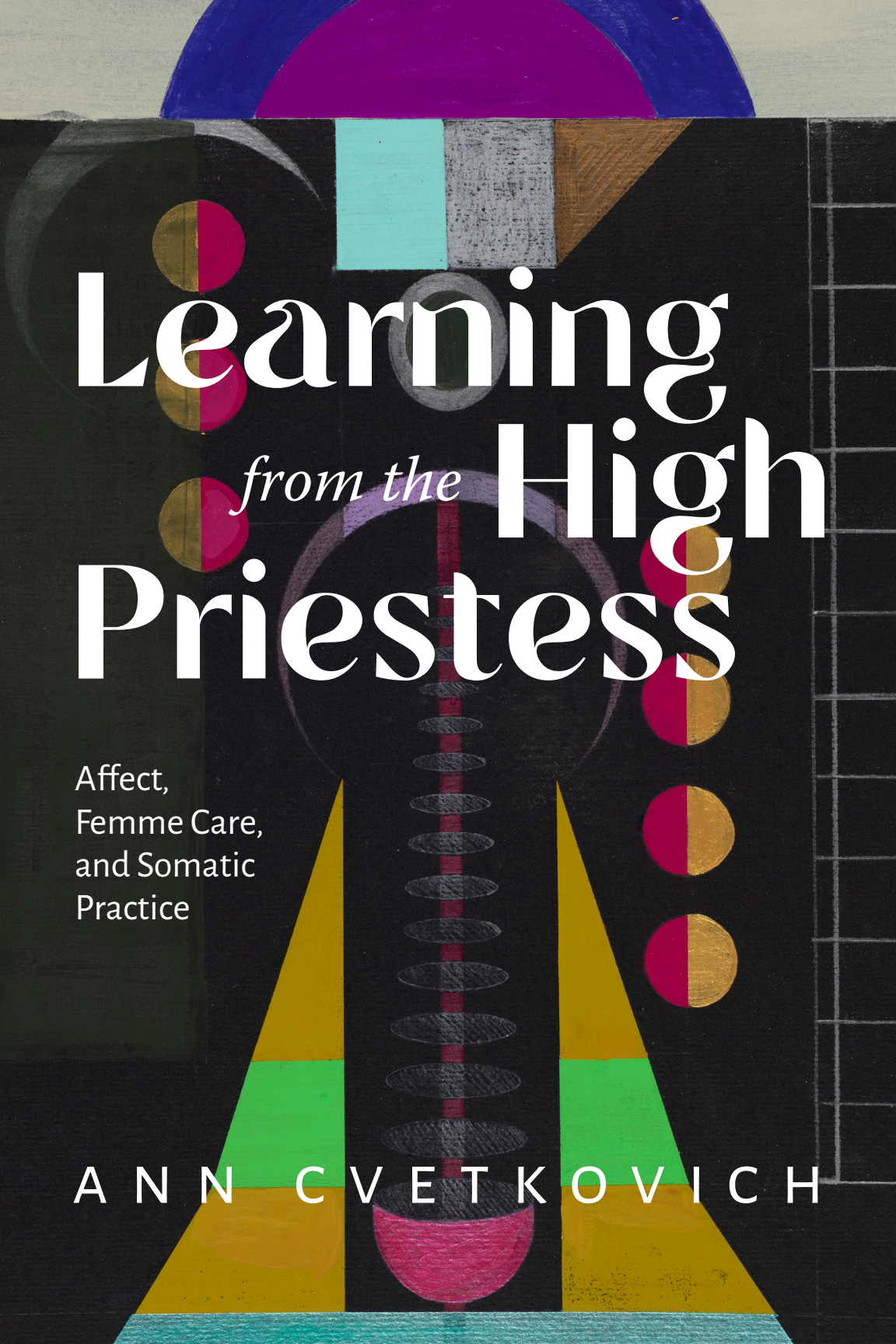




Learning *from the* High Priestess

Affect,
Femme Care,
and Somatic
Practice

A N N C V E T K O V I C H

Learning *from the* High Priestess

BUY



Learning *from the* High Priestess

Affect, Femme Care, and Somatic Practice

ANN CVETKOVICH



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Tarot, 2021. Courtesy of Hilma's Ghost.

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Once again for Gretchen Phillips,
my beloved lab partner in the art of feelings

and for my teachers,
including my students

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There's a new day comin', everything's gon' be turning over,

Everything's gon' be turning over, where you gon' be
standing when it comes?

—Bernice Johnson Reagon, “There’s a New World Coming”

Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “There’s a New World Coming,” from *Give Your Hands to Struggle* (1975), was written in response to the end of the Vietnam War, and its chorus has been incorporated into Bernice and Toshi Reagon’s adaptation of Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* as a congregational opera. The song’s message of revolution and liberation is another way of articulating Butler’s philosophy of “God is Change,” and its refrain also invokes that of the classic protest song “Which Side Are You On?,” popularized in the civil rights era by the Freedom Singers, whose members included Bernice and Cordell Reagon, Toshi’s parents.

Toshi Reagon also recorded a version of the song titled “Where You Gonna Be Standing” for her album *Kindness* (1997), and she has collaborated with Alexis Pauline Gumbs on songs for *Undrowned* and with adrienne maree brown on a podcast called *Octavia’s Parables*. The intergenerational and intertextual transmission of these words through music is a form of somatic practice. And collectively this body of work provides resources for continuing to stand in the face of tumultuous change.

Lyrics courtesy of Toshi Reagon and TRO Essex Music Group.

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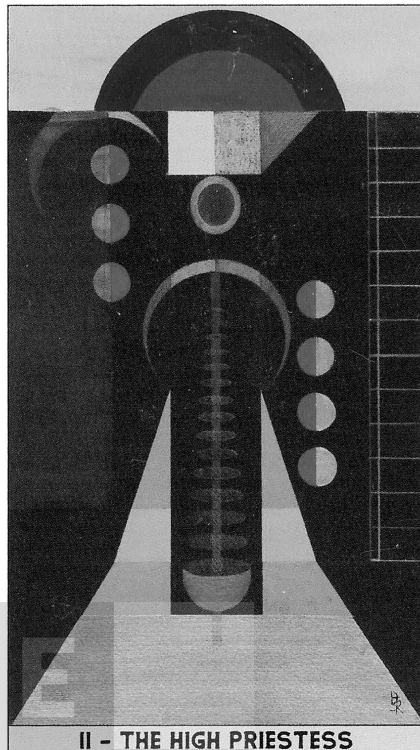
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INTRODUCTION

Grappling *with a* “Mental Health Crisis”



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II - THE HIGH PRIESTESS

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Hilma's Ghost, The High Priestess, Abstract Futures Tarot, 2021. Courtesy of Hilma's Ghost.

I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. . . .

And you who seek to know Me, know that the seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.

—Starhawk, “Charge of the Star Goddess,” in *The Spiral Dance*



In their Abstract Futures deck, artist duo Hilma's Ghost (Dannielle Tegeder and Sharmistha Ray) rework tarot for contemporary times using abstraction inspired by the work of visionary modernist Hilma af Klint. Their cosmic geometries remove the tarot deck from its associations with Judeo-Christian traditions and free viewers to make their own meanings.

The High Priestess card appears here and on the cover in order to signify the book's interest in alternative ways of knowing, especially affective ones. Our own somatic experience is a source of knowledge, as is our felt connection to the world around us. In keeping with Starhawk's suggestion, in her version of the charge of the star goddess (adapted from Doreen Valiente), that the mysteries of the universe lie within, I invoke the High Priestess to suggest that we all have the power to access her wisdom, which is ultimately also our own life force.

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Over the last decade, since publishing a book about depression, I have watched with interest as discourses of mental health circulate in new ways not only in academic scholarship but also in the public sphere. I've been watching two arenas with particular interest: the university and activism. Within the university, what feels like a neoliberal "emotional management" is producing "trauma-centered care" for dealing with increasing, indeed epidemic, levels of everyday anxiety and depression for students (not to mention faculty and staff) that accompany increasing levels of violence, ranging from active shooters and guns on campus to everyday racism and sexual harassment, as well as the impact of a larger political context that has included not one but two Trump administrations, Black death on the streets, border wars, bathroom bills and other anti-trans legislation, and—oh yes—a pandemic.

I first started tracking this evolving public discussion at the University of Texas, where campus carry legislation passed in 2015 made concealed weapons on campus legal (and signs for Gun Free UT illegal) and two students were murdered in two successive years, in one case in open view of many others on a plaza outside the gym. Those of us who are teachers grew used to having to negotiate "trauma in the classroom," the name of one of the helpful handouts we received from the university administration along with lots of concerned email announcements from the president, the provost, the dean of students, and the campus mental health services. There's a full-time institutional apparatus at work, and the problems only seem to worsen. Moreover, my move to Canada in 2019 did not necessarily bring any significant changes, since a kinder and gentler institutional culture has also been dealing with a chronic mental health crisis and a universal health care system that is strained to the point of breaking.

These institutional discussions, both formal and informal, accelerated during the time of full-blown pandemic when all of us were having to think about our own mental health and that of many others on a daily basis. But the public priority given to mental health and wellness often seems focused on forms of what has become known in the vernacular as "self-care" that falls to the individual—take a walk, take a break, take a breath.¹ There's a strong critique of this advice as neoliberal policy where responsibility still lies with the individual students, teachers, and staff to get help, which often takes the form of medicalized care, not structural change in the workplace or the classroom, as we all grapple with economic and social crisis. Not only are we continuing to struggle with a pandemic that has officially been declared over but is in fact chronic, especially for those who are vulnerable, but the list of ongoing stress points has continued to expand as I have been working on this project:

severe forms of backlash against DEI policies, reproductive rights, and access to care for transgender people; the decimation of life in Gaza combined with the repression of anyone who speaks out against it; climate change that brings with it alarming and near-daily reports of unusual storms, floods, heat waves, and forest fires; and the reality of another Trump presidency. As I completed one draft, on July 2, 2024, the Supreme Court had just granted Donald Trump increased immunity from prosecution, Hurricane Beryl had destroyed Audre Lorde's ancestral home of Carriacou, and the war in Gaza continued unabated. As I completed another, on May 22, 2025, Trump had been sharing false stories about the persecution of white South Africans with the country's president; the "gift" of a presidential jet from Qatar had been accepted by the United States; Mahmoud Khalil, still in custody in Louisiana, had been denied the right to see his one-month-old child; two young Jews who worked in the Israeli embassy in DC were shot and killed; and the approaching five-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder seemed destined to be remembered as a time of backlash against antiracism. The updates will continue well after this book is published, especially since as I prepare it for publication, higher education, one of the key sites for its inquiry, is being upended.

Given the dire conditions, it is perhaps no surprise that attention to mental health has also grown more prominent in activist circles, including DIY anarchisms, feminist and queer of color organizing, and trans and disability justice cultures, where understandings of self-care circulate alongside concepts of radical care, collective care, and mutual aid, with the latter terms often designed to address the individualism that attaches to the former. As someone who has been part of conversations about political depression within activist circles that can be the result of burnout, and collective failure and disappointment, I have been very intrigued by this work because it speaks to the need to think about the affective dynamics of activism. An important inspiration for Black Lives Matter work, which has significant feminist and queer roots, has been Audre Lorde's words from her book *A Burst of Light*: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."² Emerging from the specific context of not only Black feminism but also her struggle with cancer, Lorde's phrase "taking care of myself" has morphed into the concept of self-care as it has gained in popularity. Its prominence in both activist and self-help circles has led to much "grappling" with self-care—a fear that it is too individualist and that it pulls focus from "real" political activity or structural change.

But this debate only has life because a new generation of BIPOC, queer, and disabled activists that includes adrienne maree brown, Leah Lakshmi

Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs has been drawing on a legacy of women of color feminisms, including imaginative writings by Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, and others, to provide new discourses and practices that put mental health—understood very capaciously as an emotional well-being that includes body, mind, and their entanglements, or what I will call a somatic politics—at the center of activist and creative work. That work manifests as a politics of breath, embodied, for example, by Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s collaboration with her musician partner Sangodare on the Black Feminist Breathing Chorus, a twenty-one-day series of audio meditations drawn from the words of Black feminists and distributed in a digital format. One aim for this book is to explore how a multigenerational lineage of Black, women of color, and Indigenous feminisms provides resources for understanding self-care in ways that are not distinct from collective care and reframes mental health—both what it is and how to achieve it—as a form of freedom and decolonization of the bodymind.

As a white queer lesbian feminist, I, too, have been shaped by this lineage and have wanted to see it transported (with care and respect) into other circles. This book draws together the arenas that have shaped me (the university, the arts, and activism) in order to ask how we might think about mental health—understood very broadly as forms of psychic, emotional, and spiritual survival—in this time of crumbling US empire. It seeks to integrate—as in putting disparate things together but not necessarily making them whole—in order to resist the divisions of segregation, separatisms, siloed disciplines, and isolation. It seeks to reframe understandings of mental health to explore how to use writing and thinking practice to respond to the trouble we are in. It draws on theory and conceptual analysis but also on what I have learned from somatic practices—from yoga and meditation to swimming and dance, and also writing as practice—to envision pathways through the mess, or sometimes just creative ways of being inside it. And borrowing the figure of the High Priestess from the tarot deck as a visual icon for its aims, it plays with alternative modes of study and embodied ways of knowing.

A Mental Health Crisis in the Headlines

Even a cursory use of a search engine yields tons of hits for “mental health crisis,” which has become a convenient shorthand for skyrocketing numbers of diagnoses and pharmaceutical prescriptions. Under the *New York Times* subject heading “Mental Health and Disorders,” there are new stories almost every day, with a particular focus on young people. Sample headlines in re-

cent years include “It’s Life or Death: The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens” (May 3, 2022); “Inside the Adolescent Mental Health Crisis” (August 30, 2022); “Meeting the Mental Health Challenge at School and at Home” (October 6, 2022); “Global Issues Are Taking a Major Toll on Young People’s Mental Health” (August 13, 2024); “A Global Flourishing Study Finds That Young Adults, Well, Aren’t” (April 30, 2025); “America’s Children Are Unwell. Are Schools Part of the Problem?” (November 24, 2025).³ In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, there are equally regular stories on student mental health, which is also a major topic of conversation within scholarly journals in higher education administration and psychology.⁴ I’m not statistically inclined, but even so, the numbers are extraordinary and hence a starting point for discussion: In 2019, 13 percent of adolescents reported having a major depressive episode, a 60 percent increase from 2007. And suicide rates, which had been stable from 2000 to 2007 among this group, leaped nearly 60 percent by 2018. Express Scripts, a mail-order pharmacy, reports that prescriptions of antidepressants for teenagers rose 38 percent from 2015 to 2019, compared with only 12 percent for adults, and in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a 17.3 percent rise in anxiety medications for teenagers as compared with a 9.3 percent rate of change in anxiety medications for adults. And a 2020 study found that 40.7 percent of people aged two to twenty-four who were prescribed a drug for ADHD were also prescribed at least one other medication for depression, anxiety, or another mood or behavioral disorder.⁵

This is a public health emergency by any measure, but I’ve also had some resistance to the term *mental health crisis*, even though I use it myself as a convenient shorthand for this phenomenon. Putting it in those terms seems to belong to a largely medical paradigm in which the solutions are more counselors and doctors, more drugs, more scientific research. As a longtime critic of this model, I’m interested in what else we can do, especially if we conceive of the problem as cultural, social, and systemic. If it’s a crisis, it’s what Lauren Berlant would call a case of “crisis ordinary,” a problem that is long in the making and chronic, not a sudden or unexpected phenomenon. As with diagnostic categories, such as trauma or depression, or institutionalized terms such as *sexual abuse*, the term *mental health crisis* can obfuscate, putting a range of phenomena under a big umbrella that would benefit from greater nuance. Moreover, the *mental health* in mental health crisis sometimes seems vaguely sanitized, like the words *sexual abuse* or *human rights violation* (or using *mental illness* rather than *crazy*) and requires scrutiny for its bland normativity.⁶

And yet despite my skepticism about declarations of a mental health crisis, I want to acknowledge that the term has impact as a way to register a problem for which help is urgently needed in the places where I live. Although I may make certain choices for myself, as a teacher and also as an auntie and a friend to parents with young adult kids, I am not sure those same strategies are right for others. What is to be done? And how can I help with the tools that I have, which are mostly analytical and cultural? Because I am interested in the affective and lived experiences of social transformations and movements, I have been drawn to trauma, depression, and institutional discussions of mental health as a lens through which to filter the geopolitical context. Although I've taken a crack at it already in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, I have felt compelled to try again to provide some resources for psychic survival given the ongoingness of the problems I was trying to tackle there.

As someone who has been trained to use the tools of critical theory to describe the present conjuncture—as a necessary component of making good decisions about what to do—I also seek to acknowledge conceptual and practical impasses that demand different kinds of strategies. I imagine what it would be like if the headlines declaring a mental health crisis were replaced by ones that to me feel more accurate: “Crumbling US Empire Is Making Us Crazy”; “State of Psychic Emergency Declared”; “Climate Change Produces Climate Anxiety”; “Racial Capitalism Responsible for Fatal Epidemic of Microaggressions”; “Sex Panic Strikes Again! Anti-Trans and Anti-Immigrant Backlash”; “Feeling Scared? It Might Be Political.” All of these would be ways of linking up the felt experience of distress with the dire political conditions that we are in. To start there would be to think of mental health or affective problems as geopolitical problems and vice versa.

With respect to describing “the way we live (and feel) now,” racial capitalism is always a good starting point. What I’m naming in shorthand as a “crumbling US empire” feels like something new to this child of the postwar boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. The specific forms of decline have been coming as surprises even as they make sense once they’re here, especially the dismantling of democracy (which was always an unfinished project at best and worthy of critique) and the unrestrained oligarchic power of megabillionaires and corrupt politicians. I place myself inside the dream of a university that could be a foundation for social justice, which, to be sure, is also predicated on forms of prosperity that should be acknowledged. When I entered higher education as an undergraduate, the dream was still alive, although the 1978 *Bakke* case signified resistance to affirmative action from the get-go, as did the 1978 Proposition 13 property tax wars, also part of Reagan’s years as

governor of California, which set the foundation for his presidency and for increasing resistance to state funding for public resources such as health care and education. But even with setbacks, we made genuine changes in higher education; the university is just not the same place it was when I entered it either in terms of curriculum or in terms of who is there. The heartbreak of this current moment of attack is that we were actually getting somewhere and creating a critical mass with momentum. But the virulence of this new wave of backlash (even though it has been consistent throughout) has shaken, but not destroyed, my faith in the civil rights era conviction that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. I agree with those, such as Mariame Kaba, who point out that hope is a discipline or a practice, and I would add that it can be a somatic practice.⁷

My project is also shaped by what are now multiple generations of critique of left critique. These include the new social movements of my youth that brought gender, race, and sexuality to old-school analysis of class and revolution. That critique was also accompanied by the tools that critical theory and cultural studies provided for thinking about how art and culture were part of social movements, which also opened up new understandings of why and how universities, and other forms of culture-building and study, could matter. As those critiques have taken hold, they have in turn given rise to new models for the affective dimensions of collective organizing that take into account conflict, burnout, and grief.

This is not the whole story of what's happening now—just one piece of it from my vantage point as an academic, as queer, as North American, to name a few salient categories. As the book moves forward, it may seem to shift from the big-picture context in favor of the small or the local. But I hope its focus on affective life will be understood through the larger lens of capitalism in its many current manifestations. It may not speak to those who are living the crisis ordinary from other locations—geopolitically, socially, generationally—but I hope it will give license, and even possible models or visions, to others for making sense of their own lived experience and orienting toward what's next to craft visions of the future.⁸ I know from my exchanges with people outside the United States and Canada that people are hungry for a version of where we are now and where we go next that addresses affective experience and affective strategies, including the terrible toll of political conditions on mental health.

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Grappling with “Cure”: Eli Clare and Queer Disability Studies

In this book, then, I propose to offer some humble tools from the world of cultural theory that I inhabit, as well as from lived experience—in academia, with depression, in lesbian feminist circles, with activism. This is an “essay”—a thought experiment in what we might do to address the mental health crisis—with the hope that if solutions are not possible, a better grip on the problem might help. I’ve been prompted in part by the discovery that the work of my previous books on trauma and depression is ongoing due to the persistent relevance of those concepts and the problems they describe, as well as shifts in my own thinking. One of the book’s methods is *grappling*, a term taken with great respect and gratitude from Eli Clare’s *Brilliant Imperfection*, whose subtitle, *Grappling with Cure*, provides an important conceptual tool.

Clare opened up places that had been stuck for me, providing a new approach to the tension between critique and the reparative that has so driven my career in theory over the last couple of decades. While he is a critic of medical approaches to disability and hence an ardent advocate for not seeking cure, he is also embedded in community with those who do, and the act of grappling constitutes a very ethical and respectful acknowledgment of different ways of thinking about cure. He writes, “As an ideology seeped into every corner of white Western thought and culture, cure rides on the back of normal and natural. Insidious and pervasive, it impacts most of us. In response, we need neither a whole-hearted acceptance nor an outright rejection of cure, but rather a broad-based grappling.”⁹ Clare introduces this idea of grappling after having described “ranting”—the desire to wipe out stupid notions of cure that depend on medical models and that turn disability into a problem or abnormality. At the heart of his approach is a queer sensibility whose embrace of the nonnormative I recognize very well. And I also recognize critique as rant, especially when it feels like your voice is not heard, from many circles I’ve been associated with, including pro-sex feminism and radical feminisms. When in conversation with, or even confronted by, a friend or someone he actually knows, Clare’s vehemence drops away: “My impulse to rant has vanished.” These are the affective dynamics of sociability (and the antisocial) and especially of infighting: “I let this multitude of relationships we have to disability, illness, suffering, injustice, and cure jostle me, knowing that I need this exact tangle of conflicting and overlapping conversations. Holding it all—sickness and human vulnerability, health and disability, the need for

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and the rejection of cure—is much harder work than writing anti-cure diatribes. And much more necessary.”¹⁰ There is humility in Clare’s engagement with ideas as embodied in people’s lives. Like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick arguing for the flexibility of “weak theory,” Clare is able to hold out for messiness rather than clarity, for “jostling” and “tangling” rather than the self-righteous conviction of the rant.¹¹ Grappling suggests both physical and psychic movement, perhaps twisted and uncomfortable, but still a form of engagement or motion rather than the fixity or rigidity of impasse or distress.¹² It also seems appropriate to borrow the concept of grappling from disability studies because this book has been inspired by its embrace of nonnormative forms of embodied practice that encompass both the physical and the mental and their entanglements.

In addition to being a powerful model for the intersections of queer/trans and disability studies, Clare’s work has encouraged me to continue to grapple with mental health in the medical sense—with clinical diagnosis and pharmaceutical treatment, and with pragmatic approaches to intervention particularly in institutional settings where it can be valuable to put infrastructure in place. I keep listening to those for whom medical care has been important and who push back against my work when it seems to question the choice to take medications or to seek psychiatric help.

For example, one of the most gratifying but also disturbing forms of reception of *Depression: A Public Feeling* was a piece written by the Egyptian journalist Naira Antoun for an online publication called *Mada Masr* in 2017.¹³ Antoun takes the concept of political depression and considers its relevance to activists involved in the Egyptian revolution as it devolves into a series of failures and disappointments, including the ongoing and brutal suppression of protest. The Rab’a massacre, in August 2013, of hundreds and perhaps thousands of activists (the numbers are contested) on the streets of Cairo leaves her anguished about the exposure of fellow protestors to violence as well as traumatized by the losses.¹⁴ While sympathetic to a political understanding of depression, Antoun finds herself troubled by the needs of her fellow activists, who are struggling with ways to get help when mourning the dead and in the absence of political transformation, and who often turn to clinical forms of care. I was amazed to see the concept of political depression useful in one of the important social uprisings of our time and one beyond the North American context, and my exchanges with scholar-activists in other contexts—including Turkey, India, Colombia, Chile, and Serbia, as well as Western Europe—suggest that a cultural reading of depression is valuable. At the same time, the case of Egypt is a reminder that even where the cause

might clearly be political, the need for immediate help sometimes requires medical treatment as part of the care, if not the cure. There is an opportunity here for comparative and transnational approaches to mental health as part of a coordinated political response to racial capitalism and to movements for liberation that are often part of ongoing struggles for decolonization—responses that embrace a politics of affect that recognizes the limits of national and electoral politics. Nowhere is this clearer or more urgent now than in Gaza, where multiple generations of violence have created not only material but psychic destruction. Lara Sheehi, a Palestinian psychologist and herself the target of attacks for being anti-Semitic, articulates the need to cultivate forms of “psychic militancy,” a steadfast ability to hold on to one’s own account of the world, including collective history, and one’s own sovereignty in the midst of unrelenting attacks that include the erosion of the capacity to name and make public the reality of one’s own sensations, feelings, and lived experiences.¹⁵ Psychic militancy, or what might also be called affective sovereignty, is another way of naming mental health that takes it out of the realm of the medical or psychiatric and places it in the realm of the social and political.

And so I grapple. Although there are many places where this work is relevant, my own local reference point has been closer to home in the North American university, where I have watched with interest who gets charged with the task of addressing mental health; counseling and mental health services are central, but disability accommodations are now also increasingly a place where students seek help. (Moreover, initiatives to defund the police on university campuses also place an increased responsibility or burden on mental health counseling as a way to resolve problems.) With my eye on systemic issues, I often find these institutional responses to be inadequate even on their own terms as they struggle to keep up with increasing caseloads. The expansion of disability services to include a range of cognitive and mental health issues presents the challenge of finding meaningful accommodations—more time on tests doesn’t seem to really address the issues at stake. The provision of mental health counselors who are trained to address culturally specific experiences of race, gender, and sexuality is welcome, but it suggests that larger structural changes are necessary. What are we asking students to do in order to fit in with capitalism?

And who takes care of the caregivers? That’s another major site of grappling for this project—and I share the sensibility of Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto’s post-care polemic about exhaustion.¹⁶ I, too, am suspicious of care as a substitute for cure or a cure-all for institutional woes, especially since I was raised in the ways of critique to suspect it. And as one astute reader

pointed out, grappling, like care, is also exhausting! To keep going back and forth between positions requires agility and flexibility (to use other embodied metaphors), although in the spirit of disability studies, which embraces non-normative bodies and movement, I would suggest this “movement” work can be done in many different ways—slowly, clumsily, tentatively, and with failures. I hold to the labor of grappling, including the dog-paddling of impasse, because, schooled in the paranoid/reparative dialectic, I know there are no immediate answers, in which case increasing our capacity for not knowing is valuable.¹⁷

Although the current conditions for grappling will likely be different by the time this book is published, they will no doubt still feel urgent. The need to address student mental health was heightened and brought to visibility in pandemic conditions, and it continues unabated especially as higher education in the United States is under attack—targeted for protest, for immigrant students, and for DEI initiatives. Although my place in the struggle is very local and very privileged, it is nonetheless one of the many places where struggle is ongoing, necessary—and exhausting. How do we acknowledge that grappling (with care) is exhausting work while still continuing to do it?

About This Book: Keywords as Sites of Grappling over Time

This book takes the form of a grappling with key concepts (care, disability and madness, trauma and somatics, and breath) that have emerged as sites of thinking, feeling, practice, conversation—and struggle—over time. For example, I started thinking about disability—and then madness—through responses to the depression book that included questions about why I didn’t claim depression as a form of disability and through the rise of critical mad studies, which made me continue to question and expand my own thinking. Or, despite my critique of trauma extending back to *An Archive of Feelings*, the term never seemed to disappear in favor of other terms or paradigms. So I wanted to explore the ongoing presence of trauma and PTSD in discussions of mental health and politics, especially racism, including its role in what I call a somatic turn, in which trauma discourses enable more body-centered understandings of ways to heal or to feel better. An explosion in discussions of care, especially those inspired by Audre Lorde to underwrite practices of self-care that allow for tending to feelings and mental health in cultural struggle, encouraged me to revisit earlier versions of feminism that I had dismissed as essentialist for gendering care as feminine or maternal, or that seemed part

of a politics of sympathy or naturalized feeling. Another key concept for this project is what I have called the “sovereignty of the senses,” which is a somewhat fancy way of describing what it means to be in the body as a liberatory practice—to decolonize not just the mind but the body, or what has increasingly been called the bodymind so as insist that they are integrated.¹⁸ As I turned more fully to somatics, not just through theory but through practice, I found myself pulled to write about breath as a foundational practice despite feeling self-conscious about drawing on my movement practices, especially those from traditions not my own, as a form of knowledge. Wrestling with both my current practices and my earlier work, I decided to keep pushing the envelope.

The result is four chapters—or mini-essays—that meditate on each of the keywords that served as inspiration for my ongoing efforts to find conceptual tools and resources for these troubled times we are in. The keywords often found me because they were places where I could find company. In this respect, the book is not aiming to be new or original—it’s a way of joining conversations that others are also engaged in, strengthening connections and confirming hunches, and adding to what I hope is a chorus of voices. It’s not a conventional scholarly book that consists of reading cultural case studies or inventing new concepts and theories. This is particularly true because it is informed by practice—sustained relations to concepts over time that continue the unfinished and ongoing business of my previous books on trauma and depression. The process has to keep registering the current moment and adapting to change.

The first chapter, on care, engages with an explosion of work on the topic, including debates about the concept of self-care catalyzed by the wide circulation of Audre Lorde’s comments about “caring for myself.” Discussions of self-care are part of a longer tradition of feminist work in care, including critiques of it as a way of letting the state off the hook in favor of individualism and of failing to address the geopolitics of class and race that often leave poorly compensated care work to women of color from the Global South.¹⁹ Despite these critiques, care has also been taken up anew by feminists and queers using it as an umbrella to propose alternatives to business as usual in activism and in the academy. These tensions are one reason why care is a good site for grappling; it was one of the starting points for the book both because “care” is so often proposed as a solution to “grappling with cure” and because “care” talk is an accessible way to bring affect to social justice politics.

I try to resituate care in relation to femme facilitation, a key focus for the book, as theorized and practiced by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (in

Care Work) and adrienne maree brown (in *Emergent Strategy*), for whom care takes the form of strategies for organizing groups that make plenty of room for feelings, including negative ones. I also offer a reading of Audre Lorde on trusting your feelings as my way of doing homage to what I have ultimately learned from her in a long journey that has also included resisting her because of what I was taught in theory. In my effort to develop theories and practices of self-care that insist on forms of sensory knowledge so often dismissed in academic scholarship and institutions, the *sovereignty of senses* has become my term for practices that decolonize the body and disrupt the sensory habits of white supremacy, such as knowing over feeling, head over heart, sight over touch, individualism over collectivity. Sovereignty is yet another site of grappling given queer theories of nonsovereignty from Leo Bersani and Lauren Berlant to Billy-Ray Belcourt that question the notion of the coherent individual self.²⁰

In the chapter on disability and madness, I start with the question of whether to claim my own tendencies to anxiety and depression as a disability. Rather than trying to definitively settle on an answer, I focus instead on what I have learned from disability studies and mad studies not only by reading in the field but by living in the university and learning from students and from my experiences as an administrator and teacher. These first two chapters are my effort to be in conversation with both care work and disability studies, which I consider to be fellow travelers with affect studies and crucial practical directions for the study of affect, not just as a field but as a resource for survival.

In the next chapter, on trauma, I move more fully into the current state of my thinking as I have continued to look for a trauma studies that moves in the direction of antiracism and political somatics, including through practice. Structured in the form of a reading list, or what I call a bibliographic altar, which is an important genre for both “self-help” and “study,” the chapter tracks the idiosyncratic (or queer) bibliography I have had to craft to meet my needs, as well as how actual practice through courses in embodied social justice and politicized somatics has changed me. The final chapter weaves together my own breath practices, including kundalini yoga, with what I have learned from workshops with Rev. angel Kyodo williams and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, continuing the book’s trajectory of acknowledging the significance of Black feminisms. All of this work is ongoing—as reflected in a brief conclusion about my current practices, including a centering practice and a land-based practice informed by Indigenous ways of knowing. Indeed, one of the book’s fundamental goals is to expand work in affect studies and connect it

to otherwise ways of knowing/feeling and being/doing in the world that can be found in many lineages and traditions.

Black and Lesbian Feminist Lineages

My inquiry is also grounded in, and seeks to build from, a long-standing engagement with women of color feminisms, and especially Black feminisms, that includes grappling with how, as a white scholar, to build relationships with Black feminisms and Black feminists without merely virtue signaling or being extractive. The book has emerged in the time of the Black Lives Matter movement that was catalyzed by the increasing attention to Black death that started with Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014 and reached new levels with the murder of George Floyd in 2020, but this recent surge of activism is the cumulative effect of work, especially prison abolition, that has been going on for a long time. A key feature of this movement has been the presence of feminists of all genders and sexualities—in organizations such as INCITE! and Critical Resistance (which began in the late 1990s and early 2000s), Black Lives Matter, the Movement for Black Lives, and the #SayHerName project, and in local and neighborhood-level organizing, such as the community-based activism of mothers of people in prison, about whom Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes in *The Golden Gulag*.²¹ These movements are grounded in relationships and immediate needs rather than theoretical concepts of left liberation, although they also move between analysis and practice so as to generate visions for social transformation within the context of the immediate help that emerges from asking what is to be done. And as part of their vision, they have spawned renewed discourses of care and mutual aid that put affective life at the center of political movements.

I've watched these developments unfold as a white lesbian feminist (which I understand as an intersectional political identity that signifies a commitment to antiracism) from an earlier generation who sees myself as part of a multigenerational and multiracial movement, one that makes good use of conceptual resources that connect the academy and activism. Black Lives Matter draws on women of color and Black feminisms that are also entwined in the lesbian feminisms that shaped my education (and my life experience) alongside of poststructuralist theory—a world that includes Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and *This Bridge Called My Back*; womanist writers such as Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and bell hooks; the rediscovery and circulation of an African American literary lineage that includes Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ann

Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, and many, many more; and literary publics created by Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, and others who have worked not just as writers but also as editors and teachers. In addition to learning from lineages of lesbian feminist and women's writing, I also grew up reading a generation of senior scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby, Michele Wallace, Angela Davis, and Patricia Williams, whose presence (and visibility) accompanied a new wave of institutional change enabled by affirmative action policies. This, too, is part of what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery," and I, too, am the beneficiary of policies, currently under attack, that made it possible for me to have teachers and colleagues who provided me with training in critical race theory and antiracist practice through both their writings and their experiences.

Among other things, this book is a way to acknowledge and reflect on this cultural and institutional history and the accompanying relays between academia and activism. It is also an opportunity to review the movement of thought across racial lines and what it means to have reached a point where it is no longer possible (or at least no longer likely) to be a white scholar of critical theory and not have at least some literacy in Black feminisms and traditions of Black radical thought, as well as institutional literacy in antiracist efforts to transform the university. This project is a form of cross-generational and cross-racial transfer—motivated by a desire to do what I can to contribute to movements for antiracism by keeping the past alive in support of the future—and also to participate in finding ways for white people to take up the work in meaningful and substantive ways. The boldness of work that crosses boundaries both aesthetic and social has in turn emboldened my inquiry into body and spirit and feeling. I am grateful to the scholars of my generation, and those of now multiple next generations, who help make my work possible.²² It is exciting to see new work flourish, which in turn has made possible new directions for my thinking particularly as theory melds into practices on the ground, including new genres of writing based in somatic practice.

Of particular importance in these partial lists are those who have been my colleagues at the University of Texas over the years, especially those who helped build the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies and its Black Queer Studies cohort, as well as those who tried to make lives within an English department that was often rife with ordinary racisms (that led to the departure of many valuable comrades).²³ What has been built is very precious to me—especially since it has taken multiple generations to consolidate the work so that single hires become cluster hires and form the basis for new programs

and departments that can train new cohorts of grad students. Given histories of segregation and exclusion, it takes time to reach a critical mass that allows for BIPOC-centered and BIPOC-led spaces, including ones that are strong enough to invite white people as guests or participants. The painstaking, and often exhausting, behind-the-scenes work of building institutional infrastructures is a necessary foundation if new forms of study and scholarship are to happen. It's been exciting to see the relays across generations that mean that what we teach in our university classrooms goes out into the activist world and then returns to transform what we do and build. This transfer across generations and institutions is particularly exciting to me as a white queer lesbian feminist watching values that mattered to me and have long been marginalized actually come to the fore. Some of what I'm saying in this book about affect—especially historical trauma and political depression—is not new, but it is refreshed by the places where the thinking has gone and the places where it is coming from, including the centrality of affect to antiracist organizing. This book is marked by a desire to push forward the momentum of many years of study—by which I mean not just reading and writing but also being in relation with others. I hope I have been respectful in my use of Black feminist traditions because at this point I am so steeped in these sources that it feels impossible not to think with them.

And again, I write as the work is not by any means something we can take for granted because there are active efforts to dismantle it. I'm not sure what will happen even in the time between finishing writing and publication. It is all the more alarming to see our projects dismantled by anti-DEI legislation and attacks on higher education because they have taken many generations to build—and there is so much promise for new forms of “integration” of body, mind, and soma, for multiracial collaborations, and for otherwise ways of knowing, feeling, and doing.

Writing as Affective Method and Somatic Practice

This project is also an experiment in method, particularly in its use of writing practice as an affectively driven method. The individual chapters or sections are more like think pieces, or essays in the literal sense, rather than conventional scholarly arguments. They sometimes feel loosely written, moving quickly across examples or individual moments and insights; rather than expanding on an argument or delving into a close reading as I have been accustomed to do in the past, I have often found myself contracting in order

to cut to the chase. I have been influenced by new developments in creative nonfiction and the essay form, both inside and outside academia, that blend thinking and writing across a now porous boundary between academic and public writing.²⁴

I have also been enabled by other scholars taking risks and inventing new genres—Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart’s hundreds and experiments by my other Public Feelings comrades; Sara Ahmed’s manifestos and tool kits; Avery Gordon’s conversations with ghosts and artists; Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s use of her PhD training to create forms of study outside the university; Katherine McKittrick’s footnotes and playlists.²⁵ In a version of lifting each other higher as we climb through our “essays,” or our desire to try out something new, I also situate myself within a multigenerational tradition of lesbian feminist writing, enabled by small presses, independent bookstores, and queer public spheres across a range of media, which has combined and crossed genres in order to do the thinking that the movement demanded. I’m happy if I can contribute to these efforts, but regardless, the process is literally self-help—me using the act of writing to feel my way toward other ways of thinking, and other ways of living.

At one point, I imagined this book as a guidebook or manual of some kind that would very explicitly make recommendations for what to do, perhaps with lists and exercises to complete. Self-help books (and now podcasts, TED talks, and other social media forms) are a major genre for giving shape to personal testimony as public feelings. What might it mean to conceive of academic books in this genre? This book didn’t ultimately take that form in part because any advice it has to offer doesn’t necessarily lend itself to easily generalizable or codifiable instructions, and I also didn’t want to overinflate what I could provide. In the end, the tools I have are primarily those of a reader and writer trained in academic cultural theory—and inspired by artists—and what I have to offer is the process of thinking and articulating.

But that’s not nothing! I’ve been thinking about theory as a form of self-help ever since confessing to my dissertation committee, who thought my familiarity with Victorian poetry on my comprehensive exams was lacking, that I read theory for fun. In response, my adviser gave me the advance proofs for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* with the inscription “for bedtime reading.” A recent exhibition of Sedgwick’s archival collections at the Duke University libraries includes a letter in which, describing the early stages of writing on gay shame, she notes that self-help books are actually more useful on the topic than many other sources, thus suggesting a link between the self-help genre and reparative theory.²⁶ My turn to reading as a form of solace

has been supplemented over time by the practice of writing. Pop psychology has long recommended “journaling” as a form of therapy, but I have found more academic forms of writing equally effective. My Public Feelings group morphed over time from a reading to a writing group, using the model of the five-hundred-word salon (for which each participant brings five hundred words to share) as a way to share ideas in process and to describe the times we’re in.²⁷

Writing even more explicitly becomes therapeutic or a form of care when it is conceived of as somatic practice. My work has been enhanced by many of graphic artist Lynda Barry’s techniques for combining writing and drawing, or text and image, including list-making, daily diary pages, and other techniques for keeping the hand on the page so as to emphasize writing as a physical activity.²⁸ Barry recommends drawing spirals, for example, as a simple and effective way to keep hand, eye, and mind on the page in a version of automatic writing. Writing can be placed alongside movement practices such as swimming, breathing, and walking to become another somatic tool.

I decided to let this book unfold in whatever form it needed to take. So my experiment in writing method has also included following my gut feelings. And just saying things without needing to back them up with an example or a reading—and definitely not with evidence-based research! The resulting book has an informal tone and structure because I was aiming for ways beyond the conventional academic essay to make thinking and writing useful. It represents a form of what Christina Sharpe has called “becoming undisciplined” or, in the words of Lauren Berlant, finding ways to think “the unthought.”²⁹ Treating study as a method, the writing records a process of thinking as it happens, in dialogue with others about questions that are not new but persistent. Rather than trying to say something new, I just want to add my words to a chorus of voices that I seek to acknowledge through my engagement with them. That’s what the practice of writing-thinking is—and I hope my readers are inspired to create their own conversations.

This approach to writing also seems timely as we grapple with questions of why academic work matters. We are grappling in part because we are being attacked but also because, for some time now, we have been engaged in our own critique of the university and in search of ways to replace not only old content but also old forms. Our critique also includes a critique of critique in favor of creative and affective approaches to writing and thinking that can feel enabling. This book constitutes an effort to keep to the North Star of doing what we do, even as our work is being dismantled, and to insist on continuing to make new paths.

The High Priestess

Visual images have been important guides in this work. The title page of this introduction features the High Priestess card from a version of the tarot deck created by the artist duo Hilma's Ghost. Inspired by the visionary artist Hilma af Klint, they created abstract images whose "sacred geometries" combine the mystical and the mathematical. In the more traditional Rider-Waite deck, the High Priestess is a queenly figure who sits on a throne of pomegranates, a nod to Persephone's connection to the underworld during the winter months, a period of gestation that leads to the fruition of spring. Fusing multiple traditions that transform goddesses and virgins into visual icons to enable sensory practices of worship, she is draped in blue robes with a globe like a crystal ball in her crown, a cross around her neck, a Torah scroll tucked under her arm, and the moon at her feet.

My own long-standing relation to tarot is somewhat unorthodox, beginning with what I learned from my colleague and mentor Betty Sue Flowers, who introduced me to the practice in a meeting with colleagues to sort out an institutional challenge, and who encourages the person drawing the cards to make their own meanings. The centerpiece of that first reading was the Star card, an image associated with the moon, with the element of water, and with inspiration, and it guided me through the writing of *An Archive of Feelings*. (I also pulled the Tower card, which is especially apt for the University of Texas, as well as for those who want to see the ivory tower crumble and burn.) I so appreciated the creative approach to academia, including the invitation to read the cards in my own way rather than through some fixed key, a sensibility that now guides my work with other readers of the cards, including my students.

Across multiple iconographies, the High Priestess signals for me the power of intuition and feeling (that I also take from the tarot more generally). She suggests alternatives to scholarly learning and rational thought, both of which are part of my lineage but with which I have struggled or grappled. Although it can seem presumptuous to imagine myself as the High Priestess, I consider her to be a channel for knowledge, including somatic wisdom, that we all carry within ourselves. As the second card in the Major Arcana, which maps a progression from the open curiosity of the Fool to the fullness of the World, she is at the beginning of the journey and actually a rather humble figure. I use the High Priestess as an emblem for this book not because I think of myself as a priestess or aspire to be a leader but instead because I seek to be a fellow traveler who encourages others to find their own paths and access

their own truths. If I can be a priestess, then anyone can be a priestess. One of the important discoveries in my wayward research process has been Starhawk's charge of the star goddess prayer, which invokes the divine presence in nature but also the divine within, which I came to understand also as creative force and life force.³⁰ I conjure the High Priestess to make visible and declare prominently my commitment to a path of feeling as a source of knowledge. Associated with the moon, with receptive and interior knowledge, she is also good femme icon!

I have worked extensively with the traditional Rider-Waite deck, in part because of the familiarity of the fairy-tale imagery with which I grew up, including the nineteenth century's wild fusions of old and new, East and West, secular and sacred. The imagery and the occult practice are associated with my own white colonizer traditions with all of their dark side irrationalities and appropriative romanticizing of other traditions. The tarot can be a way to acknowledge those tensions and contradictions, forging a path that sticks with the messy contaminations. I also consult queer and feminist revisionist sources both old and new. I use the classic lesbian feminist Motherpeace deck, which is steeped in goddess religions, Michelle Tea's queer guide, and the fusion of old and new in the reinterpretation of Ruth West's black-and-white lesbian feminist deck from the 1980s by trans reader Oliver Pickle. I have mostly made my own meanings from the cards, using them to integrate different traditions and lineages and to resolve binary divisions, in other words, as a site of grappling.³¹

In the Hilma's Ghost cards, the turn to abstraction combines visionary magics and modernisms whose rejection of representation is also a rejection of Western and Christian traditions of iconography. The High Priestess is composed of a series of moonlike circles and crescents with a frame of purple and blue half circles overhead and color blocks in blue and green against a black background. Abstraction sidesteps some of the problems of appropriation that turn up in so many tarot decks, including the lesbian feminist Motherpeace, whose embrace of Indigenous and African traditions sometimes leads to cringey stereotypes such as the High Priestess as a wild witch doctor figure. Titled "Abstract Futures," the Hilma's Ghost deck opens out onto visions of the unknown rather than looking back to suspect traditions of the past.

My connection to tarot has been an alternative to scholarly ways of knowing and academic institutions, and it's been interesting to see it showing up now as part of a counterdiscourse in academic contexts, especially queer and feminist ones, that includes an interest in witches and the occult. There are increasing numbers of scholars not only openly discussing tarot and other

kinds of oracle cards but practicing with them and even making them: Denise Ferreira da Silva's use of tarot in the Sensing Salon project, Mimi Khúc's deck for Asian American academics with cards for the Student and the Abyss, Nathan Snaza's references to the esoteric, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs's oracle cards.³² Close reading an image comes naturally to the cultural studies scholar and provides an alternative vocabulary or an oblique way to address questions and problems. Tarot can be a useful tool within academia in part because it seems so taboo, especially as a way to help with administration. Facilitating a difficult meeting by pulling a card in advance is like summoning the power of the witch for circumstances that I would have no idea how to deal with it. I'm always happy when I get the High Priestess to encourage me to lead with magic and with the heart, to suggest that I am a witch with magic powers who can trust to intuition and the moon.

Although this book is not as image-heavy as some of my previous work, the multiple iterations of the High Priestess, from Rider-Waite to Hilma's Ghost, have kept me company while writing it. She also calls to mind my connection to the Virgen de Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico and also revered in the US borderlands, who has connected me to Texas, to lesbian feminist traditions of the goddess, and to the love of icons that is part of my Catholic heritage. Like the many manifestations of the Virgin Mary, the High Priestess is a visual emblem of feminine power that appeals to my femme sensibility. Although the tarot draws from many visual traditions, its medieval and Western European origins are rooted in the icon worship of orthodox Catholicism, which in turn draws from pagan and other alternative practices before and beyond Christianity. Catholic traditions of iconophilia are thus a good opening onto alternative ways of thinking about the sacred intersections of the material and the visual in spiritual practices. Despite many forms of iconoclasm, including Protestantism but also left thinking such as Marx's critiques of commodity fetishism, folk Catholicism persists. In Texas, images of the Virgen de Guadalupe are everywhere present in yard art, wall murals, bumper stickers, T-shirts, and tattoos, and for anyone connected to the region, including white settlers, she is embedded in the culture. I have also come to her through feminist and queer reworkings by folklorist and performer Kay Turner, whose work on vernacular altars spans traditional, artistic, and queer interpretations of the Virgen, and by artists such as Yolanda López, Ester Hernandez, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Alma López and hence with a sense that these traditions can be reworked, as is also the case with tarot.³³ It is in that spirit that I hold up the High Priestess as a meaningful emblem and avatar.

My love for Catholic icons (and for the convergence of the visual and material in somatic practice) is also inspiration for another of the religiously inclined concepts that comes up in the book: the use of the term *bibliographic altar* to describe affective relations to collecting and displaying books and to practices of reading and writing. KA Hogan's "feminist shelf" is a similar idea, but calling a beloved collection of books an altar is a way of explicitly signaling a relation to sacred traditions and spiritual practices that are affectively laden.³⁴ Personal altars can be Catholic, but they are also part of many traditions, including syncretic ones that combine Christianity with paganism and animisms—and they are also very common in lesbian feminist cultures. The bibliographic altar also lends itself to thinking about books not just as verbal texts but as visual and material icons that lend themselves to somatic practices of knowledge formation. The visual rendition of bookshelves in queer art projects by Allyson Mitchell and Chris Vargas, among others, further suggests the iconic power of books.³⁵

The High Priestess and the Virgin are also joined by the witch, who comes up late in the book in connections between flying on broomsticks and somatic practices of swimming and breathing. Like tarot, the witch has also been making a comeback in recent scholarship and is no longer just the purview of folklorists or dismissed as the domain of woo-inclined feminists. The remarkable *Witch Studies Reader*, for example, which appeared late in my process and moves between a still active political economy of witch-hunting and the many esoteric practices of modern witchcraft, serves as affirmation of this book's embrace of intuition and magic.³⁶ We may still be reaching for ways to bridge the gap between the sacred and the secular—but there has been a definite sea change.

As they move into academic and scholarly practice, the High Priestess, the Virgin, and the witch signal a commitment to alternative practices and to otherwise ways of knowing as feeling, as well as a willingness to risk being "out there" with affective methods.³⁷ The revival of Euro-American traditions of land-based practice can be a way to circumvent cultural appropriation and reframe whiteness. Land-based practices that have been erased by conventional forms of scientific rationalism and skepticism are an important form of somatic practice. Even as witch-burning is alive and well, not only in literal forms of witch-hunting in some parts of the world but in the purging of immigrants, queers, academics, it's exciting to see witch work find its way into scholarship and the university.

The High Priestess and her sisters have guided my words in this project. Let's see where they go!

INTRODUCTION

- 1 See, for example, Carleton University's "Student Mental Health Framework," accessed June 13, 2025, <https://wellness.carleton.ca/framework/>.
- 2 Lorde, *Burst of Light*, 130.
- 3 The May 3, 2022, story was part of a series on teen mental health that also included "Is Teen Mental Health in a State of Crisis?" (May 3) and "What Students Are Saying About Teen Mental Health" (May 12). The October 6, 2022, story was part of a series on new approaches to mental health. My most recent search in June 2025 suggests that the flurry of headlines is tapering off but partly because the clamp-down on campus protest, Trump's election, and the accompanying attacks on higher education have consumed the headlines and strained emotional and material resources. See Callie Holtermann, "Is Teen Mental Health in a State of Crisis?," *New York Times*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/05/learning/is-teen-mental-health-in-a-state-of-crisis.html>; The Learning Network, "What Students Are Saying About Teen Mental Health, Moderating Speech and Special Talents," *New York Times*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/12/learning/students-mental-health-moderating-speech.html>; Matt Richtel and Annie Flanagan, "'It's Life or Death': The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens," *New York Times*, April 23, 2022, updated May 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html>; Michael Barbaro with Matt Richtel, "Inside the Adolescent Mental Health Crisis," *The Daily (New York Times podcast)*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/podcasts/the-daily/teens-mental-health-crisis.html>; Eilene Zimmerman, "Meeting the Mental Health Challenge in School and at Home," *New York Times*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/06/education/learning/students-mental-health.html>; Christina Caron, "Global Issues Are Taking a Major Toll on Young People's Mental Health," *New York Times*, August 13, 2024, updated August 19,

2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/13/well/mind/mental-health-young-adults-trends.html>; Christina Caron, “A Global Flourishing Study Finds That Young Adults, Well, Aren’t,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2025, updated May 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/well/mind/happiness-flourishing-young-adult-study.html>; Jia Lynn Yang, “America’s Children Are Unwell. Are Schools Part of the Problem?,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/24/magazine/youth-mental-health-crisis-schools.html>.

- 4 In a January 18, 2023, article, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that “72% of student affairs officials report that campus mental health (students, faculty, staff) has worsened in the past year.” Eva Surovell, “Colleges Are Investing in Student Mental Health. But ‘There’s Still a Long Way to Go,’ Survey Finds,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 18, 2023. Other recent stories include Adrienne Lu, “Faculty and Staff Are Feeling Anxious, Depressed, and Burnt Out, Study Says,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 2024; a special report titled “Overcoming Student Loneliness: Strategies for Connection,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2024; Kate Marijolic, “Trauma and Social Anxiety Are Growing Mental-Health Concerns for College Students,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 25, 2023; Kate Hidalgo Bellows, “A University’s New Approach to Student Mental Health: Put Therapists in the Dorms,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 21, 2023; and the virtual forums “The Mental-Health Crisis on Campus,” November 18, 2021; “Trends in College Students’ Mental Health,” September 7, 2022; and “A Holistic Approach to Campus Mental Health,” September 7, 2022. See also Daniel Eisenberg et al., *The Healthy Minds Study: 2023–2024 Faculty and Student Report*, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/HMS-2024-Faculty-Staff-National-Data-Report.pdf>. And there are many more, not just in the *Chronicle*.
- 5 From Richtel and Flanagan, “It’s Life or Death”; Matt Richtel and Annie Flanagan, “This Teen Was Prescribed 10 Psychiatric Drugs. She’s Not Alone,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2022, updated December 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/27/health/teens-psychiatric-drugs.html>; Casey Schwartz, “The Age of Distracti-pression,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/style/medication-depression-anxiety-adhd.html>. From the National Institute of Mental Health website: In 2020, 8.4 percent of US adults had had a major depressive disorder. Rates are higher for women, and the age-group with the highest rate (17 percent) is 18-to-25-year-olds. Rates are also high (15.9 percent) for those reporting multiple (two or more) racial identities. Moreover, 19.1 percent of US adults had anxiety disorders in the last year, including 22.3 percent of those aged 18 to 29, and 31.1 percent of adults had an anxiety disorder at some time in their lives. See “Major Depression,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>; “Any Anxiety Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>. See also Ellen Barry, “PTSD Has Surged Among College Students,” *New York Times*, May 30,

2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/30/health/ptsd-diagnoses-rising-college-students.html>, which reports that rates of PTSD doubled from 3.4 percent to 7.5 percent between 2017 and 2022.

- 6 On the problem of the category of health, see Minich, *Radical Health*, which, as the title suggests, aims to redefine the concept.
- 7 Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*.
- 8 On “crisis ordinary,” see Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
- 9 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 14.
- 10 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 62.
- 11 On weak theory, see Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading.”
- 12 I only learned very late in my process that *grappling* is also a common term in wrestling. It adds another layer to my understanding of grappling as not just a metaphor but a somatic process and one that can borrow from the model of athletic practice. My thanks to Lyndon Gill for pointing this out.
- 13 Antoun, “Politics of the Personal.”
- 14 Although the numbers are contested, Human Rights Watch describes it as the largest mass killing in the modern history of Egypt. See “All According to Plan: The Rab’a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt,” *Human Rights Watch* report, August 12, 2014. For more on revolutionary affect and political disappointment, see Moradian, *This Flame Within*.
- 15 Lara Sheehi, keynote address, Lockdown University: Policing Minds in the Age of Authoritarianism conference, New York City, April 11, 2025. For an account of Sheehi’s institutional harassment both at George Washington University, where she is a faculty member, and as chair of Division 39 of the American Psychoanalytic Association, see J Oliver Conroy, “Inside the War Tearing Psychoanalysis Apart: ‘The Most Hatred I’ve Ever Witnessed,’” *Guardian*, June 16, 2023.
- 16 See Nash and Pinto, “On Exhaustion.”
- 17 On impasse as “dog-paddling,” see Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.
- 18 See Cvetkovich, “‘It Feels Right to Me.’”
- 19 See Nadasen, *Care*.
- 20 On nonsovereignty, see Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”; Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*; and Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*.
- 21 See Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *Color of Violence*. For an overview of the recent history of organizing around anti-Black racism, see Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*.
- 22 It’s hard to name all the names in a way that is expansive but still meaningful. I am grateful to those with whom I have been in direct conversation and relationship over time, and to the younger scholars who continue to push the conversations forward.
- 23 A partial list would include Wahneema Lubiano, Mia Carter, Helena Woodard, Jennifer Wilks, Darieck Scott, Elizabeth McHenry, Van Jordan, Meta Ewa Jones, Michael Hanchard, Ted Gordon, Omi Osun Olomo Jones, Jafari Allen, Omise’eke Tinsley, Matt Richardson, Lyndon Gill, Xavier Livermon, Cherise Smith, Lisa B.

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Thompson, Simone Browne, Ben Carrington, and Hershini Bhana Young, some of whom were my colleagues for only a brief time but who nonetheless left an impact. I haven't named all the names, but all of them are important. (And let me also add Lora Romero.)

- 24 See, for starters, Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Nelson, *Argonauts*; and Rankine, *Citizen*. But I would also add many names to this list that come after—including Billy-Ray Belcourt and Cathy Park Hong, whom I have written about in “Minor Feelings and the Affective Life of Race.” I am also wary of citing them as an origin or beginning given that their work draws on previous lineages that include critical theory and creative writing in various genres, including the mixed-genre writings of women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, and the many writers they published in Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*.
- 25 See Berlant and Stewart, *The Hundreds*, which is indebted to Circe Sturm, whose work with the hundreds genre developed by Emily Bernard can be found in The Black | Indigenous 100s Collective, *Say/Listen*; Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*; Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoy Handbook*; Gordon, *Hawthorn Archive*; Gumbs, “We Can Learn to Mother Each Other”; Gumbs, *Survival Is a Promise*; and McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. This is a partial list that—rather than being exhaustive—should be understood as a genre of personal playlist that combines different kinds of books, each one discovered, and cherished, in affective ways.
- 26 See “An ‘Open Mesh of Possibilities’: Thinking Queerness with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Archive,” Duke University Libraries, accessed September 19, 2025, <https://exhibits.library.duke.edu/exhibits/show/eks/intro>.

In a letter to Simon Watney about her developing work on shame and performativity, Sedgwick writes, “It’s weird to be writing about something like shame that has no theoretically respectable literature (e.g., psychoanalytic), and whose dis-course comes mostly from (of all places) my own shrink and the ubiquitous pop-psych books that I think she’s plugged into. (One section of my paper is called “Cruising Your Inner Child.”) I would argue that Sedgwick is here “grappling” with her ambivalence about popular psychology and finds a way to use it through the queer/camp humor of her subtitle.

- 27 For more on the salon process and writing practice, see Cvetkovich, “*Alphabet of Feeling Bad*.”
- 28 See Barry, *What It Is*; and Barry, *Syllabus*, among others. For an example of spiral practice, see her version of a pandemic diary, in “Documenting All the Small Things That Are Easily Lost.”
- 29 See Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13; and Lauren Berlant, *Supervalent Thought* (blog), accessed September 19, 2025, <https://supervalenthought.wordpress.com/>. See also Chen, *Intoxicated*.
- 30 Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 102.
- 31 See Noble, *Motherpeace*; Tea, *Modern Tarot*; and Pickle with West, *She Is Sitting in the Night*.

- 32 For recent scholarship on tarot that is embedded within cultural studies, see Khúc, *dear elia*; and Snaza, *Tendings*. Tarot is also part of a wider interest in occult and/or esoteric practices, such as the recent surge in witch studies, including Lang et al., “The Witch,” and Chaudhuri and Ward, *Witch Studies Reader*, which includes an essay on tarot. In 2024, I participated in a Society for Study of Affect stream organized by Nathan Snaza on Esoteric Affects, which continues to meet. And I’m also aware informally of tarot practices by other scholars, including Denise Ferreira da Silva (see The Sensing Salon, www.thesensing-salon.org) and Ervin Malakaj. Another related project is Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s oracle cards.
- 33 See Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*. For examples of work by Yolanda López, see Davalos, *Yolanda López*; for work by Ester Hernandez, especially *La Ofrenda*, see <https://esterhernandez.com>; for work by Alma López, especially the video *I Love Lupe*, see <https://almalopez.myportfolio.com/work>; and for work by Amalia Mesa-Bains, see <https://amaliamesabains.com> (all accessed October 12, 2025).
- 34 Hogan, *Feminist Bookstore Movement*.
- 35 See Mitchell and McKinney, *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle*, which features wallpaper based on drawings of books in the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as well as oversize papier-mâché sculptures of books in the Riotgrrrl Reading Room; and Chris E. Vargas’s bookshelf wallpaper in the bathroom for *Scientia Sexualis* (2024) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, accessed October 12, 2025, <https://www.theicala.org/en/exhibitions/137-scientia-sexualis>.
- 36 See Chaudhuri and Ward, *Witch Studies Reader*.
- 37 For uses of *otherwise* to describe alternative and queer ways of knowing, see, for example, Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Turner, “Otherwise”; and the 2024–25 Knowing Otherwise: Haunting, Conjuring, and Spectral Encounters lecture series at the Institute of Women’s Studies, Rutgers University. In Turner’s work, there is a strong connection between the witch and otherwise ways of knowing. Her “What A Witch” project, begun in 2012, ritually deconstructs affective and sensate aspects of the witch, such as smelling, flying, devouring, longing, and desiring, to arrive at a deeper understanding of the witch through the practice of what Turner terms “embodied knowledge.” See Turner, *Before and After* and “The Witch in Flight.”

1. CARE

- 1 For recent discussions of care, especially ones that focus on its circulation within activism, see Hobart and Kneese’s special issue “Radical Care” in *Social Text*; Samuels and Freeman’s special issue “Crip Temporalities” in *SAQ*; Malatino, *Trans Care*; Spade, *Mutual Aid*; Arani, “Mutual Aid and Its Ambivalences”; de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*; Kim, *Care at the End of the World*; Nadasen, *Care*; the Emergent Strategy book series edited by adrienne maree brown for AK Press; Sharman, *Care We Dream Of*; and Page and Woodland, *Healing Justice Lineages*. See also Nelson, *On Freedom*; and Coyote, *Care Of*. It has been a challenge to keep this list

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