

On lived experience as a source for creativity



Food designer and social practice artist Krystal C. Mac discusses being more than how you earn a living, making her own table, and the importance of community.

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As told to Harley Oliver Brown, 2664 words.

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You have so many different interests. It's all laid out on your website, but there are objects, and there's literature—essays and poetry—and comestibles. How do you nurture those interests and cultivate curiosity?

This sounds so simple, but to me it's going about my everyday life. i [Mack uses the lowercase "i"] believe it was Robert Hass who said something about poetry being our lived experience, and the gift that we have of seeing the world. That's not exactly what he said, but i do feel like there's so much poetry in everything. There's a poem by Ocean Vuong in the book *Time Is a Mother*, ["Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker"] that's literally what [the nail tech] ordered all the way up until their death. When people ask me what i do, i think it's interesting that they're confused when i say, "i am an artist." i don't want to claim the role of chef or anything else because i feel like those things are too finite. A mailman isn't a chef, but he's also not just a mailman. He's so much more than the way he earns a living.

i think we see art as either a talent you naturally have or something you have to acquire the skill for. We don't think of our lived experience as the act of acquiring a skill or even as art itself. We don't think about how moms have to pick up those things as they go. That's literally both the art and the acquired skill, the lived experience. i think if we begin to look at homemaking and other things we do every day that capitalism and white supremacy and patriarchy says are not things of value, but would completely destroy our world if those things did not exist, we could learn how to heal ourselves, heal each other, and maybe try to begin imagining a world outside of the framework of this horrible system that we're living in right now.

In a Patreon post from last year, you write, "i'm not writing and cooking to be the best. i am writing and cooking as an act of love for myself." How do you protect that credo from this capitalist, white supremacist society that fosters competitive striving and perfectionism?

i think about the reality of the situation, knowing that nothing i'm doing is new, but the things that i'm doing were honored and respected when my ancestors did them. The things that i'm doing have allowed me to exist within myself, but also for me to even be an idea, to be a thought, to be Krystal, to be born. All of that creative energy that my ancestors had and my elders have, that hasn't been lost on me. i'm still experiencing the wisdom and knowledge of folks like James Baldwin. Imagine if they thought that they couldn't share their truths and speak on things or share their work with us.

Lauryn Hill once said, "Light up your corner." You don't necessarily have to light up the whole world. That's the same thing Tupac said: "i might not be the change, but i can guarantee i will spark the change in someone else." i don't think that i'm going to be the person to change people's minds, nor do i think that my opinion is not important. But deep down, i know that i have something special and unique because it is coming from me, and no

one else is me.

i think that we, especially as Black women, get told oftentimes that we're not worth anything and the lack of traditional investment in Black women's creative pursuits is proof of this. i've done Kickstarter. i've done Patreon. i do fundraisers all the time. When i'm having bad days, it feels like i'm saying, "Please see my worth." But on the good days, it's like, "You're not saying that." What you're saying is you love yourself and you need to create some parameters around your practice. The only way i can do that is by asking my community for what i need in order to keep this thing going. If they care about me and they love me, and they think my work is timely and necessary, they will help.

Community is such a big part of your practice, from palatePALETTE involving food workers and organizers from around Baltimore City, to How to Take Care, sourcing recipes and rituals and self-care tools from friends. Can you talk about the importance of community to your artistic practice?

Community is so important to me. i still have a very Pollyanna rose-colored lens around the word "community," what i would like it to be, and the reality of what it means to some folks. As i get older, i've had to sit down and think about what my boundaries are and what i need for myself from the community, because i think oftentimes, we ask, "What can we do for the community?" And yes, we are doing something for the community and for others, but we also need to show up in a way that allows us to be firm in what our boundaries are because when there are no boundaries, that's when the miscommunications happen and the hurt happens and the mistrust happens. We have to show up for ourselves first in order to make our commitment to the community sustainable.

i do think that when it comes to being in community and having a social practice, there is a real conversation that does need to be had around decentering yourself. It's easy as an artist, whether you're in school or working the lonely artist's life, to forget that there are other people outside of you that are experiencing real-time hurt and pain and joy and change. It's not always about the next thing you're making. It's not always, "How can i turn this into something?"

As social practice artists, many of us often make work about others' experiences and move on, while the people who inspired the work are still trying to figure out how they're going to get to work, feed their kids, what they're going to do now that they have long COVID, all of these things. It can be very easy as an artist—especially those with degrees from arts institutions who conditioned students to cater to capitalism—to move on. The practice progresses over time and you don't think about the old work. When you come to social practice, you really have to check yourself and understand your motivations for why you want to be in community with others and why you feel your practice is necessary.

You've talked about how you want to explore social media for the next issue of palatePALETTE, and how it's involved in hospitality and the food industry and journalism and elsewhere in Baltimore City. Can you talk about how social media is a part of your own practice?

Social media has become a part of my practice because i was never equitably allowed physical space. Systemically, everything was tied up in my inability to afford a physical presence. i hardly got invited to do pop-ups in restaurant spaces. This is all going back to when i had a few food concepts. The way to get the word out for your event is through social media. As an Autistic person, it's always been a good way for me to meet people. It takes some of the anxiety away. So to me, it feels like a low-risk type of networking.

As time has gone on, it's definitely become, i wouldn't say high-risk, but definitely very complex and unique. You can't really feel people's energy on social media because people's lives have become more and more curated. i use social media to be like, "This is truly who i am, but also know that you're not getting the full spectrum of me, nor do you deserve to get the full spectrum of me, because i don't know you." Unless, of course, we have a real relationship intimately offline. i'm a human being and i'm complex and i have emotions. When people are more vulnerable and real about what is happening in their world and in their lives online, the more we can start to connect to actual methods of change.

You wrote about incorporating a "first look and listen" before release in your contracts, which links up with how

other people try to define you and the work that you do. What tools have helped you self-advocate in situations where you or your work is being represented by other people?

i have to give props to Denise Brown, an amazing, beautiful designer, for the "first look and listen" thing. She was the person who told me about that. i don't think my practice and my studio, IAO [In Absence Of], would exist if i hadn't met her. Looking at the work of my ancestors, Ntozake Shange, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Toni Morrison, bell hooks—thinking of all these people who have done amazing things and said things that are so powerful and still true today. i want to be careful of saying that Black women are tools because we are not tools. We are whole human beings.

But i think that a tool or resource is my humanity, right? My feminine ways, being a woman, my disability, my city, being from Baltimore, my lack of higher education, my lived experience are all resources that help me better advocate for myself and others. After a trauma in my late teens, i went from floating on friends' sofas to sleeping at bus stops, thinking, "How did i get here? And how will i get from here?" i've never forgotten what it was like to be hungry. i've never forgotten what it was like to not have a place that i felt like i could trust to sleep in. i apply knowledge from that experience to any conversation i have with someone, any work that i create. My life is my resource and sometimes, when i'm lucky, other folks, specifically Black women, are my resource. They've helped me and guided me, told me that i was going to be okay, and shown me i was going to be okay, whether they even knew that they were telling me that through their work or directly.

The person that connects with me the most is Maya Angelou. She's worn many hats in her life. She was a sex worker, a train conductor, a dancer. She did so many things before she was a mother, and before she was *the* Maya Angelou. We wouldn't have Maya Angelou if she didn't have all of the experiences that made her.

What was the moment you fell in love with food, and was that the same moment that you knew that comestibles would become a cornerstone of your work?

i was thinking of all the roles that i'd had in the food industry and in hospitality and thinking, all of this has helped me learn, but i can work with food in a better way than all of these jobs combined. i'm living in a time where i have the resources to work with food in such a playful and imaginative way that my ancestors and elders and even some people today can't quite possibly do. Why can't i make a beautiful, fabulous food installation that feeds my community? It doesn't have to be this untouchable thing on a luxurious capitalist platter that doesn't address the real systemic harm in our communities.

Once i started making the work more, i would say that "Clearing the Field" was when i fell in love with my practice. i had never in my wildest dreams thought that i could create a meal that would hold me and make me feel seen in that way. i was able to fully contextualize all this world has thrown at me into 18 courses and poetry. It was like, "i can do all of these things, and i didn't do it in a restaurant." i didn't do it at a pop-up. i sat here and was able to think, and create, and be in nature. Cook on a coal fire and do all these things that people would tell me i don't have the ability to do because i didn't go to CIA [Culinary Institute of Arts] or i didn't go to MICA [Maryland Institute College of Arts]." That dinner really allowed me to quiet all of the noise and the haters and understand my work actually has more value outside of traditional food spaces because that is where the majority of our relationships with food begin.

When i started this work, the first thing i created was the "Table of White Supremacy," a tablescape where all of the items on the table represent byproducts of white supremacy. It was a commentary on what i was experiencing. It was a common phrase around that time in 2017-18 that i had been hearing a lot: "Black folks need a seat at the table. Women need a seat at the table"—the table being the food industry—or the Shirley Chisholm quote, "If they don't have a seat at the table, you bring your own chair." But i thought, "Why can't i make my own table? This table doesn't want me, this table exploits me."

If i walk away from this, i can make my own where everybody is welcome and nobody has to stress or feel exploited or used. That's been a driving goal of my practice, creating my table. i like to envision it as a very long table. As i grow and continue on this journey, the table is being built. Then one day, God willing, if i'm old and gray, i'll be at the head of that table. At the table with me are all the people who helped me get there and

supported me.

How do you process and move through setbacks, and what heals you during those times?

i think about how there has to be more to this story. It's like when you're watching a movie that was going in all kinds of crazy directions, and you're like, "Is this the end?" Whenever i think it's over—"Wow, i'm really tapping out of food this time, huh"—something comes up around the corner. Missed opportunities or failed opportunities, to me, are lessons. When bad things happen i think it's important to see both sides. There's always the chance to grow from something. i always think of that when i think of *Raisin in the Sun*, about Walter and how it ends. It's like, but there's more, right? There's still possibility after that. The "raisins in the sun" can become Straw wine. There's always another day, always.

Krystal C. Mack Recommends:

Living With an Invisible Disability by Imani Perry (The Atlantic)

The Down To Earth Deck: Conversation Cards for Comin Home to Our Communities and Our World by Loam

The World Is On Fire But We're Still Buying Shoes by Alec Leach

Black Landscapes Matter edited by Walter Hoof & Grace Mitchell Tada

Comestible Archiving. For the past two years, i've been trying to preserve moments in time throughout the seasons with seasonal produce as my medium. These days, time feels like a blur, but when i am making jam, preserves, and pickles, it feels like i am conserving a moment that i can return to and share with others. i like to think of it as comeestible archiving. i just made a Strawberry & Red Wine Jam on Juneteenth with a Pinot Noir/Grenache wine blend! i plan on sharing my archives in a dinner format in the seasons to come. [Folks can join my patreon to learn more.]

Name

Krystal C. Mack

Vocation

food designer and social practice artist

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