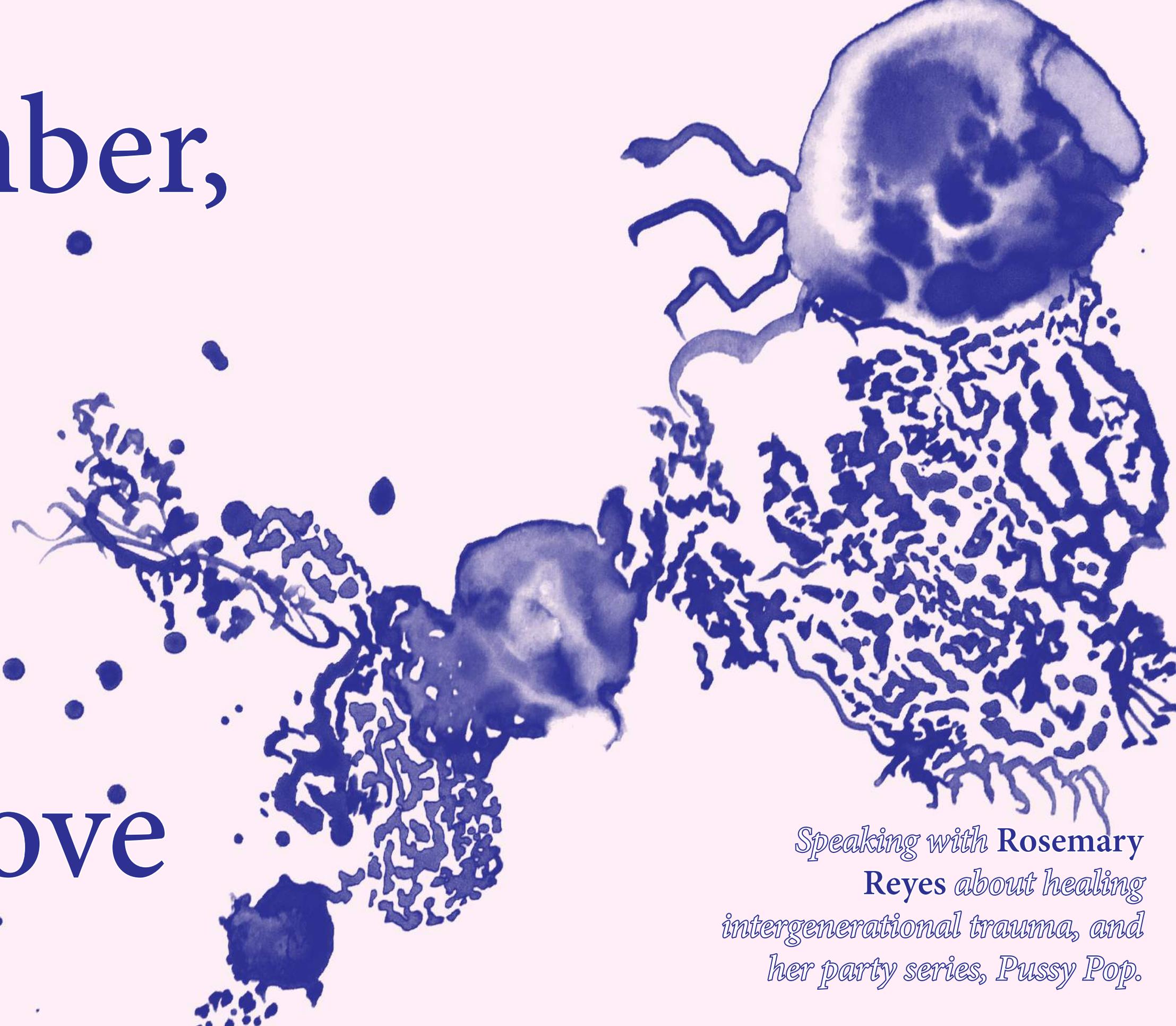


Remember,

Repair,

Send Love



*Speaking with Rosemary
Reyes about healing
intergenerational trauma, and
her party series, Pussy Pop.*

Kimi Hanauer: What is your relationship to immigration or cultural passage?

Rosemary Reyes: My parents are both immigrants from the Dominican Republic. I was born in New York, and they came here in the late '70s/'80s. I don't know if I felt as much of a relationship to immigration as a part of my identity growing up. It was tough with my parents and I; we had such different ways of identifying. I was navigating a double consciousness that they experienced as well in a different way when they first came to America. In the past couple of years and with the current administration, I have been more acutely aware of the privileges of where you are from, which dictate your experience. There's a difference between being a European immigrant versus being someone from Latin America. Immigration ... I've only recently started to navigate what that means for me.

When I went to the National Museum of African American History and Culture recently, it was really intense. Dominican racial identity is so fucked up. There is a lot of denial of Blackness because of the history of ethnic cleansing, and it is still happening, and colorism is so embedded in our culture. It is so violent. When I went there, up until that point, I still separated myself from African Americans. I just felt like I couldn't claim that identity for a multitude of reasons. When I saw the history laid out so clearly, I realized, oh my god, because of slavery, it's all the same thing, we just landed in different places. That helped me remember. You always know where you're from, but that helped me to really remember where I was from and allow me to identify with Afro-Americanness.

There are a lot of different migratory chains in New York. It is very Dominican here. Then I think about forced migration from Africa, so it's a constant part of my identity and ancestral lineage. So it's such a big, vast word I can't really pin down one main point.

Yeah totally, there are different ways in which nations sometimes try to reinforce some sort of identity onto people, when actually, our ethnic

identities are much more complex than we are made to acknowledge. Then, the stories around immigration in the U.S. are also much more complicated than the narratives projected onto actual immigrants.

Anytime you try to take a concept and try to attach it to anything monolithic, it becomes very problematic. It is unfair for the people who are tied to that concept.

It is dehumanizing.

Right. This is a city of immigrants, that's the New York cliché. But it really is! I'll be on the train and look around to see only people of color, but then you think of the European migration movements. It's complicated because when you think of immigration in the United States today, you really think predominantly of people of color. You almost forget that white people also immigrated here because of the way Americanness has been constructed.

That is a huge part of it. From 1790 to 1952, one of the qualifiers for citizenship was being a "free white alien." That was part of a movement to create value around citizenship based around whiteness and exclusion rather than building a culture of what it means to be a citizen, or what it means to be a community member, or what it means to be an accountable resident. It's rooted in this history.

I am curious about your experience as an immigrant. You tread these lines where you could pass as American because you don't necessarily have an accent that outs you as a foreigner. I want to know about what the experience is like of having to out yourself as someone who wasn't born here.

That is something I struggled with since I moved here. My accent comes out when I am mad or tired, it's kind of funny. In my process of moving here and going through assimilation, I definitely felt difference from American-born people.

Do you think people have a different perception of you when you tell them you are not from America?

Definitely. It also comes out of cultural things. When you move somewhere, you don't know the rules, you come from a different background. My lens to the world has often felt different than that of my peers growing up. I spent many years trying to hide from people that I was an immigrant. I'm sure my experience would have been different if I didn't pass for a white American. At the same time, there are moments where my difference is revealed beyond my control. In the past, I experienced a lot of rejection and isolation because of the differences I have, but when I finally realized that my experience could also be a point of connection with others who have similar experiences or perspectives, I started to become much more comfortable being open with who I am.

Yeah, I am thinking about how I didn't learn proper English until I was around 6 even though I was born here. I was raised by my mother who speaks Spanish at home, then I went to a kindergarten in Washington Heights which was bilingual because it is so Dominican there. When I was 6 years old, that is when I started to really learn English. I had an accent until I was 8 or 9.

I moved to the suburbs in Jersey and was immediately put in a whole different world. The assumption was that I was an immigrant. I was othered, which was shocking when I came from a community of kids that were just like me. Just across the bridge, it was predominately white and Asian. I was this alien. Now, those are the things I treasure about myself, but at the time, it felt like an insult to be assumed as *other*, especially as a child. I was like, "I'm not an immigrant!"

Looking back, I definitely didn't have the critical lens I have now. But it is also a situation similar to what you are describing, where before I had immigrated I never had to identify myself to the other, and after I moved I constantly had to because the other became the majority and I was the only one of my background anywhere I went. That type of interaction was very transformative for me.

Now I am just thinking about how Israel is such a complicated place. A lot of Israelis don't identify as people of color, I can't imagine the level of explaining you have to do.

It can be really complicated in all directions. White supremacy is internalized everywhere.

Right, and coming from a place where the people are so mixed-race and with a history that is so inherently about mixing [forced or otherwise]. Places like the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean are great examples of places where everyone is [visibly] mixed race. My mother has fairer skin than me, and straightens her hair, dyes it blonde, and in some instances can pass as some lady from the Mediterranean or something, and she, of course, takes pride in that.

I identify with Blackness a lot. When I left the Northeast and went to school in the Midwest, that is what people were labeling me as [Black]. That was really shocking at first because of how I was raised, but then I realized that was my reality. People don't know what it means to be Dominican outside of coastal enclaves. The denial of Blackness is what I grew up with. Now, I identify as a Black woman, and it is something that is empowering for me, but my mother would never. We are technically the same ethnicity, but if you get too deep into the labeling, it gets really messy. Which is why I feel that it is so stupid to put people on this gradient.

Everybody is mixed, even "white" people. Another thing you are bringing up that is interesting, that has actually come out in a lot of other conversations as well, is that the categories of race are different in other contexts, generations, and cultures.

In some circles, I think I would be considered a light-skin woman and there is a level of privilege that comes with that, but as I've grown into my identity, I've realized it complicates how people perceive me 10 times more because of an expectation of the denial of Blackness that comes from other people. I am not Black enough—or people question why I claim Blackness when I look like I could be anything. That makes me question what is privilege? What is racial privilege when you are at an intersection of nationalities and history?

I recently had a 23andMe test done and it was shocking. It was something like 58 percent Iberian Spanish, and then I spiraled into a space of, “The colonizer is in me!” Then there was 25 percent from West Africa, which was clear why, and then the rest was indigenous/native blood of the Americas. My history was laid out, and it hurt me to see it, to see in my blood that whiteness was prevalent because of the way everything played out historically. Then I flipped it and was like, “No, actually, I am a miracle,” the fact that I am out here existing and representing, living my life in New York City. You can frame my privilege in many ways, but really it’s incredible that I exist.

That is such a beautiful flip. It’s not the same content, but I had a similar experience of “flipping.” On my dad’s side, my granddad is a Holocaust survivor. Once I realized the significance of that, realizing that a whole side of my family was institutionally murdered, I was able to attribute a lot of trauma that I have to this thing I didn’t even experience. Then I realized that I am just lucky to be alive because not many people survived.

Exactly, and it’s about recognizing the trauma and subverting it by existing in [some form of] freedom, which is really all you can do. I don’t know if this happens for families with Holocaust legacy, but in the Caribbean and the DR, a lot of the anti-Blackness is rooted in pain that came from that [enslavement and colonization]; you don’t want to remember this reality that is in all of us. The torture and deep violence, it hurts too much to recognize it. So people focus on their European blood, since Europeans were empowered to come and fuck everything up.

Yeah, so interesting. Freedom has also been a topic in other conversations too. It’s something that is impossible to an extent, or a utopian idea, but I believe there are degrees of freedom you can find. I am wondering what you mean when you say “freedom,” what does that look like to you?

It is funny you ask that, because in the past year or so, I have been aggressively trying to be free. I have been navigating my relationship to institutions. I have my undergraduate and my mas-

In My Dreams, I Find the Way, Rosemary Reyes, watercolor, 2018.



ter's, so I have been moving through institutions throughout my whole adult life. I realized that [moving through institutions], to me, is being in shackles. I have so many student loans. [Financial] institutions imprison you by telling you this is "good debt." I had to go through a moment of realizing I didn't want to be a director of "X" arts organization or whatever, even though that is the expectation put on me because of my career path thus far. There is pressure around a woman of color having the privilege of even getting a job like that, or to even pursue a career like that. For me to peace out, not sit in front of a computer for most of the day [and relieve myself of that pressure], that is what freedom is. Those obligations are what the shackles look like. In the past year, I have been just trying to freelance. It is really hard to face my financial reality. My student loan debt is really high, my rent is really, really high, so to find a way to balance an energetic relationship with money, it is almost like a game.

To me, money is energy. But also, you gotta work. I have the privilege of an education, a master's degree to get a job with if I want, but I have been intentional about how I make money and contribute my skills. It is not easy, but I think that is what freedom looks like to me. What about you?

I recently left a nonprofit job as well. I was working for an art district doing public programming. It started off as something I didn't exactly agree with the politics of, what I wanted wasn't exactly the right fit, but I felt like if they could support me to do the work I felt was important, then maybe I could even change the organization. Obviously, I was totally wrong! So naive!

Exactly, that's what they want you to believe. That's how they get you.

It got to a point where I was like, I can't do this anymore. I left without any sort of plan. I think that moment was affirming to me in the sense that I figured out I had to do my work as an artist, not through a nonprofit. Occupying the identity of an artist has felt really right for me so far, even if it is much harder financially. That was also an affirming moment

where I realized I wanted to focus all of my energy on Press Press. So, I left the nonprofit and a few months later we [Press Press] were really fortunate to get a grant from a foundation in Baltimore called the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation. That support, plus having the support of our community there, and being able to do freelance work, has enabled me to dedicate much more time to Press Press. The process has helped me recognize what the things are that actually make me happy: having conversations like this, collaborating on projects, doing work for my soul.

That resonates so much with me. I'll get a freelance gig that pays enough for rent, I can calculate the time and I'm like, OK, that time, I'm not working [for the hours I am not being paid]! You know what I mean? In the last six months, since I have been working more independently and intentionally taking time off as much as I can, I have been able to heal personal trauma that everyone has, trauma that you don't have time to address when you are working a full-time job.

Reading—getting off of social media and reading again—that is huge. When you are reading grants or writing grants [at a nonprofit], why would you want to read more, you know? When you get home, you are tired, and often things are on screens, you just make up excuses for not making time for the things you love. Again, when you are in this imprisoned lifestyle ... like in New York, I see a lot of my peers, brilliant friends that are all getting famous, they are all grinding, full-time jobs, they come home to do their thing on the side until midnight. I don't see them! That's not the lifestyle I want. It is hard because when you are surrounded by that, it is isolating. People look at you like, "You what? You don't work anywhere? What does that mean?" I work for me! I hop around from project to project, which is kind of scary because there is no financial security, but I am way happier. I do think millennials—I don't like that word—but people in our generation born from the late '80s to mid '90s, are really challenging the workplace and what that looks like. You know, start-up culture to me is just another iteration of corporate culture. It is just the younger white man's version of the corporation, but even that is an impressive step in another direction, mixing work and play a

little more. That's the way it should be, work should be play.

I like this thing that you bring up, how being in a position to experience your freedom, whatever it is, also puts you in touch with what is traumatic to you. It gives you space to sit and think about who you are, your history, the things that have been building up. I feel like that's something that is really scary, to put yourself in touch with those things.

That's terrifying. Again, taking that time off, waking up and not guilting yourself over "I don't have this thing I am forced to do right now. What do I do with my Monday?" It has taken me several attempts at figuring this out. I have always ended up at a 9 to 5 or a traditional job setting, and every time I find myself freelancing again or doing something independently because I am getting better at it. It is a skill you build, it is deprogramming. I don't want to replace it with another program. Tapping into what really speaks to you, is important to you, and moving away from this obsessive society that we live in is really hard and scary.

It is tricky because you get rewards for being in that system and punished for trying to do something else. For example, when you are self-employed, your taxes are double.

There are so many reasons you could justify not moving away from our obsessive society. Real reasons.

Just real, systemic punishments.

You are punished for getting free. But also, this is me right now. Maybe talk to me in six months, I might be at a full-time job. I don't know, but I can only speak to what I am experiencing now. Sometimes you want the rest of your network and your community to follow.

I was recently listening to this interview with Terry Gross and this man who was a truck driver. He wrote a memoir about what it was like to be a truck driver; he was a mover. One of the questions she asked him was how he spends a lot of time alone driving, and

can only imagine how his monsters really show up. Your shadow, your darkness comes up when you spend that time alone. I was like, wow, that's true. When you are alone or working from home, that's when you don't have that many distractions and learn how to work with it.

For me, it has also been acknowledging that these things aren't negative. Although objectively they can be negative, they are still parts of me, and there is potential for them to be a part of my work in a meaningful way. That is also something that has been important to recognize: It's because of who I am that I can do the things I do, not in spite of who I am. That is totally something that has been pushed out of the systems that we are talking about; emotional sensibility, personal experiences, all these things that create how we see the world are tools that make certain things accessible to us, but these tools are not supported or seen as valuable in those structures, at least through my experience within a nonprofit.

I was recently looking through my mother's collection of my childhood memorabilia, and I came across my kindergarten report card. Which is so, oh my god, that's a thing?! Whoa, the 5-year-old version of myself, holy shit. I read through the report card, and the teacher said—well I guess this is so personal but whatever—she said, "Rosemary is very, very attentive, very detail-oriented, smart, and is a very good student, but is very emotional." When I think about that framing ... of course I am emotional. This is my first time being in school, I am a 5-year-old! It's kind of crazy that was her critique of me. Of course I am going to cry when I feel slighted or lonely or weird about leaving my mother, but using "emotional," something every human is, as a negative trait. It is so unfair.

It is already seen as a weakness when you are 5. Have you read Audre Lorde's essay *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*?

Oh, yeah. Exactly. It's totally like that, and it's daunting.

Emotions are a super gendered thing. At least womxn can be excused to

be a little bit emotional, just as long as we don't bring it into the workplace! Meanwhile, so many men can be totally stunted emotionally.

Which is a result of all of our wars and our current disaster of gun violence in this country. It is all connected. That is when it behooves me that politicians ... well, we all know it is a performance so I am not gonna out them like it is a real thing to criticize, but mental illness and all these gun laws are all a result of the denial of humanity and basic human rights.

And patriarchy harms men as well. Obviously there is a power dynamic and they get the upper hand in many ways, but it is still harming them.

Depression and rage. Where is that coming from? Gee ...

Whiteness and white supremacy is also, in a way, harming and minimizing the way white people see the world.

It hurts everybody.

People in power can more easily ignore the way it is harming them. We live in structures that are constantly denying those problems.

As I am digging deeper into spirituality, I am trying to realize—instead of the ways we are different—acknowledging that we all are from the same place. But to think about white men not being affected by white supremacy, that is crazy. Because if it affects me, of course it is going to affect them. It just looks different.

It is about nuance, which is also pushed out. Whiteness wants to put us in clean-cut categories so that it can organize us within a hierarchy, and manifest that hierarchy into the real, material conditions we live in.

The language we come up with in social justice is such a bummer. The accountability politics, the call-out culture, adrienne maree brown talks about this. She's the shit; she gave us a blueprint on how to save the world. *Emergent Strategy*, she dropped that book at a good time. She also has a podcast, *How to Survive*

the End of the World—it is really good. She talks about the call-out culture, which is so harmful. Especially in queer communities of color, which is my community, as a person organizing events around that identity, people will come for you for not using a word that is in line with the most current language around social justice and language around identity politics. People will come for you and try to destroy your effort. Just call me, let's have coffee, let's talk face to face. Don't try to destroy what I am trying to do and put so much negativity on it so that it doesn't serve anyone anymore. That is what she was getting at: It's not productive. It is really not.

I saw her talk in Detroit. She talked about apocalypse—not what we see in movies, but apocalypse in the sense of a total transformation of something. She was talking about Detroit through that lens, and how there is real potential in that type of transformation. We'd all like to think that when something goes down, we will be with our people and work together to figure something out. The reality is that we are not just going to be with our besties, but also with people that we don't get along with at all. We still have to work together to get out of whatever situation that is. If we cannot even communicate, if we can't make this work now, how are we going to survive?

Yeah, how are we going to survive when push really comes to shove? That is a good question. She really is one of the most brilliant thinkers of our time.

I had a reading recently with this witch. She saw into my future and said that I would have to work with a lot of people I don't like and that I was going to have to be a mitigator. As soon as she said that, my heart sank. I was just like, oh, god! But that is one of the most important things! It isn't always going to be pleasant. Not being willing to do that, do the actual work, is the problem. We aren't going to be surviving with our kin, our tribe.

There's another Audre Lorde-inspired idea: In creating spaces, people often come together because of similarities. Which is true, we all are similar in ways that we don't want to acknowledge, but we are also dif-

ferent. There is a power in acknowledging that difference by learning from it rather than trying to erase it. And there is a potential for that erasure to happen in spaces that only gather because of similarities.

Totally! Agh, yeah, that is a really good point. I organize this party called Pussy Pop. I started it in New Orleans. It was meant to center queer people of color because I felt the need for it there at the time. When I moved back to New York, I saw that there was a need for a space for femmes of color. But something about that, something about centering the space from a similar identity, that did feel like it was inhibiting in some way. Of course, it is important in marginalized groups—again, the word “marginalized” doesn’t feel right anymore—but centering groups that are not centered is always going to be powerful. But then there were times that I was like, let’s just get all kinds of women in one space. Trans women, straight women, queer women, Black women, Black straight women, all in one space: Why does that not happen? Why don’t I organize that? And the reality is that it’s just more difficult. It is harder to get all those different types of people in one space, but that is where we should be moving.

I think it is really hard because you don’t want to organize a space where all different kinds of people are going to gather and not be equipped for whatever comes out of that.

And that already happens in a queer spaces of color. You give enough people some booze and a late night, and all of a sudden you are held accountable for somebody’s drama. Yeah, this is my space, but you are adults! Take care of your business! I created a loving environment and good energy, it is up to you to maintain that.

Yeah. What is our responsibility to one another?

New York and Baltimore are very intercultural and mixed, so why are we not existing in the micro of the macro that we are? Beyond the subway, where there is a Jamaican family next to a Chinese family next to this white dude, why aren’t we existing in those

spaces? Truthfully, I don’t want to organize around white men at all, I don’t really want them in a space I am organizing.

Sometimes at events I’ve organized around queer women of color, I will have a voyeur, who walks into the space unknowingly or out of curiosity, sit down and observe in a way that is like, “Huh. Why is this happening?” There is a gaze. But because there is power in everyone else in the space, the voyeur will usually walk away. But if it is a fundraiser, I’m like, “Uh, can you give us money? You can stay here and watch, but you need to pay!” There is always that. Those who have privilege will feel like they have the right to be in those spaces and they will be in there no matter what. Then I question if and why I am creating a space that is exclusive, but you could really go into that.

Even though we are somewhat shit-talking all of the categories, there still is the politics of power that goes on. There isn’t an urgency to organize around white men in the same way, since they are not in situations of bodily violence non-stop in this context.

In terms of Press Press, the series of gatherings [Sanctuary Manifesto-building workshops] we have been organizing have been “exclusive,” in the sense that we have an invite list of around 25 people for each workshop. But it isn’t as much exclusive as it is thoughtful in the sense that these 25 people were organized specifically to get something done together. It is also about creating a space that we are prepared to handle. We have trust in the people we invite to co-author the space with us, to be accountable, to be open. If the events were public, it could become something else that we are not equipped to facilitate in a thoughtful way.

If you are a new organizer, there’s no other way to learn than to just make mistakes. I am not by any means an experienced organizer. Every time I have done it, I learned something that I could do better the next time. The mistakes, the uproars, the call-outs, all of that has taught me how fragile everyone is, how hurt everyone is. That is okay. I am not trying to victimize myself either. That is just how it is; as a cis woman, I don’t have the sight for certain things that a trans person has. But, yeah, it’s delicate.

What does sanctuary mean to you?

Sanctuary, as a New Yorker, you immediately associate it with your home space away from the noise, the expectations, even though people have expectations in their home, too. I used to think about sanctuary as an external thing, a place, but for me, it is internal. I've been working so hard to find it through meditation and yoga. For me, sanctuary is inner peace. If I am feeling some type of way with an asshole on the train with his backpack on, and it's crowded, smells like a wet dog since everyone's coat is stank from the winter—if I just close my eyes for a second and pretend that I am in a technicolor jungle with giggling babies, kittens, beautiful water—then I'm good. Sanctuary is also being with family, with chosen family. The giggling baby I was thinking of was my brother's new baby. Her name is Lia, she's amazing, she is probably the best baby that was ever born [laughter]. Being with her brings me so much peace. That innocence, that pure light of the universe, you are the future, and god help you! That is my sanctuary.

Sanctuary has a very religious connotation, and everyone is really anti-religion right now, which is chill, I don't have an opinion on that. But I think about spiritual movements and how people talk about inner peace being fully present. That's all fine and dandy, being present is important, it does bring a lot of peace and joy, like having this conversation with you and just being here is bringing me a ton of peace. But, this is what my teacher just taught me, Geryll Robinson—you know, the past, there is so much healing we need to do that is informed by the past, we can't just ignore that. Especially if you are a person of color or have deep lineage trauma, genocide, you can't just be present about that. You have to remember and repair and send love to those ancestors. That is also sanctuary. It's not always about being in the present moment for me.

Reckoning with your history.

I think a lot of the spiritual movements led by white folks ignore

their past, because why would they want to reckon with a history of oppression that their ancestors were at the center of? And those are the people that need to repair their past the most.

I mean, there's just no acknowledgement here of the history of the U.S. and you feel it here in every way, with every person you talk to, on every street. And yet, there is zero social acknowledgement of this history in mainstream media.

I mean, meanwhile, I get my 23andMe and there's my *conquistador* relative just sitting right in front of me. So, shit, I have to reckon with it.