

Also by Tressie McMillan Cottom

*Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit  
Colleges in the New Economy*

*For-Profit Universities: The Shifting Landscape  
of Marketized Higher Education*

(co-editor with William A. Darity Jr.)

# **THICK**

## **And Other Essays**

**TRESSIE McMILLAN COTTOM**



NEW YORK  
LONDON

*Fabulousness doesn't take a lot of money. It requires high levels of creativity, imagination and originality; it's dangerous, political, risky, and largely practiced by queer, trans, trans-feminine people of color or other marginalized groups; it's about making a spectacle of oneself in a world that seeks to suppress and undervalue fabulous people.*

—Madison Moore, "Fabulousness"<sup>1</sup>

*What do you call an educated negro with a B.A. or an M.A., with a B.S., or a Ph.D.? You call him a nigger.*

—Malcolm X<sup>2</sup>

**E**verybody needs a crew. I have many because I am embarrassingly fortunate. One of my crews gathers sporadically to discuss culture, politics, or economics when something in the zeitgeist is especially interesting to us. Jamelle Bouie is a political editor at Slate magazine. Gene Demby is a co-host of the NPR podcast Code Switch when he is not writing, producing, and running distances better left driven. And the mastermind behind it all is Aisha Harris, writer and producer (also at Slate). In the twilight of Barack Obama's presidency, black writers and pundits and thinkers were tired. Many of us had powered through what felt like countless videos of black men and women being executed by the police. We had watched or felt or experienced

*the civil unrests in Ferguson and Baltimore and Charlotte. We had marched in New York and Atlanta and Chicago and Oakland and Boston. We reported on and analyzed Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. And then we watched our colleagues and intellectual ballasts rationalize Donald Trump, dismiss our expertise, and mock our concerns that he could win.*

*What had been called “the race beat” in the 1960s was just as exhausting and demoralizing in 2016. A joke among those of us who study race is that we never get to move beyond 101, because the world around us is always stuck in first gear.*

*Our crew wanted out of first gear. In 2018 we sat down to discuss the Starbucks Incident. It is now part of the year in social media clips of white people calling the police on black people for merely existing.<sup>3</sup> There was the Starbucks manager who called the police on the black male patrons who did not buy a cup of coffee quickly enough for her liking. Alison Ettl did not like the young black girl who was selling cold waters on a hot day on a public sidewalk, so she pretended to call the police on her. Some black folks*

*in Oakland decided to BBQ in the park (because out west they don’t know the difference between a BBQ and a cook-out, but I digress). Jennifer Schulte, a white woman, called the police on them for using charcoal grills after reportedly tossing around the word nigger.*

*A twelve-year-old boy in Ohio started a grass-cutting business. A white woman thought he had cut too close to her yard, so she called the police on him. A black man was listening to a Bikram yoga CD in his car before a class when a white woman called the police on him for making it hard for her to live. A black family in North Carolina bought a home in a community with a pool—no small feat given the decline in black homeownership after the Great Recession. One of their neighbors promptly called the police on them when they used it. It’s a genre.*

*Throughout the public discussions about “white people calling the cops on black people who are just living” is the idea that black people were, in almost all of these cases, buying something. Or they had rightfully bought something: a house, a meal, a cup of coffee. People made many appeals to the right of consumption. Americans have the*

*right to buy! It is a tenuous right indicative of our consumer society. Being a consumer, or not, should not condition your civil rights. That kind of thinking is how we end up with cruel policies that police where homeless people can sit in public or where poor people can stand without violating an ordinance. The idea is also ridiculous for how it ignores the history of black people buying wrong. Like many ideas about race, these notions are contradictory and yet live side by side in our popular imagination.*

*Black people deserve to consume in peace, but also, black people consume wrong. Compounding the complexity is the assumption that most black people are poor. Not only are black people wasteful, but they are poor and wasteful. Indeed, our poor consumption patterns are often offered up as the reason why we are more likely to be poor. The following essay was written a few years before the crew sat down to talk about the crisis of black consumption in white spaces. But it is part of that story.*

Every time there is a national news story about a black shopper harassed in a store, there is a predictable backlash to the

miscarriage of justice. We tend to move quickly from being outraged that it happened to critiquing why a black person was shopping there at all. Much like we interrogate what a woman was wearing when she was raped, we look for ways to assign personal responsibility for structural injustices to bodies we collectively do not value. If you are poor, why do you spend money on useless status symbols like handbags and belts and clothes and shoes and televisions and cars? One thing I've learned is that one person's illogical belief is another person's survival skill. And nothing is more logical than trying to survive.

My family is a classic black American migration family. We have rural southern roots, moved north, and almost all have returned. I grew up watching my great-grandmother, and later my grandmother and mother, use our minimal resources to help other people make ends meet. We were those good pors, the kind who live mostly within our means. We had a little luck when a male relative got extra military pay when he came home a paraplegic or used the VA to buy a Jim Walter house.<sup>4</sup> If you were really blessed, when a relative died with a paid-up insurance policy, you

might be gifted a lump sum to buy the land that Jim Walter used as collateral to secure your home lease.

That is how generational wealth happens where I am from: lose a leg, a part of your spine, die right, and maybe you can lease-to-own a modular home. We had a little of that kind of rural black wealth, so we were often in a position to help folks less fortunate. But perhaps the greatest resource we had was a bit more education.

We were big readers and we encouraged the girl children, especially, to go to some kind of college. Consequently, my grandmother and mother had a particular set of social resources that helped us navigate mostly white bureaucracies to our benefit. We could, as my grandfather would say, talk like white folks. We loaned that privilege out a lot. I remember my mother taking a next-door neighbor down to the social service agency. The elderly woman had been denied benefits to care for the granddaughter she was raising. Her denial had come in the genteel bureaucratic way—lots of waiting, forms, and deadlines she could not quite navigate. I watched my mother put on her best Diana Ross *Mahogany* outfit: a camel-colored cape with matching slacks and knee-

high boots. I was miffed, as only an only child could be, about sharing my mother's time with the neighbor girl. I must have said something about why we had to do this. The Vivian fixed me with a stare as she was slipping on her pearl earrings and told me that people who can do, must do.

It took half a day, but something about my mother's performance of respectable black person—her Queen's English, her *Mahogany* outfit, her straight bob and pearl earrings—got done what the elderly lady next door had not been able to get done in over a year. I learned, watching my mother, that there was a price we had to pay to signal to gatekeepers that we were worthy of engaging. It meant dressing well and speaking well. It might not work. It likely wouldn't work, but on the off chance that it would, you had to try. It was unfair, but, as The Vivian always said, "Life isn't fair, little girl."

I internalized that lesson and I think it has worked out for me, if unevenly. A woman at Belk once refused to show me the Dooney & Bourke purse I was interested in buying. The Vivian once made a salesgirl cry after she ignored us in an empty store. I have walked away from many a hotly

desired purchase, like the impractical off-white winter coat I desperately wanted, after some bigot at the counter insulted me and my mother. But I have a Ph.D. and I support myself by aping the white male privileged life of the mind. It's a mixed bag. Of course, the trick is you can never know the counterfactual of your life. There is no evidence of access denied. Who knows what I was not granted for not enacting the right status behaviors or symbols at the right time for an agreeable authority?

Respectability rewards are a crapshoot, but we do what we can within the limits of the constraints imposed by a complex set of structural and social interactions designed to limit access to status, wealth, and power. I do not know how much my mother spent on her camel-colored cape or knee-high boots, but I know that whatever she paid was returned in hard-to-measure dividends. How do you put a price on the double-take of a clerk at the welfare office who decides you might not be like those other trifling women in the waiting room and provides an extra bit of information about completing a form that you would not have known to ask about? What is the retail value of a school principal

who defers a bit more to your child, because your mother's presentation of self signals that she might unleash the bureaucratic savvy of middle-class parents to advocate for her child? I didn't know the price of these critical engagements with organizations and gatekeepers relative to our poverty when I was growing up. But I am living proof of its investment yield.

Why do poor people make stupid, illogical decisions to buy status symbols? For the same reason all but only the most wealthy buy status symbols, I suppose. We want to belong. And not just for the psychic rewards, but belonging to one group at the right time can mean the difference between unemployment and employment, a good job as opposed to a bad job, housing or a shelter, and so on. Someone mentioned on Twitter that poor people can be presentable with affordable options from Kmart. But the issue is not about being presentable.

Presentable is the bare minimum of social civility. It means being clean, not smelling, wearing shirts and shoes for service, and the like. Presentable as a sufficient condition for gainful, dignified work or successful social interactions

is a privilege. It's the aging white hippie who can cut the ponytail of his youthful rebellion and walk into senior management, while aging Black Panthers can never completely outrun the effects of stigmatization against which they were courting a revolution. Presentable is relative and, like life, it ain't fair. In contrast, "acceptable" is about gaining access to a limited set of rewards granted upon group membership.

A manager at the apartment complex where I worked while in college told me, repeatedly, that she knew I was "okay" because my little Nissan was clean. That I had worn a Jones New York suit to the interview really sealed the deal. She could call the suit by name, because she asked me about the label in the interview. Another hiring manager at my first professional job looked me up and down in the waiting room, cataloging my outfit, and later told me that she had decided I was too classy to be on the call center floor. I was hired as a trainer instead. The difference meant no shift work, greater prestige, better pay, and a baseline salary for all my future employment.

I have about a half dozen other stories like this. What is remarkable is not that this happened. There is empirical evi-

dence that women and people of color are judged by their appearances differently and more harshly than are white men. What is remarkable is that these gatekeepers, in one way or another, actually told me why I was deemed acceptable. They wanted me to know how I had properly signaled that I was not a typical black or a typical woman, two identities that in combination are almost always conflated with being poor.

I sat in on an interview for a new administrative assistant once. My regional vice president was doing the hiring. A long line of mostly black and brown women applied because we were a cosmetology school. Trade schools at the margins of skilled labor in a gendered field are necessarily classed and raced. I found one candidate particularly charming. She was trying to get out of a salon because ten hours on her feet cutting hair would average out to an hourly rate below minimum wage. A desk job with forty set hours and medical benefits represented mobility for her. When she left, my VP turned to me and said, "Did you see that tank top she had on under her blouse?! OMG, you wear a silk shell, not a tank top!" Both of the women were black. The VP had constructed her job as senior management. She drove a brand-new



BMW because she “should treat herself,” and liked to tell us that ours was an image business. A girl wearing a cotton tank top as a shell was incompatible with BMW-driving VPs in the image business.

Gatekeeping is a complex job of managing boundaries that do not just define others but also define ourselves. Status symbols—silk shells, designer shoes, luxury handbags—become keys to unlock these gates. If I need a job that will save my lower back and move my baby from Medicaid to an HMO, how much should I spend signaling to people like my former VP that I will not compromise her status by opening the door to me? Maybe that candidate could not afford a proper shell. I will never know. But I do know that had she gone hungry for two days to pay for it or missed wages for a trip to the store to buy it, she may have been rewarded a job that could have lifted her above minimum wage. Shells aren't designer handbags, perhaps. But a cosmetology school in a strip mall isn't a job at Bank of America, either.

At the heart of incredulous statements about the poor decisions poor people make is a belief that we, the hard-

working, sensible not-poor, would never be like them. We would know better. We would know to save our money, eschew status symbols, cut coupons, practice puritanical sacrifice to amass a million dollars. There is a regular news story of a lunch lady who, unbeknownst to all who knew her, died rich and leaves it all to a cat or a charity or some such. Books about the modest lives of the rich like to tell us how they drive Buicks instead of BMWs. What we forget, if we ever knew, is that what we know now about status and wealth creation and sacrifice are predicated on who we are—that is, not poor.

If you change the conditions of your not-poor status, you change everything you know as a result of being a not-poor. You have no idea what you would do if you were poor until you are poor. And not intermittently poor or formerly not-poor, but born poor, expected to be poor, and treated by bureaucracies, gatekeepers, and well-meaning respectability authorities as inherently poor. Then, and only then, will you understand the relative value of a ridiculous status symbol to someone who intuits that they cannot afford to not have it.