

THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW

Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Tressie McMillan Cottom

The April 13 episode of “The Ezra Klein Show.”

April 13, 2021

Every Tuesday and Friday, Ezra Klein invites you into a conversation about something that matters, like today’s episode with Tressie McMillan Cottom. Listen wherever you get your podcasts.

Transcripts of our episodes are made available as soon as possible. They are not fully edited for grammar or spelling.

EZRA KLEIN: I’m Ezra Klein, and this is “The Ezra Klein Show.”

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So when I do these introductions, I try to have a particular thread I’m following, something to set up the main argument or the main question of the show, but that’s not possible today. It wouldn’t do this justice. There’s too much in this show for me to wrap it into one idea. It is, as my guest might say, really thick, and it is great. Tressie McMillan Cottom is a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

She’s the author of the book “Lower Ed” and then the wonderful essay collection “Thick,” which was a National Book Award finalist in 2019. She won a MacArthur “genius” grant. She’s a co-host of the podcast “Hear to Slay,” and she’s just one of those people who you can ask her any question, any question at all, and you just get a sparkingly interesting answer.

Prepping for this was intimidating because her work is just vast, from academic research on how for-profit colleges generate inequality, to sprawling essays on Dolly Parton, to these analysis of how beauty functions in contemporary America, to ideas about the roles hustle plays in the American economy, everything, everything, everything in between.

But in part, I just wanted to understand how does she take on so many different topics constructively. Like, what is her process for being able to say something useful as she moves into these different areas. It's a lot to find something intelligent to say about, but as you'll hear, there's also one idea that thrums the core of a lot of this, and that is the way status structures reinforces the hierarchies of American life of who gets listened to and who gets seen and why, but this is honestly one of those conversations that could have gone for four more hours. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. As always, my email is ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com. Here's Tressie McMillan Cottom.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So something I always admire about your work is the range of topics you're able to write in and the range of topics you write about and this crazy group of registers you do from Twitter, to Substack, to academic work. So I wanted to start here. How did you train yourself to write in so many different ways?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Oh, man. I wish I could say that I did train myself to write in so many ways. I think what happens instead is that — first of all, I'm a very curious person. I'm in these spaces anyway. I am an internet person for better or for worse, right? I came of age as a public person and like live journal, right? Like, I have followed the development of these spaces just like any other person, I think, of my generation, though. That's just kind of where. That's where we were hanging out.

And when I'm in a space, this predates being a sociologist or an academic. When I'm in a space, I'm very much a one step, in one step removed kind of person. I'm watching the thing I'm participating in, can't turn that off. It's just what I am and who I am. And so it makes sense for me that if I'm on Twitter, I'm also thinking about Twitter, right? I'm thinking about, why are all these people here? What's the audience looking? What's that about? And so that comes out in the things that I'm interested in. So that's one thing.

I think training myself to write to that audience — understanding it is one thing, to be fair. Understanding everything as a genre is another thing, and there was a moment when I realized this is just like learning how to write the five paragraph essay, right, as opposed to a long form piece of creative nonfiction. Every medium has a genre, and some of that, cracking some of it really is just fun for me.

It's like, OK. Let me see if I can do this. I can't do them all, to be fair. There are definitely some genres, especially ones that lean more visual, because I'm a textual kind of girl. And I just don't get like visual and editing, but some of it is just fun for me to see if I can remix the genre. First of all, can I capture it? And then can I remix it a little? Can I make an essay you

have like the freewheeling feeling of Twitter? Can I surprise an audience that thought they were showing up for like a first person essay with a little bit of empirical thinking? Can I just sort of surprise people? That's part of the fun for me.

EZRA KLEIN: How do the genres change the way you think? When you sit down and you begin writing in the academic register versus the personal essay register, does it change the kinds of thoughts you have?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes. What will often happen is I sit down, and there's something I want to write about or I'm obligated to write about. That happens sometimes, too. Like, I just got to write about it. And one of the first questions I kind of ask myself is, what is the right speed for this argument? So I actually think that one of the things that happens in writing in different registers is that you become much more reflexive about, should this have just been a tweet, which is totally fair, right?

And I think it's a fair thing to say. Sometimes I'll start on an argument, and I'll go, this is not substantive enough for like this genre. And I'll even push back sometimes now, like editors or people I'm collaborating with and go, y'all, I think we just mean to write a quick write up and move on. One of the things the academics are taken a task for is bloviating and overcomplicating simple things, and I really do think we could be set free a little bit if we would just admit that sometimes the thing we turned into like an academic piece probably just should have been either a first person essay or a tweet or somewhere in between, but status drives us sometimes more than the question we're asking.

But I sit down and I go, OK, what is the right speed for this? What's the right genre? When will I know that this argument is done? I like a complete argument. I like to walk away from something and say I left it all on the court, and sometimes that's 240 characters. Sometimes it's 20,000 words, and just being like attuned to that, that those are options. Those are choices. I ask myself that a lot when I sit down and I start with an argument. What's the right size?

EZRA KLEIN: I feel like I used to be able to ask that question of myself. I came up as a blogger, and I'm an internet person.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: And I would write little posts and long ones. And I swear to you, I cannot, no matter how hard I try now, write something that is in between 280 characters and 1,800 words.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: It's one or the other?

EZRA KLEIN: I completely lost the register, like all the way in between. It's like a book. It's like a long essay, or it's a tweet.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yup.

EZRA KLEIN: And God forbid you have 400 words worth of something to say. I just can't seem to stop then.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Because then you just feel like you talk — it feels like a stub, right?

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I call those stubs. I've got so many of those. It's something like 350 words or something, and I'm not sure where that would go. I think what you're asking is for us to bring back Blogger. I think that's what you're suggesting we do.

EZRA KLEIN: Well, I'm always asking for us to bring back blogging.

[LAUGHING]

There is a nostalgia, oftentimes, among people who came up in it, for the internet of the aughts.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. The old internet.

EZRA KLEIN: Do you think that's nostalgia, or do you think something was lost?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Hmm. OK. So I now work with a lot of internet people. I'm in an information school at a university. And so a lot of my very good friends are those people, so I want to tiptoe carefully. I do think that there was a clubbiness and a camaraderie, even among people who politically disagreed. There was a class of thinkers, a class of writers who came up in that web 2.0 that does feel like, yeah, we lost something there.

There was a humanity there for good or for bad. Humanity is messy, but there was a sense that those ideas were attached to people, and there were things driving those people, there's a reason they had chosen to be in that space before it all became about chasing an audience in a platform and turning that into influencer and translating that into that — before all that happened, the professionalization of it all. And that's what I think we're missing when we become nostalgic for that web 2.0. I think it's the people in the machine.

Having said that, I am very resistant to nostalgia as a thing because usually what we are nostalgic for is a time that just was not that great for a lot of people. And so what we were usually a really nostalgic for is a time when we didn't have to think so much about who was

missing in the room, who wasn't at the table. So when I talk to friends, and especially younger people coming up behind us either in the internet or in writing spaces, we're like, that time was horrible for young queer people.

They talk about looking for little safe pockets of space in web 2.0 world where it was still very OK to be homophobic, for example, in those spaces and our casual language and how we structured that kind of thing. And they love being able to leave that part behind in this new world of whatever the web is now, both a consolidated and a disaggregated new web.

That's why I'm like resistant to nostalgia. At the same time, I'm like, yeah. I also laugh and go, I really miss having a blog. In some ways, coming back to the newsletter, and Substack was kind part of that. It's me being nostalgic for having a place where I could put thoughts that didn't fit into any other discourse or genre, and I wanted a space where I could talk to people who were actually interacting like real people. They weren't acting like bots, or trolls, or whatever your internet persona is.

So, I mean, I say I'm resistant to nostalgia. I just try not to reproduce, but even I get a little — I'll always have a soft spot for Blogger, which is coincidentally my first "where I state" space on Blogger.

EZRA KLEIN: Yup. Me too.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: [LAUGHS] I'll always be a little romantic about it.

EZRA KLEIN: But I think you're right about that criticism of it, too. Something that, for all that I can tip into nostalgia, something that I think is often missed in today's conversation is the conversation has never been wider.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes.

EZRA KLEIN: People talk all about things they can't say, but it has never been wider.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yup.

EZRA KLEIN: There's never been a larger allowable space of things you could say.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: That's right.

EZRA KLEIN: And people have also never been more pissed about how it feels to participate in it. I don't want to say never, but broadly, there is an intensity to that conversation that is distinct, and I don't think those things are unrelated, right? I think it is the wideness of the conversation and the fact that there are so many people you might hear from that make you feel cautious and insecure and unsafe, and the good of it is the bad of it.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Exactly. One of the things I like to say to people is that we think that broadening access in any realm — we do this with everything, by the way. It's such an American way to approach the world. We think that broadening access will broaden access on the terms of the people who have benefited from it being narrowed, which is just so counterintuitive.

Broadening access doesn't mean that everybody has the experience that I, privileged person, had in the discourse. Broadening it means that we are all equally uncomfortable, right? That's actually what pluralism and plurality is. It isn't that everybody is going to come in and have the same comforts that privilege and exclusion had extended to a small group of people. It's that now everybody sits at the table, and nobody knows the exact right thing to say about the other people.

Well, that's fair. That means we all now have to be thoughtful. We all have to consider, oh, wait a minute. Is that what we say in this room? We all have to reconsider what the norms are, and that was the promise of like expanding the discourse, and that's exactly what we've gotten. And if that means that I'm not sure about letting it rip on a joke, that's probably a pretty good thing.

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah. Jennifer Richardson, the psychologist at Yale, once called this a democratization of discomfort to me.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes.

EZRA KLEIN: And I think it's such a good line. And something it always makes me think about is that there are a lot of us who came up in an earlier iteration, not just of the internet, but of journalism or cultural criticism or whatever it might be, and there were certain things it selected for. You know what I mean? There was like the 80s "New Republic" people who were really selected for slashing counterintuitive, provocative, and somewhat offensive essay-writing, and just — this era requires different virtues, and that's the conversation I almost never hear people have.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: That maybe just the new internet or this moment, to be in one of these highly public and very privileged positions, you're going to need to develop a different set of virtues and competencies and how to conduct a conversation and how to speak to people that are just hard. It's just going to be really hard.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. Yeah. And human nature is resistant to learning. I mean, nobody knows that more than people who teach for a living. But for all we valorize learning and education, human nature really trends towards inertia, and every layer of

privilege you layer on top of somebody makes that more true. And so what we're fundamentally, I think, saying to people is — who achieved something where part of the promise of the achievement was that I'll never have to learn anything new again, right?

This was the promise, right? I'm now the editor. I'm the gatekeeper or whatever, and the whole promise of that was I'll never have to worry about learning anything new again. And then we come to them and we go, no. You got to relitigate. You got to reconsider what your role is, and now there actually are people who can hold you accountable for that in a way that wasn't always true.

And I found it to be true in every space I've ever been in, every organization. It is true of myself. Nobody likes being reminded that they are not done yet, that there's still more work for them to do. And that's, I think, what we're fundamentally saying to people, and they resist that because that's human nature. It's just that some people get to resist it in a way more aggressive fashion than other people.

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah. Yuval Levin, who's this conservative thinker, I once heard him say that almost all change is generational. Almost all real change that happens is when a new generation comes, and they are able to change. And I hadn't thought about it quite that way before. But now when I look at, say, Congress, and I see the way, particularly, the Democratic Party is changing, or I look at what's happening in online discourse, some of it just feels to me — I'm of a different generation, even than some of the young writers now — and you feel a little left behind. There is more change generation to generation than there is within generations, and maybe it's for exactly that reason.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. Nothing is funny to me than when I realize, we wrote all of this stuff. We did all this stuff. We threw out all these theories of change, and then people believed us. That's literally what happened. You've got young people who said, wait a minute. Gender is a spectrum? OK. I'm a live it like a spectrum. And we're like, no, but we didn't mean that.

Really, what fundamentally happened is we hypothesized and imagined all of this stuff, wrote it into the ether, and then we're surprised that people actually took it up and lived it. That does happen faster, as you point out. We do owe that to the internet. The generations are now like four and a half years long, but it happens faster, and so we feel older faster, and we feel outdated faster.

But I get so inspired by the people who, within a generation, have resisted becoming that old person. And I'm just like, OK. I'm just going to double down, right? I think we've got a choice. You can become like the Angela Davis of the world, or you're like, OK, I hear you. Each new generation comes along, and I hear you. I got to get with it, and I've seen Angela do that in real time.

Like a young person will stand up in the audience and go, and we say “sibs” now. And she’s like, I’m with you. Gotcha. Like, you just take it, and you’re supposed to go. And I think we’ve got a choice. You can become that person within your generation who lives in that uncomfortable space, or you can become the person — I won’t name a name — but you can become the person who doesn’t and resists it. I just don’t want them writing about me like that later. So I’m really shooting for the Angela Davis model.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me ask you about your own generational change. You have this line I love where you say that all of your essays begin with a question of why me and not my grandmother. Tell me about your grandmother.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Oh, thank you. I’d love to tell you about my grandmother. I’ve been thinking about her so much lately, in part because I’ve moved back home to North Carolina, and that’s where my family is, and so getting nostalgic, and because we’ve been trapped in the house. What else is there to do? But my grandmother was a part of this sweeping — talk about a generational change — sweeping generational change in the United States of America, really, I think in the Western world when we think about how central the United States is to that definition.

She’s the tail-end of the Great Migration generation, Black people who left point South for points North and West with millions of other people, spans about a generation and a half of people if we use the big definition of generations, but I think something really just coheres that generation of African-Americans in particular. They’re the ones who made really foundational decisions about whether to stay or to leave.

And my grandmother was one of the people who left, and she was probably the least likely of her family members to have been predicted to leave. I mean, this was not a brave woman. I love her dearly. She’s sweet as she could be, but this was the woman who had 19 locks on the door. She wasn’t exactly a pioneer and that pioneering spirit. What she was pragmatic, however.

And if jobs were in the North and that’s where you went — but I think about how much she probably had to fight her nature to do what she needed to do. She was creative. I get so much of, I think, my creative energies from her, a big reader, which all of us are in the family. But even in a family of readers, my grandmother was the reader, really wide reading. She read anything, and I think I got that from her, too.

Very agnostic on genre, and I don’t care. I’ll read anything. I got that from her. And so when I’m thinking about why me and not her, of all of those instincts that I inherited from her and all those things she socialized me into, she’s just, for me, the concrete example of how you can be everything that a culture values and not be in the right body for the culture to value

it, and that is going to shape the limit of your life. It is my understanding of this is what inequality and stratification looks like in a very real way. My grandmother should have had my life, basically.

EZRA KLEIN: And what life did she have?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: She had a hard life. She moved from rural Eastern North Carolina where hard life meant partially sharecropping, leasing yourself out in the summers to pick tobacco that was left over after the machines that come through. She went into labor with my mother in the middle of a field and almost did not survive childbirth. So she leaves that to go to Harlem, which would have been an exciting time by all accounts, but another hard transition, small, crowded living conditions, very different from what she'd come from.

For many, many years, she went back and forth between working for Jewish families as a domestic worker to, again, working in the garment district and just always trying to eke out something that was just a little bit better than the position before, and then eventually came back home to North Carolina, as many Black folks did in the reverse migration, and by that time was done with raising people and taking care of people and being a caretaker, and she really spent the last few years of her life reading, and I think it was the most peaceful she'd been her whole life Living right there at the edge of social change, as much as we like to write about it and romanticize it, living it is tough. So she had a tough life.

EZRA KLEIN: And so tell me about the question why you and not her. What is that question?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I think that question is about the limits of how we internalize the American dream. I think a lot about nobody believes in mobility more than Black people. Nobody believes in the promise of this country more than Black people, and nobody has less reason to believe it than we do, and I think holding those two ideas at the same time is probably why our health outcomes are as poor as they are.

I think living in that liminal space between it's supposed to be better but it isn't and trying to just constantly trying to butt up against that, just trying to find a crack, trying to get in there. And I think what I'm asking about when I think why me and not her, one, I hope I'm keeping myself grounded in how contingent this all is. I never want to wed my sense of self and my identity to something I don't control.

And part of being Black and being a woman in this country is that, even when you're very successful, you just don't control the terms of your success. My success is always limited by how well other people can imagine the possibility of me. When people could not imagine my grandmother, she just wasn't possible, you know? Here is this big reader who did well in school, and she's a domestic worker.

They just couldn't imagine anything else for her, and so I'm always really aware of and never want to forget that, that no matter how hard I work — and yeah, you're supposed to maybe work hard or whatever, and then you invest in yourself, and you develop your skills. I always want to be really clear that I can do all of that. I can do all of the right things, and it still won't work out, and I think that's just the basis of my work of trying to explain that to other people.

Many people who, for the first time in their lives, are reckoning with the fact that I did everything right, and it didn't work out. Maybe this is just not supposed to happen. And what's basically just becoming more true for more people is that more people feel like my grandmother than they ever imagined would be possible for them.

EZRA KLEIN: Sometimes I hear a line when I'm doing the show that I just know I'm not going to get away from for a long time, and how well I did is how well people can imagine me is one of those. That's a remarkable way of putting that. You say something in *Thick* where you write and, quoting, smart is only a construct of correspondence between one's abilities, one's environment, and one's moment in history.

I'm smart in the right way in the right time on the right end of globalization. Tell me about that because I think we frame smart culturally as something that cuts through time, space, society. Tell me about seeing smart as contingent.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. I think we love that idea because I think it's an idea about ourselves, that there some one true thing about human nature that will be as fixed as a mathematical relationship. It's a very post-enlightenment sort of way to think about it, but yeah. There's supposed to be one smart, that you would recognize genius no matter where you were on the timeline, right?

I'm not into this show, but I have a young person in my life who's very into the "Doctor Who" show. One of the things I do find interesting about "Doctor Who" is it's that premise. It's that conceit that no matter where you drop in the time-space continuum, you're going to recognize that person as the doctor, the scientist, the one who knows, right? And it's just so not true.

What a culture needs from its smart people at any given point in time changes. We can have a very different value system about what constitutes smart. What I want to keep in mind, and one of the things I hope that people take away when I say something about the correspondence of how smart you are is just really about your place in the world is because I want people to feel obligated to think about what world they're creating for somebody else, but first we got to recognize how vulnerable our own identity is.

If you build your whole identity on how smart you are, I think it can make you very small and selfish in thinking about the world for everybody else. And so that's why I try to pinpoint, like, if you think that I'm good enough, if you think, wow. Tressie's really sharp, right? Tressie's really brilliant. What I want you to imagine is how easy it would be for you to not think that and for me to just not exist, right?

I'd still be me. I'd still have my talents and abilities, and that we do that to people every day. We build a world that's just not allowable or acceptable, and then I also really want to push the idea that we have so embodied the idea of smart as being something that a person is that it makes us really easy to disinvest from the things that make smart actually possible because smart is like a social problem.

We make smart. We make smart with schools. We make smart with our political decisions and choices, right? And if you think nature is just going to take care of it and it's just going to give you a once in a lifetime genius every go round, then you don't invest in the things that produce smartness. And a fixed idea of intelligence invites us to disinvest from the social contract of making more smart people. Just make more by expanding your understanding of it.

EZRA KLEIN: One of the things I was thinking about with that is I've been thinking about the idea of disability studies, that disability is about a relationship between you and the built world.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yup, yup.

EZRA KLEIN: And we were talking before we began recording about our eyesight, that you got LASIK, and I had negative eight vision since I was five, basically. And in another context, I'm just completely useless. The things that make you smart, like I'm a good reader and I can write a lot, I can't do that without my glasses, not that long ago in human history that it wouldn't have been possible for me.

And even that, you can have everything exactly the same but just one lapse in the accommodation society or technology is able to make for you, and you're gone. And meanwhile, I have no sense of direction whatsoever.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Same!

EZRA KLEIN: My mechanical and physical intelligence is really weak.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yup.

EZRA KLEIN: I think all the time about how low the esteem I would be held in at other points in history.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Mm-hm. You take away things like libraries and the written word and the printing press, and I my social value declines significantly. I've learned so much from the disability studies people, by the way. And it's actually something that was in back of my mind the whole time I was answering your question. One of the things that just sort of flipped a switch in my brain, I was in graduate school at Emory University, so we had a really strong contingent of scholars who were doing disability studies, and I learned a lot from them.

But we were having coffee one day with some of those folks, and friend Adam turns to me. And he's like, the thing is, it's not about who is disabled. It's about when are you going to become disabled. We will all be disabled at some point in our life course, and so much middle class consumption, by the way, and our obsession with health and wellness is about that.

We are fundamentally — because we know how horrible we are to other disabled people, so we are terrified of becoming in any way disabled or differently-able, right? So take your bee pollen, and get your magnesium, and — well, you're going to age. If nothing else, your eyesight is going to go. You're going to lose some of your mobility, speaking about smart as a fixed idea. Just the way your brain works is going to change. We're just so vulnerable to nature and time and biology, and we're so terrified of it, I think, because we know that a lot of what we have built our ideas of who we are on are really far more vulnerable than we think they are

EZRA KLEIN: I think about this all the time when I cover health care policy because people will, during these fights, they'll talk about, well, I don't know. As a healthy person, do I need to be subsidizing the sick so much? Or they'll start talking about the old and the young, and I'm always screaming during these debates. These are not fixed categories. We go in and out, you know? You're young now, but you're going to be old someday, hopefully.

And you're healthy now, but you're going to be sick someday, and it's funny. It's a place where I think our enthusiasm for categorizing people — it's one of many that really leads us astray. As soon as you begin talking in categories, it tricks the mind into fixing the boundaries, but a lot of categories are very porous.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes. Categories are really useful for like analytical thinking. Like, yeah, it helps me get my arms around something that's really messy, and it helps me figure out like — because you can't just consider every eventuality. That's just a limit of human nature, of how the human mind works. So categories, they become useful as long as you keep in mind that that's all they were, right?

You got to constantly, I think, relitigate. Wait a minute, what was the category I had at play here? We were talking about the old internet and the world people miss. I think one of the things that people are so uncomfortable with right now, why there's just so many — there

seems to be moral panic after moral panic after moral — we've got a lot of moral panics happening right now, hard to even like separate them out, and I think that it's because it's all one big moral panic about I don't think we feel equipped for doing that. It is a moment, I think, in time when we are being asked and really pushed to rethink almost every meaningful category that we've kind of taken for granted.

EZRA KLEIN: I love that description of the moral panic. You talk in your book about thick descriptions and thin descriptions, and one of the things that feels to me like part of the moral conflict or the reason it feels so panic-inducing is we are having the thickest conversation possible in the thinnest mediums possible.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Bingo. I totally agree. So thick description is ultimately about asking as many questions of yourself as you're asking of other people. So a thin way of engaging with the world is to assume that everybody has already made the decisions that you've made prior to the discussion, and all of your questions are going to be reserved for the object that you're talking about, right, the people you're talking about, the idea you're talking about. I think that's one way to think about it.

We also think about thick description as being really evocative, and that's true, too. Using language to really try to capture people's experience of things, that's also true. Whereas thin description usually tries to flatten differences between experiences because it wants to tell you about sort of a universal experience, right, that I can make you understand your connection to something by pointing out what's universal in it.

We think that we're going to lose people when we start talking about the differences, by the way. And I'm not sure that's true, and I try to show in my work that that's not true, that you can absolutely seduce people into having a thick, nuanced conversation. It's just going to take work on your part, right? I think you have to be dead on with craft. I think you have to be brutal about your empirics being accurate. I think you have to consecrate your own belief in yourself as being the universal storyteller.

But I think if you do all of that, people will follow you into a thick, uncomfortable conversation that they did not know they needed to have, but the mediums you talk about, who's going to do that, right? The economics of that are horrible, and I know that. I get it, but I think what we're seeing is an unspoken desire for exactly that kind of work, but a media ecosystem and an attention economy that just cannot allow that to happen.

That takes a lot of human beings, a lot of human power, takes a lot of willingness to embrace risk because you're going to mess it up. You're going to fail, and you're going to piss somebody — right? This is just going to happen. There's a lot of risk involved. And initially, it's not profitable, but that is one of our struggles, I think, in the public discourse where we are trying to have that kind of conversation that I think people absolutely are attracted to

even if that attraction feels like they're angry about it, but that's still desire for the conversation. I think they're attracted to it, but we've only figured out the economics for very thin genre.

EZRA KLEIN: I don't want to pick on Twitter and cable news here, which are two mediums that I operate in sometimes, but I will see conversations happening there, and I'll just think, that is such an important conversation, and there is no way I'm engaging it in this medium.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: That's right.

EZRA KLEIN: I'm not going to come within 1,000 feet of it in this space.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Same, never going to happen.

EZRA KLEIN: Whereas, in a podcast, there are things you talk about in a podcast that are a lot trickier because it has this quality of hesitancy. I got a reader email yesterday, actually. I guess it was a listener email, but they were emailing me to say that they listen to a show, and they just thought there shouldn't be podcasts anymore. They thought podcasts were part of a ruining America because it was such a loose and messy form. People just talk.

I mean, they prefer columns, which is fair, and I write columns. But as I was reading it, I was thinking it's the exact thing I like about the medium, that messiness allows things to be thick. To take on these topics, you have to let things breathe a little bit. And so many mediums over time, particularly when they get professionalized, they trend towards this type optimization. You ask as little of the audience as you possibly can before letting go of them. And that works for scale, but I think it's bad for understanding and very bad for your relationship with the audience.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. I don't think we have the luxury right now of scale and efficiency. We don't have a culture right now for scale and efficiency that can be productive. That's for a culture that mostly agrees on who and what it is is mostly functioning the way most people need it to function for a good life. We don't have that culture. And so I tell people, maximizing efficiency is for very different political body and public discourse than the one we have.

The one we have is trying to grapple with potentially massive social change and social transformation. That is a culture that needs messier, more nuanced places for public discourse. Trying to skip over that to get to the scale and efficiency part is how you become antagonistic to the audience. Even as y'all are sort of in a dance together, I think that thin stuff that is narrowed, asking the least from the audience, is actually fundamentally antagonistic to the idea of having an audience.

EZRA KLEIN: What are those spaces for you?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I mean, I think I'm in part trying to build that with increasingly thinking about micro media, of which podcasting is one of those. I tend to think of audio storytelling, which is a little bit broader to me. Thinking just about podcasting because I'm thinking about the different cultural traditions for telling oral stories, and that there has to be more than one way for us to capture those and share them and reproduce them.

So audio storytelling just broadly excites me a lot as a potential avenue, and I think it's all right if that never scales. I think that's actually probably preferable. I think what we are in a moment for is a lot of micro media attempts to capture the parts of the discourse where people are willing to be called in to complicated conversations that, again, scale just might not be the goal. It might not even be preferable to desire scale in that arena.

I'm still working out whether or not I think something like — I've been on Substack. I've been on Medium. I've done my own sorting, and that's just way too hard. I don't like running all the back-end, but basically trying to recreate the comment section of web 2.0, becoming a destination conversation place for people around an idea, and I think that's what some people are doing with the newsletter model, and et cetera. So I'm interested in that. I'm not sure yet what I think that space does, but I like the experiment.

EZRA KLEIN: I think a lot now about the way we're all taught to want scale and the way that that's often a false or counterproductive desire. I am somebody who is taught to want scale, and I got it, and I can't tell you I'm happier for having it. It definitely affords me opportunities and all kinds of things, but I can't tell you I'm happier for having it, and I know a lot of people who got it, and I can't tell you they're happier for having it.

And it's a funny thing, the desire people are given for a certain kind of success as measured by scale where scale takes away a lot of what makes these conversations and work joyous. And yet, it's the way we are taught to measure, whether we are succeeding in these conversations and work. And so then you see now, I think, Substack and podcasts, you see a lot of people who've achieved scale actually fleeing to things that are smaller scale.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: They're to actually pare it down. I was about to say. So what you have is you got somebody with like a million followers on Twitter who has realized it's actually horrible, and now they want to talk to 20,000 people more regularly in depth, and we don't have a way to either capture the value of that — that's actually, I think, part of what a lot of the more contentious debates are about.

We don't know how to value that. I mean, we don't know whether we can say that's worth a half a million or not, but I don't think that's about our inability to — we have the tools to capture how many eyes you have on it, how long people spend. So it's not that. I think it's

what you're saying. I think we are just resistant to the idea of valuating anything other than scale, right?

I think it's perfectly reasonable to imagine like a midterm future where having 20,000 regular people who meet and talk about an idea is valued roughly equal to a periodical that has a mailing readership of 350,000 people. We don't like thinking about it that way, but I think it's entirely possible.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

EZRA KLEIN: I got to read a lot of your work all at the same time to prepare for this, which is great, but something that leapt out at me was that a lot of your work revolves around this idea of status, how it's developed and what it's composed of. So how do you define what status is and how we construct it?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: It's a great question, and I think I would agree. A challenge for me, professionally, is that I write so broadly, and certainly the way other people experience it is broad. But in my mind, I'm always writing about one thing, and I'm always stunned that other people don't see it. It's just status. It's just status. The thing is, status looks the same everywhere you go, but it wears a different outfit.

So it's always at play. It's always happening. And so when I show up and I see status, it's not that I'm the person who does race and gender or whatever. It's just that I entered a room, and I looked around, and I went, oh, here's what's happening here. Here's the status that's at play. And sometimes that's a little bit more gender than it is race. Sometimes it's a little bit more class than it is race, right? But it's always there.

And the way I explain it to students and my audiences is status is the thing that is external to you that defines you as much as your identity does. So we love to talk about identity, right? We've got a whole language about identity, about self and our political identities and our racial identities and sexual identities. We don't have as rich a conversation to talk about status, which, coincidentally, is some of the most powerful work that status does.

It becomes so taken for granted that we never even label it, right? We'll walk into a room, and everybody agrees who's supposed to sit at the chair at the front of the room. That's status, right? And that it operates a little differently everywhere you are standing. But if you learn how to identify it wherever you are standing, in many ways, you become one of the most powerful people in the room because you see what's driving and shaping the decisions.

But as a cultural critic, as a social investigator, you also become super important to the people who will never be invited to that room, right? So when I leave a room, I want to be able to tell people not just what happened, but I want to be able to give an informed opinion about why it happened, why it happened, and that's what understanding status does. It

means that when I leave the room, I can bring some of the people who will never be invited to that room with me by being able to translate the dynamics that happen in that room, and it's a hard thing to do with American audiences.

I travel, before times, I was doing quite a bit more international travel, and it's so interesting. I can go to the UK where everybody gets this. Their language about social class is so refined that they get it. They may not have our same understanding of race and gender, but their language about class has really given them a public language of talking about status. In America, we only talk about status as race, and so our language is very, very atrophied, you know?

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah we want to ignore the idea that class is status.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: That's right. Class is natural. Class is biology. Class is destiny. Class is family. We talk about it embedded in those things, family politics. We talk about it about values, ideals, having the right behaviors, but we don't have any language to talk about it in this country. And since it is one of our biggest status differentials in this country, it means we miss a lot of what's happening.

EZRA KLEIN: I think a lot about places where we have language that hides what we're doing, hides, particularly, the way we actually treat people. We have language that venerates them as a way of not making good on what that language would say. So middle class, working class, essential workers, the military and veterans are huge in this. There are certain groups where we have an agreed upon political language.

And if you were an alien who came to this planet and this country and listened to us talk, you'd be like, ah, those people they're talking about, they have the most status, and they're going to be treated the best. And then you look at how policy plays out, and it's the exact opposite. And the language, we are pretending we have a different social hierarchy than we actually do.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Which is super important to our ruling ideology, which is merit. How else do you get people to buy into the idea of merit when their own lived experiences say to them every day that merit is not real, or certainly not as concrete as everybody says it is? Well, you get them to buy into it by saying you just need to get into the right category.

And if you get into the right category — military veterans is one. It's a big one in my world, like in education policy. We make horrible education policy for veterans. They have some of the highest rates of student loan defaults. The money that they're given to go to college

really translates into them going into high quality institutions, but you try to talk to somebody about making the G.I. Bill more robust, and they will have a public meeting in the middle of Capitol Hill.

Everybody shows up. There's the equivalent of bible thumping, and then they will all close the doors — and both sides of the aisle, by the way, will close the door and will agree to not do anything to protect veteran students, but the veterans believe that they're protected, you see? That's what matters. They believe. How else do you get somebody to sign up for something like military service when they're poor and working class and from places with poor economic outcomes?

You do it by saying, yeah, you won't be rich, but everybody will value you, will give you status instead of money. This is one of the allures of becoming a police officer where status can far outstrip the economic rewards of being a police officer to take on the risk of doing the job. So really tightly closed status that does not have the economic power to go with it can actually become violent, frankly, but we don't have a language yet to talk about any of that.

All we know how to do is say this group of people deserves our deference and our respect, but we don't have a commensurate policy conversation to talk about how we attach actual meaningful resources to it.

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah. There's almost nothing more destabilizing in politics than a group that the way they are talked about and the way they talk about themselves in terms of merit and status is not recognized by society because it creates a deep sense of unfairness, of shame, of resentment for individuals for whom it happens to. I think it collapses a person's psyche, oftentimes.

But for groups, particularly when it's a group that is told or actually has power, but then society isn't treating it like it does or stops treating it like it does, that becomes, as you're saying, it becomes very violent. This whole discussion has always been to me like the molten core of Trumpism. It's this class of voters and Donald Trump himself who, on some level, have so much status and have had so much power.

But then what begins to happen is not just a losing of power, but a losing of status, a feeling that the culture is turning on them, that they're being disrespected. What motivates Trump is disrespect, the feeling that he's not a winner, right? And the same for what motivates many of his supporters, and I do think this is why the fights over speech and cancel culture and all of this are so intense because they are, at some fundamental level, about who has the status to decide how they are spoken about, and then who has the status to not fear what it is they're saying? And you can't solve that with policy. It's actually a question of social hierarchy.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: A lot of people woke up to find that the merit culture that they have been operating in has been, for a very long time, an honor culture. See, we were supposed to be too sophisticated for our honor culture of ritual and honor, exchanges of prestige and status and privilege, right? We were supposed to be too sophisticated for that.

And so you work hard and that the status will follow, economic achievement. And when that economic promise starts to collapse but the ritual of status remains, you really just have an honor-based culture where people will defend honor, will determine their honor in relation to other people. They'll build hierarchies of honor within their own little corner of the world that might be at odds with another corner.

That's when we talk about the siloing effect of culture. It's not that people don't know that people disagree with them. It's that they've built their own little honor culture over here. And if there are no economic incentives to leave it, why would you? If you can be the king—what's the guy with the thing on his head, the horns on January 6th?

EZRA KLEIN: Oh, the QAnon Shaman.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Thank you. But if you're going to walk around with horns on your head, I get to mock. So that's an honor culture he brought of a subculture that had a set of rules where that actually wasn't absurd, but if you divorce then some of the economic incentives for people to participate in that, all you're left with is the guy with the horns on his head.

EZRA KLEIN: You did this research project about white deaths of despair that feels relevant to this conversation.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Very much so.

EZRA KLEIN: Do you want to talk about it a bit?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes. So our argument — my colleagues Arjumand Siddiqi, Sandy Darity, and I did — so we were responding to the documented demographic data points about change in white Americans' mortality. One of the arguments had been that was due to several things, the opioid crisis, growing economic insecurity, job polarization, and access to health care.

Well, one of the things that we actually find and argue in the data is that you see those deaths even in places where those indicators do not exist, where they have not experienced job losses, where they do enjoy access to health care and a certain amount of economic security. And our argument is that white people's deaths of despair, as it has been called, is not as much about real losses in their status. It's about perceived loss in their status, right?

The perception of loss was enough to undermine positive health outcomes and health-seeking behaviors. That point you were making that people feel like they have lost status, whether they've lost it or not. Well, that's not about actual loss. That is about perceived loss, and that we so underappreciate how much perception matters to how much we'll even accept facts, right?

Most people will just accept the facts that match what they already believe, you know? Confirmation bias and et cetera. We've seen this in vaccine roll-outs, right, where people's political identity shapes what information they will accept about scientific evidence. Well, that happens in every facet of life. And so perception is just as important as any universal belief system and what's true and what's untrue, and that that perceived loss is enough for people to not seek out health care or to engage in dangerous health behaviors.

How else do you explain people arrested on Jan. 6 who perceived loss of status? And they engaged in — if you think about self-selecting into a conflict with armed police as a dangerous health behavior, that's one way to think about it. You can quite literally get hurt, right? They elected to go into this risky behavior that could end in loss of life, and for several people did.

That's a risky health behavior, and that's about perceived status, and that we haven't thought concretely enough about how dangerous privileged people will become if they just perceive that they have less privilege, not actual loss of privilege, but they perceive they have less privilege.

EZRA KLEIN: I wonder if one way of thinking, too, about this actual versus perceived is to think about base rates versus rates of change.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: You get this in economics all the time where people, particularly their politics, are much more driven by how their economic situation is changing than what it actually is. The fact that you're richer than you were 10 years ago doesn't matter in terms of a recession. If things are getting worse right now, you get really upset, and I think there's something in this for white voters, for more conservative Christian voters, for more traditionalist Christian voters, where, still on top, no doubt about it, but in terms of groups raising and lowering their power in society, in terms of rates of change in status, the rate of change is bad.

White people feel that they are not as protected as they were, not as powerful. Christian folks feel they don't have the hammerlock on politics they did, particularly white Christians, once upon a time, and that people are very sensitive not just to rates of economic change,

which we in the literature forever, but they're very sensitive, much more so than we give them credit for, to rates of status change.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes, actually. I think that's a great way to think about it, and it's actually like — when we talk about socioeconomic status, the addition of the socio to the economic status is something that was being said in I think my old sociological literature, the '60s and '70s, where we had something called like — we'd do these massive class structure and stratification tables. They said that people's understanding of their economic position was conditioned on their social position, basically.

We got away from that understanding when we thought that there was more equal opportunity access to economic positioning. Well, yeah. That makes sense when you got a lock on something like male privilege in the workplace, but once women entered the workplace, we expected those things to level off. So it isn't that those things stop being true. We did, however, stop studying them that way.

There became a real preference for saying that your economic position was so wedded to your social position because we were more egalitarian. And macro economists, especially more critical ones, will now say that what you're really seeing is, with the polarization and the pulling apart of the economic structure, a re-emergence of the importance of how social position conditions your understanding of your economic position.

But if you look at women, however, women workers, for example, nonwhite workers, that's always been true. It's always been the case that we understand the fine-grained differences in our relative economic status based on who we are and our lack of social status. It is just more true now, however, for white workers, especially white males.

EZRA KLEIN: I always think that the political conversation here is driven basically mad by something that's all over your work, which is that status is not stable.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: And there's no agreement as to who is where, and that's partially because who is where changes, but there's a real different status hierarchy in elected politics and how power records there to where it is in culture to where it is and religion to where it is in a bunch of other parts of our society. One of the things I noticed in your work is that you are incredibly sensitive to using the way status changes for you moving in and out of different rooms as an example to showing it for others.

You really do use yourself as like, look what happened to me here, and look where I was here, and look where I was here. Could you talk a bit about that? Because we keep using status as a singular, but it's not. It's a shifting plural.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yes, it is. It's highly contextual, which is why we don't like trying to measure it, frankly. And it is experienced subjectively but has objective consequences and measurable effects. That's why it's a really messy thing to try to understand. But as we start our conversation with the mess is where the good, important stuff is happening, and then we also are living in a time where — this is the technology piece.

Almost all of the dominant technological changes that have reshaped our world over the last 30 years have only made status more contextual. So it's added a layer of how important context is to status. Audiences can be collapsed and expanded so quickly, and they can shift so rapidly, and there new forms of status emerging all the time driven by digital platforms and digital technologies and just digital ideas, the idea of technology.

And so at the very time that status has become more destabilized and contextual and transient, there are also ever new and emerging forms of status, right? One of the examples I like to give is you can be a celebrity, what we call a micro celebrity in some digital space, and that translates to absolutely no form of capital anywhere else.

I love these stories. They do them every few years where they go, oh, what happened to somebody who was in that massive meme, you know? And they'll go find them, and they're working in fast food, or they were doing what they were doing before, usually worse off because the celebrity impacted their ability to work and get a regular job. And so status has become decoupled in so many micro ways from economic relations.

And I use myself as an example because people are so resistant to thinking about themselves as being vulnerable. If I invite the reader to think about how much status they lose when they go from one room to another, very few people are ambitious enough and courageous enough to do that. It's a level of vulnerability to ask from the reader to go, you know how you feel like such a girl boss when you go do x, right? But you know what happens when you leave that room and you go to this other room, right?

And it doesn't feel good to people, but if they can project it onto me and experience it through the way I've learned to see myself as sort of like a meta-narrative as I move through the world, I think it shows them a model for, when they're ready, a model for how to think about it in their own lives. I think of some of my work, especially in *Thick* and some of the essay work as just trying to model for people that you can understand that this thing is happening to you and it not change who you are, right?

I'm still who I am. I still have what I have, but I know there are rooms that enter where my status evaporates the second I walk in. You can almost feel it sometimes. You can become so attuned to it. I can feel when a room changes, and we know that feeling. If you've ever been

someplace, when a celebrity walks in the room and the air gets that crickle-crackle feeling in it, right, we know it. We just don't think of it as being something that happens with us and to us.

And so I use myself as an example to try to give people a way to develop a model of thinking about the world, that you don't have to be afraid of acknowledging that because status exists and it makes you vulnerable, acknowledging it doesn't change your vulnerability. You're vulnerable whether you develop a language to think about it or not.

And that thing you talked about earlier, that psychological fissure that can happen when the world doesn't recognize your status the way you think they should, developing a language is the most powerful thing we can do to protect ourselves from that kind of psychological trauma, that I may not be able to control how the world will see a really smart Black girl as she walks around in the world, but I can have a language for describing it, and I can know, at the end of the day, that if I can label it, if I can talk about it, it hasn't completely broken me, and that more of us need that language. More is needed.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

EZRA KLEIN: We've talked about some of the tributaries of status here, money, education, race, gender, politics. One of the really challenging essays from Thick, one that I still think about having read it now, I guess, a couple of years ago, is *In the Name of Beauty*, and attractiveness is a huge generator of life outcomes, of status. And you write in that that beauty isn't actually what you look like. Beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order. People talk about lookism. Is attractiveness a generator of status, or is it the reflection of it?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Both. I just did a really fun project — fun for me project — about Dolly Parton, and I read a book, *“She Come By It Natural”* by Sarah Smarsh. And what Sarah is doing is she's talking about her. She comes from a white working class rural family, woman-dominated family, a very matriarchal family, and I could relate. I come from a very patriarchal family, and she talks about the women in her life, in her family's lives about how important it was for them to be attractive as working class white women.

And she said it wasn't attractive the way attractive matters to my now upper middle class white peers. Her life has changed. Being attractive meant a level of security and very marginal economic mobility for white working class women. She was like, for us, staying thin or staying attractive or staying pretty was about just being able to get some favor at a really brutal job.

If I'm a waitress, then it means I get a slightly better shift because the manager thinks I'm cute, basically. Or it opens up an avenue to marry and get the hell out of the Blue Ridge Mountains, right? That marginal amounts of very conditioned and complicated status, that beauty and attractiveness was generating then in that space status. But it also — the idea of what is beautiful, about what is attractive is a reflection of our collective political values and is about reproducing the underlying economic relations embedded in them.

And the way you know that it's true is because if beauty were some objective idea, the same thing would have been beautiful in 1880 that was beautiful in 1980 that will be beautiful in 2080. And in fact, what you see when you study ideas, popular ideas about what constitutes attractiveness and desire and beauty, is that they have changed to match whatever is the economically valued group of people in the world.

And so yeah, there's some underlying — sometimes evolutionary psychologists like to point to work about how there's a universal equation for beauty, like there's a ratio. The beauty, I think, ratio is what they call it, that we all value eyes that are set to something, some weird math. And I go, or there was a global system of capital by the 1500s countries that developed an idea the world over that was predicated on an equation of beauty that was exported.

And when I do that, they always get very eh with me, but I also complicate the evolutionary psychology people because I think they are wild. That's just a wild group of people, but looking for stable ideas across thousands of years is wild to me. But yet, we don't think about — we'd like to think that beauty is just like the merit myth, so that we'd like to think of beauty as being objective at the same time that we want it to be achievable, right?

So this is the tension. And in every idea about merit that is both supposed to be inherited and achievable, and things cannot be both. If you inherit beauty but you can also achieve beauty, then inherited beauty won't matter as much, right? And that's the tension that we have and the ideas about what we'll say is beautiful becomes a tool for consolidating status and opportunity and privilege for people who have inherited a social position.

One of my favorite ways to get people really upset is to talk about how much we valorize blondness in our culture, right? So here you have a biological blip, a set of recessive traits that has been elevated to almost a political ideology that we never, ever, ever critique as political or economic-based, but turn on the evening news tonight. Turn on Fox News, right? And you tell me what the visual comportment of power looks like.

EZRA KLEIN: I think all the time, just all the time, about how Hitler ran this genocidal campaign in service of an aesthetic ideal that he didn't represent.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Didn't embody, yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: It is — the mind crumbles. [LAUGHS]

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Mm-hm.

EZRA KLEIN: And not that it's funny, obviously.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I know what you mean.

EZRA KLEIN: But it's just one of these things. Sometimes I sit there with that, and it is the strangest thing. I understand on some level going nuts in service of something that obviously accrues to your own power, but the whole thing he was fighting for, he would have been on the outs — it just — It drives people mad.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: It really, really does. It does.

EZRA KLEIN: I don't know if you across this. I come across it a lot. There's a what-aboutism around beauty and attractiveness that will come from people who say, oh, well, you care about discrimination or inequality or inequity that comes from race or gender or education or something else, but look at the research on unattractiveness, and you don't seem to care about that. And it's always from people don't care about any of them who are saying this.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Anything else. Uh-huh. Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: But it actually is, but I do think that it's a critique worth taking seriously in the sense that there is something real to it, that we really do treat people differently in society based on height, based on looks, and we don't have a very good critical discourse around that, in part because I think it implicates us too much, right? It's very hard to talk about something that you're part of that you can't change or don't want to change what you're attracted to, or don't want to think too hard about where it came from. It feels like a pretty expansive vista for complication. Not that, obviously, a lot of scholars haven't been doing this for a long time, just that, in the public conversation, it's a little thinner.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. And it's the one that goes at the heart of — listen, you don't own a lot in a leasing society, right? So here's a society where we running out of stuff. We don't get much, OK? Many of us are going to be renters forever. So the idea of the things that are naturally occurring that emerge from our true selves, I think we have always put value in that, but I think we especially put value in that now.

So this is the part where people will feel implicated, I think, in critiquing beauty privilege or whatever, attractiveness privilege, is what they think we're saying is who you are attracted to is a social construction and a political problem. And well, here's the truth. That is exactly what I'm saying. I am saying that that is not nearly as natural as you think it is, and that one of the most basic ways that we are all implicated in the status hierarchy is in naturalizing those differences and saying that they are naturally occurring.

And then that gets really, really, really fuzzy when I think it pushes people on thinking about something like gender and desire. I think that there is a lot of resistance coming from that side, but I also just think there's just sort of a routine uncritical resistance to the idea that you're going to try to police what I find attractive, and you're going to tell me that even that is a political problem. And yeah, it kind of is.

EZRA KLEIN: I think it's hard in a lot of these conversations to hold the idea that what we believe, think, do, intuitive reactions we have do reflect political problems, but they are not sins.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Oh, yeah. The morality. Yeah. Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: Yeah. People have a lot of difficulty. Even I have a lot of difficulty with the idea that there can be things about me that don't fit my politics. That can be an interesting fact and worth interrogating without it being something that I have to like loathe myself for.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. One thing I didn't get from my family was — we are what I call culturally Baptists. We show up on Easter and Christmas, and we do some of the things, but we were not like devout churchgoers, which actually made us quite different in the places that we were from where the church is the center of the social and economic life of Black communities, right?

We kind of participated, but we didn't bring a lot of that home. And I think because of that, I never had some of the moral baggage. I mean, I have some that just comes from, I think, living in a secularly religious society, but I never internalized that because I am a part of a thing that's bad, I am bad. And I actually will forget sometimes that other people aren't like me in that regard.

And yeah, they'll start spinning out. And I'll go, what's wrong with you? And somebody will say, Tressie, you basically just went at the core of their entire belief system. But I was like, well, all I said was you like blondes, and that's a little eugenicist. I mean, I don't know why you're now crying. And apparently, because I don't have that impulse, I forget to be empathetic with others. So thank you for reminding me. Yes, it does, I think, make people feel really bad.

EZRA KLEIN: But also, just, I don't know. I don't want to get prescriptive here coming to the end of this, but when we were talking earlier about mediums for thicker conversations and how do you have them, and how do you have this, like, what you described as a unified moral panic about our categorization systems without it feeling like a panic and without it feeling like a war of all against all.

I feel like there's something here that's really important in the way you approach it that makes a lot of sense for why you're good at talking about these things because, somehow, it has to be OK that we are going to fall on the wrong side of even our categories. And I don't know that we can do that in these spaces that are so tuned for shame that are tuning us for shame. You somehow have to — it has to be safer than it is to have some conversation because, if it isn't safe, you can't you can't admit any of it.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I actually have a really counterintuitive position on shame which is that it can serve a social function when it is divorced from some of the other social functions. So one of the problems right now is that social shame, which I think in and of itself is enough, usually, to discipline most people, is now tied to economic and political and cultural capital in sort of a way, and people feel that in a really gut level, and I think they're right to feel it.

Shame is important to kind of like get people to adhere, especially to new norms, and we got to have. And so I'm always like, you don't want to take shame off the table. What we probably do need to have happen is we need to divorce it from our micro celebrity driven culture.

EZRA KLEIN: That is such a good point.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Where your systems are the people, right? People become avatars for a whole system of thought, and I'm just like, well, that's almost never going to work, the celebritization of some of these things that are always supposed to be really contentious sort of trade-offs, right? Well celebrity is not set up for trade-offs. Most of what we do for work is not set up for trade-offs, but our status is set up for that.

And so that's probably where we confine those conversations to. I think is perfectly fine to say, when somebody is on the wrong side of one of our political values, to say I don't mess with them when they're talking about minimum wage, right? They've been wrong on it. When they get started on minimum wage, I tune out. And for that to be the take away, tune out on so on so when they do minimum wage because they don't know what they're talking about, and they're on the wrong side of history on this one, but to say but that person tends to be in the pocket on X, and we'll listen to him on X. That would be to me contextual and status-based.

Like, OK, let's not give them status on this idea, but give them some status on it that idea. But micro celebrity and the microeconomics of writing into public life right now really privilege everybody being a generalist and a universalist who performs being an ideologue, and you just can't do all of that. You can't do it all.

EZRA KLEIN: Ooh, let me try to make this comparison. So this feels technological, at least in part. We were talking earlier about your work on how status doesn't follow you room to room, how you change room to room, but one of the problems online to what you were just saying about how many things shame attaches to is our, at least our group identity, our name online is cohesive.

And the things that attach to it, which are not everything. It's a very flattened identity. Only a certain number of things attach to it, but the things that are attached to it follow it into every room, follow it into every Google search, follow it into what anybody would know about that online identity, and it's very then hard to change it. You can't get out of the room, and we don't really know what to do with that well.

And it's funny because were talking earlier. I think it almost maybe sounded negative that the things in our lives are contextual. But in many ways, I think the problem with our online identities, which now, as you're saying, are our economic identities, our cultural identities, et cetera, is they are noncontextual. They are decontextualized.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Yeah. That efficiency and maximization piece again, the thing is, technologies can only maximize and increase efficiencies in a system of unequal distribution. It's just going to make unequal distribution more efficient, and it's just going to maximize it. And in the case of our very identities, that's what it does most effectively. It flattens differences and distinctions and elevates the place where you have cobbled together the most consensus, even if that consensus is itself negative and decontextualized, but it will drive efficiencies of driving up consensus, even if the consensus is negative, and that there might be some value in there being contextual spaces where, in this space, I am an expert. In this space, I'm just a member of the audience, right? And in this space, I'm a membership of a group who has a group position, and we're trying to move forward a group agenda, and that we cannot do that when we attach our work to our identity.

So what we may have here is just a fundamental critique of, should we be our work? And I always tell people, if you judge me by Twitter, that's on you because I write all the time. And I have made as much of it free as I possibly can. So I'm like, you can judge me on what I write, but I've never told you to pay attention to me in these other contexts, and that is one of my ways of trying to navigate that.

If I write and I articulate a reasoned, more thoughtful position on something and I make it freely available, then I always feel like I've got plausible deniability on the fallibility of being a digital person, an internet person, right? That's me trying to build a buffer. It's harder to do when you don't control where you write, and you can't control the circulation of your ideas, but yeah. That's what I think I'm trying to get around.

The technology is never going to give us that affordance. We're going to have to come up with social norms about it. The technology just can't differentiate. The economics aren't there. The political structure regulation isn't there to make it differentiate. So what we really would be asking for is something like where we own all of our data and we could change access to different parts of the data we produce in different ways. We just don't have that environment. So that means social norms are going to have to do it.

My challenge is this. I want those social norms to bubble up from the actual vulnerable people and not to be imposed top down from the people who only perceive that they are vulnerable.

EZRA KLEIN: I think that's the good challenge right there. You want to do some book recommendations?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Oh, yes. Yes.

EZRA KLEIN: All right. What's a work of cultural criticism you'd recommend?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Oh, yeah. And this is not only one of the more recent things I've read, but it is one of the better things I've read, and so I got lucky in that regard, and that is *Minor Feelings* by Cathy Park Hong. I think everybody who says that they are an essayist and a popular culture critic right now needs to be chasing this book.

EZRA KLEIN: What's the best book by a contemporary sociologist who isn't you?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I'm actually going to recommend something that, in my dream scenario, these things would come together in a pack when you went to the store. Like, if you bought one, you get the other, and that is Sabrina Strings, who's a sociologist, and she has a book called "*Fearing the Black Body*," "*Fearing the Black Body*," that actually gets it some of what we were talking about, the construction of beauty, how we have defined beauty to be antithetical to whatever our racialized assumptions were of difference at any point in time in history, and that if that's the line you take, then beauty has been stable. The construction of beauty has been whatever was not the racialized moral panic of the time. And so it's a really great book.

EZRA KLEIN: We managed to have so many interesting conversations, so I didn't expect that I never got to all of my education questions for you, but because you've done so much education work, what's the book you recommend on thinking about education?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Well, when I think about education, I am most often thinking about higher ed. So this is going to be the higher ed book. I think it's just the GOAT. I think you got to do the GOAT book, and this was one of those when we talked about the difference between census reading and reading around. This is a census book. So that's why

I say these things still matter to do. It's just I want people to do both, but you got to read Jerome Karabel's "The Chosen," which is the history of selective admissions in elite higher education.

I, as a person, do not care about Ivy League institutions. I tell people this all the time, and I think they think I'm doing that to angle for a job at one, and I promise you I'm not, but we are always, always in a long historical conversation in higher ed circles in this country with the foundations of how selective admissions were designed. And until we fully understand that, you can't grapple with something like student loan debt or why people keep showing up for paying \$100,000 for a master's degree that has a symbol on it, right? We got to get that, again, status.

EZRA KLEIN: Then finally, always our last one, what's your favorite children's book?

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Well, I should have said a Judy Blume book, considering we've lost her recently. And certainly, there are many of hers on that list, but my sentimental favorite will always be "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry" by Mildred Taylor. I often call this book — it was baby's first novel. It was a longer book, right? I wasn't a children's reader, so I felt very grown up when I read this book. Didn't have any pictures in it. I was so impressed with myself, and it is the kind of story — I mean, I saw myself in that story in a way that was really new for me at that age and at that time, and the book holds up. I reread it again within the last year and a half or so, and it really holds up.

EZRA KLEIN: Did it really? I remember reading that as a kid. And actually, it was almost too adult for me.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: Well, that's why I liked it, to be fair, and probably why I now think it holds up because now I'm the adult, right? I thought it nailed the emotions of a certain point in history without being too heavy-handed, but it was adult in a way that all kids don't get to be kids. That's kind of the moral of that story. So when we're talking about a moment when the adultification of young men of color and young women of color, making them more vulnerable to police violence and et cetera, one of the my adult takeaways from the book is that not all kids get to be kids in the same way, and that's probably why I liked it as a kid.

EZRA KLEIN: Tressie McMillan Cottom, thank you so much. What a pleasure.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: It really was a really good time. For a thing that did not involve cocktails or dinner, this was a lot of fun. Thanks, Ezra.

EZRA KLEIN: Well, next time we can do it with cocktails.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: I'm holding you to it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

EZRA KLEIN: That is the show. We'll see if I keep doing this, but I thought it might be fun to offer occasional recommendations of my own here at the end, and here's mine for today. I just watched "My Octopus Teacher" on Netflix, which is in their nominated for Oscars documentaries category, but it's all about a guy's friendship with an octopus, and it is wonderful.

I think I need to do a show about octopi at some point. I've been reading some books on them. And then after watching this, it's really strange how much we just have a wonderful alien-style intelligence on this planet and how little attention we actually pay to that fact. But if you want to just — I don't exactly want to say trip out here, but if you really want to enter a different world for a while, "My Octopus Teacher," it's terrific.

If you want help the show, you can leave us a review wherever you are listening, or you can email this episode or text it or however you kids share your episodes to a friend, if you think they'd enjoy it, or family member. It's a great way for the show to grow, and we always really appreciate it when you do it. "The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Roge Karma and Jeff Geld, fact-checked by Michelle Harris, original music by Isaac Jones, and mixing by Jeff Geld.

[MUSIC PLAYING]