

MEDITATIONS ON JOY FULL LEADERSHIP AND BLACK LIBERATION

Alexis Yeboah-Kodie

“Work” Word Association



“Joy” Word Association



PROLOGUE

This is a gift. The kind that when you see it, your eyes widen, you rush to rip the paper open, and then the gift-giver urges you to take your time unwrapping it. I am giving this gift to myself and to the people who participated in its creation. We all have poured so much love into this. Both the process and the finished product highlight the dimensions, the textures, and the layers of Blackness, joy, and the Black liberation movement. When I set out on this journey, I didn't know anything besides the fact that "Meditations on Joy Full Leadership and Black Liberation" had a soul of its own and my only job was to capture that as wholly as possible.

I interviewed twelve Black folks from a variety of backgrounds and fields. Some whom I know well, some whom I met for the first time through this project. I used the same questions as a grounding tool, but the order and the structure of the questions depended upon the conversation we were having. These interviews are completely uncensored. Outside of a little editing for flow and space, I made no changes to each person's voice. The word associations shown in the word clouds set the tone for each interview's trajectory, and collectively, the word clouds demonstrate our concurring multiple realities. In our current existence, joy and pain are inextricably linked. This year, the pain has been overemphasized. "Meditations" counters these narratives we're bombarded with by uplifting joy and using joy as an entry point and frame for understanding Black leadership and Black liberation.

In the interest of space and length, some portions of the interviews had to be cut down, and my portions are completely removed. So, using a picture depicting the interviewee in a moment of pure joy, I painted my experience of the interview. This allowed me to capture the decadence of my encounters with each person. I was inspired to do this based on an encounter with the first woman I fell in love with. She and I had just had a very raw and vulnerable conversation and, as the conversation lightened up, she became self-conscious of how she looked. My affirmations did not express the totality of how I viewed her, so I painted her a portrait. Then, she understood so much about herself, about me, and about our relationship.

I hope that whoever picks up "Meditations" better understands the folks in this piece and gets a glimpse at how I see and process the world. I receive information from conversations, visuals, music, reflection, etc., and I often process information in an iterative, cyclical way. Therefore, nothing in this piece is in chronological order.

Content Warning: There are discussions of violence, sexual assault, police murder, and suicide.

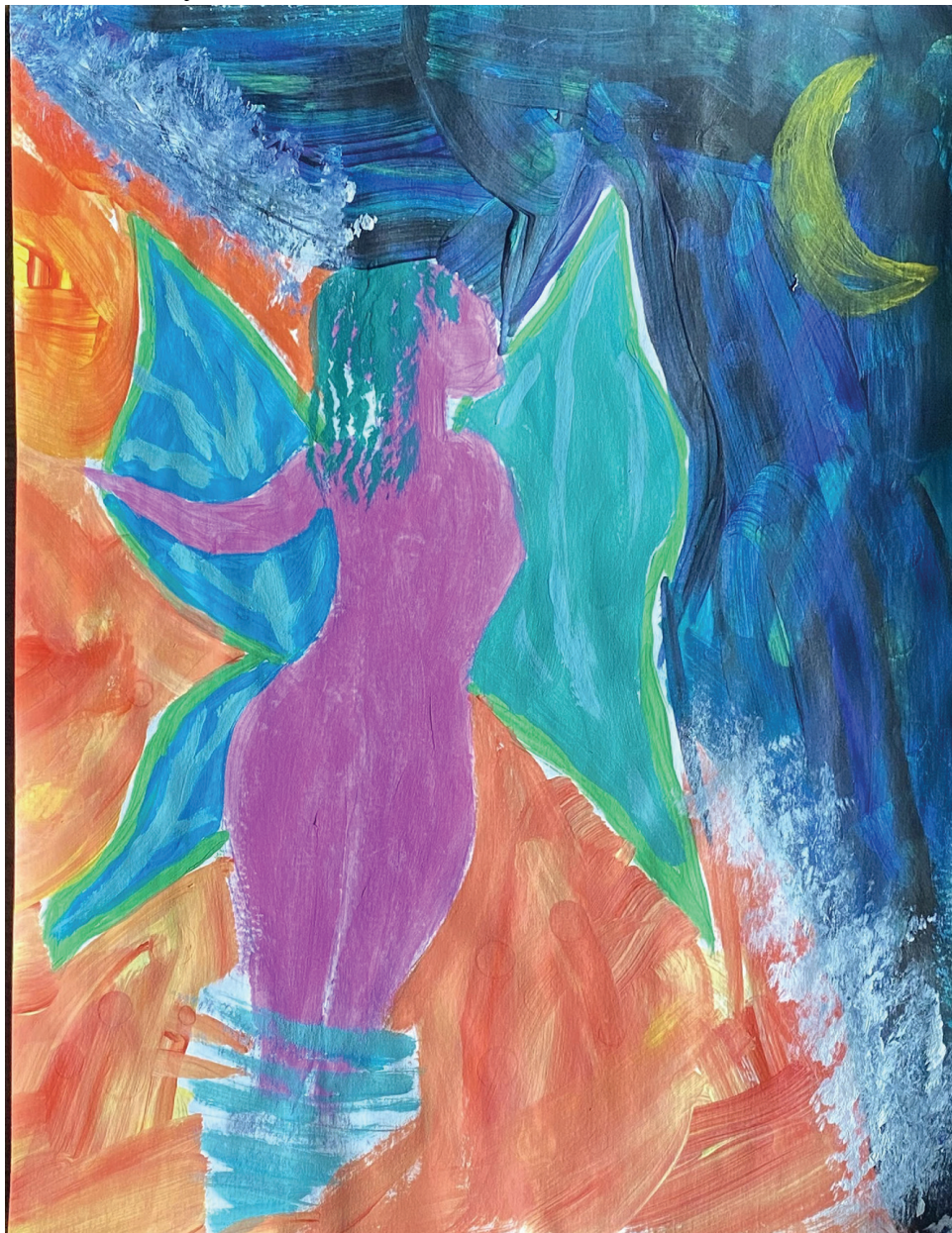
ACT I

November 28, 2020 Reflection

Today I caught up on *The Mandalorian*. Watching “Episode 13: The Jedi,” I kept thinking about *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke Skywalker meets Yoda on Dagobah to train. So, after *Mandalorian*, I watched *Episode V*, which I haven’t watched in at least a decade. I didn’t understand why I associated the two until Luke left Dagobah to rescue Princess Leia and Hans Solo. It was the fear of emotions and viewing connections to people as a weakness. In “Episode 13,” Ahsoka Tano refuses to train Grogu (Baby Yoda) because of his emotional attachment to the Mandalorian. Yoda also warns Luke that if he leaves in the middle of his training he will be susceptible to the Dark Side. Both Yoda and Ahsoka Tano are reeling from the trauma of Anakin Skywalker’s evolution into Darth Vader, and their trauma creates anxiety that anyone who has a fraction of what was present in Anakin will be corrupted by the Dark Side.

I have been a sci-fi fantasy nerd since childhood, and I always wanted to be a Jedi. I desired their connection to each other and to the Force. I admired their roles in rebellions against colonial and oppressive powers. It’s only in my adulthood that I understood the complexity and faults of Jedi, like Yoda and Ahsoka Tano, who had been weathered by these fights. Rewatching the movies last night reminded me of the pitfalls in misunderstanding who is the “enemy,” what should be feared, and how our relationship to our pain and trauma can impact our ability to see what’s possible in the future. Emotional connections and anger should not be inherently feared. They can be redirected and transformed. Like the Jedi who source their powers from the Force, we can tap into our emotions, our anger, to balance the lightness and darkness that exists within all of us and create/transform our environments. I do not think I will ever be convinced that detachment is the answer. Integrity in practice, absolutely, but not detachment like Yoda and Ahsoka Tano expected from their Padawans to be great. Luke Skywalker’s storyline is mainly to show the benefit of emotionality in mastery, as well as to break cycles of generational harm. I may need to rewatch all the episodes to see whether or not he was successful.

Keona Jeane Wynne (she/her)



I am a Doctoral Student; that is a full-time job. My Ph.D. is in population health sciences. I recently declared my minor expertise, which is in trauma violence and coping, and I put in parentheses “(and abundance).” So, I focus on how Black communities specifically interact with racial trauma and violence both with outside forces and then internal forces within the community. How can we engage with the arts for healing and reconciliation which will, in turn, enable us to lead healthy lives? My guiding philosophy is, “If you don’t like yourself, you won’t care for yourself.”

I create a lot of things. As I move deeper into this work and research, I find that my creativity is also moving and sparking. I do art along a variety of spectrums to complement my intellectual research. I do believe that intellectualism is an art within itself. It’s just using the mind and thoughts to create something you’ve never seen before.

I paint very often and create spoken words. Along with that, I do quite a lot of intellectual and philosophical work. I do fluid abstract art. I like not having a structure.

I do consider myself a leader. But I don’t think I know what that means for myself right now. Especially for us academics, we get told that we are leaders by nature of our degree and our status. But they expect for us to lead in these traditional ways like doing mentoring pipelines, or reading everyone’s application for the program that we’re in, or doing everything “Black” for the institutions that we’re in, running and starting these organizations, doing nonprofit work. I feel like those are white supremacist ways to lead because it’s doing what the institution wants you to do. As I’ve branched out into my art, for example, making that visual spoken word, I thought wow this was an incredible way to lead, but not in a traditional way where I write a paper, submit it to a journal, write an op-ed, submit it to another journal, where I write with enough lay language so that hopefully anyone can understand what I’m saying.

If I truly believe that art is an expressive form where we can truly connect, I decided to be that art and use that art to communicate in that way. It tied into a rich history of Black thought leaders. It gave me a new appreciation for James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston who had been doing that. While we regarded them and praised them for what they did, I never thought about what it took to do that because it was revolutionary. But they understood a way of communicating that wasn’t academic language; they understood there’s something about an instrumental, a visual, something more to tell the story of a People than like Blacks live in urban deprivation.

So, I do think I define myself as a leader, but that definition is changing as I am moving away from being the leader that white society expects me to be and being the leader that I feel good about and one that’s actually moving the needle in the world to where it needs to be.

With my visual spoken word, I made it, and then I submitted it to my advisors and was like, “I made this.” Then my advisors were like, “Oh wow, I didn’t even realize you were this talented.” I’m like, “Yeah, this is what I love doing.” Even among some Black academics from older generations, there are just some ways certain things are done, and that’s what

they're comfortable with. I can push the guard, and I try to evaluate the merit of a person based on their response to me pushing. I am always going to push the edge because I think we are really far from where we need to be as a society.

The response has been incredible, and the support has been great, but now only once they've had a better understanding of what I do and who I am. Now they're like, if you want to submit an art project, you can just submit an art project. So, I've submitted spoken words in place of papers because the spoken word conveyed the same meaning as the paper, but it gave it a different lens and voice and humanized the experience.

Art humanizes experiences in a way that we sometimes can lose, specifically in both disciplines I have my foot in: philosophy and population health. Philosophy becomes so obsessed with finding the perfect, rational human that they strip away all qualities and imperfections that make people, people. Then, quantitative sciences can get so wrapped up in the statistics that they don't care about the actual, contextual life of a person. I bring the arts to both of these disciplines because it was deeply humanizing.

It's been a personal growth journey for me to get to, "It's fine if you don't see what I see." Sometimes I just don't know how they got to where they got in terms of their conclusions for how we need to move forward. So, now, I've just made a practice of not listening to things that are about my life. I don't need a class on the stupid shit they always want to have a class on.

My work is completely all influenced by my life. I am African American. My family's been here for about four generations. I grew up on what's known as the Wynne farm in Huntsville, Texas. This farm was bought by my grandfather. We believe it used to be the Wynne Plantation, and then we sharecropped it, and then we bought the land, but don't quote me on that; it's hard to know those things for certain.

I had a very farm life. We had well water and animals; cows, chickens, the whole nine yards. It was a very beautiful life in that regard. But my life was also deeply violent. I'm a survivor of child abuse, of sexual violence, all those things. The child abuse was quite severe abuse until I left and went to Howard University for undergrad. I developed a very intimate relationship with violence and abuse and an understanding of the many ways it inflicts harm on the human psyche and who you are. Philosopher Michelle Moody Adams gives us a perfect example of how Black Americans are systematically denied things that affirm a person's self-respect. Say that you're born with these innate gifts, and you want to do something with these innate gifts. Say you're a beautiful singer and that's what you want to do, but society gaslights you into thinking that you can't sing. At some point you start to doubt yourself and your talents, but not only are you doubting your talents, something you really believed you were good at, so if you cannot trust that, how can you trust yourself to really know what's going on.

Unfortunately, these dynamics are very common in abusive households. I really understood it from a personal level, to come back from it and heal, which is how I got so involved in the arts to heal myself. Then I

was doing all this work around violence and trauma and African Americans, but more broadly Black Americans, I realized it was all the same things. Everything I experienced in my childhood home is what this country is doing to Black Americans. It's just a deeply personal experience where my lived experience and also being a Black American gave me this unique lens where I can see a lot more of both of these pictures that are one and the same. It made me think creatively about what we need to do to change that.

My decision to share my story comes back to do I think of myself as a leader. I noticed that my story was being white-washed and sanitized into the perfect American dream story. Farmgirl comes from Texas, from a high school education system that was supposed to be shut down because it was failing in all categories. She gets her bachelor's in three years, a master's degree in one year. Now, she's 22 getting her Ph.D. from Harvard University. It shows you anyone can do it with enough hard work. I said, "Absolutely not, that is not my story at all." Mine is one of great personal struggle, figuring things out, people helping me and showing up for me who didn't have to. People believing that I could be something, and that's how I got to where I am. I was not a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" story.

The importance of community is completely lost upon Whiteness. I think about that all the time. For me, who I am going to be, and who I am going to show up as a leader, is an authentic all-around human. Full Keona, who lives every day as a child abuse survivor, and I know this, some days are a struggle. And that's what makes me human. That will make my work effective because I am not hiding from the fact that these things happened to me, and I'm not pretending like these things happened.

I think people think that we can remove our Blackness when we enter institutions. We try and leave so much of who we are at the door, but all those things impact our health and wellbeing, specifically violence. So, if we're leaving it at the door and not talking about it, or talking about it in these decontextualized ways, we're never going to get anywhere on the subject matter. There's too much at risk for me to pretend like I am better than who I am.

Liberation means being my full self. There are a lot of components to that. First, you have to understand who your full self is. Art allows us to have an encounter with who we really are. It's just you and the art, and you do what naturally comes out. Once you have that encounter with your distinctive self, you can start asking questions like "Why is this self not showing up at Harvard?" "Why is this self not showing up in my intimate relationships or with my friends?" "I want to be this person all the time. Why am I not this person?" "Why, when I go into these white spaces, do I feel so much less than myself?" So many philosophers, activists, have written all the time how Black people are second-class citizens, how Black people are not allowed to be themselves. How we don't have full moral status, and I think that is absolutely true! But it's so ingrained into our psyche that we don't even know what that means anymore. The first people to say it, the enslaved folks, when they said it they *knew* who their full selves were. They had a reference point. We don't even *know*

what our full selves look like; we don't even know what we're losing. You say you're a second-class citizen, but I can't even imagine what a first-class citizen looks like. Sure, I'm a second-class citizen as a fact, but I don't substantively know what that means. Whenever we get to have liberation through the arts and have this distinctive experience of self as who we fully are, we then can understand what is lost.

Until enough of us are having these distinctive experiences with self, then we can understand what is being lost and what is at stake. It's so nuanced. Yes, a lot of Black people are artists, musicians, and engage with the arts, but the question is are we engaging with the arts because we want to? Or are we engaging with the arts because of the stereotypes associated with Black people being artists?

So, liberation means to me being able to fully show up in your distinctive self in every avenue, but that requires you to understand who that self is.

Black people are canvases all the time. I try and live my life as art. I have real boundaries around my academic work. All of my expertise is in trauma, violence, and coping; all my work is on the effect of violence on the Black body. I can't be exhausted moving from these papers; I have to be replenished and come at it from an angle of care and love, as opposed to anger and pain. So, I don't compromise on my self-care.

Listen, I'm excited for where the world is going if more intellectuals are engaging in art.

Jurrel Laronal (he/him)



I'm a community organizer for Families for Justice as Healing, an abolitionist organization with the mission to end the incarceration of women and girls. So, my profession would be—more specifically—the transformative justice side of being in the streets dealing with interpersonal harm. And then a lot of prison work. I'm also a coach and a trainer. I'm a fighter. I teach Muay Thai, kickboxing, and boxing. I'm a fighter for real, for real.

I try to create a space or platform to build People's Power on both sides, so with organizing and when I'm around the way talking to some young homies about a certain situation and trying to build on the power so they can get through that situation. Even just to let them know they're not alone. Even in the gym, it's the same thing: somebody can't get a technique right, and I mean I can't give them or make them get that technique right, so it's just up to me to be that facilitator and let them know what's going on and how they can fix it.

I can't make anybody else aware if I'm not aware of a certain situation. People in the work have that direct experience. I've been incarcerated. I've been in these little situations, I've been shot at, so it's like I've been there. I experienced it. Sometimes people just need that extra bump. I mean, so they can be aware of what's going on because sometimes people don't even have to be knowing something and they just be blinded by certain shit.

Even with organizing, it could be as simple as abolitionists demands versus reformist demands. Their heart might be in the right place, they want to see the safety of the people, but sometimes it takes that person who's been there and knows the ins and outs, like, "Yo, bro. Now, that's not what we're about," so others who don't know can kind of think a different way.

I do see myself having the qualities of a leader. Before, I didn't look at myself as a leader because I come from a culture where we have that soldier mentality, man. I always had that front-line type of mentality and I'm saying what that was in the streets.

I'm a doer. I didn't see myself as like a leader or somebody people will follow, in that type of sense, in certain scenarios like in prison and in the streets and even now when I'm organizing for the betterment of my community. So, now, I can kind of see myself as a leader and especially again amongst my peers who I grew up around and now, even though technically I'm the old guy. Now I'm 35, but even when I was like, 26/25, I'm saying you got the younger dudes calling me old head.

We're always surrounded by leaders. Somebody that I know that I'm always around is Andrea James, she's the founder of The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, and she's the founder of Families for Justice as Healing, which I have the privilege of working for. She started Families for Justice as Healing when she was still in prison in Danbury, Connecticut. They had a vision sitting in the yard. I've been in that situation, and I've been in those yards. To see that idea manifest itself out here and actually meet the other women whose part of the National Council in other states; right it just blossomed.

I'm from Dorchester, she's from Roxbury. Just juxtaposing her struggles with mine and then just seeing how she moves. She walks the walk and talks the talk. I draw inspiration from that.

We all know those people that would lead people down to the pits of hell. Unfortunately, I was probably one of them. But, going back to talking about building up power, building up liberation. Right. In the midst of like struggle and danger, who can still lead or give people that positive guidance for that overall goal? No matter how overwhelming the work is, who was still ten toes down? So, I draw a lot of motivation and inspiration from her.

I want the best for my own people, as hard as it might seem. We gotta stay on over here on this route; and being intentional about how you move is everything. Everything.

Liberation means to me, the total freedom from all the institutions that have plagued us for centuries. Freedom from the schooling system, the prison system; freedom from the healthcare system. All the things that we suffered from. Black liberation and freedom look to me like a society where everybody can have what they need and what they want.

No prisons, no police, because we already somewhere where we don't need that. Everybody can kind of look at each other as family. Especially when it comes to the streets. Right. That's about street culture, having a young man not look at another dude who lives a block away as an enemy.

We should be able to disagree about some things, but it's still all love. And then, we have the resources to not want to take it there [fighting as enemies]. Sometimes people do that because they don't have what they need: shelter and clothing.

I'm from Dorchester, 700 block. I'm used to one way of life, like, one way of thinking. Right. That's what landed me on a prison bunk at 19, I had to do ten years. And even then, it was a process. And I'm saying when it comes to street violence, hood drama, my mentality was all about the hood. It's all about the block.

I did like six and a half years straight. I came home around like 26 or something like that, but I was still there, my mentality was still there. I was only home for about, six, seven months. I didn't even make it to my next birthday. Because as soon as I came home, I just hit the streets running again. So that's when I had to do like three years, or something like that. That's when I had to really start kind of like thinking there has to be another way. And I can't keep doing this now.

I had to pivot. I have always been a revolutionary thinker. Even though I was involved in certain activities. I still got educated, while I was in there the first time, on the whole system. But, like I said, dudes need their food, shelter and clothing, man. And it's like, sometimes you're in a situation where you just can't really talk it out that much to me.

But the second time I had to kind of be like, "Yo, I can't keep doing this because I'ma fuck around and get a life bid, or I could die out here."

I came home and I got into martial arts. While I was in it [prison], I was a fighter. I'm always a fighter. I just had this idea that this is what I'm

going to do anyway. But I can't see my mother and my father hurt anymore. I got a little brother right now who's in Shirley Max [Souza Baranowski Correctional Center] fighting a serious case, fighting for his life. My whole family's been impacted by the streets and incarceration, and I had to pivot.

I just had to be ten toes down. Man, it was hard changing my environment, not going around the way doing this and kind of like letting others know like this is what I'm doing. I'm gonna be uncomfortable, right, you got to be uncomfortable to succeed, sometimes. I had to. I had to do it.

And it worked out.

The fight game [martial arts sparring] itself is a grind also, know what I mean, but it opened up doors for me as a career. And then I obviously took that, then I started organizing.

The first time I came home I was like, man, I'm good. I'm gonna just do this different now. I think I tried for like a week when I first came home. But if the mentality is not there, if the passion is not there, then you just go back to doing what you were doing. People got to be uncomfortable. You gotta be accountable if you want any type of change.

Martial arts really did change my life and saved my shit. I find I had that fighter's drive and I'm saying, like I said, I've had a status with the police all my life, even in that prison. I'm known to be going at it with guards cuz of the conditions, the racism that's going on there. So, I was just like, I was always on that type of shit, whether you got a badge or not. So, training martial arts kind of just made sense.

I protected myself. I focused all that pain. All that stress. It really saved my life and my emotions.

Anger is good. That's our passion. That's that fight. I know we need that fire. If you don't have that outlet of some sort, that anger is just a fire, and then that fire is going to get directed into something that's going to be detrimental to you. With white delusional supremacy, you *will* be angered and you would want to do something about it.

Nana Fofie Oparebea Amina Bashir (she/her/nsa)



I am so many things, I just had a word cloud come in front of me. I'm a therapist. I'm an expressive arts therapist. I am a spiritualist first and foremost before anything. For lack of a better word, because I know this is overreaching and then at some point cliché, I am a healer. I'm a counselor, I am a facilitator, and I'm Executive Director of my therapist organization, the Institute for Ashe Movement.

I create space. At least that's my goal. I create visual art, I'm a photographer. I paint. I'm an installation artist. It took me a long time to realize that my altar work was also an expression of myself as an artist, in addition to myself as a spiritualist. I create music, and it also took me a long time to be able to claim that. I create many things in many different ways, but to put it all in its simplest form, what I hope is that I create space. I hope that I create space for examination, for exploration, for others to tap into their creativity for healing, and for an opening. I hope that I create spaces that are portals.

I am a leader. Yes. Just say that without apology. Yes. For me, when I say, "Yes, I'm a leader," I'm calling in the me that is my grandmother in me. That's where I'm a leader, where there's a space I'm willing to step in, and where there's a need. I'm just going to seize it. And even though I'm not saying I'm the best person or the most this or the most that, but I hear my grandmother's voice of "just go do it." And I just go do it.

I want to be really clear that when I use that word [leader], I'm not a leader because I have any followers or anything like that. I'm a leader in our circular and village and community fashion. And the way that hopefully we all step in.

Anyone who knows me even tangentially knows my love for my grandmother, Gwen. Let me call her name. We're coming upon the anniversary of her transition. This is my maternal grandmother. And we're working on these other levels calling in liberation and leadership and joy because we've been working with ancestry. I also want to call in my paternal grandmother, Marianne, who in this lifetime, I never met—she passed when my father was young. As I grew and learned to be more conscious in terms of my communication, I became just as close with her as I did with the grandmother who raised me.

On both sides of my family there's this fierce. . . what we call feminism. My West African ancestry, on my father's side I'm Somali, and on my mother's side, people don't name the fierce womanism, but it is there. And so, Marianne has taught me so much. I also want to say my aunt.

Before I went back and went ahead to be an actual therapist, I was still a coach, and my aunt—who is actually the third in line of four sisters—she stepped up as matriarch after my grandmother's passing and even before, and she is the coach of our family. Like me, she is the middle child, and she is the one who holds that ground, and so she has always been someone who really demonstrates how to just step in. It doesn't matter if that's the role that's assigned to you. It doesn't matter if that's what number you are in line. It doesn't matter if that's what was the expectation of you; get on in and fit in where you see there is a need, and she does that.

I've been talking about my biological family, but my spiritual family, the Wind and the Warrior, would not be what we are, who we are, without our grounding. I cannot *not* mention my spiritual godmother and my teacher. There's a lot more access now, in terms of our African spiritual systems, than there was 20 years ago, 40 years ago, and certainly 60 years ago. I am the benefactor of an amazing teacher who was one of those true trailblazers who actually is responsible for the Akom tradition being here and trained in this country. I started training when I was very young, so there's no part of my adult life that I cannot say has not been impacted by a powerful woman tradition with incredible elders who have passed and who are still here of the tradition of African spirituality in this country back before it was as accessible as it is now.

Still, we're in this society where we see things in such a short time span. We're in such an instant time span, and there's such a longer time span that this moment exists in. In this culture, we have to take a moment before we ask our ancestors or spirit guides what is it that we're asking for and why before we get mad that we don't get it.

Unfortunately, even when we think of tradition or even when we think of Africa we tend to still think of colonial Africa; we still tend to have these colonial times in our mind. And so how far back are we willing to go? How expansive, are we willing to really think?

"Decolonized" has become another buzzword, but what does that really mean? Really hard because this [white supremacy] is what we've grown up with, and this is what we know. So, how do we give ourselves the opportunity to be willing to sit through the headaches of the detox?

Liberation equals healing; healing equals liberation. I also know both of those words have again become these cliché things; at the core of my own meaning, liberation is healing and healing is liberation.

When I say "detox," it's that opportunity to let the layers fall. It's that opportunity to be able to kind of get the mist off and check in all of those things. Liberation includes our system and includes everything that is about imperialism and climate and politics. To me liberation and how we even get to this level over here is this level in here. *puts palms on heart*

Liberation is becoming. It is getting even to the point of knowing ourselves. To me, liberation is truly being able to see one another. To me, liberation is not just being able to talk about trauma, but being able to actually hold each other and see how that trauma presents. Liberation is drinking water.

In the wake of the election, a lot of people were sharing "A Brand New Day." *The Wiz* is one of my favorites, but it's not the words [of the song] to me. The metaphor of liberation is what so many people did not share; before the dancing on the tables is people unzipped. There was literally a dusting away of all the sweatshop materials, and then they took off. That's liberation, an opportunity to do that.

ACT II

December 1, 2020 Reflection

I hate being worried. It's fear, anxiety, and powerlessness all wrapped up. I only become worried when someone I love is involved. Should something happen to them, I do not know how I would survive. My worry looks like thorny vines, tangled and knotted around a teddy bear. Look closely, the thorns don't even touch the bear. I am the thorns, and my loved one is the bear.

I have to remind myself of the power in surrendering; the power in trusting. This is not about me. I hold a supporting role. The bear needed a hug, not a cage of thorns.

What else is possible if I harness the power of supportive roles?

Ife Afriye Kilimanjaro (she/her)



My profession, generally, is organizational leadership: director, executive leader. Right now, I am not working. I like to think that what I create is deep moments of connection. I like to think I did my part in holding the space, even like in this room where I'm by myself, but there's still a way that the house and the elements in it contribute to my experience. They do their part in making this way. It's recognizing that connection to the environment in relationship to yourself and others around you.

I've been called a leader. When I hear "leader," I think of people who are the faces of things, who are like the front folks who are out there. Collette [Pichon-Battle] is a very clear and strong leader. The Executive Director of the organization that I worked for, she was. Both of them are the people who are in front and are really moving things, regardless of the level—local, state, national.

I see myself as more of a person who works more behind the scenes, and I think that is a leadership kind of role but expressed a little differently. And I think the way that I traditionally define leadership in my brain is the way that I first described. I'm always behind the scenes, or I'm supporting. I'm a leader, supporter, and operations kind of person.

I help them make things happen or help to make things so that other people can step in and then lean into their leadership. Does that make me a leader? I guess in some ways it does because there's a sort of a partnership in that.

In my last job I was in a leadership role where I was the second to the director. Even in that role, I really saw her as the leader, and I was a person just making the programs work.

When I first moved back to Detroit coming out of Howard, I finished my doctorate there, and I had these really beautiful mentors who were the Vice President of the college that I went to work for, Dr. Robert Bland, and the President, Dr. Marjorie Harris. They took a real interest in me and my development. I was the youngest on staff; it was a small college. It's since closed, but it was like the only HBCU in Michigan, up until it closed back in like 2012.

I developed their student retention program. They had liberal arts classes but put me in a position where I developed it into a department where people could major in liberal arts. I named those two because they were the ones who were like really advocating for me. They had a team of folks that they worked with, but those are the two that would really put me in a position to give birth to these huge babies of ideas and projects. They gave me their time; they pulled me aside, sat me down. The college was struggling financially, but they were incredibly supportive, and I just am really grateful to these beautiful Black folks.

Dr. Harris. His mother was the founder of the college, and she just was this beautiful historic stoic woman. Even her presence just really helped me to appreciate what Black leadership could really look. I was really pushed to create and it was really exciting and dynamic and the trust that they had in me as a young person was incredible.

Liberation. Well, it's a noun. I think it sort of means it's a process; it's a verb. I think it's a process of freeing oneself. But I don't see it as an end. Rather, a process that continually unfolds or maybe even moves through

spirals—in the world, within our communities, within our families, and within ourselves.

There are elements of like interrogating, excavating, shedding, releasing, seeding, letting things go, opening, breathing, creating, expanding.

It's a process of like diet decolonization. It's revolving, not evolving; there's like a leap that happens—a revolution that happens that then allows for that feeling of freedom to be there.

And then at that next level, the process continues in different ways and on different levels.

There's a certain point that, in the process of growth, there's a boundary that gets reached, and you can expand as much as you can within them, and then you're reborn. The person or your idea is reborn and then goes through another life cycle. For example, when you're pregnant, the baby is growing in the womb, and it's great until there's no more room. And so, then, the freedom for the baby is in the birth.

Then, perhaps, the freedom of our spirits is in our transition; when we've lived and done all that we can do. And then the spirit has to be freed; the body cannot contain our spirit anymore.

Right now, I'm in the process of a fuzzy transition. It felt like there was something in my spirit that I needed to get out of that situation so that I can get clarity on what was speaking within me that I couldn't hear well because of the demands of work and family.

In the last few years, I came out of a 17-year marriage that was really hard for half of it. Then, my daughter and I were really working through things in our relationship, and then with work and life. The climate crisis and the impact all of that has had on all of us. Trump being in office. It's just an odd moment where on the one hand, the whites have never let up their assault on Black life and, to the extent that we had rights and privileges within society, they continue to be challenged and attacked.

Even before Trump got into office, but then this white nationalist gets in, and then he's going after the white folks that have been coming after us. Now they're fighting, but at the same time, he's like stripping away all of these regulations that, as ineffectively enforced as they were, were in place. So, there's this fight among white people and then there's this continued destruction of lands where Black and Native folks live, and then this pandemic. But then within me there's this healing that's needed, not just for me but across generations.

I feel like my ancestors have been speaking into my body that there's healing that's needed, and I'm feeling it. And so, I just had to stop working, and I needed to work on this book. And this book would be this healing journey; it would be the space where I could work through things. I didn't have any savings, nothing, so, what I carried into this moment was trust that this thing that my gut was telling me—my spirit was telling me—was what I should be doing. And then my spirit guides and my ancestors stepped in. I was able to get enough resources to cover rent through the next few months. It was giving myself permission and trusting the universe, my guide, and my ancestors.

Aminta Ossom (she/her)



I think of myself as a human rights lawyer.

I create ways of sharing knowledge. I try to create inspiration. I like creating strategies for bringing people more power using what I know and sharing what I know with others.

Yeah, I would say I am a leader. A leader is someone who people follow. I don't really think of it as a particular title. It's someone who people look to for guidance or instruction, and it can be really informal. For example, people say that as a Clinical Instructor I'm a leader because I lead a team of students. But, I would say that, basically, the skills I'm using there are the same skills I used as a Junior Officer in my past role where I had no managerial responsibilities or title. However, you still have to get people to work together in order to fulfill the ultimate goal you're carrying out. The ones who are successful in that are the people who have a group following them.

I think of my former boss, Christopher Hall; he was one of the lead legal advisors at Amnesty. What I liked is that he's super senior but was always approachable, and mentorship was a part of his person. I feel like now there's a lot of push to have a lot of formal mentorship structures, and there are many people who don't need any of that because there are a lot of young people around them who they are pouring into naturally. They just love sharing knowledge. For example, I'd write something that he couldn't comment on because of Amnesty policy, and he'd say, "Let me look at that, but just don't tell anyone I helped you with this." *laughs* He just really enjoyed seeing people succeed. As a result of that, he expanded his influence by just being someone that people could get a lot of knowledge out of and empowering people.

What I see from toxic leadership is people whose leadership is for their own personal goals and not for the goals of the people they are leading.

Another person who hasn't been a direct supervisor of mine but who I model my approach after is Chi Mgbako, who is a Clinical Instructor at Fordham where I did my fellowship. She has the same ethos. She gets a lot of joy out of seeing people fulfill their goals and also aligning people's goals with other people and empowering them. That's the approach I like to take. There's a lot of people who I feel like are leaders for me because they are so good at what they do, and they're great at getting people to support their goals, but I think my approach is not strictly that. I want to see people who, because of my leadership, do their own thing in an amazing way. That has more influence than having people help you achieve your goals.

Liberation is whenever you're doing what you're best suited to do. You're fully achieving your potential. You are uninhibited from achieving your potential, so that it is natural and effortless.

It's joy that tells you that you're not achieving your full potential, as in if the joy is not present. When I was talking to mentors about career trajectory, they asked what's my favorite job. And I would say my post-graduate fellowship, and you would think that's a bit weird. You're ten years into your legal career; you've reached the "apex" of a human rights

career. This should be where you get the most joy from, but to me it wasn't.

For me as an individual—not a prototypical human rights lawyer—what brings me the most joy is coming up with new strategies and new theories, writing, having theoretical conversation with people, inspiring people, and doing mentorship and that's not necessarily the job. So, I was traveling to different countries, completing different missions where, for me, I like to invest in something and know it very well.

When I was thinking about coming back to teaching, that was when I felt like I needed to pivot. Not because I didn't have a great job, but because I didn't feel like I was reaching my full potential in terms of what I had to offer as a human. I think I'm working just as hard now as a clinical instructor, but I don't feel as tired. Because when you're doing stuff that naturally works for you – I'm an introvert – I have a different level of exhaustion afterwards.

Those all play hand-in-hand. Some advice that I got was to think about times where I felt most proud and excited—when I taught my first class, when I published an academic article. Whenever I felt like I'm just really tired and things don't feel like they're fitting, that's when I changed.

Substantively, there are things I took with me from my time as a Junior Officer; I know how these systems work, I have a knowledge of these different countries—those can be translated into what you can be doing. But I also took how to manage expectations of others, of myself, and of others' expectations of me. I understand myself and my boundaries better and can enforce those.

I don't know if this is a consequence of me coming from where I was, or just the stage of career I'm in. I know very clearly what I want and how to manage my time. That's something that a lot of women and Black women have to struggle with. A lot of people feel entitled to their time, and that's a huge source of exhaustion and joy depletion because you are fulfilling other people's ideas of your potential.

I value my own ambitions and knowing how to get there. A lot of people know how to get there, but they feel guilty about following the path, saying "no," and guarding the pathway they need to get there. And that is something I can do now.

I am in the process of letting go of the idea of what other people want and value is what I value. Also, the idea of prestige, which is something I talk to Harvard students about a lot and to my former Harvard classmates of mine about. I'm not living my life for prestige. I also realized how short life is. I've lost a couple colleagues and realized a lot of people are unhappy and burnt out but carry on because, on paper, they're in the highest-level job as a human rights attorney. But life is too short to be living life based on rankings.

Prestige is sometimes an illusion. First of all, it changes all the time. Also, people give it more value than it actually has. Coming from a state where not a lot of people go to Harvard and also from a family of immigrants who came over in the 80s. At that point, you can't "fail" because these people aren't going to be disappointed if I'm not at the top of my

class, and that liberated me to be able to invest my time in things that I actually cared about. Prestige is a trap.

For human rights work, something I am trying to teach namely non-Black students is knowing when to interject yourself and when to not. The predominant culture that we're hyper aware of is power and what it means and when to exercise it and when to not. There's a predominant idea on influence where you influence as much as you possibly can, similar to you achieve the most prestigious positions you can and make as much money as you can, draw a lot of attention to yourself, which is specific to human rights work.

There's a lot of human rights work that is done through your own personality. In order to be more influential, you need to draw more attention to yourself in order to gain access to resources and institutions. What comes from being Black is the idea of not interjecting for the sake of interjecting and not amassing power for the sake of amassing power.

How to share power and how to restrain yourself are some things that come from Black cultures. It's not just an individual enterprise. Everything is connected to each other.

It could even be a good thing you want to interact with and engage with, but the means you're going through to do it are not right. It's also not worth it if you're not the right voice. I think a lot of people skip to the end and are like, "This is really important!" and I'm like, "Yeah, it is," but that doesn't mean it has to be me (or you) doing it. Taking up space is exactly the issue, and the more you become a "leader," the more people push you to take up space as if it's a good value to have. Like, whenever you have the forum. No. *laughs* There's strength in restraining.

Tassiana Willis (they/them)



I am a consultant. That's the easiest way to say I do a whole lotta shit.

What I create is complex because I am; we are. I am a vessel. I don't create anything solely by myself. I am an iteration of my ancestors. So, we create art, we create music, we create songs, we create safe spaces. When I think about the word "create," to me, it has this connotation that you're making something outta nothing, and energy can never be created or destroyed. It can only be transferred.

I harness all the things I've listed and participate in, cultivate, or evolve all the things I've mentioned. And I love and care and create safer spaces. Healing. Joy. Peace. Art.

I create songs, which is interesting because I feel like there was a long time where people mostly knew me for poetry. Like people knew I could sing. I was what you would call a singing poet, and writing used to be my method. Writing was my shit; writing was my zhuzh. But now, I feel like music is the easiest way for me to transcend.

When I wrote poetry, it was cool, it was dope, it was super healing. But I don't feel like I transcend anymore when I write things. But when I sing, it's like "Ooooh this ain't me. It's me, but it ain't me," and so for me singing and creating music is just easier for me in a way, and it's my favorite kind of performing outside of acting.

I think that I'm a leader. I say that also because I think of everybody as a leader. There's this idea that there are people out here who don't lead anyone, and that's just not true. We all have some sort of influence in some way, even if it's like I donated \$20 to this organization. Or you may be someone who is cooped up in your room, and you don't really talk to people, but you're online and you're supporting people, and that may lead others to someone's page where you giving em words of affirmation or support, which may lead somebody to be like, "Oh, I wanna do that too."

My hesitation in the beginning is to think about what does society say a leader is versus what do I believe a leader is. And I just have to do some undoing very quickly because, you know, white supremacy be seeping on up in there because we're all conditioned under a white supremacist society. We all got work to do.

So, I think absolutely, I am a leader. I'm an eldest sibling so I don't really have a choice in being a leader. I got two little sisters, and even when I think they don't think anything of me they are like "Hey, what are you doing?"

An *effective* leader, now that's different. Like Hitler was an effective leader; that nigga did terrible things, and, also, he was a great leader—multiple realities and truths can exist at the same time. A lot of leaders are the epitome of that.

I think an effective leader is someone who can empower their followers: the people who believe and are impacted by them. Unfortunately, it's not always positively, because, again, Hitler. I would want to put the positive thing on there, but then I just gotta honor like whew GOD there are some really bad people who are really great leaders, and it's because they are able to impact others. I think the people who do it in a negative way

do it because of wanting power for themselves. When I look at “bad leaders” or “evil leaders,” they had this power over people, but to my definition, an effective leader is somebody who impacts folks, who changes people’s reality.

A positive leader is someone who shifts and changes people’s lives—their holistic wellbeing—in a positive way, and I hope that’s what I am doing. Even if the way I am leading makes people uncomfortable. My motto is discomfort precedes change. If we are able to be uncomfortable with each other, then we’re able to change and grow in a way that’s positive. Not every feeling of discomfort is negative.

I would hope that a positive leader is able to do something like this:

“Okay, I know we’ve been sitting criss cross applesauce, but we gon’ put our legs out today because not everyone can cross they legs.”

“But we always sit criss cross apple sauce.”

“Yeah, well, we also have people in our group who cannot, and I want this to be an inclusive space, so people who can criss cross, y’all can also lay your legs out straight. And so can the other people, and I want this to be an equitable space. And that old rule is when we could all do the thing. Now we have some new people here who cannot, and I want them to feel comfortable. And if people are going to be upset, people gon’ feel salty.”

A positive leader, effective leader, is someone who knows when to change the rules and is not afraid to be uncomfortable; also someone who’s not afraid to be wrong. I don’t want no leader who cannot call themselves out or be called out.

I trust people who are like, “Omg y’all I had that meeting yesterday, and I said ‘guys’ 13 times; I gendered everybody. I understand that people think that that’s gender neutral, I know that people are telling me ‘don’t overthink it,’ but I also know there are women in this space. There’re femmes and nonbinary people in the space, and I understand that I was wrong, and I should’ve checked my language, and I’m here to receive any feedback or things that you need me to do to restore the harm that I caused by misgendering the room.”

I understand that we are in a white supremacist society and that we are conditioned under patriarchy. All the language we use is based on patriarchal language “Hey y’all, hey guys” but to me what signals an effective positive leader, is someone who is self-reflective, and who is self-aware and is thinking about their constituents, their audience. If I want my people to do better, I have to do better, and I have to call myself out.

A person who has influenced me in totality? Mmmm no, but there are bits and pieces of folks that I definitely feel like I admire. There are things that Stokely Carmichael said that I agree with. There are things that Martin Luther King, Jr. said that I agree with. There are things that Angela Davis said that I agree with. I do feel as though their leadership has shaped me.

I don't want this to be the case, but I feel like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s language, his eloquence—not just eloquence in the ableist and academic sense, but like his ability to flow ideas together, to me—was magnificent. And I had the opportunity to do a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event. It was like an hour and a half long show at the Herbst Theater [in San Francisco], and I really had the opportunity to focus in on his language. From that moment, I just really fell in love with his language. I feel like I am the sum of a lot of things, so it feels uncomfortable for me to think through what leader has super influenced me. I'm hella influenced by my project family, my niggas from the hood. Those people influence me. My auntie, who basically had an orphanage out of her project apartment—that's leadership that influenced me.

I'm hella influenced by being where I'm from, being from the hood, being from the projects, which is an unconventional place to pull my pedagogy and praxis from. I'm a city human, but my family is from the South, so I hate shoes. I'm like a city country bumpkin. I love country shit, I truly do.

My grandmother and my mom are both really community-centered people. My grandmother was like 6 feet tall, just a really grandiose person who people in community knew, and she was loved by community. My mom always had parties, and I feel like that was radical to me. Hoe politics has influenced me; growing up in a sex positive household has a huge influence on me—with a mother who was very clear about pleasure being important. I come from a non-romantic relationship, so my mom and my sperm donor were best friends and I say sperm donor not in the technical way that most queers use, but like, *sings* "Papa was a rolling stone wow." And they were best friends, both Geminis so whew. I grew up with four parents but also none. It's very wild.

I identify as aromantic, which includes unconventional ways to love, be in relationship with others, and to raise and rear a child, so that's something. My aunt never got married, never was in a "relationship," but also had 'friends' who were partners. And I feel like she was on the aromantic spectrum which is part of my praxis. Do I feel like my parents could've done a better job? Absolutely.

But, I'm so influenced by being from the hood. The hood—other than ancestral calling and having other things spoken over my life—has cultivated my radical praxis because I've seen, been a part of, and am still a part of poverty. I know what it's like to be on public assistance; I know what it's like to be on section 8 housing. I know what it's like to also be the "smart kid" in the class and read all the shit and be a critical thinker and then go back to these redlined and segregated places that replicate what I'm learning in history.

I feel like what has shaped me and my work, who I am, and how I love has been influenced by my grandparents' spirituality specifically, my grandmother—my maternal grandmother—and my great grandmother. I had both of them in my life. They taught me how to love, how to show up for people. They taught me about family, and the hood gave me praxis to do those things.

If we don't have it in the house, there's a neighbor who "made too much food" or, "They food stamps came early, so we can just cook this here." We made Top Ramen and Kool-Aid cool, so it doesn't register in your mind that, "Oh I'm hella poor, like we don't have any food." "Oh, I love Top Ramen, so this ain't no problem; I don't wanna eat this steak and mashed potatoes and corn anyway."

I love "everybody for themselves" nights, and I think being a part of those things, while also loving to learn, has made me who I am.

When I think of liberation, I think of Nina Simone right off the bat, living without fear. That's just on the real. To live in a world where you are not afraid is a liberatory world.

There's a process; you don't just get free. You don't just flip a switch and then get free—although if there is a switch somewhere I'd really love to find it. Let my people go, God! Let me flip the switch. Even if I don't get to make it, if the person who flips the switch needs to die—someone needs to flip the switch. Liberation is a process, a war. You have to really fight for it. It's not passive; it's not something you can get through by talking. It's like a physical movement. It's simple. But that don't make it easy.

Liberation is simple: people deserve to eat. They deserve abundance. That's liberation to me: access to abundance. I might not get to see a world where everyone is happy and frolicking in muhfucking sunflower fields, but I think in my lifetime I can cultivate a world where we have access to abundance, and we don't exploit that access.

We are not going to all agree. "Okay, y'all are fatphobic over here; I'm going to get on this plane to fat world united and go where I'm loved and cared for, and y'all can do y'all fatphobia over here because that ain't none of my business." I don't believe liberation is that we're all going to agree on everything. Although, I think there are some non-negotiables, like people deserve to be loved, heard, cared for, affirmed. Those things are non-negotiable for me. I want to be clear, fatphobia is not going to be allowed in my liberatory world. I just used that as an analogy for folks not agreeing on everything all the time, and that's okay.

Liberation is so much, but at the root of it, it is access to joy. It is access to healing, access to love, to care, to water, to having your needs met, to all that you desire.

And people are gonna get their ass beat. This whole idea that liberation means we are all going to be hugging each other. . .first of all, I don't want everyone hugging me, so that's just off rip. I don't need errbody energy around me. I don't think my ancestors were murdered because they wanted us to all agree on the same thing. But in fact, that they were fighting for us to disagree and still love each other and to be willing to learn.

Niggas just refuse to put down tradition. Put that dry ass turkey down! Because you know you cook chicken better than you cook turkey.

As somebody who has dealt with mental illness and suicidal ideations, I've hit a wall where I don't really want to be here. And, I think sometimes I just woke up the next day and that catapulted me into, "I

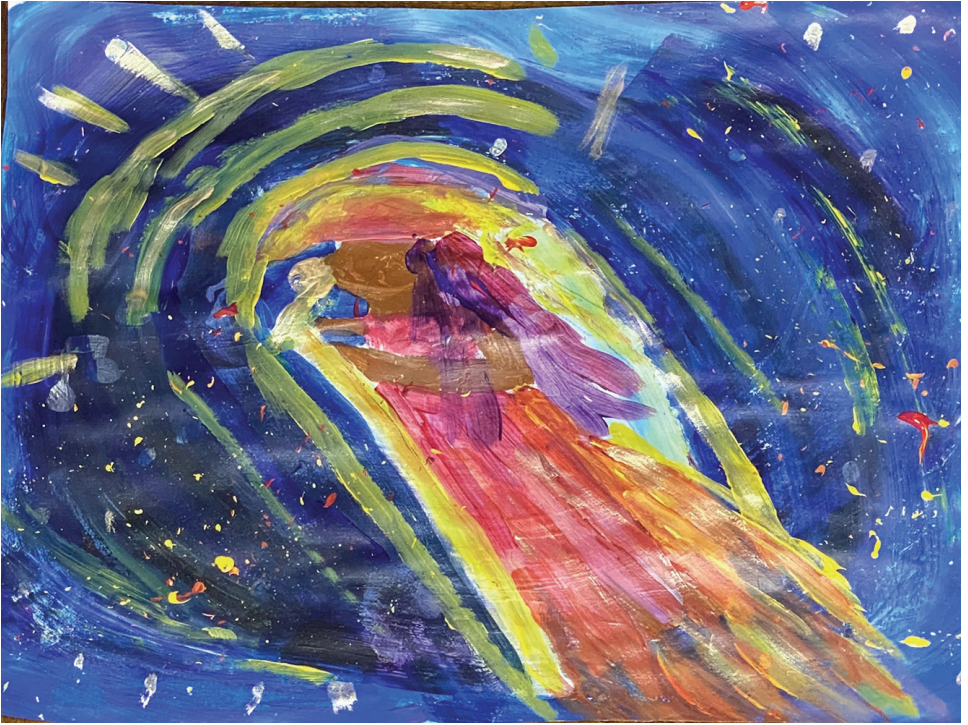
have to go to work; I have to exist." But I also feel like there have also been moments where I have been navigating ideations when it's like, "Okay, but white supremacy wants you gone. White people want you to not be here. Don't let them win by dipping up out this bitch even though you want to, and I understand why you want to." And also, not having finished my work has kept me here more than anything else. There are moments when I'm having ideations and moments here it'll be like "Bitch! You can't die, you have like three books inside you, two songs, and a one act play. You can't go because no one will know what was inside you if you go now. There's people that's not gon' get free if you don't write this thing, if you don't do this thing." It makes me think about *What's Love Got to Do with It*, where it's like, "If you die, imma kill you." I guess I gotta stay alive cuz if I die you gon kill me. A major thing that has made this life bearable is traveling. I don't tend to travel anywhere that doesn't have an ocean near it because swimming is another way to recharge. It feels like new life. It feels like being held by my ancestors, especially if the ocean is warm. I feel loved.

ACT III

November 21, 2020 Reflections

This was my first true loss. It rocked and wrecked my college community. The shock and devastation of losing such a vibrant power source and light. In Yeab's transition we found our way back to each other, all the people who shaped those formative college years where I first learned what liberation meant. I connected with an important star in my constellation, Damon Hart. We laughed! So much, so long, so hard, that the metal embedded in my bones was shook out. I slept maybe four hours, but that morning I felt more energized than I have in months.

Akua Naru (she/her)



I consider myself a conductor. I shepherd. I'm a professional artist. I mean I do a lot of things, but mainly I work through the power of my imagination as an artist.

Right now, I'm the creator of the first comprehensive digital database archive that will document women's work throughout hip hop history. I create music. I write; I've written songs for other people. I produce music. I create other things like flyers, websites. I also do video production and other artistic visual content. I also do events. I create magic through the ideas I have and my power to galvanize folks around the completion of whatever the vision.

Yes, I do consider myself a leader. Leadership could be all kinds of things. You could lead people to the pits of hell. For me, quality leadership is being committed to a vision for the future or for a moment that is projecting forward beyond the moment we're in right now. I am leading you towards something because if we're just doing something for just right now, what's the point?

I am able to listen. Leading people, but by thinking of them not necessarily as people to be led, but folks who are working alongside me and being humble enough to listen. I am leading this collective called the Keepers, and we have some decisions we need to make now. And, I could just make those decisions myself, and no one would say anything because, technically, I'm leading the project. So, they came onto the project knowing they should at least trust me. But, the thing is, I'll ask them what *we* think. I'm not above them; I'm among them. You lead people by being among them.

Being in conversation with them because for me I don't give a fuck about what society has said about what I can or can't do based on my race or gender expression, based on age, height, geography—anything. I'm doing whatever I see fit. True leadership is also not holding people to those standards. Race is a different thing, but there are people ten years younger than me, and they are sisters of mine, and they are smart as fuck, so I rock with them, and I would really be a fool to look at them like, "Y'all youngins, y'all can't sit at the table here." Like nah, "Y'all got mad knowledge." Mentorship goes both ways, so I see myself as somebody who's where I'm at, and I come to them like, "This is what I know." And they're coming from where they're coming from, and this is what they know, so we meet in the middle. How has our thinking shifted? I can show them where I'm at and what the thinking was ten years before. We learn a lot from each other. I see myself as a sister among sisters. As being in conversation, as being informed. Be informed as I inform.

You lead people by being among them. I had an office at Brown, and Trisha Rose runs the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America. And seeing how she responded to people who couldn't offer her anything. She has a title and they don't; she got money and they don't. Maybe, you see yourself as more knowledgeable than them. Maybe this person is the custodian, and you have an office in the corner. How do you treat people? Are you willing to make time when you have nothing to gain? There's a whole transactional culture at Harvard, for example, Ivy League, any academy across the board. How do you see people? Is it just

what parts of them you can apply towards your personal gain, and the rest you dispose of them, then you find someone else to suck the nectar from so you feel empowered until your tongue is bitter, and then you move onto the next? There have been people like Cornel West, who's a powerful person, who offers his time to young people on the ground. I have seen some people who have resources and access and power within certain institutions and the way they still make themselves available for folks on the ground.

Exhales wholly and deeply clicks tongue I'm not sure really what liberation means. I don't know what it means because I don't know if I will ever experience it, really. What I will say, I don't think we'll be free as Black people because there are too many of us who are invested in the wickedness that is white savagery, imperialism, racial capitalism, patriarchy and all the other bullshit. So, there are many of us who wanna be free, and then there are many of us who are so entangled that how can we break free?

I can be liberated to a certain extent through the power of community. Everything I'm saying is to an extent because I don't think I can ever truly be a liberated, free, Black woman in this fucked country and this world that is so heavily committed to destroying me on a daily basis. I can pour into community. And just as determined and committed as the environment and structures are to our daily destruction, we have to be just as determined and committed to our passion and to our ability to carve space for each other. Our ability to listen and love up on each other.

My first album was *The Journey Aflame*. I don't really like the music as my tastes have changed, but the narrative, the language, I appreciate that still. This idea of journey, traveling, being in different places and discovering myself. For me, I've always been interested in understanding the human being. What does it mean to be human in this place? What kinds of stories do you tell children? How do you interact with the elderly? What do people eat for dessert? How do you think about lunch and dinner? These things you don't really think about, but what it means to live a life in this place. Traveling and living in different places, I get to see that. I know people from all over the world, and I can just stay.

There were times when I was completely spent at the end of my rope, and I have family and friends who became family who said, "Listen, come to the Continent. Come to Kenya and stay with my family. Come to Zimbabwe. Come to Lesotho." I'm the type of Sista where I'm on my way! In my music, you hear those sounds I've recorded in different places. As I've developed those relationships with different people, I've invited them to come collaborate with me. Sometimes, I add local sounds or different languages; you hear it in my music and sort of in the reflection itself, the narrative and story itself. There is insight in being in these spaces.

I just moved back to this country [the US] two years ago and it was clear to me that if I was going to lead the Keepers and do things in a way that made sense based on who I am, we had to globalize this project. We had to decentralize the US at its onset. Right now, we have folks in Brazil,

West Africa; it's a global project, and it's just me reaching out to the folks I know to invite them to be a part of it.

Julian Hill (they/he)



I don't really think about it in terms of profession; I think that's a loaded term that's kinda weird, kinda elitist. I think about what I do as a mix of a bunch of different things. I'm mostly a lawyer, so that's sort of what I do to bring income in. When you asked about work, I was thinking about that in the traditional sense, like what do I do for compensation, to pay for the things that I need. But that's not the only type of work I think about. My organizing is work, and that has a different kind of association as compared to other work that I do.

I consider myself mostly a lawyer oriented around solidarity economy and just transition. The economy that we have is exploitative and anti-Black by design, and I, as a lawyer, try to support folks in building alternatives. I chose to be a transactional lawyer because I care about building institutions. I'm also a teacher, an organizer, entrepreneur, and in five years I'll probably give a different answer. I live my life in chapters, so that's the chapter we're in right now.

I don't create things; I co-create things. And that's important because it's related to how I think about my "work" in the sense that, because my work is centered around alternative economies, the alternative is to traditional types of work that are exploitative and really fucked up. What I co-create are spaces where people create a new relationship to their labor, the products they produce, the services they provide. Where they can be more fully human, where they can feel a sense of belonging, where it's not just a negative number on a spreadsheet, where a corporation just sees them as a cost that's hurting the bottom line.

But also help co-create institutions in my organizing work that try to create space for joy, healing, building leadership. The work that I do doing transactional work, a lot of the questions are the same as those I'd ask myself in organizing work. What are the different roles? How do we deal with conflict? You're working on that in the worker cooperative; I worked on that at the corporate law firm, selling my soul, or my soul was on lease maybe. Now, it's just more in an anti-oppressive, more inclusive, pro-Black way.

I co-create containers for conversations. A space for me is more long term. I think about BYP100, for example, as a space that we've been co-creating and shifting around culturally. A container is oftentimes an on and off kinda thing. I was doing for a while these salons; before COVID, we would go between Brooklyn and Harlem, alternating every month between mine and my partner's homes. Maybe, eventually, they would've become spaces to do a little bit of communal education, challenging each other to move differently.

Fundamental to my leadership philosophy is helping to cultivate the leadership in others. In that way, I think about facilitation and convening more than I think about the term "leader" per se, but maybe it's all of those things. Short answer, yes. I have a fluid definition of leadership. I think a lot about the definition that comes from BOLD. I don't know it off the top, but I know some of the key elements. This idea of deciding to take on a responsibility, within the context of a lot of uncertainty, and taking on responsibility for the outcomes of said project or thing that you're leading. And, just being about cultivating the leadership in others.

If you're in a leadership position, and you haven't inspired other people to take that role, or you haven't recruited people to take that role, then that's a problem. People have different thoughts around having positions, but foundational to that is helping support other people's leadership.

Ella Baker did a lot of the non-sexy work. There was a lot of bottom-lining—like, “We need to make these phone calls, send out these letters to get people to come to this thing.” As a leader, I think it's important that you always are willing to or have experience doing what you're asking other people to do. To me, it seems like Ella Baker was not afraid of doing the fucking work. She's very strategic. And I think she was a model for building out leadership. So many people talk about the ways in which they felt empowered by her. They watched her example; she poured into them.

Thomas Sankara from Burkina Faso. As a masc. person and having a very clear feminist lens in his theory and his action. Also, being a revolutionary ahead of his time from a strategic standpoint in terms of the idea around needing to build alliances with other west African countries. Just having a deep analysis of who the power brokers were, the French.

Burkina Faso [land of the upright man] used to be called “Upper Volta” which some white people gave the land, and he renamed it Burkina Faso when he became president, which means “land of the upright man.” He was assassinated three or four years after.

Liberation is New York City during the summer. Loud music. No cops around. People smiling and dancing. No worries just living.

Graphs that don't tell me that all these major outcomes are tied to my race. Black trans folks walking down the street not being harassed.

The feeling of safety. Not having anxiety. Monopolies not being a thing. Stuff being stewarded cooperatively, whether it's land or work. Where its land being healed, Indigenous folks having their rights.

A lot of Black women in leadership because we [masc. folk] be fucking up all kinds of shit. I don't trust us.

It smells like lavender.

It tastes like honey, and really good Kool-Aid, the red kind.

It sounds like really Black music. Fela Kuti, Stevie Wonder, Donny Hathaway.

It sounds like birds chirping.

It feels like warm earth on your feet. It's grass, trees, feeling the wood. Doesn't feel like concrete.

It means people feeling a sense of belonging and minimizing suffering.

In my family, there's a history of defiance in ways that resonates with me. One of the things my dad would always say was that he was shocked at how fearless I was. I would just do reckless ass shit and just be like, “What next?” My dad was a labor organizer; he was president of his labor union for several years. My mom, she don't take no shit. I'm a mama's boy.

I kinda have a lower tolerance for seeing people be harmed. I've definitely been complicit in harm, so I'm not saying I'm perfect. My folks

come from Alabama and Mississippi. I've been thinking a lot about land and wanting to grow, and I have been growing some stuff. I've also been reorienting my relationship to land. It's something I've been carrying through from my ancestors. I like to travel. I like to be with people. My maternal grandmother did a lot of traveling and was very community oriented. I like being able to show up for folks and support in whatever ways I can.

I did a lot of Latin American work when I was at the firm and did it when I was at my nonprofit. I think about the scale of the problems that we're dealing with. We're not often matching with the scale of organizing and the scale of solutions that we're bringing. So, part of what has been interesting to me around my travel and learning languages has been building alliances with people across languages, across culture, with the acknowledgement that, yes, Black folks are getting shat on and have been for forever, and anti-Blackness shows up in places where they speak Spanish and a lot of other places.

My folks had pretty low paying jobs. My mom worked at FedEx, my dad worked at a factory where they made cooking oil. So, I've always appreciated people who treated me and them with their full humanity. That's how I treat people who I work with. Whether you went to Harvard or didn't graduate high school, I felt like there are things I can learn from you. There are ways we can build together so that value I hold really dearly, and that's why I do organizing the way I do it.

I organize with cats that are ten to twelve years younger than me, and I don't treat them like, "Oh I know everything cuz I'm older"; there are things that you can offer. I have a lot of different folks in my family who are queer, gay, lesbian. That has informed how I, from an early age, accepted it and was like, "That's cool; I'm rocking with it." And that was helpful because, when I went to college and beyond, there were a lot of groups I had never been exposed to. I had never met anyone who was trans, I had never met anyone who was Muslim, southeast Asian. So, as I went in life and even now, that informed my receptivity to difference. There's a curiosity that I bring to spaces versus a judgment.

Nana Korantema (she/her/we/they)



I'm a health and wellness consultant. I have a practice where I help people with mind-body holistic medicine. I am also a priest, so that's really cool because it falls under the same umbrella.

I create space where there's seemingly none lacking. I create opportunities for people to get to know themselves in a different way. I create bridges, merging that which is tradition with that which is now seen as modern medicine. So, I really see myself as a connector of what's tangible and that which is innate.

I do consider myself to be a leader. I started to say "begrudgingly," but I don't want to use that word; I'll say yes. For me, it's those folks who are able to manage folks without it looking like that's what's happening. They're able to create space and opportunity for a variety of ways to recognize that each person's voice is powerful to the whole. I think those people who are able to pull from each person that nugget that they all have and possess and then effectively bring those voices together so that everybody feels valued, everybody feels a part of the whole.

I really see our leaders like as people who are in the arts, who work with their hands. People who are able to have a duality. One of my mentors—she's a professor at Virginia State here in Virginia, which is an HBCU—she was sharing how when she first was interviewed for her very first job eons ago, the person who was also her mentor shared that she doesn't look for the person who had straight A's because they will never understand why the person who gets Cs, gets Cs. That's always stayed with me. Like, that's so real. I want the person who has a solid B but has all these other accolades because they get why that person has a C.

My spiritual godmother is another person I look up to. When I first graduated into priesthood, which was over 20 years ago, she said, "Make sure you cuss every now and again with your clients because otherwise they'll put you on a pedestal. They need to see you as human." I saw what was happening with a couple of clients I had because they see divinity in me, but it's not me; I'm a vessel. I think folks would confuse that and begin to look at me like I don't touch the ground.

I had another mentor who was adamant that you had to have your "stew," which is comprised of the thing that makes your money, the thing that you enjoy doing, and the thing that makes it spicy. You got to have all of these things together to move your practice forward.

I think I've always seen men as leaders to a degree because of the way our society is set up.

I love, love, love that the things that really touched me beyond my godmother, and my mom, and my mentors, are the artists who give you a phrasing or an image or something to think about that leads you and touches you in a way that gives you hope and inspiration.

Liberation to me speaks to ease of access. Until probably five years ago, I wouldn't even consider myself an activist. I've been a priest for more than 20 years. I didn't make the connection that this is an activism in and of itself. For me, it is about creating that access in all the ways, whether it's access to spiritual heights that are available to us that we don't know, whether it's access to food or housing or education. So, liber-

ation for me is really about access to different vehicles that communities are able to utilize to gain that access.

You have to have community. It has to be the thing that we're trying to generate in terms of equity creation. What are the basic needs of this community that are needed? What are their goals? Not assuming that we know what they need, but creating space for the voice, so that everybody can take part in their liberation.

I went to Howard undergrad, and one day, my boyfriend at the time and I had a friend who was like, "I want you guys to come with me somewhere tomorrow." He gave us a general overview: It's a shrine house and we knew what a shrine was, and he said, "I just think you guys are going to enjoy it. I know y'all can benefit." So, we went, and that's when I met my godmother. The moment I walked through the door. Alexis. It was home.

I was emotional. It was like I had been apart from my family for years and years and years, and I was reunited just with the protocols and the ritual and ceremony. I've been going ever since. I graduated undergrad the year I graduated into priesthood. So, it was quite the adventure because this thing that was seamless for me was challenging for my some of my friends because I couldn't smoke, I couldn't drink, I couldn't party, I couldn't have sex.

But, it has literally been the thing that grounds me. Any new information that I get, it's always experienced for me through the lens of my priesthood. The discernment is the thing that helps me understand everything better. It helps me connect with everything better, that helps me drive through any issue or challenge. It helps me feel that joy even more if there's joy involved. It really is my barometer of whether to deal with the situation. It's a part of who I am.

Just knowing that I'm working in concert with something far greater than me. It permeates everything, it informs every single thing that I do. I really do trust the gods in leading me and my conversations and my movements in every aspect. I really do.

It helps me recognize that, sometimes, it's okay to be quiet. It's okay to not be doing things that's considered productive because I need that time, especially now with this pandemic, because I am still seeing clients, and I am still helping people, and I am taking their shit off of them in a way, depending on the client—that's exactly what's happening. There's no guide, no blueprint beyond spiritual communication, and if they're like, "Take some time," I'll take some time.

ACT IV

November 26, 2020 Reflections

I spoke with Nikki, and she asked me, “How do we heal intergenerational trauma, really? Does a generation have to get lost?” I call Nikki my Goddess Mother. We are not blood, but she is some of the closest family I have. I thought my first holiday emancipated from white family who have expected me to entertain them to the brink of their comfort and then shrink and be silent would feel lonelier. However, I finished grieving the illusion of family months ago. I was relieved that I could choose how I passed my time and with whom I interacted. I laughed and sang and danced and cooked. Entertaining no one but my own damn self. And I talked to Nikki, a Black/bi-racial woman who also has a white mother. Her mother, however, is in the generation that gets lost, like my grandmother. Instead of being lost, maybe they learn when they transition. Maybe their body prevents them from embracing and loving in the way my generation needs. The generation of Black and Brown grandchildren who dare to dream up a world for the Collective, rather than for our individual selves.

Nikki said something beautiful about Millennials that I cannot remember verbatim, but the essence is that my generation was born in a totally different world. We are the first fully digital generation and being liberated from analog means we can learn from the past. We see, we take the lessons, and we propel forward. We are not stuck or trapped in traditions that rely on delusions of freedom. We get to see beyond the veil and into Our future. We get to reimagine.

Karma Mayet (she/her)



I'm a vibrational interventionist, which manifests in a number of professions, I suppose. In a strict sort of capitalist, Eurocentric terms what I'm academically credentialed for is I have a terminal degree in poetry. I have certifications to teach yoga. Then, my bachelor's was in Spanish language, Latin American history, culture, and geography.

Most of my life I have been a teacher. I've taught early childhood, grad students, undergrads, and high school. I've taught every possible group of humans. I used to train teachers for a long time. I've been a teacher almost as long as I've been a performer as a job. I would have been like 11 the first time that I had a real show that had a real run that wasn't at school or something. I've been working in the theater ever since then.

I've been writing for longer than that though. The first books I wrote, I was like eight. I've been more or less making artworks that are designed to be performed, including poems, plays and stories. For the last few decades, I've been able to make a living at it.

The professionalization of my spirit is something I have held a very careful boundary around. I have been a medium for my whole life, and it actually took a really long time for me to consider having that be a public or publicized part of my general offerings to the world. Going on about 30 years or so I've been facilitating folks to go into nature to pray, to meditate, to sing and to do an Earth-based spirit practice.

I've had to recently add the practice of sacred rootwork as a part of the curriculum that I am available to teach again. The fact that I have the thing that is needed is more important than whatever the risk may be with respect to the cultural structures that we're working inside of that don't always reflect the values that are at the heart of our cultural practices. So, of course, we're negotiating that conflict all the time. There's a way that I feel like I've tended to want to protect, and there's of course lots of history in the US protecting those practices.

The children need to know we are here, those of us who have had the privilege of having this be part of our education and having decades in. We are called upon to be really deliberate in disseminating that information.

I do consider myself a leader. I've always been. It's not optional. I define leadership as love and courage. Transparent intention. Clear communication. Humility.

I've had some of the most excellent teachers in the whole wide world. So many of them at the same time.

For me the joy part in leadership is if you lead somebody someplace, and then we actually get there, together. It's the giving of a gift, and that's what the joy is for me.

Having been given the courage—and I say given the courage because the courage comes from having been nurtured, right, which is to your question of the examples. The courage comes from having been nurtured. I come from this amazing tribe of Black women who each and all have poured so much into me as a child. What possible option could I have other than to be excellent all the time?

And it goes back generations, like there this is the story in my family. My Grandmother highly valued education and was so hardcore because she did not have a chance to have an education. When my Mother and my Aunties were in school, my Grandmother called the school to find out what a B was! *deep, full-lungs, full-body laughter* Like, she knows what a B is looking at the letter B. But why is it on *this* report card, and what does that signify?

My Mother, Katherine Coleman Johnson, is a badass. My Grandmother is a warrior of another dimension.

I have a deep reverence for all my teachers. I have had so many. I feel like that's all I am; I'm their teachings. At least, that's who I'm hoping to be.

My Grandmother Ruth Gafton Shareef is the Queen Mother, and has the teachings of patience, perseverance, and peace. My other Grandmother, Josephine Harris, is the Warrior Queen whose teachings are how to wield your sword.

One of my first early mentors—I was in my early 20s—was Sonia Sanchez who, again, is still in my life. I'm so grateful. She has helped me so much because we were born a couple days apart and there's so much that I don't have to explain. She knows what I'm thinking. Her example of leadership is a lot of where I've come to really understand that love part of leadership. She has the most generous soul.

I'm also trying to be like Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon when I grow up, another strong mentor for a long time. I had the opportunity to work up under her for about ten years where I developed my performance work. And having the benefit of her work as a historian of our culture and also specifically of the vocal music forms: sacred music forms and folk music forms of Black people here in this country. Her approach to leadership is so hardcore. She's a Libra, just like my mom. I keep getting Libra mentors. My godmother, who is the Queen Mother of the shrine that the four of us Wind and the Warrior belong to, is a Libra too.

Dr. Reagon's a Libra. She and my mom were born in the same week. They're both very tough, like very stringent disciplinarians in terms of like in the studio, in the room. It's an intense kind of love. It's so much love, that kind of leadership where you're leading your students to a higher level of their own mastery by whatever means necessary. Like, I've been the recipient of that and I am grateful for that. And it has made me focus on that highest capacity of the situation, the group, and the individual. So, I try to keep that in the heart of how I activate leadership.

With liberation, we're into the nameless. We're into the place of sweet weeping.

Free life on Earth is one thing.

The ability to remember and recall and to relive and to recreate. Freedom to be at the helm of our lives with accountability.

For joy and pleasure to be held as well. All of our relationships are reciprocal.

Emanuel Powell (he/him)



At least right now, I would describe my profession as a legal worker. Someone who works with the law for Black liberation. I'm new to the game, but that's how I am framing it now.

I create stories that get captured in the court system, opinions, filings that I hope will exist long after our cases. I think that creates space for my clients to tell their stories so I can capture them and advocate for those stories in the courts or otherwise. This is about telling these stories. The word has power to change how things are, be it for an individual client or how things happen in the city or generally.

No [I don't consider myself a leader] *laughs*. I think because that word is so caught up in certain narratives: an individual, patriarch, telling people how to do things. If I was to say I was a leader, it's because I am part of the kind of leader-full movement. I would say I am surrounded by amazing, thoughtful people, most of them queer, most of them women. Then, yeah, I think if I'm part of that process of telling stories and helping them tell their stories, then yes, I feel leader-like.

The Movement for Black Lives, which I would say is part of my political awakening, says that there is no charismatic leader. There is no Malcolm X or MLK because it's purposefully decentralized; it's purposefully about building power, awareness, and the voice of the entire family that is the Black family such that together we are collectively strong enough to realize a liberatory future together. We are able to share ideas and gifts and talents such that we actually can see a future that doesn't get taken over by a system that is extractive and capitalist. The idea that we think of leaders like John Lewis and Bayard Rustin, it was easier in that context to get co-opted to become players in a state that is oppressive, even though, when they were younger, they were such active parts of the liberation struggle. This movement is asking us to purposefully build power collectively. What it looks like is that there are *roles*, so as a lawyer I do have a role. I'm supposed to show up as a lawyer. I have that skill set. What I'm not doing is I'm not showing up as an organizer if that's not what's needed. I am showing up as someone who knows how to take something to trial or knows how to file a complaint. That's who I am. I bring the skillset, and I do that work in partnership with organizers and even legislatures, policy makers, and that's my role to play in this.

The project I'm doing now, the organizers bring these families together, but as we were talking, I really heard families weren't able to get access to info, and I found the legal hook that would help families get that information, and I am working on lawsuits that would enforce that law.

Someone who inspires me a lot is Fannie Lou Hamer and her capacity to get others collectively to struggle together so that they can create new things. Fannie Lou Hamer was an archivist. Her interest in getting Black voters on the voting roll was of course, in part, electoral outcomes, but a lot oriented around having people who were descendants of formerly enslaved whose names were not captured as citizens to have their names captured on the rolls as humans as full members of society. That was archival work. So, I think about myself. I am working around people who are getting killed by police and those names usually go forgotten, and so I want those names captured for the sake of the capturing. I want their

stories archived. Because, maybe, it's not helpful today when I file this lawsuit, but 50 years from now someone picks up the story and says, "I can learn from this," or "I see myself here." Hamer was doing that, and she was also someone who worked across mediums. Yes, she could work on electoral justice, but she could also start a freedom farm so that people were eating. So, the idea that, yeah, I'm coming here as a lawyer arguably, but I'm going to work across approaches so what's needed gets done. I'm not gonna be so siloed that I forget that there's probably a lot of paths to liberation and a lot of people need to be involved. Plus, she's from Mississippi which is where I'm from. Those are my people.

One of the things that I appreciate about Movement for Black Lives is that one of its principles, I believe, is the concept of Black family. And, that is Mississippi to me. There is a large Black population, there's a long history of Black freedom struggle there, and that is part and parcel how I think about how the work is supposed to be done: as a family that struggles together. We're not always on the same page, but we are in this struggle together to get free. Mississippi also shows up as a reminder—and this is something I struggle with, there might be something classist here—that people are not interested in hearing academic and or theoretical answers to real questions. Where I'm from is one of the poorest parts of the country, and it's not helpful for me to talk about abolition from the perspective of an academic or abolition as a purely theoretical concept. But it is helpful in real terms of how prisons and systems of carcerality harm their children. The home of so much struggle, the good and the bad sides of it, and there's still so much joy. The best music, food, and people. And both things happen at the same time, so all that horror is mixed up with all that joy. Whenever I get to feeling despondent or despairing, I think about people like Fannie Lou Hamer who had it worse than I did, singing "This Little Light of Mine" and showing up to do the work. Then, I'm like, "Alright, if they can show up in the 60s, then I can show up now."

Collectively, as well as on an individual level, we are working to make it so that every person has a life full of love, potential, opportunity. And that, when they mess up, because most people will mess up, that there's a way to get back to that beautiful life, that beloved community. I don't think it's going to be utopia—it's going to be human. It's going to be messy. But it will be full of love that will deal out accountability with punishment; deal out opportunity without this idea that only a small subset of people get that opportunity.

Things that were important to me then in law school are still important now. Leaning into what I understood to be the philosophies of a movement. Trying to deeply understand Black queer feminist thought. Trying to model that. A reminder to put people who are directly impacted, if there is an ability to say most directly impacted, at the table at a minimum. It's important to remember it's not that serious, what I am doing. I am part of a long struggle. It's important for me to maintain my joy and happiness and build friendships. All these things should be happening at the same time as this other stuff.

Leaving behind an idealism of these philosophies that are important and remain important to me. They're theories and thoughts that are de-

veloping and growing right now as we put them into practice. I'm coming to terms while I practice law with how deep-seated the oppression of certain communities are. It's in simple things, like the inability to access a computer and what that means for your ability to take a deposition. So you cannot litigate your case the way the city can. All these things present a false sense of justice and fairness, and they really can make things so hard for folks. I always believed that law wasn't the answer, but now I'm like, "Jesus Christ! It's not doing too much at all."

Law school is a time when you're learning a lot. A lot of it is not good, and it's a space I've had to heal from. To remember that things like your worth is not built up in your productivity. I should be enjoying this life. I lost people this year. I lost people in law school. My whole job is centered around death in many ways, and, still, I should be joyful. I'd rather be happy than stressed all the time.

I had a career before law school, and I jumped out of it because I had a belief in something totally unseen. I feel very privileged that I had other options, and many times I was like, "Should I be doing something else?" And I think the biggest time was when my cousin got killed by the police. There was nothing I could do. I was at that place [Harvard] where I thought I could do something, and I called all these people; my professors were lawyers, my professors had clerked for the Supreme Court, and not any of them could help me. That was a very scary moment. Why am I still so powerless here? But then that goes back to the realization I made: I'm not going to be able to do this by myself, I need to build something that is going to collectively struggle with families to deal with these types of problems. That's why I'm here now doing exactly that because I realized very quickly, me being a civil rights lawyer was not going to do it because I can't do it alone. I need to be part of a struggle. I need to be part of a movement.

When I started seeing the application and the practice of law in clinics, what that would take, that was exciting for me. I was working with organizers and students like yourself who are brilliant and asking these questions and struggling through what it meant to be a lawyer and a lawyer that's part of the freedom struggle. Whenever I got down on myself, that was a reminder, like, "Baby Boy, you are part of a collective," and those people gave me all the energy. This mom who's alone with her kid under these horrible living conditions. She just smiled at me because I got \$5K for a new house. This is it. This is what I came here for. Things like this were a reminder, almost like a slap over the head like, don't get too big for yourself. There's a lot of people that you're working with and for.

God sits inside of all of us, and if I start to move and change things, then I'm changing myself in that moment, and that's more metaphysical. Whatever work I'm doing, I need to think about it as something that's happening to me or with me. I don't subscribe to the idea of the lawyer being an external tool. No, I'm part of this. Your struggle is wound up in my struggle. The process is where a lot of impact happens. What may be more powerful may be the lawsuits I bring, but more likely the families I connect. Every time I talk to them, the way I think about things changes:

I'm changing how I'm approaching the law; I'm changing how I see my role in the struggle.

Jewel Cadet (she/her)



It is so powerful to have this conversation right when I am about to write this letter to leave my job. I'm in full entrepreneur mode. So, my profession is I am a creator. I create things. I think about that on a spiritual realm as well, being a conjurer. Creating events, creating healing spaces, creating conversations, when I think about my talk show and all forms of talk show, whether I am cohosting "The Word" with B-Hawk or I'm doing my own talk show "Jewel's Gems." Everything I am doing I am creating. Everything I am doing I am giving birth, giving life to something. And, I think that's why the word passion came up because when I really step into work, it's soul work. It's your passion work, it's your life-long work; it's actually not work. Real work is not work.

I think about A Ratchet Realm. I was still in BYP100 when I created A Ratchet Realm. The same people I am organizing with, that I am on the frontlines with talmbout "Fuck the Police," I see them free and able to let loose on the dance floor. Let me get into pleasure activism, let me get into the activism that cultivates joy because Black people deserve to be joyous.

When I think about Sunday Survivor Series, Black people deserve to heal holistically. Not just through therapy, but through reiki, sound healing, twerking, writing; we deserve that. To me, being able to create. . .we would be on the phone for days if I just told you all the ideas floating around in my head. I am always giving birth to new ideas; community is my doula. Everyone is helping. I am on the delivery table/floor/tub, my legs are open; I have ideas and community is around ready to bring this baby into the world.

I create what I don't see. I don't see Black queer radical ass femmes from the hood who have all of these lenses who's not only throwing the party, but also in the party twerking and invites her friends. That makes it about her people. I never saw Black femmes on the 1s and 2s, I never saw trans folk being at the door, being there to greet you. I never saw a party where someone gets on the mic and says, "White people, you gotta go." I never saw a party that says, "Black femmes, I got you on the Lyft and Uber." There were \$300 allotted at every single party for Black femmes to get home safely. It probably exists somewhere, but I ain't never seen it. So, now it exists.

I think so much about enslavement. I think so much about our ancestors who were enslaved, who were stolen and still found joy. They still got married, performed ceremonies for their love, gave birth, performed funerals, danced, played music. That's what they did in the midst of being enslaved! So, while we live in a world where there is police brutality, racism, misogynoir, transphobia, homophobia, all the things, abuse, poverty, climate change, all this shit, there's dance. Because I am still angry. And I am also joyous, and it doesn't stop. When I'm dancing on the dance floor with my niggas, who are the same niggas, like *you*, not only am I creating, I'm co-creating. And when I'm with my niggas on the dance floor, the same niggas who was just protesting, I know they're still angry, but they get to lay their burdens down. Because we gotta fucking lay our burdens down.

There has to be a certain level where we transform our activism. Because we, especially Black women, cannot be on the frontlines all the

time. We have to balance our activism. We have to balance the rage with joy. That's how we remain sustained. Imagine if every protest had an after-party? That's what we need.

I feel like I am a leader, but it's the last thing I think about. I think I'm a subconscious leader. If I think about my life, my entire life I've been leading, from kindergarten when I was learning how to jump rope, and I was the kid who would learn and then ask who wants to do it and then teach other people. I do what I want to do, when I want to do it, how I want to do it. Period. I think I just came out that way to be honest.

Maybe I don't think about it as leadership because the world has such a centralized, hyper-masculine, dictatorship vibe of leadership, and I reject that and rebuke that. I don't want to gatekeep. I don't want to use my power for evil. You co-create, you never make it about you. You lead from the back sometimes.

We get to create the versions of ourselves that we want, and we don't need a model to figure that out. So, if you asked someone on the outside world, they'd say, "Yeah, hands down, Jewel is a leader," but me. . . I hesitate.

I don't believe in a centralized leader. So, my role models are everyone that I love. Role model implies that this person is who I aspire to be. The person I am aspiring to be I haven't seen, but my role models are my community. You need to talk to Tassiana, the Chubby Goddess on Instagram; I model a lot of what I do on them. Collectively, y'all are the role model. Community means so much to me, and holds me accountable; that really gives me the vision for how I want to live and be in the world, that is important for me to take with me where I go. It's like a locket.

Being Haitian is really interesting because I am first generation. My mother and father were born and raised in Haiti. My grandmother and my mom raised me. My grandmother was born in Jamaica but raised in Haiti. A lot of West Indian Cultural vibes going on. I was made fun of so much for being Haitian. We were constantly getting teased by other Black people for who we are, so I had a lot of shame for being Haitian because of what was being shown on TV. So, it's so interesting now stepping into it and making amends with ancestors like, "I'm so sorry, y'all, that I didn't always wear my heritage with pride." When I think about doing the work and really tapping into the stories my family told me, I think a lot about the Haitian Revolution. These were people who had everything to lose, but they didn't give a fuck, they didn't care. The first motto of the flag before it was changed was "Liberty or Death." Give me freedom or nah. Either I'm free or imma die. So, I've been thinking a lot about moving through fear, because you think they wasn't scared? "We don't know what the fuck this outcome is going to be, but we're going to keep fighting this fight for independence over several years." People think 1804, but the Haitian Revolution started in the late 1700s. Motherfuckers were fighting for years. So, they fought, and they had a hard life so I don't have to.

I asked my grandmother what it was like to graduate from high school in Haiti, and she said, "I had to stop going to school when I was sixteen," and I was like "Why?! That's not when you're done with

school,” and she said, “I didn’t have any shoes.” Poverty isn’t far from me; not having isn’t far from me. My mom made \$14,000 when I went to college. That’s what was on the FAFSA. She had a family of her, me, and my brother to feed with \$14k a year, and that’s when she was at her peak.

Hustle and grind and freedom by any means necessary, and they did all of that so I didn’t have to. No parent wants their lineage to suffer more than they did. So, I remain grounded in the suffering. That’s why in bios I don’t put my degrees, I put, “Jewel was raised by a single mom.” I start with the struggle because that is the foundation.

That’s the cultural story: Haiti. Haiti to me is a country of resilience. Of revolutionary, real Gs. Really stepping into my power as a conjurer, root worker, witch, because that is also ancestral for me. The way I was protected as a child and still protected is because the Black women in my family put good money into protecting me. I only had spiritual baths. Once a week. My grandmother and my mom would pray over me. They were grooming me for success.

Asking Spirit, “What is my destiny?” And then, “What do I need to do to remain on this path?” I’m always taking spiritual prescription, always taking inventory of what I need mentally, spirituality, all that, to be successful. I come from a people who fought for freedom. I come from a lineage of motherfuckers who made it work, even if they had to burn shit down. I came from a lineage of “by any means necessary” ass niggas. So, that’s going to be my motto too. Keep that same energy.

Liberation means being able to breathe. Like fully, without being constricted. When you’re not liberated, you have constricted air flow. Your worries are not worries. When you experience liberation, you experience a level of relief, hair down. Literally cannot put into words that’s why I’m saying it’s a breath it’s *exhales heavily and wholly*

I think that for Black people, that’s why one of the taglines of the BLM movement right now is “I can’t breathe.” When I do anti-Blackness trainings, I tell the white people in the room, “You know we ain’t never been able to breathe, right? This has always been the case for us. You need to breathe to live. When Black people are saying I can’t breathe, we are also saying I’m not living!” Liberation has to be breath. It has to be.

EPILOGUE

Alexis Yeboah-Kodie (she/her/we)



I am a storyteller, a visual artist, and a mirror. This year in particular, I needed to shift my perspective on my work. 2020 stripped away all the distraction and noise to lay bare the cracks and failures of our society, our institutions, and our relationships to one another and to ourselves. I had no choice but to reorient and struggle and surrender to this new way of existing.

I create fires and connections. Things do get burned down. However, I am much more interested in what rises from those ashes, what can be cultivated and grown from that now fertile soil. “Meditations” is my 2020 Harvest. I have never felt more like a ticking time bomb than this year. I lit so many fires out of necessity, whether that was in relationships, in my sense of self, in writing, or my interactions with institutions like Harvard. I’ve been tilling the soil with the folks in this piece—and many folks not explicitly named in “Meditations”—all year, through work, friendships, art, coalition building, and spiritual practice.

Part of what fueled these fires was reflecting on the Harvard Law School chapter of my life. I was admitted here because of my vision, my relational leadership style, my intellect, my anger, and my passion. Then Harvard, except for some critical liberatory pockets, spent the last three years attempting to strip me of everything that makes me, me. What is the actual purpose of Harvard’s legal pedagogy? Probably, to warehouse power. What is clear to me is that the institutional decision makers do not have the discernment to understand different kinds of power. Therefore, they underestimate the precision and sophistication of the power that myself and many other students working toward a liberated and joy-full world are wielding.

My purpose is and has always been to center humanity and human dignity in all aspects of society and life. Each person in “Meditations” holds some version of that world. We are aligned and in conversation, moving together towards a world that completely diverges from what this country promotes as a full, successful, and happy life. “Joy-full” is similar to “leader-full.” Leader-full means we recognize and support the power within each person to propel us towards our ultimate goal, and joy-full indicates the ways in which joy, in all its forms, permeate everything. Joy is the thread weaving everything together.