



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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# ON GRIEF AT THE END OF THE WORLD: A BLACK, DISABLED, QUEER RITUAL FOR PERSONAL AND GLOBAL APOCALYPSE

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## My Apocalypse

I'm not an expert on snakes or healing, but I *am* a shedding human. Meaning I am a mess. Meaning I am gloriously whole. Meaning I am a glorious, whole-ass mess.

I began this research during an intense moment of shedding in my life. Shortly before the pandemic started, I began recovering memories of being sexually abused as a child. The memories were so intense, and my reaction to them so strong I developed PTSD. It got so severe I couldn't work, I rarely left the house, and I began to close in on myself. Then the pandemic hit, and I joked that now the whole world was living like me, staying home, their worlds small and preoccupied with the mundane necessities of survival.

Not long after the first lockdown was put in place I started to develop pain in my abdomen. It would get so bad that for days, weeks at a time I could barely leave my bed. I spent so much time hunched over in pain I developed a hump on my spine. I went from being a lifelong athlete to worn out from going to the bathroom and getting back to the bed. No one knew what was wrong, so my body widened and softened as I gained 30 pounds. I bounced from doctor to doctor and treatment to treatment as my pain intensified and my hump grew. I named her Gertrude in an attempt to befriend her that I'm not sure was successful.

I'd been withdrawing from people in my life as all of this transpired. As a Black woman I was never taught to have needs, let alone express them. Many people in my life resented that I couldn't support them, nurture them, in all the ways I had up until this point, nor could I explain clearly why. I didn't have language for my own unbecoming, and I was terrified of it, so I hid.

Many people moved away from me, and to escape that their departure made me feel like a failure, I moved farther away from them, and me too. I didn't know who I was if I wasn't the person who always had it together, was always working and creating at a superhuman rate, and still had time to keep my apartment sparkling clean and cook nearly every night for myself, my partner, and chosen family. I was a good mammy; I was working myself into the ground with a smile on my face and a ready laugh. The world easily asks this of Black women and femmes, and we're met with confusion, often anger, and routinely abandonment and dismissal when we can't carry on anymore.

I was finally properly diagnosed and treated, and then spent months sweating and shaking in bed from the medications working to kill off the infection discovered in my stomach. It had been there so long my whole system was out of whack. My white blood cell count was off the chart, and my whole system was flooded with inflammation. That led to discovering a connective tissue disorder that has caused multiple joint dislocations, chronic pain, and neurological issues. So far I've had one shoulder surgery, and have permanent tears in both shoulders and one hip.

Most recently I went from walking with crutches, to a cane because of knee instability. The condition is degenerative, so the future of my body and mobility is uncertain.

Through all of this, my constant companion has been my snake Bisoux. He rests in his tank near the foot of my bed. He gains and loses weight without the vanity that I do. He has lost his sight temporarily when he neglected to shed his eye caps and dead skin obscured his eyes. He doesn't seem particularly bothered; he seems to trust that there are other ways to perceive himself. He is dull as he sheds, and other times his scales shine bright with gold and green colors, he seems content in both states. During many late insomniac nights, I've heard the sound of his skin rasping across a tree branch in his tank as he used it to shed and work free of his outgrown skin. And I've wondered: how does he manage to constantly shape shift without worry? How does he approach transformation without the fear and resistance that plagues me? And so I began to study him.

What follows is a ritual Bisoux inspired me to create. It's some of what I've learned, what I'm learning. Along the way Gertrude has transformed too, she shrunk so much I gave her a new name: Betty, because she's just a little boop. I'd be lying if I said we're friends, and I hope she doesn't stay, but for now, we've found a way to coexist, and maybe that's enough.

### **KIN - Organisms that are genetically related to another or others**

This is who has kept me company through becoming and unbecoming during the process of dreaming, embodying and writing. They are my kin, some of their genetic material, whether

recognizable or not, is here in my research. These scholars, friends, chosen family, healers, teachers and more make up the community that has formed/I've formed around me; their love, wisdom, writing, support, and, and, and, are part of the genealogy of my work and me. Some of them know this, others may never know, but I name them here because I know, and you should too.

My Boffice, or "bed office," where much of my writing and life takes place these days, and my pillow palace, the pillow system I purchased when it became clear my bed was going to be the center of my world for a while, are both critical parts of the genealogy of my writing and my body.

I am inspired by the words of American civil rights activist John Lewis. I am committed to making, making art, making room, making change, making good trouble.

Resmaa Menakem's research in racialized embodiment and Somatic Abolition inspires me to value and respect the brilliance of my own body instead of prioritizing the theory of others.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa, Sarah Ashkin, Ana Garcia, Alex Millar, Cheyenne Dunbar, Tatiana Ewing, Emilie Gallier, Ever Galvan, Marlene Hall, Tani Ikeda, Rajni Shah, and more have impacted the genetic makeup of my research by affecting me; some as mentors, business partners, and/or chosen family.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha teaches me again and again that my journey through cripness deserves to be cataloged and shared; we all need the wisdom of crip body-minds to prepare us for apocalypse, because the future is in fact disabled.

Judith Halberstam teaches me that all the ways that I continue to feel like a failure are actually lessons in finding alternatives, and playful alternatives are what we need to survive apocalypse.

As a self-identified artist-agitator I also draw on the legacies of agitators past and present including adrienne maree brown, Audre Lourde, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Alice Sheppard. Like adrienne maree brown, I believe in the slow pace that deep, embodied, ethnographic research requires. Moving at "the speed of trust," as brown puts it. The way Audre Lourde lived so beautifully as an intellectual, a rebel, and as an artist, inspires me to live my own identities out loud as an artist, activist, and embodied scholar. Alexis Pauline Gumbs models how to learn from the wisdom of our more than human kin, and that perhaps inside of their difference from us, lies the way to learn how to build a new world.

Alice Sheppard's rejection of an able, white, straight body as the norm teaches me about what is possible when our perceived limitations lead us down routes of experimentation we never could have dreamed of without them.

Dr. Shena Young's magic in holding space for Black survivors to find their way back to themselves has brought me home to my own body again and again.

Bisoux, my snake-love continues to teach me every day and is my primary research partner.

## A Ritual For Personal And Global Apocalypse

*What did my snakecestors know about slowing down  
That can help me understand grief as a portal for transformation?*

*If the end of the world is here  
Can we slow down to grieve what might have been  
If we'd slowed down sooner?*

My people were born through portals at the edge of the world. Narrow windows in dark cells full of grief, fear, and hot bodies, above cold ocean and sharp rocks along the coast of West Africa. Those that survived this portal, the long inhumane journey that came after, and the brutal conditions of enslavement, led to me. I have the strength of their perseverance in my DNA, their brilliance at survival, their ability to cultivate joy and play in the unimaginable reminds me I already know how to survive the end of the world.

I'm grieving the loss of my body's ability after diagnosis and long illness, and I'm struggling, caught in the portal of this personal apocalyptic moment, to love my crip-self, while also inside of a global apocalypse. I find myself desperately searching for more teachers to show me how to survive the end of the world, both personal and worldwide. I found who I needed, here already, living quietly in a tank at the foot of my bed. This is a ritual for my snake-love Bisoux, my pet who has been my companion now for almost 20 years; my teacher in the wisdom of creatures who shed their skin and my snakecestors, who wove their way in graceful S shapes across the world long before I was a glimmer in the dreams of my human ancestors.

Liberation is a technique; I'm learning mine from snakes. Their capacity to move in any direction at every moment, the slowness they remind me to play with, their capacity to be in a constant state of transformation, and yet be fully themselves at any moment. Their shedding, constantly becoming and unbecoming, living peacefully in perpetual apocalypse.

I call this ritual a "play date" to remind me to lower the stakes, to play rather than try to control. I created this to support my own intense moment of shedding, a moment of personal apocalypse, and to remind me that the next time I have to shed, I already know how. I've always known how, and so do you.

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## Play Date: Reptile Time, A Grief Ritual

Set aside a few hours if you can. Listen to or read the following, then play with it.

*A Hint: This requires ritual time. You cannot do this quickly, while multitasking, during the hustle of your day. This requires conscious cultivation of time and space to play. Take a moment to consider what you need to be ready to play. Perhaps it's after your household is asleep, or before they wake up. Maybe it's a soft cozy outfit, perhaps a cherished outdoor spot, or a favorite place in your home. Set the mood for your playtime, and when you're ready, and have cultivated the time, space, and conditions to play, continue.*

*Bonus Hint: "PAUSE AND PLAY" is your cue to try out what you've just read or listened to and continue on only when you're ready. If you can, give yourself enough time to play all the way through with time to pause and play as you go.*



This is a grief ritual

The deep slowing down to reach reptile time is what I need to process grief I need the wisdom of reptilian slowness to make enough time for grieving

For living

For being alive in apocalypse

Be sure you cannot see a clock

We are moving away from the linearity, the speed, the neatness of time measured by a clock  
Towards the millennia spanning slowness of snakes

Apocalypse isn't the end, it's a transformation  
Can you slow down enough to be curious about  
The deep unknown, the end of the world?  
Don't set a timer for this  
Stop when your body's temperature has equalized with that of whatever is beneath you  
Or just stop when you're ready and notice how much time has passed  
Whether your sense of time is close or far from the clock's timing  
Arrange as much of your body as is available so that it is resting on the ground/floor/earth  
This could mean lying down  
Resting your hands on the ground  
Feeling into your feet while you're standing  
Choose what feels possible  
Maybe you want to try this outside Perhaps in the privacy of personal space  
Feel downwards into the earth Connecting with what's beneath you  
Linger in this reaching down awareness as long as you need  
When you're ready  
Notice your connectedness to the earth  
Also that it is supporting you back  
The connection is both you reaching down and the earth holding you back  
Stay in this duet with the earth as long as feels good

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

When you're ready, notice the scores of tiny dances that happen between you and the ground/floor/earth

Maybe this is the way your relationship to what is beneath you shifts slightly as you breathe As your heart beats

Where is there contact, pressure, space?

What temperatures are created between you and what's supporting you? Can you feel any vibrations or textures?

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

If you're comfortable

Can you adjust what you're wearing so more of your bare skin is in contact with what is supporting you?

How does that change the tiny duets happening between you and what is underneath you?

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

From here, this slow deep place, ask softly what you are grieving

Allow it to gently enter your dance

How do these micro dances change when you allow grief to dance too? How is your body/you arranged around grief?

Linger here and dance with grief, your body, the earth... Remember, the world has been ending forever

We have to learn how to slow down enough to transform with it

Grieve it

The answers lie through the portal created by grief

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

When you feel your ritual is complete, take some time to reflect, be it in writing, voice note, imagining, in your native language so anything you've gleaned can be saved, and wait for the time to revisit when you're ready. Remember that repetition is your friend. You can repeat/play/practice reptile time anytime you like, if you hate it, great, thank the wisdom of your own running from the pain of grief, from the end of the world, and play again and again!

### Biography

Kai Hazelwood (she/her) is a multi award-winning transdisciplinary Disabled, Black, and queer artist, educator, and artistic researcher. She has guest lectured or taught and facilitated at universities and art institutions across the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Kai is the founder and executive artistic director of Good Trouble Makers, a practice driven arts collaborative celebrating queer identities and centering disabled and chronically ill QTBIPOC. Kai and Good Trouble Makers' collaborations have been covered by 21 media outlets including The Advocate, and have been supported by Arts Omi International Arts Center, The City of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Department, California Institute of Contemporary Arts, Pieter Performance Space, The Speranza Foundation, The California Arts Council and DAS Graduate School.

From her perspective as an embodied researcher and changemaker Kai co-founded and is a lead facilitator of Practice Progress, a consultancy addressing structural, professional, and interpersonal white supremacy through body based learning that serves non and for profit businesses, educational institutions, and individuals including MASSMoCA, Gibney Dance, Ohio State Dance Department, University of Texas, Austin Dance and California Institute of the Arts. Founded in 2019, Practice Progress leads clients and participants toward sustained cultural shift in their institutions, communities, and themselves.

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