

My Head Is a Part of My Body and My Middle Name is Makeba

Kiese Laymon

As a child, the word “crazy” bounced around every black space I called home. “Crazy” was a destination and an origin. “Crazy” was at once a pejorative and wholly emblematic of our abundance. I loved the word “crazy.” I used it a lot in my oral communication with folks I loved. I used it to describe folks I despised. When we said “crazy” in my Mississippi village, it either had 1.5 syllables or 3.0 syllables. There was no way to actually spell the 1.5 syllable version. It wasn’t at all “cray.” It was more “like craz-e” if the hyphen was extremely faint, truncated, and the long “e” was sliced in half to where it almost looked like a sick “c” barely sticking out its tongue.”

The 3.0 version, reserved for extremely crazy shit, was “cuh-raze-ae.”

I want to use the word “crazy” in more of my writing. Instead, I use the language of “health” “healing” “mental illness” and “reckoning”, but rarely do I admit that I am indeed horrified of hospitals and terrified of crazy racist doctors. Some of this has to do with the fact that I’ve always been treated like a poor big Black man, even when I was a poor young Black boy. I’ve never had a tender medical experience in my life. Instead of going to doctors, who I assume will treat me like a nigger, I’ve avoided doctors until the blood in my body hisses like boiling poison.

I’ve spent every day of my middle-aged life avoiding light, working and eating in bed, never eating in front of people, not answering the phone when family calls, not answering the door when friends come by, abstaining from that which brings me joy, expecting to die tomorrow, and hiding from people I know when I went out in public. When I was around people, at the strangest times, I’d often get this fuzzy feeling in my head and heart like I was about to stop breathing. When a friend found me balled up on a wooden bench at work, they took me directly to the emergency room. The emergency room was packed and I convinced my friend that I would call a doctor and make an appointment as soon as possible if they would let me go home and just lie down.

Three weeks later, when I had another experience of nearly passing out in my classroom, I went to the doctor. The doctor, a happy go-lucky white man in his late thirties, checked my vitals. He checked my blood. He checked my heart. Initially, he said that they need to send me to the emergency room because something on the tests “didn’t look right.” He ran the test again and said, “Oh, it’s fine. We just need to schedule an appointment with a cardiologist to see why you keep feeling like you’re going to faint.”

The doctor did not say one word about mental health. And my crazy ass thought that was a win.

I went to the cardiologist the next day. He strapped a monitor to my chest to monitor my heart rate for the next week. At the end of the week, the doctor said there was a slight murmur but everything with my heart was fine. The following day, I kept feeling like I was going to die. I kept avoiding people, kept swimming in the shame of professional, romantic, economic, and health failure.

It wasn't until I talked with Dr. Imani Walker about a project on which we were collaborating that I understood some of what was happening to my body, my head, and my relationship with "crazy." Dr. Imani did more than give me the language of "depression" and "anxiety" and "chronic fatigue" and "disordered eating." She told me that everything I thought was wrong with me was everything the nation engineered to ail Black folk in this country.

My first question to Imani was, "What's crazy?"

After my conversation with Imani, like a lot of my friends who regularly go to therapy, I started talking that *therapy talk*. I used words like "sourcing" and "sublimate" in conversations that had little to do with misdirected sourcing or sublimation. That lasted about a week. I've still never been to therapy, but I love talking to Black folks who just got out of therapy. Many of those friends tell me that I can't use the word "crazy" because I've never been diagnosed as crazy. They say this partially because they think my crazy ass needs therapy and partially because they really understand the brutality of ableism in this nation. I love my friends and/but my response to this is often, "Shid. Nigga, I'm supposed to wait on a fatphobic, anti-black doctor to tell me I'm crazy before I can use the word crazy? Shid."

I then usually go off about how folks who literally don't have the means to go into a doctor and get diagnosed as crazy shouldn't be forbidden from using a word that makes me feel safe. My friends say, "True. Now stop hiding behind poverty. You ain't been poor in a minute."

My problem, I guess, is that I don't think being crazy should stop us from being compassionate and actively regretful about structural or interpersonal harm we've caused. My friends who have been diagnosed as doctor-crazy say it's Black-crazy to think like this. I say that I don't think we've really considered whose doctor-crazy shields them from consequence and whose Black-crazy is fuel for uber disciplining and layers of humiliation.

Part of my crazy compels me to imagine, and really obsess, over the radical possibilities of art. The last few weeks of summer, though, that radical imagining necessitated commemorating radical realities I've yet to accept. I am a writer. I am a Black man. I am crazy. Actually, I am the child of two equally crazy kids from rural Mississippi. My crazy mama lives alone on the east coast. My crazy father lives alone on the west coast.

My crazy ass lives alone in Mississippi.

I have never seen my parents share loving touch with each other or any partner, yet I know as young folks from rural Mississippi, they lovingly collaborated on my name. “Kiese” was my father’s best friend in the Congo, which is where he was when I was born. My father says his friend, Kiese, was crazy as hell. Mama was unconscious for thirty hours after they cut her belly open and pulled me out feet first. When Mama regained consciousness, she found that my father sent the names “Kiese” and “Citoyen” over to Grandmama, who was with Mama every minute of labor.

Mama really wanted my middle name to be “Makeba” after the South African singer, Miriam Makeba. Now, a radical name does not a radical friendship make, but my name is Kiese Makeba Laymon because, at some point, no matter how short-lived, my crazy ass mama and my crazy ass father were invested enough in a crazy-ass radical friendship to collaborate on a name their child would spend a life time revising his crazy self into.

Over this pandemic, I’ve been doing something called “Ode and Apology.” Get it? Like “Owed an apology.” Anyway, I started writing odes and apologies to folks I’ve disrespected and harmed. That was tough, brutal. But it was nowhere near as hard as writing odes and apologies to body parts I’ve mangled through neglect. So far, I’ve written to both hips, my eye lashes, the folds in my neck, my wrists, the right side of my groin, my molars, the mole on my left ass cheek, and the backs of both thighs.

The hardest ode and an apology was written to my head, my brain, because I seldom think of my head or my brain as part of my body. My head, too big to naturally come out of my Mama, has helped me fly underneath the dirt of Mississippi. It’s helped me float when my heart has been waterlogged. When my head has begged for help, I thought I was giving it help in the form of rigorous routines of writing and reading. Our relationship is asymmetrical. My head bails me out. I punish it for bailing me out. It punishes me for punishing it and I tell it to shut the fuck up because we’re trying to work.

I actually don’t know if I am doctor-crazy. But I know my head needs help. I know that any love I purport to have for any human in this world is not nearly as radical or tender as it can be as long as I fail to give my head help. It’s crazy what this nation does to our heads. It’s crazier that many of us, who have the means, still think our heads are undeserving of help. I do not trust doctors in this nation, but my head is worth risking humiliation so we can breathe.

This is not the ending this piece calls for. It is, however, an ending that is fair to my head. I am sorry. I want to be better at love. My head is a part of my body and my middle name is Makeba.

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