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As told to Annie Bielski, 2796 words.

Tags: Art, Writing, Education, Inspiration, Education, Identity, Day jobs.

On getting everyone the love they deserve

Artist and educator Mandy Harris Williams on archetypes taught and reinforced in school, the performance of the everyday, and why people are considered deserving or less deserving of love.

Your educational goal is to get everyone the love they deserve. What does that look like?

The first thing is: what is love and what are its qualitative and quantitative aspects? If you were to list it, or describe it, what would it feel like? Is there just one love or are there many loves? I think it kind of is made as an aesthetic question, a longstanding, aesthetic question or a philosophical question. The next step in that is identifying barriers for why people don't feel loved. That's where things get kind of interesting.

Once we ask what love is, I think there's the tendency to define it with narratives that have already been said and kind of prepackaged. For me, I think that the need arose to look at what those prepackages were, because I felt like love wasn't something that happened for me or happened for people like me. I didn't really understand why that was, but I think as I grew to know myself more, and I grew to understand how love is distributed and apportioned or understood, and why certain people are deserving or considered to be deserving, it became apparent that there were some social rules that seemed extremely outdated about why someone should be loved or not.

Those social rules are actually entirely regressive, but we have really different ways of kind of dressing them up, and we also have ways of kind of moving the dial so that we don't have to be completely accountable. [This idea] translates to Black Lives Matter a little bit. For something to matter, I think it's similar to my understanding of what it means to be loved. For something to matter, it's similar to being protected or similar to making sure that comfort is guaranteed, or beyond comfort, the right to live.

You distribute a lot of your work, in the intersections of race, gender, desirability, and media, in digital spaces where the boundaries around the self and the performance of the self can be blurred. Can that feel vulnerable?

As a Black woman—and I think this is why I've kind of run with this very tongue in cheek title [online](#)—I don't think there is ever an opportunity for Black women, Black queer femmes, to not perform. If I go to work, I'm performing, if I cross the street, there's a certain performance that's required. There's a lot of performance in the day-to-day and even more performance in communities where your body is interpreted as the other and the other that is a not productive other. It's not like an idealized, exotified, or it's not like a model minority body, it's inherently subject and grotesque and criminal.

My reaction has just been to kind of, I don't know, collapse? I feel that people perform for themselves in a way. There are some people who will never even acknowledge that they're performing to their own idea of what they see, who they see themselves as, or to the social expectation around them. I don't really even necessarily believe in non-performance. I think that every day is a performance of our values. I think a lot about that collapse and I would say, I'm just not concerned about it. I'm making art from a vulnerable place. I think one of the things I'm learning as an artist is how costly that is on how much of it I can really make and what types I can make. Writing is the sort of thing where I probably shouldn't do as much of it because you get paid nothing to bare your entire soul. Especially when you're in a market about—when people contract me it's usually contracting me to write about how I'm not being loved, or how I see Black femmes' bodies not being loved, or chronically misinterpreted. I don't write fun, happy shit. That's something I need to do less of. Other creative work—music or filmmaking—these are things that I think are just less excoriating in the interplay between demonstration and excavation. So, yes, it is vulnerable, to answer your question in a word.

What aspects of your earlier years led you on the path to where you are today?

There's some key aspects in my early biography of just being strange and categorically other in a lot of spaces. Being a Black woman is a categorical other in this country, which is not to say that we're infrequent or rare, but it poses some sort of obstacle to understanding us as human. Then within that, I budget primarily white educational institutions for my whole matriculation, and I honestly just really excelled in those environments with the exception of high school, both socially and academically. On top of the evasive search for love, I continually felt like there were these other aspects that were kind of adding into the equation. I understood that all along, but I think that I first started to be able to see that connection articulated when I was around 15 and I wanted a boyfriend so badly. I just wanted somebody to validate me as wantable—I wanted the status more than anything, I think. I started taking this James Baldwin class and it was the first time that I really started to understand the connections between Blackness, and love, and otherness.

That gave me this pathway to start a thread to start pulling at: how did these categories become so controlling, and how does that benefit people to continue to be led by these categories? I then went to college and studied African American history and also some criminology, I guess. The fucked up thing about it is that if you go through the entire history of the African diaspora, at the end of your studies necessarily is a course in criminology, and so you see very kind of evenly year by year, bit by bit—I kind of built this awareness of the unabated categorical non-deservingness of Black people. I think some of the more grotesque examples of that were the mythologies of the welfare queen in the nineties, and then one of the more subtle ways in which that lives is the extremely pervasive shadism that is apparent in any sort of Black community that is considered successful. Many Black communities that are considered successful, whether that's looking at historically Black vacation communities, folks who have been able to kind of break through those glass ceilings professionally—you look at those communities and there's an apparent hue. I'm a dark skinned Black person within these primarily white institutions.

At the end of my college career, having studied all that stuff, I felt I think, a lack of love and an extreme sense of responsibility. I always kind of had it in mind that I would want to give back, that I needed to utilize my privilege for something, so I went to the classroom and I taught in the classroom for seven years. I think being in the classroom just kind of really hammered home this vision of how little opportunity people have to be understood as lovable.

You go into a kindergarten classroom and you're like, "Oh, these are the most precious beings on earth." They look at you with their little round ass eyes, chemically they know you're supposed to love them. They come in on the first day, they hug you immediately, at least five of them have told you they love you by the end of the day, and the United States has not provided me and never provided me with a full leveled library for them to learn to read. That gave me the impression like, oh shit, not only is it these controlling images that show that we're not deserving of love, but it's also these codes.

At the end of the day, whether it's stated explicitly or not, if there's a singular informational point, it was probably that there's many prisons that will utilize third grade reading scores in order to calculate what the capacity of prison should be in 15 years in the future. To think about how you get all those little micro aspects, of how do schools get funded? What is the bare minimum? What is the right of each child to learn to read and not have a prison bed basically reserved for them?

I think service, too, has played a large role in what brought me to where I am today. A lot of what I'm talking about is about consistency and daily efforts and re-imagining, and a lot of that is stuff that you do in the classroom, especially when you're teaching low-income Black and brown children to read, that you're re-imagining what literacy could look like. You have a book, you have this visual information, which is supposed to guide you into understanding just the basics of: this is good this is bad, this is a queen, this is a peasant. These are the archetypes that are already visible and understandable in children's literature. You're constantly asking: Well sure, we say we love all children, but do I have a teaching aid? Do I have books that reflect princesses and queens and heroes who are Black and brown?

I have this aloe vera plant I'm looking at in my backyard, and I'm like, so what does this aloe vera plant represent in everybody getting the love they deserve? What is the soil that I live on? Who lived here first? Where is this plant native? What about the extraction process? How did it get here? Was everybody paid a fair wage in order for it to get here for me to sit here and have this lovely garden? I think about these things, there's this micro focus of: where is the value apportionment going? It's almost like you can follow the money, and we started this conversation by talking about quantifying and qualitating love. A lot of my practice is about that.

How does your curiosity work? How do you conduct your research?

I'm a multidisciplinary but singular kind of artist, because it all gets back to that question of understanding why people are considered deserving of love, or less deserving of love. That draws you back into a history of why certain people's bodies seem to be more disposable, or in contrast, more valuable than others. You might look at politics, how people were bought and sold, right? You might look at media history for the last however many years you want to go. I think a lot about screen history and kind of the archetypes that Black folks are expected to hold up in order to have the privilege of appearing on screen, or being understood as lovable or deserving of that screen space. You could take it to psychology, you could think about why are people influenced to see certain things as valuable? How do you create value? Some of that is psychological, some of that is group psychology, and some of that is play. Some of the wackier art I do is also research, it's kind of: How can you play with organizations, some sort of social organization, or visual organization such that you're getting at these questions that are: What is love? How do we see people as valuable? How do we see people as good? What is the history behind that? I think there's a lot of mirrors in the work and they, depending on what the form is, show up in lots of different areas, but it's all based on this same body of historical and psychological research around race and positionality.

You're the Programming Director at The Women's Center for Creative Work in LA. How does that role intersect with your creative life outside of the job?

I see them as very, very similar. When we talk about the play aspect, different social organizations are putting people in spaces to ask that same question. I think especially in an intersectional feminist space, we have a specific duty to not only make sure that we're privileging all sorts of different feminist voices, but also passing the mic. My goal and one of our core values is to redistribute resources, so I think when we talk about getting people the love they deserve, getting people who we don't often see getting that love, we're talking about women, we're talking about Black women, we're talking about Black trans women.

Part of the practice is my own negotiation of what it means to be a voice that people consider to be avant, or ahead, or radical. For me right now, the practice is not adding to that, not continuing to stay ahead of that. It's also a part of the reason—I don't know if this is a terminal decision—that I have not chosen to pursue more degrees. I don't want to continue to run ahead. I just want to stay in the same space and treat the material in different angles. I think in a way, actually, my day job is an important part of that practice because it's a non-participation. I think absence is really important, too. I get to go on mute myself. I think that it's really powerful to supply this general mission to give everybody love they deserve, to give everybody the care they deserve, to give everybody the exposure or institutional support to make work that they deserve, all of which falls under the love question. It becomes a part of what the art practices. Then what's cool about that is, my relationships then become part of the art practice. The artists who I love and want to experience and want to share with other people become a part of what I consider to be my overall practice.

What is the most joyful part of your creative life?

I think I have a joyful life, but I don't know that it's part of most of the work that I put out. There is a sense of humor, but the sense of humor tends to be actually pretty dark. I think there's joy throughout it because I'm getting the heat off, it's like there's joy in catharsis—I don't even know if it's joy so much as ecstasy. What happens when you remove the barriers to understanding yourself as beautiful? You could call it joy. I think it's probably more than that. I don't know if it feels like glee or happiness. I don't know if it feels light.

Mandy Harris Williams Recommends:

Chordify: I've been really into making music and playing the piano lately. It's reminding me of a lot of places I've been in my brain that have gone long unvisited. I'm happy I'm getting back into playing more consistently and rigorously. Every now and then I like to plunk out a contemporary piece, and this app is extremely supportive in that end.

Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity: I'm aware that gender and race categories interact, but I am learning more about their specific history, so as to free myself and others more. I'm studying now, a lot.

James Baldwin Collected Essays: Biblical for me. It's wild that things published half a century ago hold so much weight and truth. Reading Baldwin also inspires me to move along faster...that we've been in these particular holding patterns for far too long.

Queer Cinema: I've been using quarantine to catch up on lots of queer cinema. I'm using a list created by my friend Vaughan Higgins, one from Autostraddle, and also some other lists I've come upon on YouTube. I'm in a life long battle to decolonize my tastes, and decolonize the gaze. Despite a really long list of films I've watched, I'm still disappointed to see that even queer protagonists rarely have an object of affection that is darker than them and femmer than them. A notable exception is *The Very True Adventure of Two Girls In Love*, which stars a very studly "Tina" back in the day.

Black Bloom CBD Balm: I gave myself a fairly deep surgery on my thigh about a month ago, and I've been enjoying the process. It was a long decayed ingrown hair that took a while to excavate. I healed it with duct tape, ZitSticka, and now massage. The process of physical healing reminds me of simple things. Controlling pain, how it feels to go numb and why that happens, patience, consistent effort, deep tissue work. I enjoy massaging my scars with this. It's extremely limited release, but put it on your "to cop" list for next season.

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Vocation


Artist and educator

Fact

Lauryn Henry

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