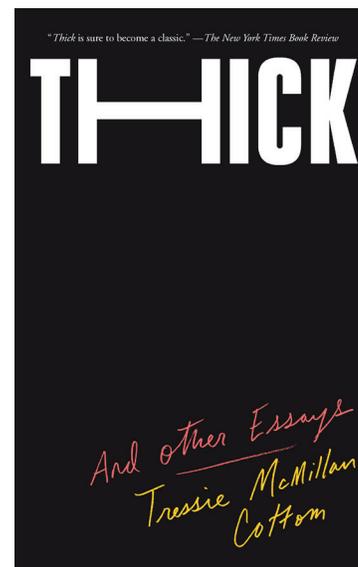


The New Press Reading Group Guide

Thick

And Other Essays

by Tressie McMillan Cottom



QUESTIONS

1. In the opening essay of *Thick*, McMillan Cottom discusses the many ways in which she is proudly contradictory. What contradictions does she highlight? What might cause the author—or anyone—to frame aspects of their identity as contradictory? Think about the contradictions you embody and share them with your discussion group. Do you feel misread or reduced on a regular basis? How do you assert your complexity, your “thickness,” in a world that wants you to be conveniently “thin”?
2. In “In the Name of Beauty,” McMillan Cottom complicates widely accepted definitions of beauty and challenges readers to consider the function and purpose of beauty. Discuss what concepts shape your own definition of beauty and how you apply notions of beauty or ugliness to yourself. Using your own observations, can you think of examples of hypocrisy in mainstream feminist discourses surrounding beauty?
3. In the same essay, McMillan Cottom says that “if beauty is to matter at all for capital, it can never be for black women.” What point do you think the author is making by identifying people as “economic subjects” in this essay?
4. Discuss among yourselves: is there a way the concept of beauty can be made liberatory? What would that look like in a capitalist society? Consider McMillan Cottom’s term “discursive loyalty”—why are the stakes for integrating an inclusive vision of beauty into our politics so high?
5. Laced throughout “In the Name of Beauty” is McMillan Cottom’s reckoning with the effect her messages about beauty have on other black women. How might engaging in candid discussions about beauty with women in communities you belong to, or in communities outside of yours, lay groundwork for political solidarity?

6. In “Dying to Be Competent,” McMillan Cottom discusses our cultural addiction to optimization. Discuss among yourselves your personal attempts at “self-improvement.” What were you seeking? Who ultimately benefited?
7. In “Know Your Whites,” McMillan Cottom mentions the history of Myers Park, an affluent subdivision in Charlotte, North Carolina. Pristine suburbs like that are often, as McMillan Cottom outlines, the product of subterranean racist agendas including restrictive zoning and development codes, exclusionary homeowners associations, etc. Yet such neighborhoods are often bastions of liberalism. What are some ways that white Democratic voters in America’s suburbs might connect their political values with efforts to diversify their own neighborhoods and schools?
8. Talk about your own neighborhoods. Did you grow up in a large city, a rural community, or a suburb? Discuss how you saw people engage with politics along lines of race. What communities existed? Were there explicit boundaries or unspoken rules communities adhered to?
9. McMillan Cottom suggests that President Barack Obama’s biracial “duality” may have been a source of delusion rather than insight into America’s racial character. She writes, “Holding two sets of social selves, two ways of being and understanding the world at one time, may soften the edge so much that for the liminal, the edges no longer exist.” Discuss your reactions to this statement.
10. McMillan Cottom asserts that Obama misunderstood white America, and that liberal Democrats as a whole did as well, which is why Trump’s election was a surprise to many when it should have been expected. How do you think presidential candidates should position their discussions of race in order to check white nationalism without underestimating it?
11. Talk about your reactions to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president. What did you assume before the moment of his victory, and what did you learn after it? How did your reaction fit into the tapestry of reactions throughout the country described by McMillan Cottom? Do you feel differently about electoral or presidential politics now that the dust has settled? Do your peers? Colleagues? Does your family?
12. In “The Price of Fabulousness,” McMillan Cottom analyzes societal biases against certain presentations of poverty—for example, the judgment of conspicuous consumption and short-term financial decision-making as character failures. What are harmful ways to discuss poverty that you’ve encountered? How can discussions of poverty as a concept or political issue be grounded in humanity?

13. Have you thought much about your class position? How has it shifted throughout your life? Do you think it has impacted your political beliefs? How you vote? How you understand social problems?

14. In “Black Girlhood, Interrupted,” McMillan Cottom explores private and public cultures of silence around sexual violence. How do you see this phenomenon play out? How has #MeToo, and the shift in public opinion following the R. Kelly documentary, impacted this culture of silence?

15. In “Girl 6,” McMillan Cottom discusses the marginalization of black women in the realms of academia and “prestige” media spaces. What are ways you work to make sure you are sourcing your reading and learning from a diverse array of thinkers? How might you go about encouraging others to introduce this same commitment to seeking diverse perspectives in their own media consumption?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tressie McMillan Cottom is an associate professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work has been featured by the *Washington Post*, PBS, NPR’s *Fresh Air*, *The Daily Show*, the *New York Times*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. The author of *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (The New Press), she co-hosts the popular podcast *Hear to Slay* and lives in Richmond, Virginia.