

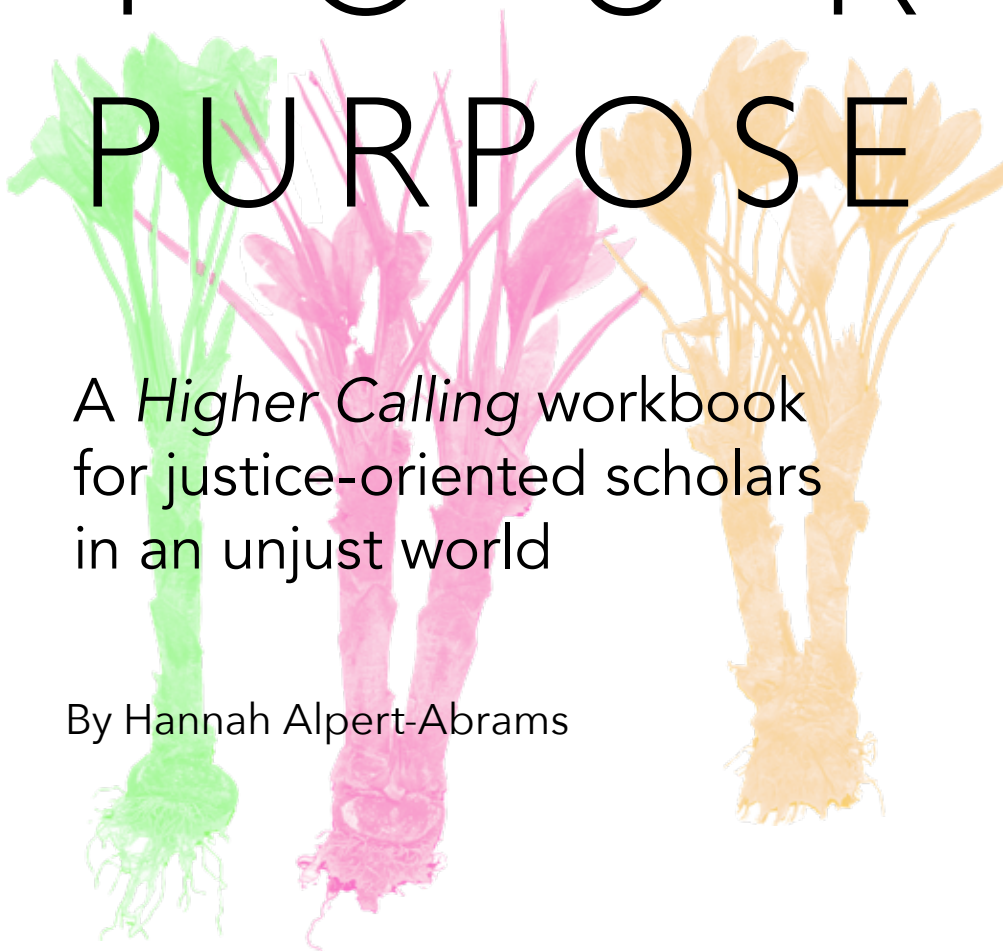
FINDING

YOUR

PURPOSE

*A Higher Calling* workbook  
for justice-oriented scholars  
in an unjust world

By Hannah Alpert-Abrams



# INTRODUCTION

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It's just like this continues to be my struggle. I don't even want out. I just want academia to change. But it doesn't change no matter what, and sometimes it changes you.

-Liz Grumbach

*Higher Calling* is a project for everyone who decided to become a scholar because they believed in the mission of higher education, and specifically, for everyone who saw participating in and working for higher education as a way to turn the pursuit of justice into a career. It aims to help you understand how to better align a career in academia with your sense of purpose; how to recognize when your purposes are no longer served by academia; how to pursue scholarly purpose outside of an academic career; and when and how to fight back against the broken system which is higher education in the United States.

When I started my PhD, I didn't know much about what academia was. But I knew I didn't want to work for profit. I knew that I believed in education as a public good. I knew that I was good at and enjoyed the trifecta of research, teaching, and committee meetings. And I knew that I admired many scholars, from bell hooks to Ana Cara, for what I thought of as their effort to make the world a better place through research, writing, and teaching. I thought maybe I could be part of that work one day.

Your story may be different from mine. You may have been drawn into academia because you wanted to do research that served your community: to understand poverty, or race, or immigration,



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or disability, for example. You may have been told that representation matters, and that your presence in academia itself was a public good. You may have entered academia because you were good at school and you didn't know where else to go. Or you may have identified academia as the most accessible path to a stable income or health insurance or a visa in the United States.

Regardless of how you got here, academia is hard, and for many of us who are interested in justice work, it can be crushing. Racism, sexual violence, and labor exploitation are fundamental to how universities operate. Rigid institutional hierarchies make graduate students, staff, and adjunct faculty into second-class employees. Departments value autonomy and productivity over solidarity, creativity, or care. At many universities, education seems to be the last priority, far behind both entertainment and profit. And that's not to mention the jobs crisis faced by PhDs in many disciplines, nor the COVID-19 policies that have thrown caregivers and the immunocompromised alike to the wolves.

If you are like me, you may have had many moments when academia felt worth it: when you connected with a student, or had a publication accepted, or organized an event in your community. In these moments, you may have reveled in the privileges and opportunities and even joys that academia affords. But there may also be times when you're not sure whether higher education is the best path for you. At these times, you may wonder if the compromises are too great, the labor conditions untenable, or the barriers to doing meaningful work too high.

This project aims to help you navigate these moments alone and in community through readings, exercises, and rituals. Its structure and values are modeled on the work of adrienne maree brown and the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute. It follows brown's framework of emergent strategy, an approach to justice-oriented change work that prioritizes care for yourself and your community and that conceives of change as something that happens at many scales and across many spaces.

This project was born from my work with the Visionary Futures Collective, a community of justice-oriented scholars in and around the academy whose friendship, support, and brilliance has changed my working life. This project follows the VFC in imagining the possibility of spaces within higher education that allow for solidarity, vulnerability, equity, and care.

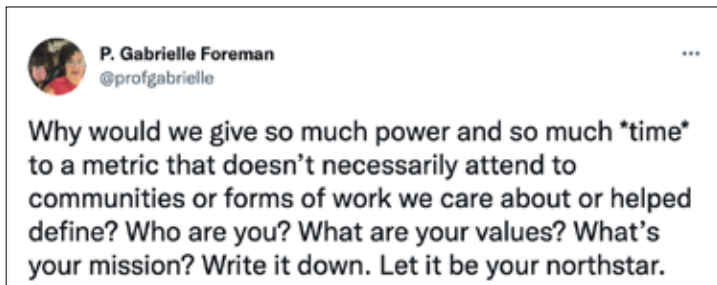
This project is absolutely agnostic about individual careers: there will be no pressure to stay or to go. But I am disheartened that academia continues to drive some of us towards exhaustion, illness, and even early death, just as disenchantment with academia is leading many of us to fully disengage from the values that brought us here.

I don't necessarily think that our academic institutions deserve to survive. But I do believe that work that matters is happening within and alongside academia. And I do believe that we collectively need a way forward for higher education that allows the good work of justice-oriented teaching and learning to flourish. I don't know what that way forward is. But I hope this project can help us to find it.



# FINDING YOUR PURPOSE

## exercises for working with intention



This is the first in what I hope will be a collection of resources for justice-oriented scholars navigating their relationship with higher education in the United States.

This book is for people at any stage of their career, but especially those who have taken at least a few steps towards a career in academia, from first-year masters students to postdocs, adjuncts, tenured faculty, post-ac workers, and staff. It can be used by those in any discipline, but it is written by and for humanists. It is not specific to any type of college, university, or cultural organization.

When you find this workbook, you may be early in your relationship with academia and questioning whether you want to continue. You may be finishing your degree and trying to make decisions about jobs and work. Or you may be committed to working within academia, but struggling to find ways to make your personal needs and professional goals align with the expectations and policies of your institution.

This workbook aims to empower you to make decisions about your academic work by helping you to identify, refine, and build on your scholarly purpose. This book was inspired by Dr. Gabrielle Foreman, who tweeted in 2019 that developing a professional mission statement can help faculty to separate their work from institutional measures of success. I have been expanding on this framework ever since with students and for myself, often in the context of deciding whether to leave academia.

This workbook is divided into six sections. The first part, Orientation, offers exercises and assessments to help you set your goals for the book. Each of the subsequent sections addresses a different aspect of the purpose that motivates our scholarly work: the people who came before us (lineage); the people we work for and with (community); the work that brings us pleasure; and the values that drive us. You can work your way through the sections in order, or skip to the sections and pieces that call to you.

Each section offers a variety of activities that may help you think about your own motivations and articulate your values. Some of these activities are workbook exercises, similar to what you might find in a self-help book or educational resource. Some are rituals that will be more familiar to those who have participated in Academic Tarot, a future-oriented community space moderated by the Visionary Futures Collective. Especially if you, like me, have always relied on your mind to think your way out of your problems, these activities will require you to suspend your disbelief and engage more with your body and environment.

While many of these activities can be done alone, you are invited and encouraged to do these activities in community. This may require identifying colleagues with whom you can be vulnerable and honest. It may be uncomfortable, since vulnerability and trust are not typically how we relate to our colleagues.

One premise of this project is that shared vulnerability can help us create better working lives even within violent institutions. That work can start here.

# A NOTE ON JUSTICE

This workbook is for people who, like me, see scholarship as one way to do good in the world, and who are troubled by and conflicted about the compromises required to put that work into action.

For me, the word “scholar” is an inclusive term, one that does not require a specific credential (like a PhD) or job title (like “professor”). “Justice-oriented” can be similarly expansive: it describes the daily labor of working to move a particular corner of the world towards good. I chose the word justice to evoke activist movements that inspire me, like disability justice and reproductive justice.

It is my hope that justice-oriented scholarship is a capacious enough term to speak to many people and experiences. Perhaps as you work through this book you will come to define that term for yourself, in ways that may clarify what academia can do for you and where its limits lie. You may find that you prefer to describe your work with other terms, like “care” or “activism.” You may feel that the word “justice” is too generous for academia, given its participation in neoliberalism, or too general for your own liberatory or radical goals. I leave that in your hands.

The word “work” has an uneasy status in this book. Sometimes work is a job, a source of income, health insurance, and visas. Sometimes work is something bigger: the ways we try to leave our mark on the world. The relationship between these two is troubled and troubling. Bringing them together requires compromise; pulling them apart leads to burnout.

“Work” in this book does not center or idealize the tenure track professorship. In this way, this book is different from a lot of writing about neoliberalism and higher education. Just as Dylan Rodríguez suggested in 2007, I do not see a path forward for faculty in which the promise of liberatory language is not tempered and weakened

by its association with the university, the state, and philanthropic funders. At the same time, in a context where tenure track faculty are a scholarly minority, it no longer makes sense to understand scholarship as tenured work.

This does not mean there are not great people doing exceptional work while employed as professors. It means that the professorship is not what enables exceptional work to exist. More often, it stands in its way. The scholarship described in this book emerges from many different places, like libraries, museums, cultural centers, bookstores, living rooms, and sometimes, universities.

There is a whole industry dedicated to writing about the neoliberal academy. This includes research on the future of the humanities; on neoliberalism, funding, and labor practices in higher ed; and on the ways that universities in the United States are violent towards Black and Indigenous people, towards women and queer people, towards disabled people, towards non-Christians, towards poor people, and towards immigrants, among others. Among these, *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks, *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and *Presumed Incompetent*, edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez and Angela P. Harris, were foundational for me.

Research and lived experience overwhelming show that universities harm and exploit people with marginalized and intersecting identities. The justice and liberation frameworks that I lean on and borrow from for this project were developed by people in those communities, especially by women, especially by queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, especially by disabled people, especially by poor people.

I have lived and worked in academia as a white woman and as a second-generation scholar. It is so easy for white people, like me, to co-opt liberatory language. So often this ends up reinforcing white supremacy and shoring up institutional inequity. I hope that I have been successful, instead, in honoring the work of my activist colleagues while making my own small contribution to the collective work of building a better future.



# INTRODUCTION

Justice-oriented scholarship can take many forms, like writing, teaching, public speaking, curation, art, and more. It can be paid work, volunteer work, and pleasure work.

Given how expansive this work can be, it can be challenging to understand how our justice-oriented scholarship is related to our sense of self and our conditions of employment.

For example, three years ago, after several unsuccessful years on the academic job market, I took a position that was not at a university. I was no longer being paid to do scholarship, and so I had to ask myself: who am I without an academic career? What aspects of this work still matter to me? What parts am I willing to leave behind? What do I want to hold on to?

A friend who is a faculty member faces similar struggles. For them, their tenure requirements and the choices made by their university contradict the values they profess in their scholarship. They have to decide when to keep their head down and seek tenure, when to take on additional, uncompensated work, and when to take action to attempt to improve the institution for themselves and their colleagues.

Graduate students often experience these questions most acutely. Grad students have to make major decisions about what to write about, when to take on professional development training, and what jobs to apply for. These decisions can feel like they will determine your identity and your future.

This preliminary section invites you to take stock of where you are now. How do you understand yourself, your work, and your scholarship? In what ways are these aspects of your life aligned? Where do you need to place your attention or seek change?



# GRATITUDE

I am an imperfect person. Regular meditation is not something I have been able to build into my life. But these pandemic years have taught me the value of meditative practices when facing emotionally challenging experiences or work.

If you are able, consider beginning this workbook—today, or every time you open it—with a meditation. You may already have a practice you would like to use. If not, consider using a grateful flow meditation. I learned this flow from Paco de Leon’s *Finance for the People*, which attributes it to Phil Stutz and Barry Michels.

Begin by closing your eyes, putting your hand on your heart, and taking a few deep breaths. Find gratitude for your breath and your heartbeat.

Think of one thing that you are grateful for that you’d normally take for granted. Today, as I practice this meditation, I choose gratitude for the sun pouring in through my office window. As I focus on my breath, I feel the warmth of the sun on my face, the joy that sun brings to my body. I feel gratitude.

Think of a second thing that you are grateful for. Today, I choose this hour that I have been able to take, in the midst of work and family obligations, entirely for myself. I breathe. I feel my mind expand with the freedom that this time allows. I feel gratitude.

Think of a third thing that you are grateful for. Today, I choose the people who have taken the time to read and provide feedback on an earlier draft of this book. I breathe. I smile when I picture their faces and their generosity. I feel gratitude.

# FINDING YOURSELF

This exercise invites you to look closely at how your scholarship, your job, and your sense of self intersect.

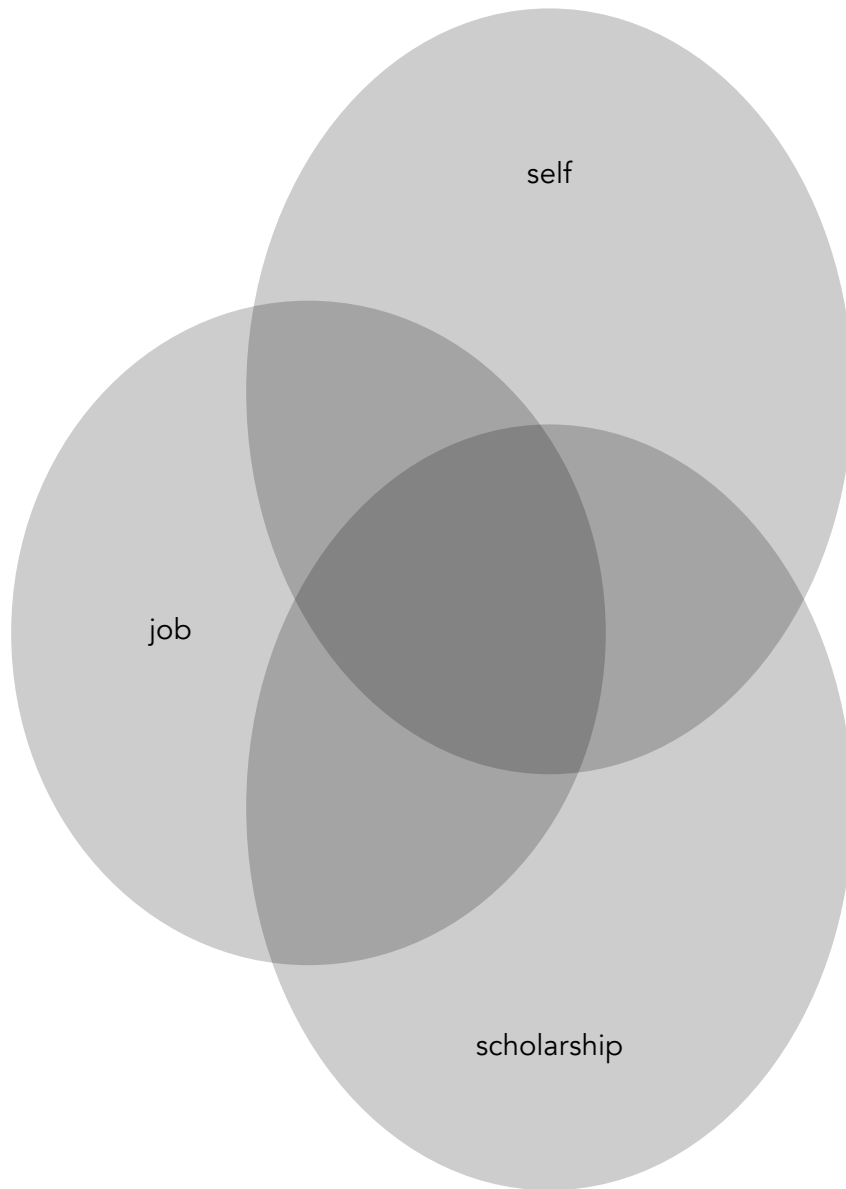
By scholarship, I mean your intellectual contributions to meaning-making conversations in the public sphere. This could be a dissertation or a monograph. But it can take many other forms. For me, this workbook is my primary scholarly project.

By sense of self, I mean the way you understand yourself as a social actor in the world. These are the things that bring you personal satisfaction, pleasure, or meaning.

By job, I mean the work you are paid to do. In academia, we often allow fantasy to distort our understanding of our jobs, both by including uncompensated labor like mentorship, and by excluding unglamorous activities like event coordination or email. At the same time, when we leave academia, we sometimes struggle to see how our new jobs build on and expand our contributions to justice-oriented scholarship, especially when those jobs are in entirely different fields.

Use the venn diagram on the next page to categorize the work you do across these three categories. If you’re not sure where to start, consider these guiding questions:

- What scholarly projects, broadly defined, are you working on?
- In what ways do you work with students?
- In what ways do you work for a public audience?
- What did you do for your job last week? Last month?
- What work do you do for your family and community?



# ASSESSMENTS

This workbook has five further sections: Lineage, Community, Pleasure, Values, and Purpose. The following exercises are designed to help you assess your relationship with these themes. They are modeled on the assessments in *Holding Change*, authored by adrienne maree brown and designed by Zuri Tai.

Use these assessments to check in with yourself or with your community. What kinds of hope or discomfort do these topics bring up in you? To what extent do you feel that you actively engage with these topics already? What areas are you excited to explore?

Choose the option that best represents your feelings from each row, then calculate your total score out of sixteen.

A score of 4-8 may indicate that something isn't a priority in your working life. It may also be an area that requires action or change.

A score of 8-12 likely reflects an area that is a work in progress.

A score of 12-16 may indicate something that doesn't require much additional attention in your life, or it may indicate a priority that you would like to focus on.

Importantly, there is no value attached to these assessments. A low number is not a sign of failure or cause for shame. Many of the statements in these assessments are aspirational. It is my intention that they will bring you clarity, hope, and direction as you move through this book and work through these questions for yourself.

In addition to helping you orient to this book, these assessments are intended to serve as a navigational guide. Flip to each section for more detailed discussions of what each term means.



## Assessment: lineage

In this book, lineage refers to the network of people whose relationship to work inspires us or serves as a model. This network may include friends, family, colleagues, or celebrities. It may include people in all professions.

Total: \_\_\_\_/16

I know who is part of my lineage and what gifts they have given me. (4)	I know who is part of my lineage but not their influence. (3)	I don't know who belongs in my lineage. (2)	I don't think I am part of a lineage. (1)
I feel proud when I imagine sharing my work with people in my lineage. (4)	I feel fine when I imagine sharing my work with people in my lineage. (3)	I feel anxious when I imagine sharing my work with people in my lineage. (2)	I feel ashamed when I imagine sharing my work with people in my lineage. (1)
I have regular practices that allow me to actively engage with my lineage. (4)	I have occasional practices that allow me to actively engage with my lineage. (3)	I only engage with my lineage passively. (2)	I don't engage with my lineage. (1)
I would describe my relationship with those in my lineage as reciprocal. (4)	I would describe my relationship with those in my lineage as unidirectional. (3)	I would describe my relationship with those in my lineage as passive. (2)	I do not have a relationship with those in my lineage. (1)

## Assessment: communities

Community refers to the network of people who you work for and with. A community could be organized by institution (a department, a student body); by location (a neighborhood, a city); by identity (Black, Indigenous, queer); by purpose (theater, cycling, reproductive justice); or by any combination.

Total \_\_\_\_/16

I can name the communities I work for and with, and they can name me. (4)	I can name the communities I work for and with. (3)	I am not sure which communities I work for and with. (2)	I don't think I work for or with any communities. (1)
I am proud to share my work with members of my communities. (4)	I feel fine about sharing my work with members of my communities. (3)	I feel anxious when I imagine sharing my work with members of my communities. (2)	I feel ashamed when I imagine sharing my work with members of my communities. (1)
I have regular practices that allow me to actively engage with my communities. (4)	I have occasional practices that allow me to actively engage with my communities. (3)	I only engage with my communities passively. (2)	I don't engage with my communities. (1)
I would describe my relationship with those in my communities as reciprocal. (4)	I would describe my relationship with those in my communities as unidirectional. (3)	I would describe my relationship with those in my communities as stagnant. (2)	I do not have a relationship with those in my communities. (1)

## Assessment: pleasure

In this book, pleasure refers to the good physical, mental, emotional, and intellectual feelings we experience when doing our work. In this assessment, scholarship can encompass any number of activities, while “job” refers to the work you are paid to do. These may not be the same.

Total \_\_\_/16

Pleasure is fundamental to my job. (4)	Pleasure is one aspect of my job. (3)	I rarely experience pleasure in my job. (2)	I never experience pleasure in my job. (1)
I feel joy when I think about my job. (4)	I feel neutral when I think about my job. (3)	I feel anxious when I think about my job. (2)	I feel despair when I think about my job. (1)
I am aware of and center the parts of my scholarship that bring me pleasure. (4)	I am aware of but do not center the parts of my scholarship that bring me pleasure. (3)	I am aware of but can't often enjoy the parts of my scholarship that bring me pleasure. (2)	I don't know what parts of my scholarship bring me pleasure. (1)
I believe pleasure is essential to a good working life. (4)	I believe pleasure is a nice addition to a good working life. (3)	Pleasure is not an important part of work for me. (2)	I do not think pleasure is relevant to work. (1)

## Assessment: values

In this book, values are the beliefs that ground and motivate us. Naming values can help us identify meaningful work, decide when to make compromises, and set boundaries around the role of work in our lives. In this assessment, scholarship can be broadly defined, while job is the work you are paid to do.

Total \_\_\_/16

I believe that my job is aligned with my values. (4)	I am trying to align my job with my values. (3)	I don't know if my job is aligned with my values. (2)	I do not think my values are relevant to my job. (1)
I feel hopeful when I think about my values and my job. (4)	I feel neutral when I think about my values and my job. (3)	I feel anxious when I think about my values and my job. (2)	I feel despair when I think about my values and my job. (1)
I know what my values are and how I practice them in my scholarship. (4)	I know what my values are but struggle to practice them in my scholarship. (3)	I don't know what my scholarly values are. (2)	I think it's impossible to practice my values in my scholarship. (1)
I feel comfortable with how I compromise my values at my job. (4)	I feel ok about how I compromise my values at my job. (3)	I feel troubled by how I compromise my values at my job. (2)	I'm not sure if or how I compromise my values at my job. (1)

## Assessment: purpose

In this book, purpose refers to the logistical, personal, and social motivations that lead us to our work. In this assessment, scholarship can be broadly defined, while job is the work you are paid to do. Total \_\_\_\_/16

### Finding your purpose

I am clear and consistent in my scholarly purpose. (4)	I am somewhat clear about my scholarly purpose. (3)	I am not sure what my scholarly purpose is. (2)	I do not have a scholarly purpose. (1)
I feel hopeful when I think about my scholarly purpose. (4)	I feel neutral when I think about my scholarly purpose. (3)	I feel anxious when I think about my scholarly purpose. (2)	I feel despair when I think about my scholarly purpose. (1)
I feel that my scholarly purpose is consistent with my job. (4)	I feel that my job helps me achieve some aspects of my scholarly purpose. (3)	I feel my job is poorly aligned with my scholarly purpose. (2)	There is no relationship between my scholarly purpose and my job. (1)
My scholarly purpose is directly aligned with my lineage, community, and values. (4)	My scholarly purpose is somewhat aligned with my lineage, community, and values. (3)	My scholarly purpose is disconnected from my lineage, community, and values. (2)	I'm not sure if there is a relationship between my lineage, community, values, and purpose. (1)

### Finding Your Purpose

# GOALS

Use this space to set goals for yourself, drawing on the orientation exercises you have completed.

1. How do you hope this workbook will help you understand your identity as a justice-oriented scholar?

2. How do you hope this workbook will help you understand your scholarship and the role it plays in your life?

3. How do you hope this workbook will help you understand your career in relationship to both your scholarship and your identity?

# INTRODUCTION

Lineage refers to the path that leads from our families, friends, lovers, cultural icons, and thinkers, to our own beliefs and desires. I borrow the term from adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism*, which asks us to think about where we come from in order to understand how we can do justice, in our lives and our work, to the legacy of those who came before us.

I choose to use the word lineage, rather than the more academic "genealogy," in order to step away from the Critical Theory framework of scholarly parentage. I have never been comfortable with the idea of a family tree of scholarship. This is because it implies a practice of loving that is largely absent from scholarly production; because it takes heterosexual marriage and procreation as its guiding metaphors; and because it tends to be very closely tied to both prestige and debt. The word lineage is not free from these associations, but I follow brown in reframing it as a way to locate our work within the family we choose.

In this context, lineage can refer to writers, artists, friends, relatives, teachers, and colleagues. In academia we often think about lineage in terms of citation: the people whose scholarship has shaped the discourse where we aim to intervene, and who we recognize through the format of footnotes. Here, I am asking you to think about a slightly different web of relationships, and a slightly different format of care.

Are there people who you have encountered on your professional journey who made you think: I want to be like you? This may include someone like your dissertation advisor or a scholar you frequently cite. But it may also include people whose disciplines, professions, and lives look nothing like your own. It is likely to include people you love.

For many years, I have thought of my lineage as a site of conflict. I have spent a lot of time trying to unlearn unhealthy ideas about productivity, prestige, class, and race that came from the people



Who are the people whose work and presence in the world have shaped your sense of scholarly purpose?

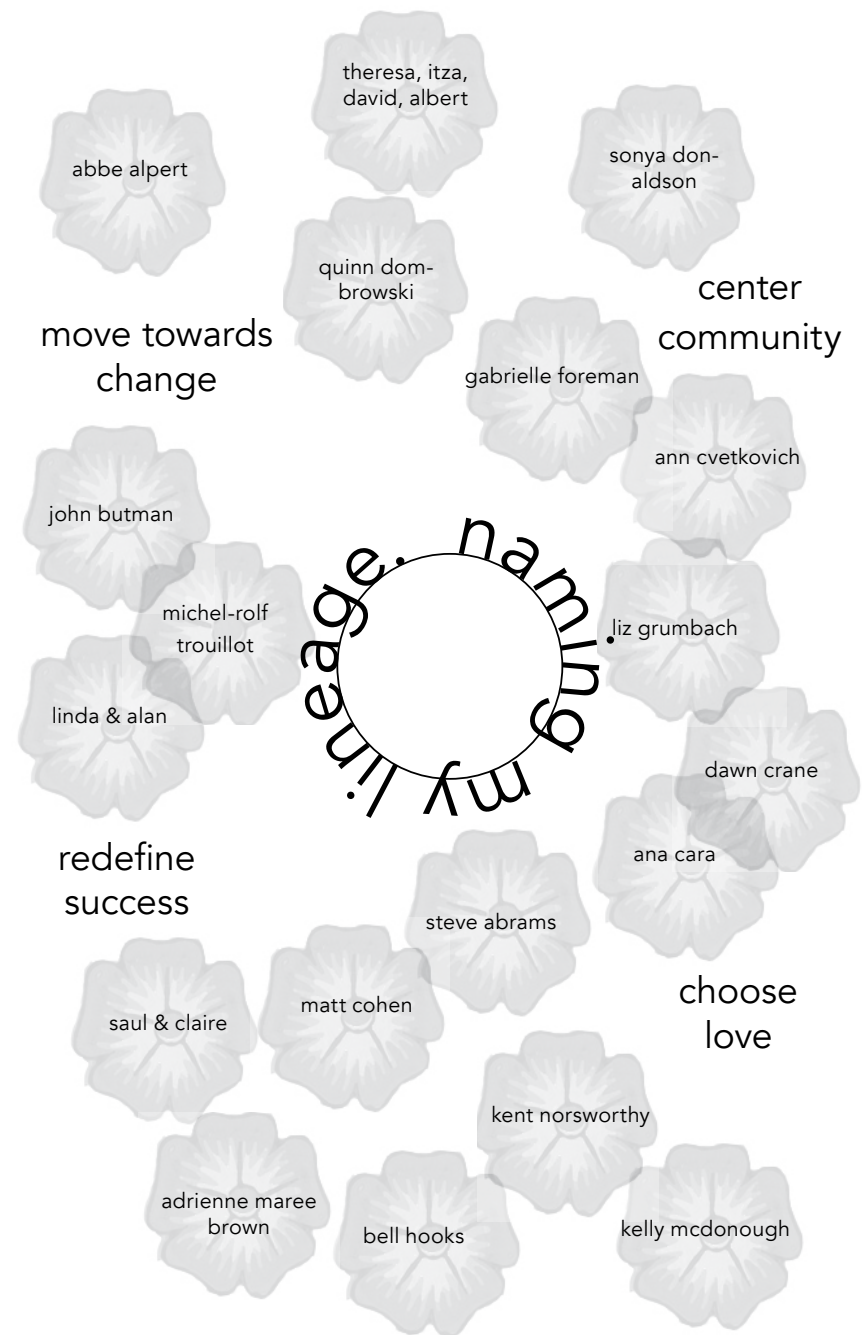
who influenced and educated me. I have also struggled to understand my relationship to ideas that informed my own, but that were written by scholars known for violence and abuse. Telling a different story about the people who formed me has brought me comfort and hope.

Following Christen A. Smith and *Cite Black Women*, I also understand lineage to be a way to reorient myself away from models of value, productivity, and success based in capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. The *Cite Black Women* framework reminds me to be particularly attentive to the Black women and women of color in my life whose influence I might have undervalued. I also try to expand this framework to bring my attention to the other people in my lineage whose contributions academia has always tried to erase, like those who are unaffiliated and uncredentialed.

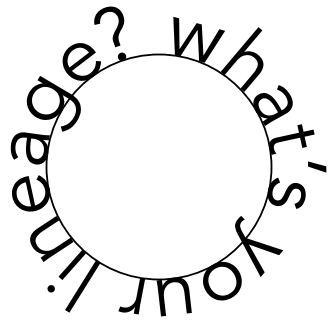
I conceive of lineage as something that is reciprocal and loving, terms I understand through the work of bell hooks, Matika Wilbur, Adrienne Keene, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Crystal Wilkinson, among others. Neither the Jewish tradition my family adheres to nor the white suburban community I was raised in maintains active and ongoing relationships with ancestors. But from these Black and Native thinkers, I have begun to imagine what it might mean to be in right relation with our ancestors and with each other.

In naming my lineage, I seek to understand how I can actively honor and love those who have taught me; how I can recognize and use their gifts; and what gifts I can give in return. I have come to understand this work as part of the responsibility and the pleasure of naming lineage.

The following page is an incomplete sample illustrating how I understand my lineage, organized around four categories that emerged from this exercise: redefining success, choosing love, centering community, and moving towards change. There is also space for you to name your lineage and see what values and patterns emerge.







# MAKE A LINEAGE ALTAR

An altar is an elevated place where we perform rituals to show respect and love.

In this exercise, you are invited to identify a place in your workspace that can serve as an altar dedicated to the people who make up your professional lineage. Things you might place on your altar include books, quotes, photographs, and gifts.

The purpose of the altar is to help you recenter yourself in your work and maintain active engagement with your sources of inspiration. You might add incense, candles, or crystals that you can use to draw and center your attention as you reflect on what these individuals mean in your life.





# INTRODUCTION

I am not an expert on community. I am just a person trying to understand how to live and work well in this world.

I have always been wary of, if not downright uncomfortable with, community. I am an ashkenazi jew: white supremacists attempted to commit genocide against people who shared this identity, including members of my family. I enjoy the privileges of assimilation into whiteness in the United States. A religious leader who was also a member of my family sexually assaulted several of my relatives. My identity has been mobilized to justify the ongoing violence in Palestine.

I know that communities can reinforce violence, communities can reinforce oppression, and identifying with a community can be dangerous and can make you dangerous.

I also know that communities are essential to the pursuit of justice, love, and care in a world structured around colonization, imperialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism. I know that change cannot happen without community. And I know that none of us are free unless all of us are free.

I associate with many communities: religious, regional, scholarly, professional, activist. There are some communities that matter to my understanding of self, but that I engage with only minimally, like my religious community. There are other communities that I actively seek to be in good relation with, like academic twitter, the anti-racist and reproductive justice activists in my city, and the members of my union local.

There are also communities to which I do not belong but which I participate in as part of my job. I do not work in academia, but I aim to sustain relationships with and advocate for colleagues within the scholarly community. I do not have any Latin American heritage, but I worked and studied in Spanish and Latin American Studies departments for many years. In that time, I began the process of



Who are the people and networks of relations that you work with and for?

learning how to shift from extractive to collaborative and community-driven models of scholarship. This work is ongoing.

When I envision being in good relation with a community, I think about having relationships of trust and vulnerability with individuals. I think about educating and learning from members of my community. I think about working together towards shared goals that can lift all of us up.

While all of these communities matter to me, I do not consider my professional work to be equally in service to each of them. I have found it useful to distinguish between communities that I care about and those that I am paid to work for, or that I feel an obligation to serve while doing salaried work. In my work, I typically prioritize my relationships with, students, academic colleagues, and my collective bargaining unit.

What this means in practice is that I am trying to build structures into my working life that ensure I have reciprocal relationships with those communities, relationships built on trust and vulnerability and shared goals even in the context of uneven and unequal power dynamics and hierarchies designed to keep us apart.

Through this workbook, I have learned to understand my relationship with my communities as a series of small actions, from texting the group chat every week to co-hosting recurring tarot meet-ups and union meetings. As the second exercise in this section highlights, thinking about community through the lens of these small actions can make relationship-building feel less overwhelming, especially if the gap between the idea of a community and life in the world feels hard to bridge.

Writing this, I feel nervous that those with more expertise in community organizing will find my descriptions oversimplified. But I hope this is a helpful starting point for those of us who struggle to do right by the many competing relationships we sustain in our professional lives.

# COMMUNITIES

What communities are you affiliated with?

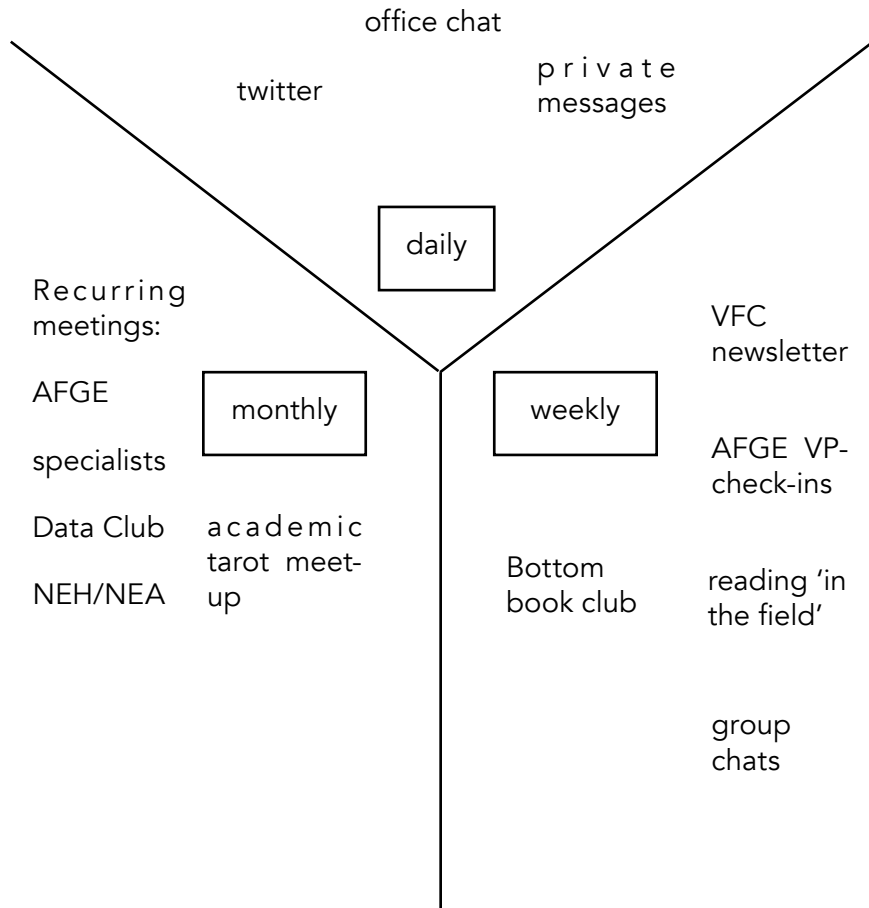
# AT WORK

What communities do you work for?

# COMMUNITY AS A

Taking part in community is work; structuring that work into our jobs can help center and prioritize relationship-building and set us up for more meaningful and impactful work.

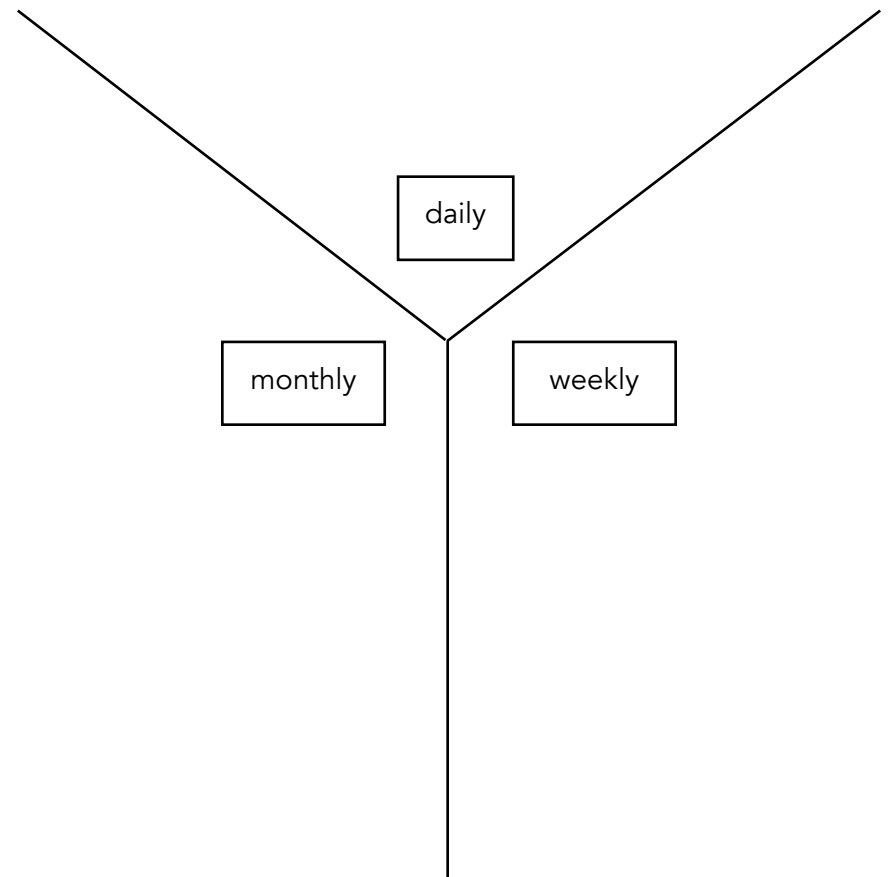
In this exercise, I describe some of the structures I use to maintain active relationship with my communities. Doing this exercise showed me which communities I am not engaging with as consistently as I would like. And it gave new meaning to some activities that I had previously undervalued, like texting friends.



# DAILY PRACTICE

How can you grow the ways you practice being in community?

Use this space to name the daily, weekly, and monthly actions you are currently taking or you would like to take in the future to strengthen those relationships. This exercise may help you shift the balance of your labor, by reducing, increasing, or altering how you spend your time.



# COMMUNITY PLACE

## IN

In my years as an international grad student, infinitely more than solitary studies in moodlit alcoves with artisanal coffee, I've benefited from union meetings in flatly lit basements with cheap pizza. I still fantasize about libraries, but I dream about them being opened up to the public, hosting free events, making sleeping arrangements for unhomed students, and being funded by the endowment redirected from its professedly arcane self-multiplying remit.

-Saronik Bosu, Post45

Community, like love, is an action: our communities exist to the extent that we participate in them collectively. We come together in place, or in virtual space, to share feelings, provide care, take action, dream, and play.

In this exercise, inspired by Mimi Winick, you are invited to map the places where your community comes together. What are the flatly lit basements, zoom rooms, backyard fire pits, or church pews where you find your people?

To have an investment in community is also to have an investment in place. What can you do to sustain the environments that house you? This might mean an investment in infrastructure or an expansion in the services that infrastructure can provide, as Saronik Bosu writes. It may also mean, as Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, building a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment around you.

# A

## PLACE-BASED MEDITATION

This exercise is a meditation on community and its attachment to built, natural, and virtual environments.

Begin by identifying a single physical or virtual location where you find yourself in community. Some examples might be: a fire pit, a bar or coffee shop, a grad student lounge, a virtual meet-up.

Picture the physical characteristics of the space: what do you see? What do you hear? What does your body feel like? What do you smell?

Picture the people in the space: who are you with? Who shows up? What do they bring to the community?

Picture the emotional characteristics of the space: how does it make you feel to be present in this space?

Ask yourself:

- What is this place giving me? How does the place make space for community to form?
- What am I giving to this space? What do I do to be present when I am in this community? How do I serve as a caregiver for the space we share?
- Is there anyone I can bring into this community who might benefit from it? How can I serve as a point of entry for growing community?
- Is there anything I can do to make this space a better location for building community? Would it benefit from more intentional communication? More regular use? More accessible facilities? Better coffee?

# INTRODUCTION

Love, passion, and commitment are taken for granted among higher education workers. As Sarah Jaffe writes in *Work Won't Love You Back* and Fobazi Ettarh in "Vocational Awe and Librarianship," this is part of what allows labor exploitation to be endemic to higher education, alongside other feminized professions like health care, non-profit work, librarianship, and k-12 education.

Pleasure, however, is often pushed to the margins of our work. For those of us interested in justice-oriented scholarship, in particular, pleasure can feel like a luxury we cannot afford or do not deserve. The privileges of academia can feel so great, the work so profoundly difficult, and the expectations so high, that pleasure feels guilty. If we do find pleasure, it is more often through self-care rituals designed to keep us from falling apart as we push ourselves to our limits.

And yet there is no social change without pleasure, and pleasure is absolutely fundamental to the future I am fighting for. I did not know this to be true until I read *Pleasure Activism*, a collection of conversations and essays compiled by adrienne maree brown that seeks to understand the relationship between pleasure and Black liberation. brown writes:

Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy.

Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this. In this moment, we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression.

# PLEASURE

How can we use pleasure at work as a source of liberation and a site of change?

# PLEASURE AT WORK

Pleasure activists seek to understand and learn from the politics and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good. This includes sex and the erotic, drugs, fashion, humor, passion work, connection, reading, cooking and/or eating, music and other arts, and so much more.

Pleasure activists believe that by tapping into the potential goodness in each of us we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists.

Pleasure activism acts from an analysis that pleasure is a natural, safe, and liberated part of life—and that we can offer each other tools and education to make sure sex, desire, drugs, connection, and other pleasures aren't life-threatening or harming but life-enriching.

Pleasure activism includes work and life lived in the realms of satisfaction, joy, and erotic aliveness that bring about social and political change.

Ultimately, pleasure activism is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet." - 13

In this workbook section, you are invited to join me in thinking about pleasure. What does it mean to bring pleasure activism into our work as scholars? How can we find sites of scholarly pleasure that aren't defined by and subject to the violent structures of our institutions or our jobs? How can we pursue pleasures that align with and build towards the unravelling of oppression? How can we make the work of justice-oriented or liberatory scholarship joyful, for ourselves and our communities?

I spoke with colleagues on social media about where and how we find pleasure in our work. The conversation that resulted brought up many strategies for using pleasure to protect ourselves from the harm caused by working. More difficult, but in some ways more important, was identifying ways to bring pleasure into work.

## protect your mind-body

take the dogs for a walk  
close the computer at 5pm  
ride a bike  
listen to music and sing  
take a lunch break  
watch tv at work  
crosswords & sudoku  
yoga

## care for community

hold a birthday party  
share baked goods  
give glitter (controversial)  
co-work  
form a virtual community  
schedule gratitude  
schedule retrospection  
share your excitement

## feel good working

light a candle  
wrap in a blanket  
drink a nice tea  
use nice pens  
color-code your planner  
use nice paper  
use a typewriter  
dress up for work

## do good work

swim in your sources  
sit in the stacks  
embrace solitude  
process over product  
create something beautiful



# TELLING YOUR PLEASURE NARRATIVE

What if the story of your career was a story of pleasure?

My first instinct when I asked myself this question was to tell two complementary stories.

One story was a string of accomplishments, in which long periods of struggle were punctuated by a hard-won reward: the day I defended my dissertation; the day I learned I won an NEH grant; the day my first article was accepted for publication. This is a story I often tell when I need to offer a quick summary of my professional biography to colleagues or friends. It is made up of moments I think of with pride.

The other was a story of humble achievements, typically associated with feminized care work and free from public accolades: the interactions with students and peers in which I was able to offer learning, or support, or compassion. Each of these interactions came with their own moments of private joy. This is a story I often tell to demonstrate that while I can and do navigate academic models of success, I am not tied up entirely in institutional structures of meaning-making.

My therapist, who asked to remain anonymous here, is helping me to learn what it means to experience pleasure and joy in the body alongside the mind. Reflecting on these two narratives, I see that they both say more about how I want to be perceived than about how I feel.

These are not my joys. They are for you. What's more: they depend on and exist only against struggle. Defending a dissertation was

a joy because graduate school was a misery. Receiving positive feedback from students was a joy because teaching, under the conditions in which I did it, was a misery. This is not pleasure activism, but rather the rationing of pleasure through which neoliberal institutions make us complicit in our own exploitation.

So: to tell the story of my career as a story of pleasure, I have to go beyond both of these narratives. This may be natural to you, but for me it has been an uncomfortable excavation of self. The story that has emerged has forced me to face some difficult truths: about the work I do, about the choices I make, and about the future I want for myself.

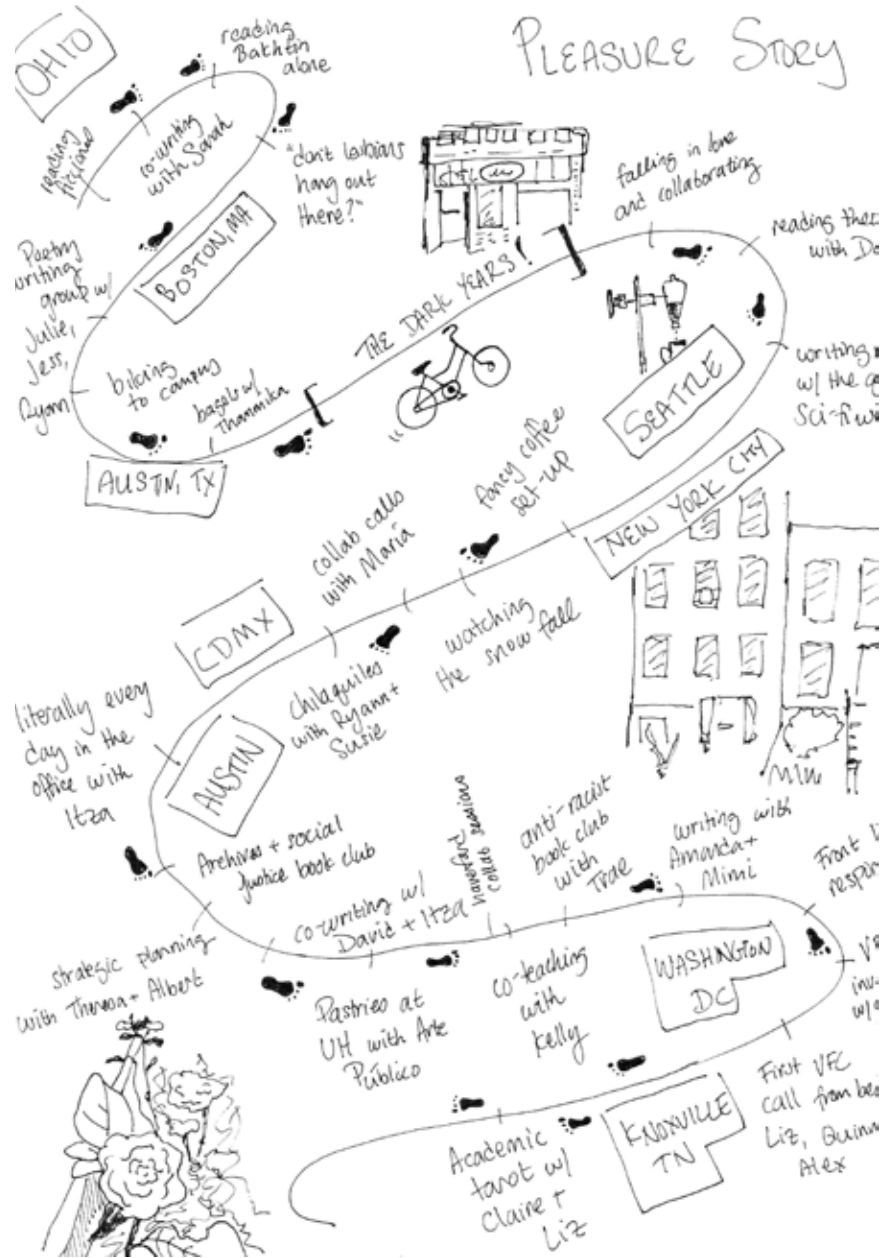
This exercise has also allowed me to see that my primary source of professional pleasure comes from doing creative work with people whose energy sparks mine. I also find great joy in working with language, in physical activity that goes beyond the computer, and in being in a position to bring out the best in others.

As I think about my professional future, I think about how to bring those joys back into my daily labor. I also take note of the aspects of work that don't appear in my pleasure narrative, like classroom teaching. Perhaps that is not the priority I thought it was.

The following page shows a visual representation of my career as a journey of pleasure. There is also space for you to write your own pleasure narrative.



# PLEASURE STORY



# PLEASURE STORY



# INTRODUCTION

There are a few things that I find especially difficult when it comes to talking about values and work in higher education.

By values I mean the underlying beliefs about the world that motivate our actions. For example, I believe that love is the most important work. That we are all entitled to meaningful and well-compensated employment. That wealth should be redistributed. That privilege comes with obligations.

One challenge is that our values change, all the time. The values that led me to pursue an undergraduate degree from Oberlin College in 2003 were not the same values that motivated me to pursue a PhD in comparative literature almost ten years later, although the one certainly informed the other. I grew wiser; I learned better; my understanding of the world and my role in it became more nuanced and complex, if not more clear.

A second challenge is that values are both contextual and aspirational. I aim to live in alignment with my values, but more often than not, I fall short, or find myself compromised by circumstance. Sometimes I find that my perceived values are in contradiction with one another. Sometimes I cannot figure out the right thing to do.

For me, a discussion of values often becomes an opportunity for self-critique. My goal in writing this, instead, is to focus on accountability alongside forgiveness, growth, and inspiration. Articulating values may make visible the ways we are falling short of our expectations. It can also help us make better decisions about our time and our work.

The third challenge is that sometimes, work itself is the compromise we make in order to be able to live our values elsewhere. When I finished my undergraduate degree, I thought that a good job should not only provide money and benefits, but should also empower me to feel happy, supported, and capable of living my values in the world.



How is it possible to live a values-oriented working life under capitalism?

Now I think every day about the words of activist K. Agbebiyi:

You're never about to catch me crying about paid work. Work isn't where I can fully be myself. It's not where I can fully bring my values. I'm working within an apparatus that I don't agree with, the non-profit industrial complex, and I'm doing it for money. So there's just no way, in my opinion, that I can fully show up as the organizer or the person I am if I'm getting paid, even if it is for seemingly good work.

— K Agbebiyi, Gender Reveal Podcast Episode 111.

This is both a revelation and a confirmation of something I have been feeling for a long time now: that I need to decouple my values from my labor. This means setting firmer boundaries around my expectations at work, both for myself and for my place of employment, which in turn allows me to be more specific about where I want to work for change at my office. It also means setting more boundaries around my job, so that I have more space in life to do the things I value. And it means being much more thoughtful and intentional about when I seek payment for my labor, and when I choose to do it for free.

It is my hope that the exercises and rituals featured in this section will help you find similar clarity about where, when, and how to compromise; when to change your life; and when to fight to change the system.

# VALUES

What values do you bring to your work? Example of values might be: access to education is a right; anti-racist education is vital to a just society; writing can create change.

# NEEDS

What needs does working fulfill in your life? Examples of a need might be: a work visa, health insurance, a reliable income, intellectual stimulation, access to community.

# AFFIRMATIONS

Affirmations are statements of truths that we struggle to believe about ourselves and our place in this world. By repeating them to ourselves with conviction, we can break self-defeating thought patterns and strengthen our resolve.

I started using affirmations when I began working with graduate students. I saw how my desire to succeed in academia had eroded my sense of self. I wanted more for my students. I now make it a practice to remind the students I work with: you are a brilliant writer and teacher and scholar. You are so much more than your job. You deserve to be here.

I have found it much more difficult to use affirmations for myself. It wasn't until I read bell hooks' *All About Love* that I saw how my resistance to self-respect and self-gratitude was holding me back from building the life I wanted.

Now, I follow the method given to me by my therapist: I write the beliefs I want to hold close on slips of paper and put them in a bowl. Each week, I draw two or three to focus on. Each day, as part of my morning routine, I repeat those affirmations out loud.

Many of the affirmations I use have nothing to do with my career. (*I am so much more than my job.*) But for this exercise, focus on truths that you want to hold on to as you navigate your working life.

For example: I am here to serve first-generation students. I am here to surface forgotten histories. I am here to help my mother pay her mortgage. My worth cannot be measured by my job.

# AFFIRMATIONS

Use this page to write affirmations for your working life. You can even cut them out.





# AFFIRMATIONS



# start | stop | continue

List three things you'd like to start doing at work to be more aligned with your values.

Why?

List three things you'd like to stop doing at work because they're not aligned with your values.

Why?

List three things you'd like to continue doing at work because they are aligned with your values.

Why?



# Our work is not our value: a release ritual

This ritual is designed to help you release attachments that have become burdensome or painful. It has been lightly adapted from a cord cutting ritual described by Gigi Young (<https://gigiyoung.com/releasing-spell/>) and introduced to me by my therapist.

For this adaptation, the goal is to let go of attachments to expectations, disappointments, and fears around work. Some examples might include: the belief that your job will be the primary place where you can create change, or the dream of being a professor.

Confession: of all the exercises in this book, this has been the hardest for me to do. I hope it serves you.

## What You Will Need:

- 3 Pieces of yarn
  - Red: representing passion and connection
  - White: representing intention and clarity
  - Blue: inviting knowledge
- 1 Candle
- 1 Bowl filled with water

## The Ritual:

1. Sit in a quiet, relaxing place where you will not be interrupted.
2. Place the candle in front of you and light it. The candle is a centering and purifying force. It brings our energies into focus and lets them go.
3. Take the yarn and cut each of the colored strings into approximately 9-inch sections.
4. Tie the yarn together so you can make a braid.
5. Clear your mind and focus.
6. Say aloud: "It is my intention to cut all ties with \_\_\_\_\_. I

release all connections in all directions of time. I allow wisdom and light to fill any spaces that are left as I let go."

7. As you begin to braid the strands, embody all of your feelings, questions, and frustrations. Allow your emotions to flow as they need to; allow anger to rise and meet your intention; allow sadness to be released through tears; allow any confusion to be pushed into the cord. Take as long as you need.
8. Once you feel a sense of space or clarity, it is time to let go. Take the cord firmly in both hands and hold it over the flame. Say aloud: "I let you go now. As I burn this cord I release all connections in all directions of time. I have forgiveness for any pain that has been caused, intentional or not. I let that go now. I forgive myself for any wrongdoings I may have done, intentional or not. I let that go now. I feel gratitude for what I have learned, and I open myself to understanding why this has manifested in my life. I allow wisdom and light to fill any spaces that are left within me as I let go. And so it is."
9. Allow the cord to burn in the flame. Once you feel satisfied with its destruction, place it in the bowl of water. Make sure the fire is safely out. The fire purifies all.
10. If you can, pour the water and the charred cord in a hole in the earth. If you do not have access, simply pour it out in a mindful way, while remembering and honoring your intention.

## Post-Ritual:

How you handle yourself after the ritual is just as important as the ritual itself. You can reopen the wound that is just beginning to heal, or you can continue to reinforce the ritual.

If you find yourself returning to the thoughts and feelings that you sought to release, picture them burning in the flames.

# INTRODUCTION

This workbook aims to bring clarity to your purpose as a justice-oriented scholar. Doing this work has helped me to make decisions such as:

- Whether I can let go of some of my scholarly commitments.
- Whether a new opportunity is a good fit for my goals.
- Whether there are changes I can make to align my work more closely with my needs, values, and desires.
- When a workplace problem is something I should take on.
- When a workplace problem is beyond the scope of what I am able to offer.
- Whether I can continue working in my current position.
- Whether I want to continue working in academia.
- What kinds of alternative employment might be a good fit.

In this final section, you are invited to reflect on how your understanding of your lineage, your community, your pleasures, and your values come together to form your sense of professional purpose.

In the past, I have referred to this as a “mission statement.” But these days, I’m leaning more towards purpose. When I think about the word mission, I think about practices of evangelization and conquest that masquerade as good work. The word purpose evokes some concerning ideas too, like neoliberal productivity culture. But for me, it also feels narrower in scope and closer to what a healthy working life could look like.

I do not enter my workplace as a missionary seeking global transformation. But I do go to work with purpose. I evaluate job offers, opportunities, and activities against that sense of purpose. And I revisit my statement of purpose over time as I reflect on my changing needs and values.

# PURPOSE

What gives purpose to your working life?

# Where should we focus our energy as we seek to understand our professional purpose?

In my work with the Visionary Futures Collective, I have been drawn to tarot as a tool to help answer difficult and intractable questions. In this case, I used the VFC's Academic Tarot deck, a major arcana deck designed with artist Claire Chenette, to help us understand how to think about our professional futures.

For this reading, I drew three cards representing the past, the present, and the future. Use this as a starting point as you think about your purpose. If you have your own deck, you can expand on it by asking additional questions or drawing additional cards.

**Past:** The first card I drew was the IT Specialist, an academic take on the Strength card which shows a woman setting up a hybrid classroom. In this card, the IT Specialist is intertwined with the academic system: at times in control, at times controlled by it.

This card asks us to accept reality and find the strength to co-exist with our own wild beasts. As a response to our question, this is a powerful and affirming card. It says that we have shown courage as we have sought to maintain a sense of purpose in a complex and frustrating system.

At the same time, this is a card of infinite transformation. It asks us to allow ourselves the grace to accept the struggles of the past and the strength to face changes in the present.

**Present:** The second card I drew was the Sidegig, traditionally The Chariot, which depicts a pedicab paused in front of a university campus. Drawing this card suggests we are currently on a journey in which we are both the driver and the passenger.

This is a card of determination and drive. It assures us that we

are ready for change, and affirms that we will overcome the obstacles in our path and reach our destination.

In the context of our question, this card suggests that now is a good time for change. It affirms the value of taking the time to think about and establish our purpose. But thinking is just the first step. Now is the time to take action to manifest our goals.

**Future:** The third card was The Alt-Ac, or Death, which shows a smiling woman standing in front of a thrift store with a box of donations, including halloween decorations and a dissertation.

The Alt-Ac is a card that speaks of significant change. It signifies that something important in our lives is coming to an end. But it also represents letting go of a belief, practice, relationship, or identity that is no longer serving us. This is a card that opens the door to something new.

I drew this card reversed, suggesting that we may be resisting the change this card is calling for. This change may be deeply personal and profound. It is also likely to be physically and spiritually healing.

The card depicts someone leaving academia, but it is not prescriptive. Instead, I hope you take this as the good sign it is: that the work you are doing has set you on the right path, and there is a better future for you, and for us.



## S A M P L E

## STATEMENTS

## My statement of purpose

In my scholarship, I aim to use technology to build community, increase transparency, fight inequity, and create a better future for the humanities.

I seek to maintain boundaries around my job that allow me to prioritize my relationship with the land I occupy and the people I love.

Visionary Futures Collective  
statement of purpose

The Visionary Futures Collective brings together humanists across the United States to tackle challenges relating to the present and future of higher education.

This group is made up of scholars of the humanities. Many, but not all of us have or are currently pursuing graduate degrees. Many, but not all of us work or study at universities. Some, but not most of us, are professors. All of us believe in the transformational power and vital importance of the humanities.

This group believes that the study of human history and cultural expression is essential to a more just and mean-

ingful society. Our purpose is to create the conditions in which this work can thrive.

We begin with the premise that current conditions in higher education are incompatible with the work of the humanities. We formed at the start of the coronavirus pandemic because we understood that this public health crisis would exacerbate the structural inequities that characterize U.S. higher education. Our work is shaped by the long-overdue national reckoning with racial inequities led by the Black Lives Matter movement.

We believe that humanities labor must be carried out under conditions that do not put our lives or our health at risk. We believe that humanities labor is valuable, and must be credited and compensated fairly and equitably.

We believe the systems in higher education that depend on labor exploitation, racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression must be dismantled.

We believe that higher education should be for the public good, and that the work of the humanities should be conducted for and with our communities.

We recognize that these conditions will not be created through top-down change, and so we aim to build collective action from the bottom up.

We are constantly learning new ways to enable change, but this group focuses on increasing transparency in higher education; creating compassionate communities through shared vulnerability; and working collectively to shift institutional practices.

— From the Visionary Futures Collective website:  
<https://visionary-futures-collective.github.io/>

# WHAT'S YOUR

Use these pages to reflect on where you find purpose in your work, your job, and your personal life, and to articulate your statement of purpose.



# PURPOSE?







# Further Reading & Listening

adrienne maree brown: *Emergent Strategy, Pleasure Activism, and Holding Change*.

Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love*

Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship"

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez and Angela P. Harris, *Presumed Incompetent*

bell hooks, *All About Love* and *Teaching to Transgress*

Incite! *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*

Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*

Leah Lakshmi Plepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*

Paco de Leon, *Finance for the People*

Christen A. Smith, *Cite Black Women Movement*

Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid*

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*

Tuck Woodstock, *Gender Reveal Podcast*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Matika Wilbur and Adrienne Keene, *All My Relations Podcast*

## Notes

This workbook was written by Hannah Alpert-Abrams with input from: Abbe Alpert, Saul Alpert-Abrams, Kristen Block, Saronik Bosu, Matt Cohen, Ignacio Carvajal Regidor, Quinn Dombrowski, Sonya Donaldson, Brian DeGrazia, Julie Fischer, Liz Grumbach, Amanda Henrichs, Carter Hogan, Rachel Ida Buff, Sara Rico Godoy, T. Salvador, Hadassah St. Hubert, & Mimi Winick.

This work is collective. The people who created it are far too many to name. Thank you all.

## Images

All images in this book come from the Smithsonian Open Access.

J. Gay, *Crocus flavus* Weston, National Museum of Natural History, 1819. nmnhbotany\_15719420

Baker, *Erythronium borneense*, National Museum of Natural History, 1927.

William Morris, *Daisy*, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, 1864. chndm\_1980-73-3

