

# How Pleasure is Revolutionary

Connor Stevens

2019

a review of

*Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, adrienne maree brown, Editor. AK Press, 2019 **AKpress.org**

This book is about creation, the act of re-creating the world; about a new world, a new language, a new flesh. Politics based around healing and happiness. adrienne maree brown and her fellow contributors offer a gift of unspeakable value by way of this sturdy, hilarious, tragic book. By helping to reinvigorate the world with magick and remembrance of the ancestors, it is more revolutionary than any text I can recall reading in years.

By emphasizing the physical, embodied consciousness, it is more liberatory than a thousand declarations of rights. By centering the voices of black women and transwomen and holding tenderly the pains inflicted by thousands of years of oppression and loss, it is a splendid celebration that “[t]his is the unveiling, and at the end of the unveiling, we have nakedness. And that nakedness calls for new desire.”

Neglecting our ancestors and their pain and neglecting the realities of the soul and of magick is as destructive as neglecting our own bodies. For truly they are all bound together. In this way *Pleasure Activism* is a precious laboring for the sovereignty of the soul.

The path to the soul, the path back to the earth, is the way of bliss. “There is a path in which everything is learning, playing, practicing, doing things anew.” It is the way of bliss that we have strayed far from in this thing called civilization.

But the return is not a regression. We must follow our own bliss, the tug of our hearts, the tingling of our guts. We wander through the darkness of apocalypse, of ecological collapse, of soul-death, and yet we wander still—but we feel the sun upon our flesh anew.

This book is a collective testament to the eruption of the marvelous right through the cracks and crevices of civilization by brown and other writers such as Audre Lorde, Joan Morgan, Cara Page, Sonya Renee Taylor, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Grieve, yes, but there is an end to the grief as there is an end to the night.

Laughter returns. Tentative at first, through all that concrete and steel. Awkward, thinking we forgot. But cultivated, indulged, it erupts from the belly and the whole body sings the praises of creation, the glories of life.

The realness of the book, its sheer authenticity, is attested to in how many memories it invokes in me, how much self-exploration, propelling my own self-creation. As a Euro-American, cisgender, homosexual man who has spent the last seven years in prison, I know well the power of laughter and intimacy as a means of resilience and resistance.

However, there is a central contradiction in the book, and of radical discourse more broadly. By celebrating changes in mass culture, such as the chapter on Beyonce, are we not, in a way, affirming capitalism? Or is it that this dominant system can, after all, be utterly transformed through forces arising within its own approved channels?

Most of the contributors to *Pleasure Activism* support themselves through academia and the arts, with heavy overlap in the Nonprofit/Industrial Complex. In all this talk about pleasure and only doing what you want, which brown defines as “intelligence,” one has to ask, who is supporting this?

Food, clothing, shelter, society's entire infrastructure is built on the backs of working people and nonhuman life the world over. When we are not grounded in the real work of cultivating such wealth—real wealth, not abstract wealth—such as through urban farming, for instance, we are floating in a wonderland of immense privilege built on exploitation and ecological devastation.

Even when we are thus grounded, serious doubt exists as to what technologies are sustainable or whether or not large human populations are truly sustainable even at basic levels of technology.

In all the book, there is only one passing critique of technology which is entirely anthropocentric, and no exploration of how we can all live in a high-tech society without destroying the world and everything in it. In more than one essay, there seems to be a feverish techno-fetishism at play.

It would be unfair to expect the book to resolve the defining contradiction of our era. However, the failure to even acknowledge it in any serious way is troubling. But it does embrace our dawning nakedness—and with a warm, fuzzy arm it gestures toward the realization of a new desire, which turns out to be the most ancient of all: “the soul and the mind and the body surging at once, nothing left out.” Those words were written in 1920 by D.H. Lawrence, regarding “the pure present.”

Pleasure Activism is not actually about a future utopia at all, despite repeated comments regarding “that long arc bending toward justice.” It is about what Lawrence called “the insurgent naked throb of the present moment,” “the immediate, instant self.”

The most powerful essay of the book is by Junavda Petrus entitled “Black Women Wildness: A Spell.” She writes, “Nature puts the struggle in perspective, and I am filled with my own power.” It is this earthy perspective, grounded in feminine energy that is new, ushering in vital transformations. “Being in my wildness has allowed me to know the divine consciousness in a real way,” she writes.

As brown states, “Whatever joy I have is grounded in the miraculous and tragic dual nature of the real world.”

To that I say, in the final words of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Molly Bloom, wrapped in a moment of eternal naked rapture says, “...yes I said yes I will yes.”

Connor Stevens is a poet about to be released from prison after seven years for his involvement in the revolutionary anarchist affinity group known as The Cleveland 4 ([Cleveland4Solidarity.org](http://Cleveland4Solidarity.org)).

He is currently finishing his first novel, *Scattered Leaves*.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/404-summer-2019/how-pleasure-is-revolutionary>  
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