to have learned a usable political praxis around drug consumption in real, tangible, physical life and not through reading social scientific research papers from my plush chair as a Zoom academic. There's an entirely separate essay hiding inside this paragraph on how the crack cocaine epidemic never actually ended, how it was and is an intentional genocide, and how proof of how well counter-insurgency works lies in how much we don't talk about it anymore. Literal governmental organizations declassified that the the US *really was killing people* via drug dependency, killing *citizens under their constituency* because they were Black and had the nerve to maintain growing militancy and political thought. How the heroin

epidemics of the sixties and seventies and the crack cocaine epidemics of the eighties and nineties and the cannabis epidemic currently turning all the corner store bodegas into smoke shops allow for convenient thieving of the land. How we really should be calling gentrification by her government name, *ethnic cleansing*. New York City has radicalized me something fierce, and the club set me up with eyes to see that.

One day when there are far less consequences, I'm going to write about the various ways I've been absolutely blasted as a fancy pants, Beautiful, academically-lauded professional person and I will pull no punches. "And I woulda done heroin too if it hadn't been for me working in the Beauty field. I couldn't afford the track marks but whewwww if I could" type shit. I will be able to openly call out those of us with the sugarized caffeine mega drink every other day looking at heroin users like they're the scum of the earth with the appropriate amount of expletives. Why is no one concerned about sugar like we should be? Sugar and screens are so hard to avoid in the empire.

ANYWAYS. STAY SAUCY. ALWAYS GLOSSED.

IG

POST-SCRIPT: I know that calling the proliferation of cannabis across the United States a drug epidemic might ruffle some feathers. I would like to posit: I lived in Los Angeles for a few months before moving to New York. Every day when I woke up and looked out of my window from my 450 square foot studio, I saw a billboard for weed. The advertisement boasted that you could get weed delivered to your house. I lived within walking distance of three different dispensaries but could not walk to my nearest grocery store. I hadn't smoked in a while before moving into that place in LA, and then I started keeping a pre-roll on me. I noticed how many times I said, *ooh, I'd really like to be sober today*, and smoking anyways. A few questions:

(1) why is it legal to advertise for mind-altering substances so brazenly? Especially ones carcinogenic?

(2) Did I want to smoke? Or was I compelled to smoke? Reasonably: how well is any young person— any *person*— equipped to tell the difference?

## WORKS CITED

- Ducharme, J. D., Video By Ang Li, & Li, A. L. [Video Constructor]. (2019, September 19). How Juul hooked kids and ignited a public health crisis. TIME. <https://time.com/5680988/juul-vaping-health-crisis/?ref=threadings.io>
- Grendel, L. G. [@focusedoninfinity]. (2023, October 14). Marching is not going to stop this. TikTok. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from [https://www.tiktok.com/@/video/7289885183711497515?\\_r=1&\\_d=secCgYIASAHKAEspgo8yHLcpadeDbG%2BfQlhBX1cICvV6uZ9yx3SAN0ADmB8b3k3IKTE5Ptbd4BFszGI7fXfXtTAVvkEdZYIuaGgA%3D&u\\_code=df37jbe3jnj09c&share\\_item\\_id=7289885183711497515&tamp=1698164172&utm\\_campaign=client\\_share&utm\\_source=short\\_fallback&share\\_app\\_id=1233](https://www.tiktok.com/@/video/7289885183711497515?_r=1&_d=secCgYIASAHKAEspgo8yHLcpadeDbG%2BfQlhBX1cICvV6uZ9yx3SAN0ADmB8b3k3IKTE5Ptbd4BFszGI7fXfXtTAVvkEdZYIuaGgA%3D&u_code=df37jbe3jnj09c&share_item_id=7289885183711497515&tamp=1698164172&utm_campaign=client_share&utm_source=short_fallback&share_app_id=1233)
- Gross, T. (2023, February 1). How “modern-day slavery” in the Congo powers the rechargeable battery economy. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/02/01/1152893248/red-cobalt-congo-drc-mining-siddharth-kara?ref=threadings.io>
- Lenoir, M., Serre, F., Cantin, L., & Ahmed, S. H. (2007). Intense sweetness surpasses cocaine reward. PLoS ONE, 2(8), e698. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0000698>
- Meshi, D., Elizarova, A., Bender, A., & Verdejo-Garcia, A. (2019). Excessive social media users demonstrate impaired decision making in the Iowa Gambling Task. *Journal of behavioral addictions*, 8(1), 169-173. <https://akjournals.com/downloadpdf/view/journals/2006/8/1/article-p169.pdf>
- The water situation in Yemen. (2022, June 8). International Committee of the Red Cross. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/water-situation-yemen?ref=threadings.io>
- Umoja, A. (2022). Straight ahead: The Life of Resistance of Dr. Mutulu Shakur. *Souls*, 23(1-2), 4-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2022.2097570>

## THERE IS NO REVOLUTION WITHOUT MADNESS.

CIRCULATED OCTOBER 2024

**T**his is an essay once entitled, “revolutionary love costs you your sanity, at minimum. are we sincerely prepared for it to cost us our life?”

Hello and welcome to threadings., the newsletter and podcast where we consider the bits of my politic that stitch me together like a patchwork quilt. Today, I am bound together at the seams by the thought of a new world, what it might cost us, and what we stand to gain. I write to you bereaved from watching the avalanches of death manufactured by the United States, via their bloodchildren (the United Nations, the so-called state of Israel, the existence of the US Dollar, and more). I am bereaved from the war in Sudan, knowing that a war of similar groundings burned my grandmother’s home to the ground in Sierra Leone. I write to you feeling grief bloom in my bones.

The first thing I (ismatu) do in this essay is give the work presented context. Why do I write this? What does it matter? What does the work of considering sanity (or the lack thereof) change about me?

The next thing I will do in this essay is move through the chosen text: *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*’s chapter one, “Mad is a

Place” written by La Marr Jurelle Bruce. I move through this text with reverence to revolutionary thought, intent, and action as I know them.

And the third thing we (those reading, writing, watching) will do together is consider what it means lay down our sane minds as we move towards means of world-making. Because: there is a world coming after this one. I consider it inevitable. Not “wishful thinking,” not the idealism or hubris of being young— a new world is coming like the dawn. Like a baby being born. It is inevitable. Capitalism is crumbling around us; the world that comes after this one is up for grabs. Whether or not we (the masses) gain sovereignty or not— *something* is coming.

At the top of this essay, I remind us all: to call for revolution is to call for death. There is no iteration of Western, sanitized Reason that will co-sign the destruction of itself— the system that keeps us at the mercy of our extractors. Death makes the ground fertile for life, as per the design of nature.

**Thesis: there is no future that belongs to the people in which we stay Sane. Revolutionary thought, intent, and action requires insanity.**

I am ahead of myself. First, the context.

Originally, when I planned an internet-based educational series on Revolutionary Healers of Radical History, I did so to contextualize the decision to practice mental healthcare for free. The works from my unwavering faith in the world I see coming compel my hands to do what I have been previously told is impossible. I spent the entire arch of my personal story dreaming aloud of healthcare for free, and was told by everyone Reasonable it was not possible. In part, I deliver this essay to argue that to negotiate Reasonability is to negotiate with terrorists.

**Within world-making, the ends are the means.**

Every decision I make propels me forward, shifts my timeline, grants me access to new and different modes of being. I am just as capable of world-making as you, as our neighbors, or our statesman in the ruling class. I study the work of people that came before to guide my steps

forward in the decisions I make (that lead to the world my hands touch). Two foundational principles from the words of Che Guevara:

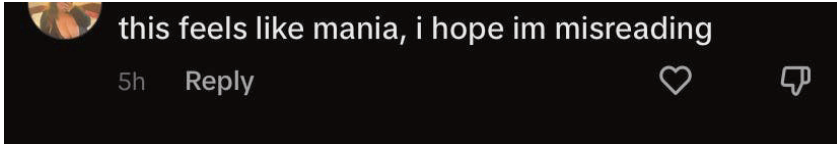
- On Revolutionary Medicine: For one to be a revolutionary doctor or to be a revolutionary at all, there must first be a revolution (Guevara, 1960).
- Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution, quoting Lenin: Without a revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary movement (Guevara, 1960).

So I do not consider revolution or world-making as a young person because I romanticize war— once again, I cannot stress enough, to call for revolution is to call for death. I consider revolutionary theory and praxis because I prepare for when war comes to my door, as it must eventually when you live in a country whose the largest asset and most lucrative export is the US Military. Or when you are from a country that is considered “war-torn” as foreign powers quietly ransack the diamonds and gold in droves (Bart-Williams, 2020). Beyond surviving the violences of slavery-backed capitalism, I consider world-making to be universally-accessible work. We currently wade through a social order born from the ideations of extractive, war-mongering, white anglo-saxon slave-owners. Terrorists. Why would I allow them to tell me what is possible?

So then, in my endeavors to be the person I dream of being in as real a time, I decided to practice for free and study in public. [Editor’s note: if you’re new here, I have my master’s in Clinical Social Work and a concentration in Global Health Administration and Policy. Dissemination of accessible healthcare, in this case mental healthcare, is kinda my jam and jelly.] The announcement came after months of ruminating, of feeling unsatisfied, of considering the financial precarity, attempting to charge (poorly) and finding that I had no other choice but to find a way to provide my works for free. Work done for the benefit of the community needs to be accessible to the community at large; all cost is a barrier; cost eradicated. Done.

My initial machinations for the Revolutionary Healers series were essentially, *show your work, ismatu*. If I wanted to expand into space the

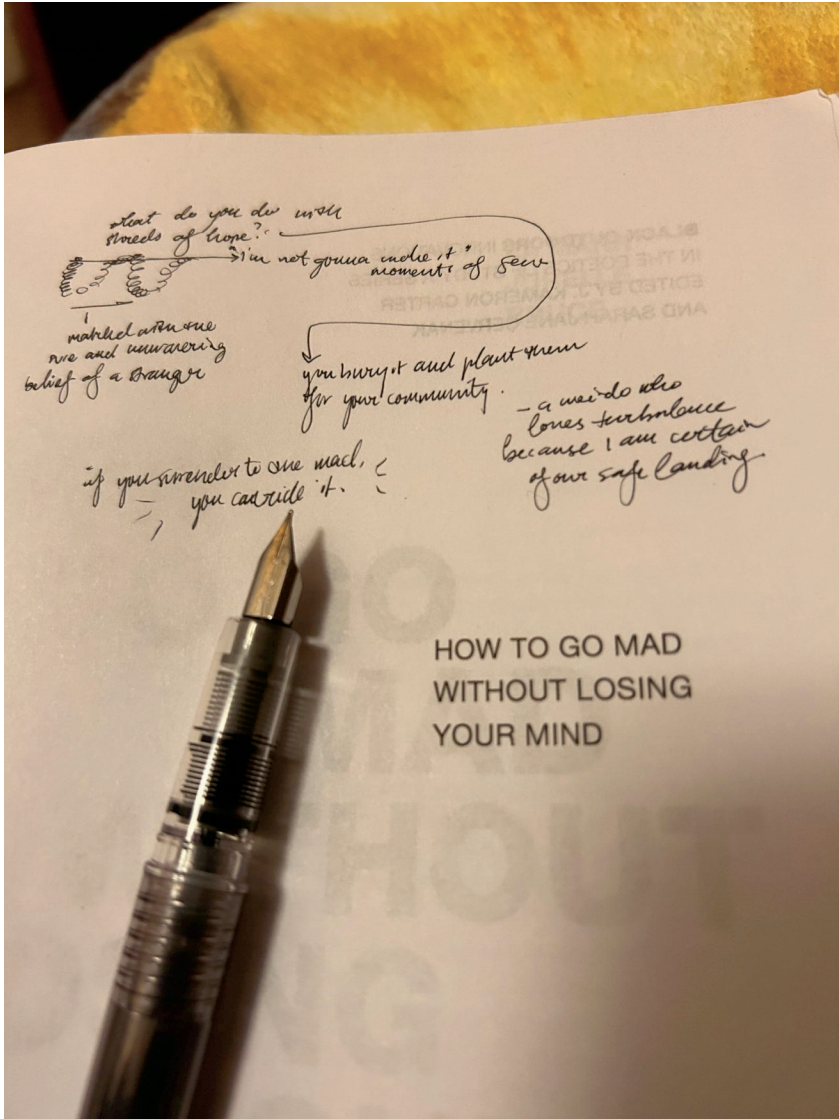
way I dream of doing, if I want my ripple effects to disturb the placid lake of Reasonable Possibility, I must then do something outside what I have been told is Rational. I received feedback which called various words for crazy: manic. Deranged. Self-harming.



Thus, the context that this essay comes to you, the reader, from makes itself known. I feel nothing but unconditional peace. Revolutionary work (such as free medical care) will always, always, seem crazy in these iterations of Possibility. I work for the day my daughter('s daughter's daughter) cannot conceive of a world as violent as this one.



HOW TO GO Mad without Losing Your Mind by La Marr Jurelle Bruce:  
Mad Is a Place



From the text: Hold tight. The way to go mad without losing your mind is sometimes unruly. It might send you staggering across asylum hallways, heckled by disembodied voices— or shimmying over spotlight stages, being

*greeting by loving applause. It might find you freewheeling through fever dreams, then marching towards freedom dreams, then scrambling from sleep, with blood and stars in your eyes, the whole world a waking dream. But for now, we wade through a liquid void, among ominous ships, where this study begins.*

Dr. La Marr Jurelle Bruce is such a moment. What a superb read this is.

I consider *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* mandatory for world-building praxis. When discussing revolution, we think about violence first. We think about [joke about, are tempted by] the burning and the bombing and the tearing down—and sure. All of that is necessary [and I do repeat: necessary] for the purpose of having a new world stand on top of fertile ground. Death makes the ground fertile by the design of nature. “Civilians” become martyrs because we, the world-makers left behind, do not allow them to die for the gain of colonizers. What do we want? What do we build? Do we remember how crucial the work of honing our imagination is as part of revolutionary theory? Thus: *How to Go Mad* is a study of the madness present in Black radical creativity. Without creativity, the means to think up world makings we cannot yet see/taste/touch, what do we take up arms for? What do you burn and fight and kill for if you cannot taste the sweet plum of freedom bursting on the other side? Revolution is to call for death you cannot hide for the sweet plums ripened on the other side. The first and most necessary death of revolution is the death of all semblance of Reason.

Questions for your reading and my writing consideration: What is Reason? What is unReason? What kinds of madness are there? Which madness(es) calls to us? Why is it so important that we reject the lens of the current world-markers when thinking about what freedom will actually cost us?

### **What is Reason?**

From the text:

For the purposes of this study, I distinguish reason (lowercase) from Reason (uppercase). The former, reason, signifies a generic process of

cognition within a given system of logic... Meanwhile, Reason is a proper noun denoting positivist, secularist, Enlightenment-rooted episteme purported to uphold objective “truth” while mapping and mastering the world. (Bruce, page four)

In my own words: Reason (capital R) is a school of thought conceived from white world-makers to decide who is compliant with their world-makings and their understandings, and who is deviant (and thus dangerous) to those understandings. This is my personal definition; I came to rest on these understandings while I waded through Very Expensive Therapy School (™). Bruce, in Chapter one, speaks to this truth: psychiatry is susceptible to ideology (7). All of the psy-sciences (psychiatry, psychology, sciences of the mind and understandings of what makes sanity and insanity) are based in the ideologies of the person(s) holding the evaluation form, the person(s) who made the form, and the person(s) who devised such protocol was necessary. I want us to note the emphasis on world-making— Reason decides what is an appropriate, understandable, “reasonable” school of thought as a means of thought policing. Reason quite literally creates enforceable policy on what one can be allowed to think without the threat of psychiatric imprisonment, social ostracization, state violence, even justification for public lynching (Levenson, 2023)

[Editor’s note: Rest in peace, Elijah McClain. I wish you the dearest peace in your rest.]

To deviate from Reason is to call forth some kind of death. This alone should tell us something about the role of unReason in calling forth revolution.

### **What is unReason?**

From the text: ...political theorist Achille Mbembe remarks that “it is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject, or more fundamentally, of what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and, in the

process, to become a fully moral agent. The exercise of reason is tantamount to the exercise of freedom. (4)

To break the above down further: passion as unReason, finding oneself compelled by the emotion which emanates from our bones, which we are told never to lead with. Fantasy, too, sits under the umbrella of unReason— escape into a world where one can experience this one, even (especially?) if it only exists in the mental sphere. Reason is the means one utilizes to gain freedom, and the pursuit of freedom (life, liberty and happiness, or whatever those genocidal white men said) presents the pathway to becoming a moral agent. Morality here (and everywhere in the white and Western world) acts a prerequisite to qualifying as a Human. A common tool of white supremacist propaganda frames targets of their genocidal intents as people who have no imaginable morals in white boundaries of understandings.

[a note from the editor: One day, I will write an essay about post-humanism, because to be considered Human in this world-making is to be white and wealthy and belonging to an acceptable nation-state. Today is not the day.] So then what kind of unReason is the desire for revolution? Passion or fantasy?

I argue will to act in revolutionary theology comes from a mix of the two: passion for what we desire and fantasy for what could be. We now turn to Bruce, who argues for a third entry for unReason: madness itself.

### **What kinds of madness are there?**

Bruce brilliantly builds us the foundation for madness as methodology, wherein madness is an “ensemble of epistemological modes, political praxes, interpretive techniques, affective dispositions, existential orientations, and ways of life (9).” With this text, he imagines mad as a place one can inhabit, specifically at the intersection of Black radical creativity. Madness as a “floating signifier and dynamic social construction that evades stable definition” and madness as a “lived reality that demands sustained attention.” Bruce puts forth four kinds of madnesses as conglomerates. Everything in italics is taken from the text.

**Phenomenal madness:** *an intense unruliness of the mind— producing fundamental crises of perception, emotion, meaning, and selfhood— as experienced in the conscious of the madsubject.* Phenomenal madness is first person: singularly felt and centers the interior mindscape of the madsubject. Phenomenal madness is, then, self-experienced and self-defined.

**Medicalized madness:** *the range of “serious mental illnesses” and psychopathologies codified by the psy-sciences of psychiatry, psychology, and psychoanalysis. These serious conditions include schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and the antiquated diagnosis of medical “insanity.”* Medicalized madness is felt individually, yet diagnosed (or pulled into reality as a consequential condition) by a secondhand party. The experience of madness then is both in the person laboring under a diagnosis which might strip them of their freedoms or ability to pursue freedoms and by the medical professional exacting those chains.

I cannot stress enough that medicalized madness garners its powers from the hallmark of legitimacy. White-made, white-servicing Logic is responsible for targeting Black men with increased diagnoses of schizophrenia<sup>1</sup> when “there is nothing inherently, ontologically, transhistorically pathological about hearing voices” (7). As Bruce states: psychiatry is susceptible to ideology. White made conceptions of rationality once had Black people marked as clinically insane for desiring to seek freedom in the days of the Confederacy (17). Each and every system of the current world-makings is susceptible to ideology.

**The Madness of Rage:** *an affective state of intense and aggressive displeasure (which is surely phenomenal, but warrants analytic distinction from the unruliness [of phenomenal madness]). Black people in the United States and elsewhere have been subjected to heinous violence and degradation, but rarely granted recourse. Consequently, as singer-songwriter Solange Knowles reminds us, black people “got the right to be mad” and “got a lot to be mad about.”* The inclusion of rage as madness delights me, not just in the acknowledgement of the way mad (angry) also habitually means mad (crazy). Madness as rage is the first categorization that posits madness as something that a group can feel collectively. Rage is not just individ-

ually felt and policed individually— blessed rage, generational rage, rage anointed in blood moves entire bodies of people into uprisings. The response from the whitely Sane, then, also coalesces into a collective backlash.

With this, I wish to briefly jump forward in the text a tad to highlight an instances of collective madness (rage and psychosocial madness) within the diaspora: the birthplace of alleged dysaesthesia aethiopica, what makes Black people “pathology lazy,” Haiti (18), the first (and thus far, only) Black nation to successfully hold a slave revolt and win their country back after twelve years of armed insurgency. What else but the madness of rage could compel a people to call for massive death? Rage, hefty doses of phenomenal madness, mixed together in a cauldron of psychosocial madness, proved to be beautifully lethal. The perpetual madplace of Haiti causes the West to find any excuse to occupy her, destabilize her, and further ensure that they cannot world-make a reality where the Haitian moves free to determine freedom and sovereignty for her own bought-and-paid-for self. We see this currently as the United Nations (\*retching noises\*) clears another genocidal occupation of Haiti (Johnson, 2023) through the use of Ugandan and Rwandan soldiers.

Note: I might input spiritual madness as a category separately, due to the spiritual bloomings of voodoo in the Haitian revolution. I use the word “bloomings” not because voodoo found its birthplace in the burgeoning nation, but how voodoo played a massive part in the ceremony which inaugurated the war (Désir, 2024). Spiritual practices that honor ancestral lines, venerate and strengthen deities and spiritual figures outside of the Judeo-Christian pantheon, how intensely white genocidal world-makers shroud indigenous traditional religions and spiritual praxes across the globe with complete demonization— as if we don’t sacrifice children on the altar of white capitalism all the time — constitutes its own type of madness. But again. That’s an entirely separate essay.

Psychosocial Madness: radical deviation from the normal within a given psychosocial milieu. Any person or practice that perplexes and vexes the psycho-normative status quo is liable to be labeled crazy.

Psychosocial madness is one where an individual person (or a group of people) deviating from the status quo is policed by the collective, who legitimize themselves not through elite education or a degree of expertise, but from the Reasonable understanding that they are within correct and polite society. Individually felt, communally-policed.

What madness(es) call to us? Collectively and personally?

So then, where is Reason in liberation? Let's focus in on Nat Turner's Rebellion.

Nat Turner was a "self-avowed prophet" (20)—though in my personal text, I scribbled out the "self-avowed" because it felt too much like allegedly—who led his constituency to kill their genocidal overseers. Around sixty total fell dead at the hands of people they [white landowners, allegedly "civilians"] butchered slowly for the purposes of labor extraction and capital gains. Nothing about this sort of armed resistance was Reasonable, and (because) it was effective in emboldening enslaved people to fight back. "Because of the prophet's access to heaven's revelations, the madperson's exile from the domain of Reason, and the genius's elevation above ordinary intelligence curves, all three of these figures inhabit spheres of mind supposedly inaccessible to normal-minded masses." (21)

I want us to note: armed resistance is always called terrorism when the narrative is not written by the people rebelling. Identities like "civilian" and "terrorist" are matters of opinion, up entirely to the person holding the pen.

Preliminary Conclusions: Freedom exists outside Sanity. It will never be "sane" to negotiate your individual life for collective liberation.

It might seem counter-intuitive to start a series on healing focusing on death. I don't think so. To be focused on healing means you often breathe in the death around you in attempts to preserve life. The reality of my experiences in the healing vocations is that you are the first people to feel the ripple effects of bodies hitting the floor.

The month of October has seen death live-televised in ways that we (US-Americans and others of us living in imperial cores) do not



personally understand. We do not live in circumstances where we cannot hide the dead (Alsharif & Sanchez, 2021).

*Image description: Sierra Leonean bodies covered in soiled PPE and buried nameless in shallow graves during the Ebola crisis.*

Seeing this picture thrown into an article haphazardly made me weep on the ground of my room. My dad came and collected me off the floor. Look at the “care” Westerners brought to my home. The bodies they would not allow us to bury with rites. So many bodies they threw them in mass graves.

### **Hundreds of bodies of covid-19 victims still in New York's refrigerated trucks more than a year into the pandemic**



By Brittany Shamman

Nov 9, 2021 at 5:54 p.m. EDT



This. This is what it looks like when you can hide the dead.

What happens when there are so many dead bodies piling up you cannot bury them? So many that you cannot even find them all? What becomes of you, the witness, the still alive, who scramble to aid the dying-not-yet-dead while infrastructure is decimated around you? When bodies, people that escape the crushing and leave behind their beautiful bodies. Their once breathing bodies. Rot under rubble. There is no sanity left. Sanity is not how you survive extermination brigades. It certainly is not what compels you to fight back, by documentation, with armed resistance, or by continuing to serve as a doctor in a collapsed medical system. Even just trying to imagine the carnage drains even-measured sanity out of one's ears like a faucet. The world turns over.



To be a revolutionary healer means that you have taken it upon yourself to contend with death that cannot hide. It means cannons to the left of you, cannons to the right of you, cannons which befall you for doing your job (Tennyson, 1854). In the pursuit of life for those of us that are meant to die under bondage, one becomes a target for the empire's ammunition. In every war, medical professionals are targeted for attempting—for just the *attempt*—to save people from death.

Rouzan al-Najjar, shot dead in 2018 by Israeli Occupying Forces for providing medical care during the 2018 Gaza border protests. She was twenty years old—too poor to study at university so she took up a course in nursing. She was born eleven months before me and Israeli soldiers shot her to death with her hands in the air.



The task before me with my corner of the world's stage exceeds laying out each tragedy of the peri-colonial world so that we can quiz ourselves on how informed we are. The task is to train us in study. The People in mass bloom from the same roots. We want sovereignty within our communities and lands that keep us peacefully. Such desires—kind stewardship—are interrupted, bulldozed, shot point blank, enslaved, tortured, maimed, brutalized, strung up and buried by the terrorist organizations called the nation-state.

I ask what we want because we continue to frame revolution as a fight *against* something. We call for ceasefires and an end to slavery and to stop deforestation and I just... you can call me cynical or idealist or any other thing— what I am is someone cognizant of what compels people to action. The more we admonish what it is we don't want, the more our media is saturated with it. It is not a coincidence that Western news, both traditional and via social media, is saturated with the desolation of bombings with little to no mention of the amount of organized, targeted, effective Palestinian armed resistance groups that has kept the ground invasion of so-called Israel out of Gaza strip.

[Editors note: I would recommend keeping abreast of the battles via Resistance News Network's telegram].

**if you surrender to the Madness, you can ride it.**

Here, as a post-script, I expand on the notes I have jot down on the title page of my copy of the text.

Madness is marked with the sure and unending belief of strangers. That's what you do with wayward seeds of hope—as time loops in on herself, you wrap them in paper towel and allow them to germinate. You shine them with the warm light of steely determination—the knowledge that a new world is coming like the dawn; like it's inevitable; like it's already on the way. Phonate on what you want that seed to grow into. Bury your hope and pray that even if you cannot personally see the sweet plums ripen, your children('s children's children) will. I scribble these notes on a plane enduring terrible turbulence, and I am insane, momentarily, to feel complete peace. I only feel peace because I am certain of our landing. Madness kisses us in our chapters of despair that we— We are mad to survive in the face of imminent death and have been mad— through generations, through genocides, fast and slow. And so what? So what of the madness? If you surrender to the Mad, you can ride it.

peace.

ig

. . .

## WORKS CITED

Alsharif, M., & Sanchez, R. (2021, May 7). Bodies of Covid-19 victims are still stored in refrigerated trucks in NYC. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/07/us/new-york-coronavirus-victims-refrigerated-trucks/index.html?ref=threadings.io>

Bart-Williams, M. (2020, May 9). *The Till & Keep TV | TEDxBerlinSalon | Why the wealth of Africa does not make Africans wealthy?* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPqMxRO8\\_2U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPqMxRO8_2U)

Désir, D. (2024, April 9). *BWA Kayiman: The cornerstone of a revolution built on Kongo ethics*. Institute of the Black World 21st Century. <https://ibw21.org/commentary/bwa-kayiman-the-cornerstone-of-a-revolution-built-on-kongo-ethics/?ref=threadings.io>

Guevara, E. C. (1960, August 19). *On revolutionary medicine*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1960/08/19.htm?ref=threadings.io>

Guevara, E. C. (1960b, October 8). *Notes for the study of the ideology of the Cuban Revolution*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1960/10/08.htm?ref=threadings.io>

Johnson, C. (2023, July 22). *Haitians protest UN occupation and pending foreign 'Intervention'* PopularResistance.Org. <https://popularresistance.org/haitians-protest-un-occupation-and-pending-foreign-intervention/?ref=threadings.io>

Levenson, E. L. (2023, October 7). Aurora police officer's actions had 'cataclysmic effect' on Elijah McClain, prosecutor says as manslaughter trial opens. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/17/us/elijah-mcclain-police-trial-woodyard/index.html?ref=threadings.io>

Tennyson, A. (1854). *The Charge of the Light Brigade* [Poetry].



## REVOLUTION, THEN, IS A FAITH- BASED PRACTICE.

PRAYERS FROM DECEMBER 2023

**T**OWER: KEY 19 | REVOLUTION; SIX OF SPADES ;  
ELEMENT OF AIR.

*They told us that our anger was uncooperative. They said our tears were indulgent. They tried to deny the utility of a clenched fist, a blessed root, a song, a prayer. And they were right —*

*because a fever is only productive for the host, not the virus. And we are not the virus, Baby.*

*At every chance, they will deny the utility of our tools. To bear this quietly, to go softly into death, is to dishonor ourselves and those we have inherited these tools from. Who we have inherited these tools for. Tools designed to resist physical and spiritual destruction at every turn, to conjure a way forward out of no way. We must take care not to be limited in our idea of what a tool is or can be.*

*And we owe it to ourselves to survive this moment. To at last experience what's been long promised. We owe it to ourselves to call down the spirits who riot and who burn away barriers to our safety and our dignity. And as we stand at the confluence of many generations past and, godwilling, just as*

*many or more forward, our ancestor work has begun. So look around. What are our tools?*

— FROM GRANDMA BABY'S BLACK GOLD  
LENORMAND'S DECK AND GUIDEBOOK

DEAR FUTURE DAUGHTER,

Forty days of fasting has come and gone yet here I am, still up before dawn.

Sleep passes over me like the ghost of death, so I suppose I am blessed (per the original etymology of the word, meaning washed with blood). I am still a babychild radicalized by my mother teaching me to pray, coming to greet you in the middle of the night. If there's ever a time I feel the belly of this world, it's this time of night-night: everything cold and easily terrified while we collectively wait for the sun to rise (or hope to sleep through the transition, at least). There is nothing here for me except cascading silence and balled-up prayers, and so I address them to you, the one who pushes my feet forward. If there's anything I wish to grant you, it's your grandfather's teeth and your grandmother's ability to pluck from the ether that which she could not see with hands or eyes. I direct my gaze to the horizon. The sun has set to rise.

You move me with such beautiful dance. Despair, desolation, indulgence for the sake of escapism coo at me. So lucrative, my love. So seductive. I would dissolve my focus and succumb in a heartbeat—less!—if it was not for you, beating on the outside of my chest. All this darkness breeds amnesia. Suffering makes me forget; in my forgetfulness, I have become a woman.<sup>1</sup> I have a few things I need you to hold on to for me.

---

1. "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly." Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Thesis: Revolution, then, is a faith-based practice. We ruminate on, pray for, call forth a world past what we can see. It with the utmost faith that a kinder world (1) exists and (2) actively roots and blooms.

I've been reading and studying the Haitian Revolution as a guiding force, since finding out that the war and I share a birthday. The Bwa Kayiman was the ceremony which began the revolution, turning Haiti from a slave state to the only nation able to free itself from that sort of colonial bondage. I've read an article online that was so well researched and illuminating; I wish to share some excerpts with you. After the author helps define what Vodou actually *is* (their definition comprehends Haitian Vodou as "an eco-theological philosophy whose ethical principles are the scaffolding of the traditions of liberation theology we African descendants hold so dearly"), they speak to the prayer of that night.

FROM BWA KAYIMAN: The Cornerstone of a Revolution Built on Kongo Ethics by Queen Mother Dòwòti Désir

Legend has it that on that night in the north of Haiti, the supreme Manbo Asogwe Cecil Fatima/Cecil Fatiman shared the asson (the instrument of authority in Haitian Vodou) with the maroon leader and Hougan (male priest) Dutty Boukman (? – 1791). Boukman was an African enslaved in Jamaica who was later deported to Saint Domingue cum Haiti (d. 7th November 1791.) Fatiman a high priestess, whose title translates as The Determiner of Life and Death, Keeper of Medicinal Packets, the One Who Has Mastered the Power of the Word, became possessed by the Spirit of Ezuli Dantò. In the course of ceremony, a pig was sacrificed and a "blood pack" was made. The blood of a black pig was shared among the participants with an oath to kill all the whites on the island. According to researcher, Marguerite Laurent, the KiKongo call of August 14, 1791 was (I have provided my own translations:)

E, e Mbomba, e e! [Supreme Healer, Master of Breath,]

Kanga Bafyòti [Protect and Deliver us the treacherous gangs]

Kanga Mundele [Protect and Deliver us from the hording strangers]

Kanga Ndòki [Protect and Deliver from wicked ways]

Kanga Yo! [Protect us!]

But the prayer we know best from that night is:

Good Lord who hath made the sun that shines above us, that riseth from the sea, who maketh the storm to roar; and governeth the thunders. The Lord is hidden in the heavens, and there He watcheth over us. The Lord seeth what the blanc (whites) have done. Their god commandeth crimes, ours giveth blessings upon us. The Good Lord (Bondye) hath ordained vengeance. He will give strength to our arms and courage to our hearts. He shall sustain us. Cast down the image of the god of the blanc, because he maketh the tears to flow from our eye. Hearken unto Liberty that speaketh now in all you hearts (Heil).

As of December 2023 (in the Gregorian Calendar), Haiti faces yet another occupation from the United Nation's so-called "Peacekeepers." I say my prayers for them in this night-morning. I consider their victory our victory, and I consider it inevitable; darkness can only last momentarily. Dawn is inevitable. I (today, December 9th) root myself in times when I felt cynically about prayer— particularly as a teenager, that era of life where one truly begins to feel the wickedness of the world. I wonder how old you are as you read this. Maybe you're familiar with that sort of despair that, that *bites* on the soft parts of your cheeks and knocks the insides of your skull. The late teens and early twenties saw a cessation of prayer, divine communion. I stopped journaling. I stopped writing to you (and to everyone; it's hard to hold a pen steady when you're decidedly and professionally not sober). The era can be summed up by this morsel from an essay I wrote for my internet friends:

And I (like you, like all of us) have spent the last two years swallowing these coals of grief and desperately trying to keep composure. I shuffle forward with class and school and traffic and grocery shopping and



pretend like the death does not hurt. It burns the back of my throat and I smoke to stay calm. It burns in my eye sockets and I have a glass of wine with breakfast. I have spent the last two years trying feverishly to medicate, to numb myself, to calm down and I am out. I'm out. I don't want to be numb to this grief that kills me anymore. (Feb 11 2023)

This spiritual apathy cannot stand. Every significant revolt for freedom that I am privy to solidified itself in divine intent and protection. Everything— from Nat Turner's Miraculous Rebellion to the Haitian's victorious independence brigades to Harriet Tubman's freeing of an entire plantation with not one lost. All had leaderships and people that set and fixed their eyes on that which they could not see; on faith that propelled their hands; on roots that speak the language of conjure to crop up a way out of no way; of a communion with a God who sees them through. And such hope is contagious. After Haiti declared independence, Britain, Spain, Mexico, New York State, and Brazil banish slavery over the subsequent decades— not do to a magical reorientation to a higher morality, but because slave revolts all over the world skyrocketed after Haiti's victory. Determination of self flows first through the mind. No life of freedom worth living is possible without orientation to omnipotent, righteous power from which to draw strength to accomplish the impossible. The mechanics of thought demand the expansion of the mind in order to change one's material circumstances. How else does a human being, limited in our capacities, expand past the lives we can see? One must contend with greater infinities.

By the time I came to prayer again, there was a pantheon before me where a single divine entity had been. I remembered you, my daughter, from when I was (almost) fourteen, writing to you in my first real journal, certain you would one day read my purple ink, unaware this act was prayer in and of itself. Doubt and death reframe my seedlings; my cynicism made my mind stretch to reach what I could not feel at first. Both personally and publicly, the more I meditate on liberation, the more I realized how many folks could hear me. Prayer teaches me that alignment with freedom is always synonymous with my highest

good, which must necessarily mean: regardless of my current circumstance and beyond my distrust towards a paternalistic almighty, liberation in and of itself is divine. And the pursuit of the divine is religion.

Now, in the dark of almost-dawn, I ask to be kept by you— you, who I cannot see but who I know is there. Hope is a crucial part of the garden I tend to. She blooms! Undeterred by salted soil and smoking asphalt, weeping seeds from the grief, spreading her teeny petals everywhere. Blooming. Like children do. I feel you watering my heart's desires: a world for you covered in clovers and columbines, where you view growing old as an obvious and pleasant inevitability. Where everyone knows columbines as the beautiful wildflower they are. Instead of as a tragedy. I commit myself to hope because of you.

Here are my early conclusions: in world-making, I engage in religion of liberation. Freedom is the only kind of universal goodness I can think of— not just freedom to exist without exploitation, but freedom to commune and to build with unfettered commitment to sustainability. The freedom to belong to yourself in your own people's tapestries and be soft; sovereign; laid to rest while still alive. The freedom to have power that does not cost anyone else anything.

So then if revolution is a seed, if revolution is a faith based practice, if it's a discipline to believe *in*— and not just believe, but one to feed *into*, one which requires you to fix your feet and walk towards a world that you cannot yet see— if revolution is a seed grown by my sustained attention and action, then I am to be diligent in my prayer. In private and in public, head bent to my breast, you will see who I am I devoted to.

Revolution, then, is a faith-based practice. We ruminate on, we pray for, we call forth a world past what it is that we can see. It with the utmost faith that a kinder world (1) not only exists but (2) actively roots and blooms. A new world is actively on the way.

Daughter. Daughter: every day the sun rises and i have not slept. "i am going insane," I mutter. Yes, you chuckle, *you are*.

I can tell you that the more I think of you, the more I pray to you, the more I promise to see you tomorrow (and tomorrow and tomorrow), the more I am convinced that this is not the world I will hand you. I want to gift you, my children, my children's children's children—every possible iteration of daughter— with a world that looks like you do: soft and constantly becoming and kind, and one that doesn't need or want to shy away from its softkindnesses. Past sincerity— I want cashmere. A life for you that is physically soft to the touch and better for it. I wish to leave a world that is open to your touch, a world that has every reason to trust humans rather than one that mourns our treacherous existence. That's what I want. I want to give you a world that looks like you. And when you say, *how did this happen? What was here before this?* I want to tell you how much we worked and prayed and sowed the ground with all these little blooming bits of faith in what we couldn't touch for a world where we did indeed have what we wanted. Sovereignty and ripe fruit for everyone always. I didn't know that all of this was not just possible, but actively on the way until I started praying to you. Freedom is the only way I imagine the sunrise these days: as a surety, if I only survive the night. If I do not lose sight of the horizon, I can catch the rays in my hands. I have lost the ability to settle for less.

I'll read to you what I put in my journal this morning, when you woke me up at a quarter to three in the morning, as if you are already a fetus kicking my spleen:

It is the middle of the night... and that means nothing. I do not sleep. When I dream, I see my world that I leave behind like a half-asleep baby, praying I can sneak away for rest. I blink and a new people have "managed" to "find their way" to their death. There is nothing after this. A new world is coming like the dawn ; I am up with labor pains. I feel spasms in my back. I pace back and force in my kitchen, smoking to manage the pain, convincing myself to eat snacks, wondering if the revolution is coming this time or if it's just Braxton-Hicks.

one of my elders spoke a daughter over me this year. the daughter i have been writing to since fourteen.

dear future daughter:

I love you such that I do not sleep.

love,

ismatu g.

## CONCLUSIONS

ALL MY TITLES FEEL LIKE FALL OUT BOY  
SONGS AND I DIDN'T WANT THIS ONE TO BE  
LEFT OUT... HERE'S AN EPILOGUE SUBTITLED,  
TIME IS NOT LINEAR.

**T**he title of this collection sounds particularly transient— as if I *went from* being a stripper towards a more marketably pure life as a public servant. The actual transition felt far more graded. You know sometimes how the sun just... rises? Before you notice, the dawn overtook the good and gentle night? I feel that way about the unfolding of my life— no clean sense of “before” and “after.” Rather, I woke up one day and was like, *oh. This is my life now.* The works of ismatu gwendolyn’s hands include (but certainly are not limited to): agricultural efforts (most specifically, rice farming), literacy campaigning (in Sierra Leone and the United States), organizing for free therapeutic services (US-based), a Universal Basic Income campaign (Sierra Leone) and the publishing of my writing for anyone who finds it helpful. This list is constantly growing; I am always aware that I am still in the beginning stages of things. Anyhow, I am in the spring of my life. One day I will revisit this text and see seeds yet to germinate. As much as I love the self I get to hold right now, I cannot wait for the self that comes to greet me.

I am testing out a new means of world-making. Oftentimes, with revolutionary artists, our teeth are dulled and rotted on the sweet spoils of the empire. The works of our hands, while we are young and jagged

and feeling the pain of a world made to stifle us, begins so sharp. So poignant. Then the waves of cooptation come— monies. Awards. Accolades. And suddenly it becomes a lot easier to speak about revolutionary ideas at paid keynotes than assume the risk involved with building systems for public access. I am testing out a new thing: I am not keeping any monies produced from this book. I have desires to secure libraries in Freetown, Sierra Leone and in Chicago (on the lands of the Council of Three Fires). I am crossing my fingers and hoping this is a replicable ecology. If so: I would like to never keep any royalty money from any book I produce. I already know books, music and other kinds of intellectual property can enrich an artist personally. I find that to be very boring, as I am no longer motivated by money. What could be done with *community* intellectual property? What happens if one does not conceive of any intellectual revelations or lessons as *proprietary* at all?

I am ahead of myself. All in good time.

I also can't remember if I said this at the start of the book, but if you read chronologically, you probably can't either! Feels worth the reminder: I did **not** sit down and go, *oh you know what would be fun? Cementing my history in sex work in pen and ink forever and ever amen.* I am **not** telling my mom I printed this book and there's a 40% chance she actually never finds out, so don't be a snitch. I did not intend on a theme for this collection. I was looking for personal essays that had grit to them, a particularly *me* flavor, and these were the ones that hopped out. The years I spent as a sex worker were spent *experiencing* them. I did not write anything down or process anything *about* those experiences until I was transitioning out of the life of being a full-time service provider. It makes sense to me that I spent the first chapter of my life "out" saw all these bits of myself I saved for later stumbling out of my pen.

*Out* in quotes because I left the club to pick up... independent modeling. The jokes write themselves.



Two more things: I often say that the club was one of the most radicalizing environments I have ever been in. Many an internet neighbor has asked me to elaborate on that statement and... I don't know that I could in full without betraying some of the elements of the strip club that are designed to be clandestine. If anyone knows how to keep a secret until their grave, it is your local sex worker (and if you think you don't know one... LOL). What I will say: sex work exposes you to every kind of person. If you want to make a decent living, or *any* kind of living, you have to get really, really good at talking to people you would otherwise never meet in your daily life. I met so many people working *so* many kinds of jobs and living *so many kinds of lives* it made my head spin. At first, I kept things very surface level— I'm here to make money and go home. *Buuuut* after a while, I got bored with being profit-driven. Once I mastered the art of financial seduction, I started talking politics. I was shocked, regularly, about how many different kinds of people are desperate for sustainable change in the United States. It didn't matter how people self-described: conservative, apolitical, left-leaning, straight, working class, rich. My time as a stripper is the thing that fundamentally convinced me that all *most people* want is good food, good work, and time to enjoy their lives. How do we set aside smaller differences in organizing to reach common goals? *Quickly?*

That, and the importance of unions. The working class has lost so much ground in labor organizing, especially since World War I and *especially during Reagan*— no. I digress. Separate essay.

Finally: if you purchased this physical book— *thank you. I bless you. May the work of your day pass through your hands with ease.* I'm testing out art-making as world-making in a very literal fashion. As thanks, I'm leaving us with one of my most favorite essays. While in graduate

school, one of my professors had a unit on claims-making within global public health (remember: I studied Clinical Social Work with a concentration and a fellowship in Global Health Administration and Policy). For our midterm, he had prompts we could write a four to five page double-spaced essay on, *or* we could ignore that prompt and write it on whatever we felt like. I must have asked that silly man three times to confirm that it really could be on *whatever* we wanted. He said yes. Picture me, the night the midterm is due, at the club at like 11pm, making fine money, and then going, *omg I cannot focus, I really do have to write this damn essay. I literally wasn't gonna do it but fuck it.* So I went home, popped an edible, and raced against the clock to finish writing before I was too high to read correctly. I hit submit as the sun was rising and I fell asleep on my couch face-first. I was hoping at least for a C, maybe a C+.

Reader— *I got an A!!!* Please enjoy it on the next page. All my love.

ig



## BONUS ESSAY!

Ismatu Bangura

Professor Zarychta

SSAD 30000

March 17, 2021

### Claims-Making, Social Mobilization, and WAP

I have elected to write this essay about the 63rd annual GRAMMY Awards— and more specifically, the performance of WAP. WAP, or Wet Ass Pussy, is a single performed by rapper Cardi B which features fellow female rapper Megan Thee Stallion. The song was released August 7, 2020, and debuted in the number one spot on the Billboard Hot 100, making them the first female rap duo to ever achieve such a feat. Since its release, the song has gone certified quintuple platinum, as confirmed by the Recording Industry Association of America. WAP is a hit song as much as it is a cultural moment, and to say the song is incredibly popular, incredibly well done... and incredibly explicit is an understatement. The GRAMMY Awards are shown on live television and are rated G— so with lyrics such as, “if he ate my ass, he’s a

bottom-feeder,” one might question how the duo was able to perform it live.

As it happens, substitutes and censored words will do the trick for live television, but they do little to stop a hailstorm of criticism from offended watchers. Right-wing commentators specifically expressed revulsion and shock at the performance, with many stating they had to turn the GRAMMYs off altogether. The event itself and the backlash may seem like a non sequitur in regards to larger and more important current events unfolding around us, but in actuality, this moment in music history holds centuries of narrative construction, concepts of deservingness, and Black caricatures. Pointed critiques have been lobbed at Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion regarding their *character* for making a sexually charged song, rather than critiquing the art itself (McCarthy, 2021). Cardi B noted that the most scathing critiques of WAP were coming from “big republicans... like those motherfuckers that got blue checks on Twitter” (McCarthy, 2021). Much of these critiques frame them and those that emulate the two in an intentional, deviant light. Framings such as these have pronounced effects on Black women in the United States and across the globe.

I would like to use the performance and critiques of WAP to understand the process of claims-making, and how such claims-making further shapes policy in the United States. I propose Republican and other right-wing identifying personas work in portraying Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B as sexually promiscuous, sex-worker adjacent, bad role models is an intentional framing that draws on the familiar Jezebel caricature of Black women— and that all of this framing has notable effects on policy in the United States.

Right-wing political commentators and personalities have discussed WAP at length and diagnosed it as a problem. As they are political pundits with agendas, I argue they do not just seek to label this spectacle of sexuality a problem solely because it bothers them personally, but to explain, describe, recommend, and *persuade* their audience (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). The problem of WAP is intentionally constructed to be a one that reaches you in your homes and falls on inappropriate ears, like when former Governor of Arizona Susana

Martinez states she had to turn the GRAMMYs off because she “was watching with her developmentally challenged sister” (Rumpf, 2021). Larry Elder, commentator for Fox News, said “I thought I had entered into a strip club. It was absolutely... whatever happened to being able to sing, to play an instrument, dance? Where are those skills?” These comments associate WAP with “vulgar things,” as Governor Martinez put it. Now the performers are positioned next to sex work, which is criminalized and taboo in the United States, and the dancing and rapping displayed are framed as skills that are lesser than more socially acceptable talents, such as playing an instrument on stage. This is the formulation of a problem: the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions (Spector & Kitsuse, 75). The words themselves are chosen carefully as well: *vulgar*, *strip club*, or even the pauses for speechlessness. Rochefort and Cobb (1993) said about claims-making that “actions and words influence and even stand for each other as embodiments of the ideas, arguments, convictions, demands, and perceived realities that direct the public enterprise” (p. 27).

Elder, Martinez, and many others are acting as visible spokespeople who are describing unsavory conditions and providing a cure (which, in this case, was to turn off the GRAMMYs). WAP is intentionally constructed into a social problem where the remedy is to shield the masses from it. If we fail to, then vulgar messages about sexual immorality will be proximal, frequent, and severe. And women such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are culpable for this issue.

While critiques of WAP have also faulted this “newer generation,” the story unfolds so easily because it is centuries old. Deborah Gray White, professor of history and co-director of the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis at Rutgers University, defines the Jezebel caricature in her book, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*: “One of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character. In every way Jezebel was the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudery,

indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh.” (Gray White, 52). The Jezebel character dates back to the institution of slavery, where Black enslaved women were in the furthest corner of undeserving there was. White enslavers justified their sexual assault and rape of their enslaved women by saying they could not turn off their sexual desires. Positioning artists such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion next to sex workers, calling them vulgar, and implying they resort to sexually explicit performances because they lack talent is the Jezebel narrative, and it is an easy one to pick up and disseminate because it has long since been labeled a problem.

And, as we know, problem definition is closely linked to policy formation (Lecture, 01/20/2021). The problem itself is around deservingness, and their so-called incorrect portrayals of womanhood, and so they are undeserving but still wealthy and powerful. The idea that sexually forward or explicit women are outside the realm of deservingness is in line to the United States’ policies surrounding sex work, which heavily criminalize the occupation. Such criminalization puts sex workers at increased risk of robbery, assault, and murder. Megan herself was shot in both feet by someone she knew and was friendly with, and was met with skepticism and people saying she “deserved it, acting like a Hot Girl” when the story broke (Peters, 2020). Moreover, this theory is in line with the recent votes for the Violence Against Women Act, which the House of Representatives passed along party lines— meaning 172 Republican representatives voted against the legislation. In the United States, not only are Black women the most likely demographic by race to suffer domestic violence, they are also the most likely to be criminalized for seeking help from authorities (TB, 2020). The othering of rich and powerful Black women for their perceived sexual deviancy balloons and spreads to Black women that do not have the social or economic affluence to defend themselves. So then, the problem definition widens from just Megan and Cardi to all Black women Jezebels... which could be any of us, at any time.

While Megan specifically stands at the helm of a social movement coined by her catchphrase, “real hot girl shit,” the wave began to crest in the summer of 2019, when Hot Girl Summer was released featuring

Nicki Minaj. This slogan was *inescapable*. The term “hotties” stuck as the nickname for Megan’s fanbase, and hot girl summer turned into “real hot girl shit” as she solidified her place as a rap superpower. Her rise to fame has also put her in a unique position as a representative; Megan is a tall, curvy, unambiguously Black woman who is able to speak freely about her sexual desires and conquests without backing down. Her agency in choice actually contrasts the Jezebel caricature fundamentals, which are designed to subjugate the Black woman as a wayward, wanting *recipient*. Megan does not make herself available as a conquest; instead, she on her own is the sexual conquistador. She has amassed wealth and fame, and seems to be handling it with grace, even with the loss of grounding support systems (such as her mother). With her rise, she has coined and created the Hot Girl Era. Hot girl shit seeks to center the Black woman, protect the Black woman, and celebrate the Black woman. It is a movement that seeks to change social values so that centering, protecting, and celebrating the Black woman is mainstream and commonplace. Her representation is good at uplifting Black women within the “hot girl” social movement she has created— but with some caveats.

A social movement generally refers to a large, informal or formal groupings of individuals and organizations that make claims or take actions on a specific social issue or problem that often includes a collective identity and has a vehicle for mass participation (Lecture, 02/17/21). Just as WAP was a cultural moment, a reset, Megan Thee Stallion’s region of hotties is a movement within the rap and R&B world. Megan is relatable, feels accessible, is honest and down to earth with her fanbase— and she is *still* the epitome of celebrity. Her movement, her moment, is predicated on the fact that she can be desirable and consumable to men. Megan utilizes her position on the Beauty hierarchy to secure and invest in her growing empire. Even WAP, the spectacle of sexual liberation, conveniently manages to boasts of sexual traits cisgender heterosexual men would still find attractive. Megan Thee Stallion is, in spite of her Blackness, an advantaged group. She is a cis-gendered woman who has access to capital and social mobility through her talents as a musical artist and through her ability to perform Beauty. She has a beauty brand deal with Revlon; she has an

estimated worth of three million dollars (Jackson, 2021). While being a hot girl markets itself on inclusivity, and body positivity, ultimately her fame is partially predicated on capitalizing on her desirability.

Organizing along a single axis can further marginalize already marginalized groups within a social movement (Lecture, 2/15/2021). Within pushes for social mobilization, representation through interest groups, such as Megan and Cardi, usually end up reinforcing institutional power— meaning that Black women who are not as socially or financially affluent, who may not have one a genetic lottery of desirable features and body types, then have less access to capitalize on the Beauty hierarchy that Megan uses to succeed. Megan has made her politics clear on championing Black women, specifically around the phrase “protect Black women.” She even organized a performance on SNL that was explicitly in support of protecting Black women from the various kinds of violence we are likely to face in our lives, knowing she would receive backlash stating her politics so plainly during a time where she was supposed to be entertaining (Stallion, 2020). This makes her hot girl movement enticing, as are many social movements. Enticing social movements are ripe for co-optation— though, does anyone need to co-opt a justice movement begun by a traditional capitalist celebrity?

Additionally, Megan is a part of an *interest group*, or a group that has some agency identities that seeks to advocate for the agenda of the less advantaged (Strolovitch, 2006) She is currently signed to RocNation, Jay-Z’s record label and a musical mecca where young, talented, attractive, rich Black women make industry-changing music (Jackson, 2021). The branding as prodigal is intentional and consistent across other music talents signed to the label. Importantly, Strolovitch (2006) theorizes that interest groups do not represent the disadvantaged well, and organizations are less active when it comes to issues affecting disadvantaged subgroups than they are about more advantaged subgroups. These analyses also prove true in the case of Megan’s Hot Girl era. While one does not have to have access to capital to be able to sing the lyrics when they come on the radio, in order to *reap* some of the benefits Megan’s representation brings, access to desirability is a necessity

(at minimum). Ideally, access to capital would be through engaging cisgender, patriarchal beauty standards, being able bodied and youthful, and having access to monetary surplus. Hot girl shit has organized along the axis of being attractive to men, which could ultimately marginalizes women that are not interested in attracting cisgender heterosexual men or are otherwise unable to. Beauty can be utilized to gain safety, visibility, and power where one was previously marginalized, however the marginalization of Black feminine peoples occurs, in part, because of the Beauty standards in place societally (Beauty as a proper noun meaning that which is desirable structurally and reinforced within mass media, as opposed to the individual preferences of any given person).

Between social mobilization and social problems as claims-making, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion had quite the moment at the 63rd annual GRAMMY Awards. Neither social mobilization or policy-making through problem definition need to be explicitly political in order to have real political effects on the lives of regular people—in fact, celebrities taking part in social mobilization and claims-making highlight that the daily life of pop culture does not run separately from policy-making and implementation in the United States. If the two inform each other, it's possible then that one's political views are constantly being shaped by claims-making hidden within the critique of a song.

## Works Cited

- Jackson, Lauren M(. 2021, February 20). The importance of being megan thee stallion. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a35496164/megan-thee-stallion-march-2021-cover-story/>
- McCarthy, T. (2021, February 08). Cardi B SLAMS REPUBLICAN CRITICS, blames them for backlash to hit SONG 'WAP'. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/cardi-b-republican-critics-backlash-wap>
- Rocheftort, David A., and Roger W. Cobb. "Problem Definition: An Emerging Perspective." In *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1–31.
- Rumpf, S., & By. (2021, March 15). Fox news Panel shocked BY 'VULGAR' GRAMMYS performance of wap: 'i Thought I had entered a Strip club!' Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.mediaite.com/entertainment/fox-news-panel-shocked-by-vulgar-grammys-performance-of-wap-i-thought-i-had-entered-a-strip-club/>
- Schneider, A. L. and Ingram, H.M. (2005). "Introduction: Public Policy and the Social Construction of Deservedness." Pp. 1
- Spector, M. & Kitsuse, J. (1987). "Social Problems as Claims Making" (Ch. 5), in *Constructing Social Problems*, pp. 73-78 and 85- 96.
- Stallion, M. (2020, October 13). Megan thee Stallion: Why I speak up for black women. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/opinion/megan-thee-stallion-black-women.html>
- Strolovitch, D. Z. (2006). "Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender." *Journal of Politics*, 68:894–910.
- T, B. (2020, October 05). How women of color are impacted by domestic violence. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/domestic-violence-varies-by-ethnicity-62648>



White, D. G. (1999). *Ar'n't I a woman?: Female slaves in the plantation South*. WW Norton & Company. Chicago



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*ismatu gwendolyn photographed by Eryn Johnson | 2024*

ismatu gwendolyn transitioned out of the club and into a life of social service largely by accident. When the first TikTok they ever made went viral in 2022, they found themselves with a choice: become a skincare influencer or become a public good? Thankfully, she chose the latter. By 2025, the life of the author is viral, focused, and unrecognizable to previous selves. They utilized their degree in Clinical Social Work to organize for free therapeutic services within the United States (and the concentration in Global Health Administration definitely helps with their Universal Basic Income initiative they spearhead with Swiss-based NGO, Social Income). She describes herself as a public scholar,

having dedicated the work of her day towards creating essays and videos for anyone with an internet connection and a curiosity about how to make a better world. ismatu's proper debut, *small prophecies*, comes in of May 2025 (a text which the author promises has the appropriate amount of gravitas). When she is not writing, she can be found farming in Sierra Leone, carrying on her grandfather's legacy within their family's chieftaincy. The author is entirely funded on donations (and will keep 0% of this book's proceeds for personal use).

Here's to the making of libraries while we are still young and have little to lose.

socials: [ismatu.gwendolyn](https://ismatu.gwendolyn) (pretty much everywhere)  
[threadings.io](https://threadings.io) | [ismatu.com](https://ismatu.com)