

## Preface. In the Cards

I didn't think much of anything about tarot until sometime around 2016. I'd seen tarot reading represented as "fortune telling" in countless movies and television shows, which always seemed to give it a racialized connotation (via Romani or Creole people), associating it with nomadic social formations in suspicious, if not outright antagonistic, relation to the state. But those representations always simultaneously positioned it as superstition (perhaps even the most exemplary superstition), and usually implied a scam. In the media, tarot hovered somewhere in the vicinity of grift, hoax, nonsense.

Tarot is also a highly gendered practice, and its appearance in cultural texts as nonsense always slides into the mythology of the irrational feminine. The mainstream approach to tarot—in equal measure dismissive and demonizing—allows for a politics of representational countersignification, and tarot seems to have a rather significant presence in various feminisms, with a highly visible presence on social media platforms like Instagram. That is largely where my interest in tarot lies: in contemporary feminist practice, which can also be a practice of anticapitalist, abolitionist, and decolonial worldmaking.

But when I first really began to notice tarot, I wasn't thinking about any of this. I was at a community farmer's market in Richmond, Virginia. I was there with my child, Isadora, who was four, and their mother, Julietta, my best friend. As our queer family wandered the park, dreaming up a week worth's of food from the produce on offer, Isadora found an independence that suited them. They spoke with the farmers (who often gave them a loose berry, or snow pea), or watched musicians (sometimes joining in with spare instruments set out for just such impromptu jams). At some point, I became aware that they had taken to a young person at a rickety card table offering ten-dollar tarot readings. Realizing that Isadora was occupying their time, and potentially making it appear they weren't available to do a reading, we paid them to read for Isadora.

Tarot readings became a common, if irregular, occurrence. Isadora would sit as Natasha pulled cards; usually they would talk without anyone else listening, but once, I sat in. Natasha did a very simple “Three Fates” reading and I was amazed by their ability to explain what they thought the cards meant to a four-year-old. They framed it less in terms of time, and more in terms of things Isadora might be struggling with and aspiring toward. Isadora was completely entranced and appeared to be really thinking through what Natasha was saying. It wasn’t in any way a scene of “fortune telling.” It was a scene of pedagogy, one that didn’t involve a teacher “explaining” something they “knew,” but instead involved a complex dance to make sense of a few cards where the reader offers enough of a guide for the querent to construct meaningful sense; *which* cards in which position introduces the necessary aleatory spur to the event, but the event really gathers the whole situation into itself as the reader and querent craft a narrative together. In this moment, I had my first sense that tarot is a practice of modulating attention to the necessarily situated and situational character of all interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, I noticed a curated section of tarot and witchcraft books growing just inside the door, right across from the counter, of Chop Suey Books in Richmond. As someone who reads a lot, I’ve spent a lot of time in the store since moving to Virginia, and over the years I’ve come to know the people who work there, following some of them on Instagram. Julie, who curated this particular selection of books, began to devote their Instagram account more and more to tarot, and with a friend, they created a small collective called Practical Witch Supply. The collective offered readings and classes. One of their first nondigital productions was a zine, available at the now-thriving Richmond Zine Fest (held at the Richmond Public Library), called *Anti-Capitalism: Spells and Thoughts*. It offers four spells: “Spells for Turning Anxious Energy/Depression into Righteous Anger,” “Spell for Money Healing,” “Spell for Protection Against Capitalism,” and “Spell for Re-Imagining the American Dream.”<sup>2</sup> The spells sometimes suggest gathering with a group “as we are able,” but many presume the possibility of a seemingly solitary practice. They work with simple things likely to be at hand: thread, button, flame, breath, something sharp that can cut. What Practical Witch Supply was doing piqued my interest enough that I began to read books that they recommended and took up a fledgling tarot practice.

One of the first books I bought on tarot was Michelle Tea’s *Modern Tarot*, a book firmly located in US West Coast queer and feminist punk politics. Tea

notes that “we are living in a moment of renewed interest in the mystical. Call it New Age or ‘Woo,’ call it Witchcraft or the Intuitive Arts or Mind-Body-Spirit; name yourself Bruja or Conjure or Pagan or Priest/ess. The point is, I can’t swing a magic wand without hitting someone who’s got a crystal in their pocket, or just got their aura read, or is lighting a candle for the new moon” (2017, 6). Tea subtly connects this “renewed interest” to feminist politics (summoning the second-wave mantra, “the personal is the political”) and to a kind of attention to materiality and affect that I find enormously resonant with a lot of work in affect theory and feminist new materialisms. Tea writes:

People are turning to ancestral practices for a sense of enduring longevity, and comfort. To help stay sane and grounded in the midst of so much cultural insanity. To source a different kind of power in hopes of making changes both personal and political. From learning meditation to fighting off a cold with some homemade fire cider; from indigo-dyeing your curtains to strengthening your intuition with the aid of the Tarot, such old world practices are capturing our imaginations and providing us with meaningful ways to impact our world. Tarot offers moments of deep connection during a time when connection is ubiquitous but rarely delves beneath the surface. And in a time where most religion seems irrelevant—dated, boring, antagonistic to peace—the affirming and personal nature of the Tarot offers a spiritual experience that is gentle, individual, and aspirational. (7)

At first, I read all of this with a great deal of embarrassment. Despite an abiding interest in gothic literary texts that engaged with mystical or “supernatural” forces to register the intragenerational violences of capitalist coloniality, my understanding of esoteric and occult knowledges was influenced by the highly dismissive attitude of critical theorists like Theodor Adorno, who scathingly dismisses such knowledge in *The Stars Down to Earth* and, with Max Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. My education sutured my thinking to Theory with a capital *T* (mostly “difficult” male, European philosophers), which meant I felt like esoteric texts could be engaged only via critique, only across a distance of skeptical disbelief.

Alexander Chee’s story, “The Querent,” presented tarot in a way that bypassed my skepticism about “woo-woo” knowledge by tapping into the kinds of interpretation I practice as a literary scholar, even as it short-circuits distinctions between reading and writing, between production and reception. Chee writes:

Much of what I love about literature is also what I love about the Tarot—archetypes at play, hidden forces, secrets brought to light. . . . I felt too much like a character in a novel, buffeted by cruel turns of fate. I wanted to feel powerful in the face of my fate. I wanted to be the main character of this story, and its author. And if I were writing a novel about someone like me, this is exactly what would lead him astray. (2018, 23)

Tarot is the production of story: a patterning of symbols that is simultaneously rule-bound (there are vast traditions of knowledge surrounding tarot interpretation, often drawing from many different religious and esoteric pasts) and completely aleatory. Tarot is a way of storying the world in its ongoing unfolding, a way of sensing tendencies flowing through the present that are virtual, subjunctive, potential. Chee writes, “I learned to offer readings as a portrait of the possibilities of the present” (30). These possibilities adhere in the situation, and tarot is never just about a “reader” (or “querent”) and the cards, but about an entire sprawling scene of more-than-human encounter (Snaza 2019b). Tarot is a ceremony for attending to what haunts the edges of what is perceptible, feeling out and articulating what else might be happening.

Chee’s story disputes what Tea called the “ancient” or “old world” status of tarot. Arguing that “Tarot is only about one hundred years old” (24), Chee writes:

The conventional history given on most mainstream Tarot study websites says that Tarot began as *Triunfo*, a card game popular among the nobility in fifteenth-century Italy. It involved neither fortunes nor heresies, though it was informed by esoteric and occult knowledge. It did not become what it is to us now until around the early twentieth century, through the efforts of the Society of Golden Dawn, the group of spiritualists that Crowley and Harris belonged to, who were attempting to codify that esoteric knowledge. They saw their deck as a tool for educating students in everything from Egyptian mythology to astrology to kabbalah. (24)

Tarot, in short, isn’t very traditional, and even a rudimentary genealogy of it as a practice reveals that it is, at best, a tangled mess. Its history resonates from within European theology and statecraft turned toward the colonialist project we now gather under the name of modernity, and one of its most important mutations is explicitly linked to a project of unifying distinct esoteric traditions.

But the idea that tarot reading is pedagogical—an educational experience—is profoundly attractive to me, and Mathew Arthur helped me understand

how the pedagogical event of tarot reading may be amenable to a decolonizing reorientation precisely because of this messy history. In August of 2019, I was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for the first Society for the Study of Affect Summer School (SSASS), where I was coteaching a seminar with Chad Shomura on affect theories of the event. Across the week, Chad and I spent hours with a few dozen others thinking about what work “the event” does in our imaginations of worlds that exceed colonialist orders, that wouldn’t be oriented around what Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls Man to describe the heteropatriarchal and colonialist overrepresentation of the human. (These conversations are everywhere felt in this book.)<sup>3</sup>

After the first day’s sessions, Mathew and I ended up outside and somehow got to talking about tarot. For the remainder of the week, every time we found ourselves together we’d talk tarot, feminist science studies, the politics of settler engagements with Indigenous knowledge, and spirituality. In the middle of the week, Ann Cvetkovich came to Lancaster to deliver something like a keynote at SSASS. The first part was a talk giving an overview of her earlier work, with particular attention to how she came to affect theory through reading queer archives. She also described current work emerging from her time as a “killjoy” helping visitors process their experiences of visiting Allyson Mitchell and Dierdre Logue’s *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle* in Toronto and Los Angeles (Cvetkovich 2019).

After the talk, there was an intermission for people to use the washroom, grab a snack, move around and stretch their limbs before the Q&A. After using the washroom myself, I ran into Mathew on my way out, and our enthusiasm about Ann’s talk spilled over into more tarot talk. Walking by and hearing me tell Mathew that I was reading Starhawk, Ann joined our conversation. She told me I needed to look at Vicki Noble’s *Motherpeace*, a “woman-identified” tarot practice heavily influenced by Starhawk, and she said she had brought a brand-new deck with her, wondering if it would be fun to do the Q&A with the cards: each person who asks a question would draw a card, and it would guide her answer. She told us she had been hesitant, uncertain about how it might be taken, wondering if this was the right space to perform the discussion this way. When we walked back into the conference room a minute later, Ann announced her plan with the cards and passed them around the room to gather everyone’s energy. The question I asked was about how to think through the complex affective and political stakes of reading second-wave feminist texts—it was one of my first attempts to articulate, in public, the queries that give rise to this book. Before she answered, I drew

the Moon, which “represents the core of the ancient female mysteries” according to Noble’s *Motherpeace* ([1983] 1994, 129), even “a call to enter into the darkness” (129). While much of what Ann said that day and the next has shaped how I think about esoterism, it was her willingness in this academic context to practice tarot reading that reshaped my sense of what my project was and where it could go. I felt *Tendings* bloom into existence in that room.

I have come to think of tarot as one specific version of what Cvetkovich calls a “utopia of ordinary habit”:

Although the term *practice*, a repeated action whose meaning lies in the process of performance, might seem more appropriate here, especially because of the connections between daily practice and spiritual practice, the positive and negative connotations of the term *habit* are also relevant. Habit encompasses both the desirable and healthy regularity of practice and the putatively unhealthy compulsions and obsessions of addiction. . . . [H]abit can be a mechanism for building new ways of being in the world because it belongs to the domain of the ordinary, to activities that are not spectacular or unusual but instead arise from everyday life. (2012, 191)

This interest in the ordinary and the everyday guides *Tendings*’s elaboration of esoterisms, where specific ways of being in the world are inseparable from ways of knowing. The ordinary can be an otherwise, an elsewhere.

In *Luz en Lo Oscuro*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “When troubled, conocimiento prompts you to take a deep breath, shift your attention away from what’s causing pain and fear, and call on a power deeper and freer than that of your ego, such as la naguala y los espíritus, for guidance. Direction may also come from an inner impression, dream, meditation, I Ching, Tarot cards. You use these spiritual tools to deal with various problems, large and small. Power comes from being in touch with your body, soul, and spirit and letting their wisdom guide you” (2015, 151). Anzaldúa’s words remind me that my practice of tarot reading is, first and foremost, about attention. As Tea says, “Magic is just what comes about when you concentrate on something in so singular a way, with both purity of heart and an eye for what’s possible” (2017, 25). Tarot isn’t at all about “fortune telling” but is instead about a specific ritual practice of modulating attention, including attention to the ways we are affected by spirits and materialities that we mostly ignore as part of being post-enlightenment, conscious subjects. It’s one practice of inviting the aleatory into our meaning-making and feeling connections between our particular presents and all the other presents, pasts, and futures that virtually, subjunctively haunt us.