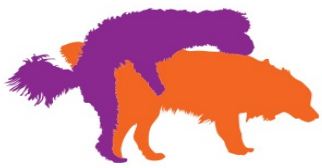


P L E A

S U R E



A C T I

V I S M



**The Politics of Feeling Good**

**Written and Gathered by adrienne maree brown**

# PLEASURE ACTIVISM

The Politics of Feeling Good

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# DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to Alana Devich Cyril (April 17, 1976–October 27, 2018), who I loved and learned from during the journey of creation and pleasure research for this book (and include as a teacher in these pages). She said, “Drink in beauty. Pleasure is a practice. Practice pleasure like your life depends on it.”

I also dedicate this book to Prince for the awakening. He said “I only wanted one time to see you laughing.”

# INTRODUCTION

The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.

—Toni Cade Bambara

Hello. Welcome to *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*.<sup>1</sup>

My name is adrienne maree brown. I am a facilitator, emergent strategist, doula, healer, auntie extraordinaire, and pleasure activist. I am your host in this sensual space, your learning companion on this pleasure journey, possibly even an arrow pointing to your erotic awakening. I have gathered here everything I know so far about pleasure activism in the form of essays, interviews, profiles, poems, and tools.

My intentions for readers of this book are that you

- recognize that pleasure is a measure of freedom;
- notice what makes you feel good and what you are curious about;
- learn ways you can increase the amount of feeling-good time in your life, to have abundant pleasure;
- decrease any internal or projected shame or scarcity thinking around the pursuit of pleasure, quieting any voices of trauma that keep you from your full sacred sensual life;
- create more room for joy, wholeness, and aliveness (and less room for oppression, repression, self-denial and unnecessary suffering) in your life;
- identify strategies beyond denial or repression for navigating pleasure in relationship to others; and
- begin to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing.
- Bonus: realize you are a pleasure activist!

Trust is a crucial part of the intimacy that yields pleasure for ourselves and others. Most likely you don't know me, so whatever trust can exist between us will come from how well I can share and how much you can open yourself to what I share. In that spirit, it feels important that you know a bit about my

identity, contradictions, practices, and desires as they relate to pleasure.

I have a Black father and a white mother with a big love story, and I grew up in all of the possibility of that. My family has not escaped white supremacy, racism, internalized racism, or colorism, but we have experienced those patterns and sicknesses from a position of love that can see through them to the humans beneath the socialization. Mostly.

I identify as a Black mixed person in the particular racial construct of this country at this time. I understand that race is a social construct, not a biological one—and in this life I experience a lot of pleasure in being Black. I love Black girl magic, Black joy, Black love, and work toward Black liberation. I feel unapologetic glee at the ways in which we subvert white supremacy, dominate culture, and “coolness,” often inviting people to the pleasures we have constructed from dreams and thin air.

And ... I understand this to be temporary—that there were, among my ancestors, feelings of love to be of tribes whose names I will never know or from nations no longer on any maps. In the future, there may be a time when the term “Black” feels to my nibblings’ nibblings the way the terms “Negro” or “Quadroon” sound to me now;<sup>2</sup> perhaps these future nibblings will invent new terminology indicating some way of understanding themselves that I cannot comprehend. There may be a time beyond these borders, beyond these racial constructs, beyond this planet even. I feel humble in the face of all that time. And, in this time, it’s a gift to be Black.

Similarly, I am learning that much of how we experience and practice gender is a social construct—and I love the particular pleasures of being a woman. I love being of women who transform the brutal conditions we survive, who are upending rape culture, knowing we are inferior to no one, weaving our suffering into a fierce togetherness, into homes, chosen families, radical sisterhood, and tomorrows.

And I’m a woman with some boy in me and haven’t found the language for that.

I know it is a privilege to feel aligned with the gender assignment I was given at birth. I love the bodies I was born from and with. And I love the wildly diverse spectrum of bodies I have gotten to hold, kiss, doula, and love in my lifetime.

I imagine there have been periods in my ancestry when gender was held very differently, maybe didn’t matter so much, or was less binary. And I imagine there will be a future with a multitude of widely known and understood genders. In

this moment, I get to be part of the expansion of possible genders that can live and love safely on this planet.

This book will center the experiences of Black women pursuing and related to pleasure, because these are the particular experiences with which I am both most familiar and most in community. But I am also always human and take seriously the truth that I am connected to all humans. I do not subscribe to any politics of reduction. I may see the humor in stereotypes, but I do not live my life or desires through the lens or limitation of anyone else's construction of power, identity, or supremacy. This book includes a few voices that are not Black or woman-identified but that I trust in the human experience of finding pleasure beyond oppression.

I have been a student of facilitation since my late teens, learning how to make it easier for people to be with each other. Along this journey I have been asked to facilitate people at a lot of different levels, each request teaching me more about what facilitation can do—coach, healer, doula, relationship supporter, grief supporter and death doula, breakup guide, and confidante for sexual adventures, as well as an organizational, network, and coalition/alliance facilitator.<sup>3</sup> I have often said yes, sometimes with trepidation, often with enthusiasm, because I am fascinated by how we interact with each other.

This book comes about partially because I realized that I have supported thousands of people in taking steps they crafted, articulated, and needed to take—steps closer to pleasure and liberation. I have seen, over and over, the connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power.

Conversely, I have seen how denying our full, complex selves—denying our aliveness and our needs as living, sensual beings—increases the chance that we will be at odds with ourselves, our loved ones, our coworkers, and our neighbors on this planet.

I enter this book with a lot of experience pursuing pleasure and power in human systems and a ton of hope and curiosity about what might be possible if we were all living our full pleasure potential. What would happen if we aligned with a pleasure politic, especially as people who are surviving long-term oppressive conditions?

In the writing and gathering process, whenever I came to one of my edges or limitations, I reached out and gathered in a comrade who knows more than I do—about sex work, BDSM, burlesque, legalizing marijuana, pleasure during gender transition, recovering pleasure after childhood sexual abuse, pleasure while

battling cancer, pleasure over age sixty, and parenting to generate pleasure-oriented children. I think the tapestry of voices here shows how many people are orienting toward and around radical pleasure in this political moment and just how many ways there are to do that.

Some other things to know:

If I were living purely from my mind, I might have become a nun. And I don't mean a naughty nun with no panties under my habit—I really love routines and quiet. I can get a ton of pleasure from precision, rigor, and discipline (those who have experienced me as a teacher may have an inkling of this). I like being of service. And I feel a thrumming, full aliveness when in conversation with the divine. I think a lot about what god is, how god is, and where we are relating to and running from and surrendering to god. My answers are always shifting, but that conversation has been continuous in my life.

But! If I were living purely from my body, I might have achieved some world record for sexual activity, or at least be the belle of some wild bordello. Perhaps a Black Moulin Rouge singer<sup>4</sup>—I love seduction, I love sex, I love an exposed shoulder, the curves of the hip, the moment of realizing that under the top layer of clothing there's no bra or boxers containing the body I am observing. I love the unspeakable heat of romance. I love all the ways we are sensual. I like to smell good, taste everything yummy, feel how alive skin is, listen to sounds of breath and pleasure, see the beauty of flesh and bones. Laugh uncontrollably. Play. Feel alive. My body has the capacity to sense immense pleasure, and as I get older I keep intentionally expanding my sensual awareness and decolonizing it so that I can sense more pleasure than capitalism believes in.

I am a hermit nudist at heart. It has taken me a while to learn this, but I feel most at home when I am alone and naked. Or with someone where we can be alone/together, naked.

I know that my body could never be inappropriate. If I walk around naked all the time, or wear a muumuu slit to the moon to show my big dimpled thighs, or let my tummy hang soft and low, it's right. I am of nature. I have cycles in my body that reflect the cycles of day and night, of the seasons, of the moon and the tides. My body is a gorgeous miracle. I know it is only conditioning and shame, particularly fat shame, that keeps me covered (especially when I am in places where it's too hot to wear a top and men are running around shirtless).

For now, I wear clothes because I enjoy fashion and to get warm during colder parts of the year. But as I get older, it's hard to keep clothing on at home, and what I do wear needs to flow and not make a big deal against my skin or it can't

stay. I also feel this way about the company I keep—that I need people around me who can adapt, have a gentle bright presence, who make me feel free, creative ... and beautiful in every aspect.

And even though I have this hermit nature, I get down with people and love it. If I am forced to choose labels to describe the ways I move toward people, I say I am pansexual to express who I am attracted to and/or queer for how I relate to sex and the world. Pansexual means my desire is not limited by the biological sex, gender, or gender identity of a potential lover. I would add species, just in case new hot aliens arrive in my lifetime. So far, I have been most attracted to gender-fluid beings, particularly masculine women, effeminate men, and trans men.

And I am queer, in the grandest sense of the word. I buck the norms in my sexual life and in the rest of my life. For instance, while I enjoy a solid dose of masculinity in my lovers, it only intrigues me if I can top, bottom, and sideways them, and if they can see the woman and the boy in me.

I have tried on monogamy, open relationships, polyamory, and solitude. Nonmonogamy tends to suit me best, even if I am occasionally focused on one lover. A recent lover shared a framework with me called relationship anarchy, which is the most precise articulation I've come across so far of my approach to love and sex, basing connection in trust, freedom, change, and honest communication.<sup>5</sup>

So that's the sex and relationship landscape ... now, onto the drugs!

Before I share my drug history, I want to say that I believe that most drugs should be legalized and that there should be safe spaces to use them. I have been privileged and fortunate to safely move through my explorations. Those who are currently incarcerated for getting medicine to people should be released and given opportunities to actually lead in their industry.

I have been an active drug user since my sophomore year of college, when I first smoked weed. I have smoked, vaped, salved, and eaten cannabis products since that fateful day and really enjoy the moderation I have been slowly growing, as well as the cultural shift toward legalization that is sweeping the United States.

I also love mushrooms! I think they are truly magical, and I have had some delightful weird experiences of perceiving the world's aliveness while tripping on mushrooms on multiple continents.<sup>6</sup> In general, the role that fungi play in nature is wonderful—they are communicators, they process toxins, they break down dead material and make it serve life. I think fungi are a crucial part of any



functional ecosystem, including our human ecosystems. But I also like to imagine mushrooms giving trees and squirrels hallucinations, for kicks.

I went through a period in my twenties where I was doing ecstasy all the time, and I believe it saved my life, to be able to buy and swallow happiness when I could not figure it out internally.<sup>7</sup> My pleasure goddess self definitely began to burst the seams of my post-sexual-trauma-frumpy-girl disorder during those years.

I haven't gone much further in the realm of drugs—a sniff or tab here, a recreational Vicodin or Percocet there. But I was once hospitalized with vampire bites,<sup>8</sup> and they put me on an IV with Benadryl and Dilaudid. Within a day, I was lying about the amount of pain I was in so they would give me more of whichever one was making everything feel like a cloud. When I left the hospital, I understood that I could never play with injection drugs, not if I also wanted to do things with my life. I think of this as harm reduction (which you will learn a lot about in this book), basically reducing or limiting the harmful impact of drug use on my life.

I love sex and drugs. I have an addictive personality, a gift and learning edge I inherited from my paternal grandmother, so I've learned to only engage those activities in substances I can moderate. Except sugar—so far that one tends to be all or nothing.

## Beliefs

The other thing I want to share with y'all are a few foundational beliefs that shape everything else that will flow from me.

I believe that all organizing is science fiction—that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced. I believe that we are in an imagination battle, and almost everything about how we orient toward our bodies is shaped by fearful imaginations. Imaginations that fear Blackness, brownness, fatness, queerness, disability, difference. Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* explores these ideas in depth.<sup>9</sup>

I believe that we are part of a natural world that is constantly changing, and we need to learn to adapt together and stay in relationship if we hope to survive as a species. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* explores these concepts in depth.<sup>10</sup>

I believe in transformative justice—that rather than punishing people for

surface-level behavior, or restoring conditions to where they were before the harm happened, we need to find the roots of the harm, together, and make the harm impossible in the future. I believe that the roots of most harm are systemic, and we must be willing to disrupt vicious systems that have been normalized. I believe that we are at the beginning of learning how to really practice transformative justice in this iteration of species and society. There is ancient practice, and there will need to be future practices we can't yet foresee. But I believe that with time it must become an incredible pleasure to be able to be honest, expect to be whole, and to know that we are in a community that will hold us accountable and change with us.

I am in this practice in as many spaces as I can be in my life. I believe that transformative justice is actually a crucial element in moving toward the kind of large-scale societal healing we need—transformative justice is a way we can begin to believe that the harm that has come to us won't keep happening, that we can uproot it, and that we can seed some new ways of being with each other.

I also believe that I am not creating the ideas in this book but observing a beautiful pattern of pleasure shifting the ground beneath us, inside us, and transforming what is possible between us. I have learned from so many teachers living and dead. To that end, I have an extended section of this book that is lineage, tracing the streams that are flowing into this particular river in ways that I hope create common ground, even a common titillation, between you and me.

Finally, I am constantly discovering new parts of myself to bring into the light, and that feels like an essential aspect of pleasure activism. I am discovering things as I write this book, and I will keep discovering things afterward.

As I gather this book together I am sitting in a quiet house, off season, on Martha's Vineyard. Right now, I am watching two massive swans slowly extend their long necks, bobbing in icy water, reaching toward each other, equal parts tentative and persistent. It is that energy in me as I take the tentative steps into this realm of the erotic, of the sensual, and ask us to explore together all of the power we potentially wield together.

In these pages, I am intentionally bringing academics into conversation with experiential experts, to show the patterns of aligned interest and learning happening across the language barriers that exist between us. I am bringing together a lot of different styles of expression in order to weave this tale. I asked contributors to share themselves as whole people, in the spirit of the Combahee River Collective, who taught me that "from the personal, the striving toward wholeness individually and within the community, comes the political, the

struggle against those forces that render individuals and communities unwhole. The personal is political, especially for Black women.”<sup>11</sup> Each person in this text is whole, complex, and brave in how they are shaping the world around them.

We are in a time of fertile ground for learning how we align our pleasures with our values, decolonizing our bodies and longings, and getting into a practice of saying an *orgasmic* yes together, deriving our collective power from our felt sense of pleasure.

I think a result of sourcing power in our longing and pleasure is abundant justice—that we can stop competing with each other, demanding scarce justice from our oppressors. That we can instead generate power from the overlapping space of desire and aliveness, tapping into an abundance that has enough attention, liberation, and justice for all of us to have plenty.

We’re going to keep learning together. These pages are a space to ask shameless questions, to love what we love and explore why we love it, to increase the pleasure we feel when we are doing things that are good for the species and the planet, to cultivate our interest in radical love and pleasure, and to nourish the orgasmic yes in each of us.

### What Is Pleasure Activism?

Pleasure is a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment. Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society. 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 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.

## Pleasure Principles

- *What you pay attention to grows.* This will be familiar to those who have read *Emergent Strategy*. Actually, all the emergent strategy principles also apply here! (Insert eggplant emoji). Tune into happiness, what satisfies you, what brings you joy.
- *We become what we practice.* I learned this through studying somatics! In his book *The Leadership Dojo*, Richard Strozzi-Heckler shares that “300 repetitions produce body memory ... [and] 3,000 repetitions creates embodiment.”<sup>12</sup>
- *Yes is the way.* When it was time to move to Detroit, when it was time to leave my last job, when it was time to pick up a meditation practice, time to swim, time to eat healthier, I knew because it gave me pleasure when I made and lived into the decision. Now I am letting that guide my choices for how I organize and for what I am aiming toward with my work—pleasure in the processes of my existence and states of my being. Yes is a future. When I feel pleasure, I know I am on the right track. Puerto Rican pleasure elder Idelisse Malave shared with me that her pleasure principle is “If it pleases me, I will.”
- *When I am happy, it is good for the world.*<sup>13</sup>
- *The deepest pleasure comes from riding the line between commitment and detachment.*<sup>14</sup> Commit yourself fully to the process, the journey, to bringing the best you can bring. Detach yourself from ego and outcomes.
- *Make justice and liberation feel good.*
- *Your no makes the way for your yes.* Boundaries create the container within which your yes is authentic. Being able to say no makes yes a choice.
- *Moderation is key.*<sup>15</sup> The idea is not to be in a heady state of ecstasy at all times, but rather to learn how to *sense* when something is good for

you, to be able to feel what enough is. Related: pleasure is not money. Pleasure is not even related to money, at least not in a positive way. Having resources to buy unlimited amounts of pleasure leads to excess, and excess totally destroys the spiritual experience of pleasure.

### A Word on Excess

Pleasure activism is not about generating or indulging in excess. I want to say this early and often, to myself and to you. Sometimes when I bring up this work to people, I can see a bacchanalia unfold in their eyes, and it makes me feel tender. I think because most of us are so repressed, our fantasies go to extremes to counterbalance all that contained longing. Pleasure activism is about learning what it means to be satisfiable, to generate, from within and from between us, an abundance from which we can all have enough.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the reason so few of us have a healthy relationship with pleasure is because a small minority of our species hoards the excess of resources, creating a false scarcity and then trying to sell us joy, sell us back to ourselves. Some think it belongs to them, that it is their inheritance. Some think it a sign of their worth, their superiority. On a broad level, white people and men have been the primary recipients of this delusion, the belief that they deserve to have excess, while the majority of others don't have enough ... or further, that the majority of the world exists in some way to please them.

And so many of us have been trained into the delusion that we must accumulate excess, even at the cost of vast inequality, in order to view our lives as complete or successful.

A central aspect of pleasure activism is tapping into the natural abundance that exists within and between us, and between our species and this planet. Pleasure is not one of the spoils of capitalism. It is what our bodies, our human systems, are structured for; it is the aliveness and awakening, the gratitude and humility, the joy and celebration of being miraculous.

So rather than encouraging moderation over and over, I want to ask you to relinquish your own longing for excess and to stay mindful of your relationship to enough. How much sex would be enough? How high would be high enough? How much love would feel like enough? Can you imagine being healed enough? Happy enough? Connected enough? Having enough space in your life to actually live it? Can you imagine being free enough?

Do you understand that you, as you are, who you are, is enough?

## Glossary

Why a glossary? Language changes so quickly these days. The right way to speak about people, about identities, about gender, about geography—everything is in motion on a regular basis. I know that in writing this book I am creating something instantly dated. Given that god is change, there are some terms in this book that I want to be super clear about.

*Bitch* is one of my favorite words. When I say it, I mean you are fierce, I love you, wow, that's the boss, be yourself, yes yes yes.

*Fat* is a word I am reclaiming for myself, especially when connected to sexy, #sexyfat. I am thick, I am big, but most of what gives me this outstanding shape and feel is actual fat.

*Somatics* is

a path, a methodology, a change theory, by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. Embodied transformation is foundational change that shows in our actions, ways of being, relating, and perceiving. It is transformation that sustains over time. Somatics pragmatically supports our values and actions becoming aligned. It helps us to develop depth and the capacity to feel ourselves, each other and life around us. Somatics builds in us the ability to act from strategy and empathy, and teaches us to be able to assess conditions and 'what is' clearly. Somatics is a practice-able theory of change that can move us toward individual, community and collective liberation. Somatics works through the body, engaging us in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision and action.<sup>17</sup>

I teach and reference somatics often in these pages.

*Pleasure* is “a feeling of happy satisfaction or enjoyment” and “to give sexual enjoyment or satisfaction to another.”

*Erotic* is “relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement.”

Finally, I believe we are actively moving toward a nonbinary gender future—one in which gender is understood as a spectrum instead of a binary with two options to move between. I write as someone raised in, interacting with, and

intentionally disrupting the gender binary. I respect how people identify themselves, what they know themselves to be.

When I use *women* in this text I mean any and all people who identify as women. This includes those who identify as cis, non-trans, trans, and anyone else who identifies with the words “woman” and “women.” The same is true for *men*—I include any and all who identify with the language of “man” and “men.” *Nonbinary* and *gender nonconforming* in this text refers to people who don’t identify with women/men binary terminology. If the content requires a distinction that draws on a specific *trans* experience—which includes the experiences of those who identify as transsexual or transgender, with or without surgery—then I (or the writer of that piece) will make that distinction. In this text, the pronouns will reflect the identity of the subjects being discussed—he, she, they, et cetera. If this is being read in a future in which this language has evolved, then please know I would be evolving right along with you.

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<sup>1</sup> If you can, I suggest that you have an orgasm before diving into this book and at the beginning of each new section. I am not joking—an orgasm a day keeps the doctor away and the worries at bay.

<sup>2</sup> “Nibblings” is a gender-neutral word for referring to the children of your sibling, introduced to me by Tanuja Jagernauth.

<sup>3</sup> People also ask me for directions a lot, even when I am in a new place and feel lost.

<sup>4</sup> You might be thinking that movies aren’t real life. I am thinking that the line between the real and the imagined is a construct.

<sup>5</sup> See the essays “Love as Political Resistance” (p. 59) and “On Nonmonogamy” (p. 409) in this book for more on relationship anarchy.

<sup>6</sup> I recommend putting them in a fruity smoothie or dark chocolate.

<sup>7</sup> See the essay “Ecstasy Saved My Life” in this book (p. 263).

<sup>8</sup> I feel your doubt. It was three sets of paired bite marks on my left arm and two sets on the right. The hospital didn’t believe me and said it was from dangerous urban composting. Like vampires don’t like leaves.

<sup>9</sup> Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds., *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 264–74.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Strozzi-Heckler, *The Leadership Dojo: Build Your Foundation as an Exemplary Leader* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 2007), 59.

<sup>13</sup> I owe this one to my incomparable, brave, and brilliant Canadian woe, Jodie. Folks who are rooted in sensing and seeking pleasure, and bring that energy into their work and relationships, are shining a light for others—there is another path that isn’t full of stress, self-doubt, pain, victimization, and suffering. There is a path in which everything is learning, playing, practicing, doing things anew.

<sup>14</sup> This is true in sex; it’s true in work; it’s just true.

<sup>15</sup> But as Maya Angelou once told Oprah, even moderation needs moderation.

16 My first memory of this concept, of being satisfiable, was from Staci Haines.

17 “What is Somatics?,” Generative Somatics, accessed July 23, 2018,  
<http://www.generativesomatics.org/content/what-somatics>.