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## Surviving Academia

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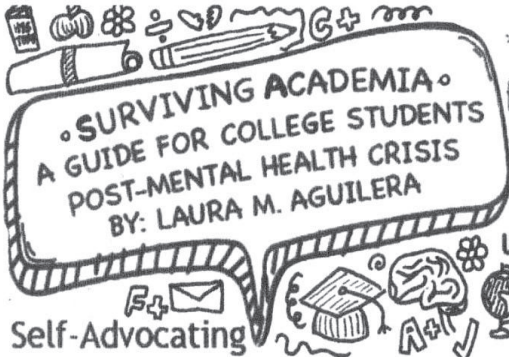
## Surviving Academia

Laura M. Aguilera

*The process of healing from first episode psychosis as a queer person of color is not represented in the medical model, academia, or media. As a pansexual, non-binary, Latinx femme with a psychological disability, walking out of the hospital doors for the final time incited immense amounts of isolation that overcame my spirit because of the lack of dialogue around such healing. I assembled this zine with the intention of my intuition that somehow, somewhere, someone with my identities and positionality exists with similar trauma to mine from having experienced a mental health crisis. Zines are an accessible multimedia approach to sharing collective wisdom. The very definition of a zine varies as each publication can differ in size, art and writing media, price, and shape. Through this multimedia personal narrative of the different stages of healing, I continue to endure as a graduate student still affected by my trauma, I hope to center the power of personal narrative and lived experience as valid scholarship.*

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**\* CONTENT WARNING \***  
 first episode psychosis,  
 mental health crisis,  
 behavioral health  
 units, self-harm, bipolar  
 disorder, depression

**Self-Advocating  
 for TRAUMA-INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY**  
 [CONTENT WARNINGS IN THE CLASSROOM]

WHAT ON EARTH IS  
 TRAUMA-INCLUSIVE  
 PEDAGOGY???

This framework describes  
 the praxis of actively  
 centering survivors of  
 trauma in order to foster a  
 holistic learning environment.

1. Trigger/content warnings refer to disclaimers about the content in given material with the intent to enable people to make decisions as to whether they would like to expose themselves to such content (Carter, 2015).

2. Sometimes speaking up in class is intimidating -- especially when it comes to advocating for yourself and/or others. Your impostor syndrome nails your arms to your sides and seals your lips from articulating why you wish she didn't call you "spicy" in front of the whole class. Your shoulders tense up with the shame you feel from internalized racism passed down from generation to generation. Be brave in the way your ancestors were when they had no choice but to focus on surviving everyday so that you could thrive. Consent to advocating for yourself when you feel ready.

3. When people in class bring up \_\_\_\_\_ without any warning, it triggers you. Your holistic response to trauma is valid and worthy of addressing. Depending on how comfortable you feel, you have the option of emailing your educators the script below. You can also say something in class along the lines of what I have provided below.

"I would greatly appreciate if we can challenge ourselves moving forward to commit to using content warnings in the classroom. I hope that we can respect them as much as we honor pronouns because I know that statistically I am not the only survivor in the room who feels impacted by the mentioning of \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you."



# Responding to Mental Health Crisis:

## A Letter to Myself on Surviving Academia's Temporality

My friend,

No one warns you about the potential, immense amounts of shame that painfully shiver through your spirit and bones after going through a manic, psychotic episode. The flashbacks and nightmares that submerge from the galaxy that is your brain will not end for a while. The guilt and embarrassment you wear like a chain mail shawl someone else knitted for you will float throughout your bodymind. The first time you considered that razor in the shower almost 3 years ago to the last time you were seeing stars in a hospital bed will maintain as painful memories of how society's health reflects your own.

Academia will make you believe and embody the notion that linearity is the standard. Capitalism will encourage you to value only your productivity and high functioning behavior. The hospital and medical model will reinforce your flesh and bone as something in need of a cure. Colonialism will harm your schema-making processes by forcing binary ways of conceptualizing your health, body, healing and sexuality. Ableism will reject your own unique constellation of brain chemicals as valid. All of these things I want you to remember.

You and I both know that the temporality of your life shifted once you got sick. You have missed graduation because your brain paradoxically tightened the edges of pure hell and apparent heaven. Your ancestors knew the universe embodied a cyclical nature, but you will forget this often during this time of regret over something you had no control over. Your body will remind you that an illustration of healing from your manic-psychotic episode looks like slowly stirring a pot of frigoles counterclockwise. You can stir this brew as slow as you want, and that is revolutionary. Fully accepting the fact that you could not graduate "in time" is a fallacy. Your soul and intuition know that time knows no bounds if you have the courage and privilege to explore methods of decolonizing your temporality.

You have to remember that the feeling of the sun painting your skin will come back again through the love languages of those that have supported you this whole time. Patience comes with the adversity you will hold in your neck and shoulders after so many months. You are more likely as a college student, queer, non-binary femme of color to experience mental illness and after experiencing this episode more likely to end your life, but you are more than just a statistic, specimen, or patient/client to me... you are beyond capable of being understood and radiate your resilience through realms of this universe with each whole breath. I hope you know that. Just because your

white therapist and psychiatrist would never understand what you feared when you were psychotic as a non-binary femme of color does not mean that you cannot heal. Healing is both a goal and a process, and you will boomerang day to day from grieving your so-called past self to being ashamed of what you said and did while you were manic and psychotic. Academia taught you that you are now separate from the old you, when in fact you will and should maintain your inner child as best as you can and tend to her most in your recovery. If there even is such thing as the new you, academia is not ready for it.

Telling your story will make your heart pound with each beat a consistent question of the validity of your experience with mental health crisis. Telling your story will make things real. Telling your story will be one of the most difficult exercises your soul will endure. Telling your story will situate your narrative as ongoing and not merely as aspect of the past you should forget. This will be hard for you to realize, but when you feel comfortable and safe, the world is ready to listen.

Con Amor,  
Laura Mercedes



**Radical (Self) Love**

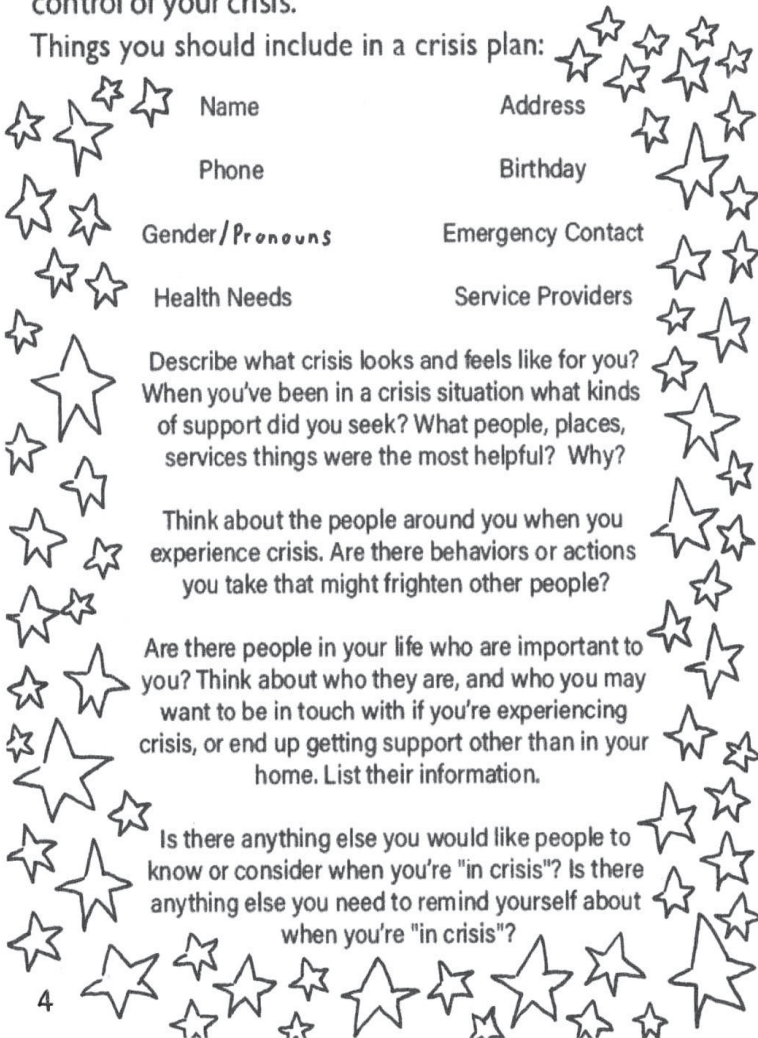
I look in the mirror  
and I remember,  
“your  
words  
as a love song  
you sing  
when you’re  
storytelling.  
Your laugh  
reminds me  
of the daffodils  
blooming  
in spring.  
Your ancestors  
sculpted  
Your smile,  
Cheekbones peak  
like your homelands’  
earth.  
Brown belleza,  
the air you inhale  
is sacred  
and your exhale  
holy.  
My medicine is  
your embrace  
your face  
this place,  
with you  
my home,  
the only one  
that has known,  
worshiped  
my softness.”  
This love  
is my religion.

## DEVELOPING A CRISIS PLAN

### What is a Crisis Plan?

A crisis plan is a piece of paper that you carry nearby you to ensure your security if you relapse. This will ground you as you will have a preventative measure to potentially avoid traumatic experiences and be more in control of your crisis.

Things you should include in a crisis plan:



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Birthday \_\_\_\_\_

Gender/*Pronouns* \_\_\_\_\_ Emergency Contact \_\_\_\_\_

Health Needs \_\_\_\_\_ Service Providers \_\_\_\_\_

Describe what crisis looks and feels like for you?  
When you've been in a crisis situation what kinds  
of support did you seek? What people, places,  
services things were the most helpful? Why?

Think about the people around you when you  
experience crisis. Are there behaviors or actions  
you take that might frighten other people?

Are there people in your life who are important to  
you? Think about who they are, and who you may  
want to be in touch with if you're experiencing  
crisis, or end up getting support other than in your  
home. List their information.

Is there anything else you would like people to  
know or consider when you're "in crisis"? Is there  
anything else you need to remind yourself about  
when you're "in crisis"?

4



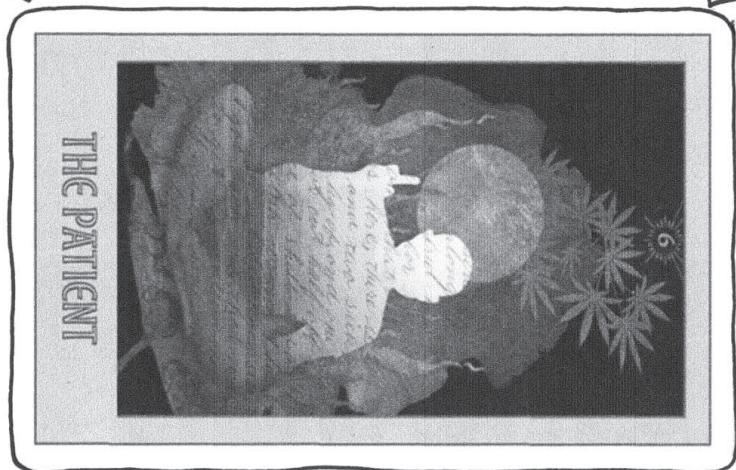
**Bill of Rights**  
*for Students Grieving their Mental Health Crisis*

*As a college student who has experienced crisis in regards to my psychological health, I have the right to...*

1. Not seek validation for my diagnosis from the world, i.e I have the right to self-diagnose.
2. Grieve every aspect of my bodymind that has apparently failed me.
3. Not be responsible for people's discomfort with how I behaved when I was experiencing crisis.
4. Feel negative sentiments towards the medical industrial complex, medical model, and hospitals I stayed at.
5. Identify my challenges with mental health as a disability.
6. Be angry and grateful simultaneously.
7. Create language that encapsulates my healing journey and my pain.
8. Grieve the bodies of those that were forced to live in mental health institutions against their will.
9. Prioritize self-care and community care over my work.
10. Re-conceptualize my temporality in order to adapt to rhythm of my healing bodymind.




MY FAVORITE TAROTCARD FROM:  
 "The Asian American Literary Review"  
 ♦ TAROTCARD DECK ♦



The Patient is the sixth card in the major arcana. She imparts her anger to those who are willing to listen. Those who seek her wisdom learn they must not fetishize illness or look to the patient for answers. Sometimes mistaken for a victim, the Patient is not patient, and she is more than a patient. Patienthood can represent her whole self or something other than a hospital gown, but never just her illness. This card is often associated with Death, which is inevitable, an indicator of life but also of mortality. Note the middle finger: it reveals more of the Patient's message; the journey has been full of rage as well as moments of clarity, fear as well as peace. Like the doctor, whose arrogance cost them compassion, the Patient in the Tarot can be a warning to self-examine. The Patient is a long, hard look at our mortal selves, and a reminder that we are all guests in our healthy bodies. Your body is already failing; right now, by seeking understanding and accepting the more embodied aspects of yourself, you accept your imperfect self. The Patient symbolizes a knowledge of the limits of your body — but does not restrict you to only being a body, only being a Patient. • Jennifer Ho



# Some Instagrams for emotional + FIRST AID! +

- 
- @projectlets
  - @rootsofsouthla
  - @nsvrc
  - @makedaisychains
  - @nayyirah.waheed
  - @survivor.love.letter
  - @qtpocmentalhealth
  - @lalahdelia
  - @thebodyisnotanapology
  - @nalgona positivitypride
  - @projectvrok
  - @chaninicholas
  - @theofficialsadghostclub
  - @counseling4allseasons
  - @queerspoons
  - @healingasresistance

An Intuitive Poem and Plan for Social  
Justice Praxis in Higher Education

What does it mean for  
my body to exist,  
to survive, and thrive,  
in this Ivory Tower?

I am queer as in “forget the system  
that latches onto my body and  
assigns every detail.  
I am Brown as in “this reflection that  
gazes back to me reveals  
my body, a mosaic of manifestations  
of my ancestors and homelands of contradiction:  
both stewarded and occupied.”  
I am disabled as in “my body is a border  
constructed to differentiate  
between sanity and incompetency.”

Every piece of the mosaic that makes up my identity  
signals, “forget the Tower. The very bricks  
that lay the foundation for your future profession  
were built without your body in mind.”

What does it look like when  
my body is a barrier  
to pursuing social justice action  
in this Ivory Tower?

Always at odds with the system  
I am a part of,  
I can dedicate  
my energy and wellbeing (my body)  
to simplicity in action:  
Surrendering to community care  
because maintenance of  
the self is too precious to not share,  
Ongoingly persisting to broaden  
and fine-tune the sculpture that is  
my critical consciousness,

Redistributing my minimal wealth to  
scholars sharing collective wisdom  
outside the Ivory Tower,  
because the revolution  
will not happen inside inaccessibility.

Areas for improvements  
first look like destroying self-hate and self-stigma  
since the revolution starts with the body, and  
minding (prioritizing) the matters of  
bodies that are barriers  
to action in institutions such as  
Higher Education.

“Who can you lean upon  
to support you and hold you accountable?”  
I cannot answer with a single name  
because my community care is  
accountability and I never experienced  
belonging until arriving in Abenaki Territory,  
so-called Vermont,  
against all odds towards  
my body of rejection, fluidity, and borders.  
Accepting the opposition of my existence  
to an educational system that would never  
consider my Abuela’s seamstress skills  
as technology,  
and complying with  
this system that would never admit  
her non-English speaking tongue  
and “fifth grade education” into an  
institutionalized  
post-secondary learning environment  
incites self-doubt, but

if my body commits to this action plan  
not only can I witness the horizon of liberation,  
but also honor my ancestors as  
we all become ancestors one day.

## Journaling Prompts to Initiate Healing

Use these questions as prompts to engage in introspection and begin the stages of your healing process from mental health crisis.

1. Can you name 5 mental health activists or influencers with disabilities?
2. How has the endeavor known as "medicine" enacted violence on you and your community? How are you healing?
3. Growing up, what words were used to describe your body/mind? What words are you keeping? What words are you letting go? What words are you letting in?
4. What are things you desire/need that are things the universe also desires/needs?
5. How does your identity affect your healing?
6. Name your favorite things about yourself.
7. What have your physical or emotional scars taught you about being human?
9. What is the relationship between pleasure & the medical model?
10. What is healing without white hegemony and binaries? What is medicine without whiteness?
11. What beings hold space for you? Make you laugh? Keep your secrets? Offer wisdom?
12. What is your theory of change when it comes to healing the earth/yourself? What future(s) is your theory of change conjuring?
13. What songs do you listen to while connecting with the space around you and losing the sense that your body is a discrete entity?
14. Whose land are you on? How does this relate to your healing?
15. What words have you lost? What words are you reclaiming? What words do you need?
16. Name the places where you find your ancestors.

Modified from @beinggreenwhileblack

I can no longer bear  
the effort of  
carving  
off and into  
an island of dried platelets  
searching for  
what softness remains  
on my body.  
My body is  
my earth  
stolen from me  
since puberty.  
Parallel menarches  
owned my arms.  
They reach to heal in  
The sunlight  
But  
I don't forget  
the night.

# Bipolar Brujeria



When I believed in Magic, the world was a Beautiful Place.

Evil eyes decked my gown and my blurred vision, well, the vacant factories

I spotted from the hospital window were mosques. I imagined the day

I would hear a call to prayer from the minarets in America.

Birds flew in circles in the sky, my gaze followed them with envy.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS...**  
 Thank you Bryan Felitto, Dan McKeon, Nathan Karas, Christina Aguilera & Jason Garvey for either your encouragement, editing and/or love.



Did you or I know that the windows in the ward had locks?

...That I had to ask for Permission to open the blinds? My psychosis was spiritual.

Patience with a Chemical Imbalance was sacred and so was refusing Medication.

Why would I want to slip that yellow pill onto my tongue if the antidepressant I stop swallowing in the spring helped me see God? It took an antipsychotic

and a mood stabilizer for them to make me an atheist, or so they thought. My neurodiversity is my magic.

Bipolar Brujeria is the capacity to feel the contrasts of earth, its landscape high in the emotional altitude of mountains and low in the depths of the ocean. What a beautiful thing to be blessed with empathy.

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