



# We Go High

Nicole Ellis

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\*profiles detail trigger experiences.





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# Introduction

In 2010, I graduated college into a recession and moved in with my grandmother both out of necessity and a desire to do something I wouldn't dare say out loud at the time: go on a backpacking trip around the world by myself. With her support in the form of rent-free living and homecooked meals, I saved enough to pursue my life's dream at the time. During my 2-year solo journey through 25 countries, my greatest survival skill was to employ the lessons I'd learned at home as the daughter of stubborn Texans descended from a long line of stubborn, enslaved, afro-Texan women who spent most of their days picking cotton, and never got to experience the world beyond the box that slavery forced them into. The survival skills passed down through my own lineage and the lineages of women I had the pleasure of meeting around the world is the inspiration behind *We Go High*.

Some stories may be difficult for you to read, as they graphically detail racism, verbal and physical abuse, and potentially triggering experiences that are,

unfortunately, relatable for many women—especially women of color, which is why I chose to include them.

My hope is that this book reminds you that you are not alone in the hills and valleys you come across in life. I hope that it gives you a few helpful tools and tactics for overcoming some of what you may face in your quest for respect, equality, visibility, and greatness. Every step forward will present new challenges that a woman of color somewhere else in the world is also dealing with. The pages that follow provide a catalogue of how a few women you may have heard of dealt with those challenges, and in many cases are still dealing with them. They are also a reminder that you can overcome these challenges, too.





# Culture





# Amanda Gorman

The rousing poet

Amanda Gorman made history on January 20th, 2021, when she became the youngest inaugural poet ever in the United States. At just 22, she joined the ranks of the linguistic greats, including Maya Angelo, Robert Frost, and Miller Williams.

On that historic day, she stood in front of the Capitol and the nation and spoke with an animated voice, filled with emotion. She described herself as a “skinny Black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother,” who can dream of being president one day, “only to find herself reciting for one.” Her poem “The Hill We Climb,” spoke deeply of loss and the fragile state of the nation. She also spoke of the possibility of a new day through unity, reconciliation, and bearing the weight of the full truth.

For Amanda, her truth can be found in her written words. She took to poetry at a young age as a result of a speech impediment. Rather than see it as an obstacle, Amanda took her difficulty with spoken word as an opportunity to strengthen her skills, mastering reading and writing at an early age. If she couldn’t speak words to power, she would certainly write them.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, she quickly distinguished herself as a rising talent. In 2017, she became the first National Youth Poet Laureate in the United States, while also studying sociology at Harvard University.

### **Finding Inspiration**

Two weeks before the inauguration, Amanda was struggling to string words together for her poem. Exhausted and overwhelmed she was concerned that she was not up to the monumental task. While it wasn't asked of her, it was the underlying assumption: this inauguration would need to bring together a divided nation, and her words were intended to be that bridge. Although she had written a few lines a day, the sentences weren't flowing, and her signature rhythm was missing. Then the Capitol Hill Riots happened. That night, she stayed up into the early hours of the morning, pouring all her unprocessed emotions into her journal. She described the apocalyptic scenes that had unfolded on that horrifying day.

On January 20th, 2021, her performance totally captivated the nation. It was an overcast day, with the sun occasionally peeking through the clouds. But what hung in the air was the tension building in the weeks prior to this day. Would there be a peaceful transition of power? No one would know until it was over. Following performances by Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez, and Garth Brooks, it was time for Amanda to share her words ...

Wearing a canary-yellow coat and a vibrant red headband, she stood and addressed a fractured country. With each verse and every stanza, she reminded every one of us that there was always light in the darkness; we just had to look for it.

*"When day comes, we step out of the  
shade, aflame and unafraid.  
The new dawn blooms as we free it.  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it."*

Prior to sharing the poem that would make her a household name, Amanda had been celebrated by notable women such as Hilary Clinton and Cynthia Erivo. Her career as a poet has in many ways been inspired by Malala Yousafazi, specifically by a speech given by Malala in 2013. At the age of 16 Amanda became a youth delegate for the United Nations. "It really opened my eyes to the possibilities of what I could accomplish," she said. Soon after, in 2014, she was named the inaugural Los Angeles Youth Poet Laureate. The following year, she published her first poetry collection, *The One for Whom Food Is Not Enough*.

Her future goals? Well back in 2017, long before she knew she would be performing at President Joe Biden's inauguration, she decided that she would run for office—the Oval Office. "This is a long, long, faraway goal, but in 2036 I am running for office to be president of the United States," she said matter-of-factly. "So you can put that in your iCloud calendar."





# Kehlani

## An artist in bloom

Turning 25 was more than a quarter-life milestone for Kehlani Ashley Parrish, it was a shock. “I always had a weird thing with being 25 or older,” she says. “I’m now older than my father got to be.” She was born in Oakland, California to a Spanish and Indigenous American mother and a Black American father. Much of her childhood was marked by trauma. She lost her father to substance abuse when she was a toddler. Soon after, her mother was incarcerated, and Kehlani bounced around foster care until her aunt dropped out of school to adopt her.

Among the turmoil, art became her saving grace. At 14, she enrolled at Oakland’s School for the Arts. She had dreams of Julliard, but a knee injury in junior high forced her to switch from dance to music. One day, a classmate from the school’s dance department suggested that she audition for a local cover band that was managed by his father D’wayne Wiggins, founding member of Tony! Toni! Toné! and brother to Raphael Saadiq. “I was hella scared,” she admits. “It was the first time I really sang out. I sang to him and he was like, ‘let’s get it cracking.’”

She spent the next three years performing covers of classic soul records in the group alongside Wiggins’ sons. Two years later, they auditioned for season six of *America’s Got Talent*. The band placed fourth, however the excitement was short-lived. “There were a lot of contractual things that were going wrong and a lot of mistreatment from management.



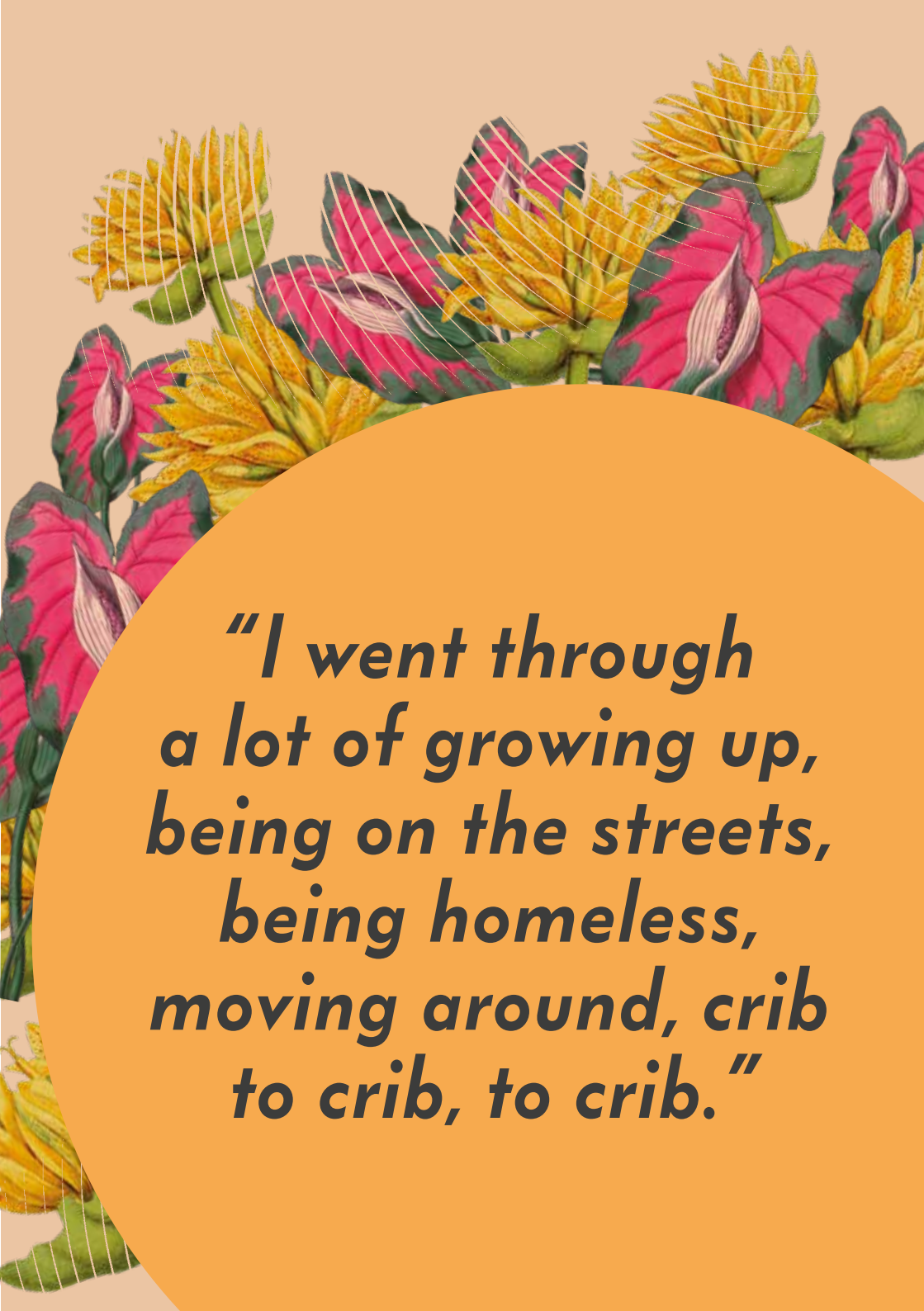
The fact that we were 16—getting robbed and getting taken advantage of—was not OK,” she said in an interview with *Complex*. “We had a meeting and [our managers] didn’t expect me to come as correct as I did. I approached them with everything that was wrong on a list and said, ‘This is not happening, this is not happening, and if this doesn’t happen, I’m out of here.’ They weren’t willing to just be appropriate and professional.” As a result, Kehlani decided to leave the band and pursue a career as a solo artist. She describes the next three years as a blur. “I went through a lot of growing up, being on the streets, being homeless, moving around, crib to crib, to crib. Just trying to graduate high school. Then Nick Cannon called me.”

### The Losses that Open Doors

He remembered her from her time on *America’s Got Talent* and had an idea for a project in Los Angeles. “It ended up being this crazy rap group that I just wasn’t down for,” says Kehlani, who doesn’t seem to realize how unusual it is to have such confidence in your own vision at such a young age. “That’s for them, you wanna rap, go rap, feel me. I’m an R&B singer.” Although the project didn’t pan out, Kehlani had found a mentor in Nick.

She returned to Oakland solo and released “ANTISUMMERLUV” in the summer of 2013. Nick Cannon called again. “He called me and was like, ‘Yo, I get your vision now! I get you, who you want to be as a solo artist. I respect it!’” She returned to LA under Nick’s guidance. This time, he made sure she was taken care of.

“He’s like, ‘Yo, you can’t be running around here trying to make music and you can’t even think about music when you’re worrying about what you’re going to eat and where you’re going to sleep,’” she says. “He comes at it from an uncle perspective. Just trying to make sure I’m alive and safe and healthy. So, he saved my life, and that’s why I’m here today.”



***“I went through  
a lot of growing up,  
being on the streets,  
being homeless,  
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to crib, to crib.”***

With Nick's support she was able to create *Cloud 19*, the 2014 album that would allow her to become a star on the rise. Her music was light, bubbly, and infectious. Shortly after, she was signed to Atlantic Records and released her second mixtape, *You Should Be Here*, which climbed to the top of Billboard's R&B charts and landed her a Grammy nomination. She was an artist in bloom.

### Growing Pains

It felt overnight; blogs that had gushed over her sultry vocals were suddenly dissecting aspects of her personal life instead of focusing on the music she was sharing with the world.

In 2017, Kehlani pivoted to pop with the release of her debut album *SweetSexySavage*. While it received positive reviews on countless music blogs, the album lacked Kehlani's signatures and was completed during a personal mental-health crisis, that all but consumed.

"I started an album as one person and went through the most traumatic event in my life," she said. It wasn't an album she was prepared to release, but her label held fast to its deadline, leaving her to make an album when she could barely recognize herself. "I didn't connect with any of the music," she says. "I was embarrassed of everything."

*"I started an album as one person and went through the most traumatic event in my life."*

When it was time for her second album, she knew that she needed to create on her own terms and her own timeline. Then the pandemic happened, and her label balked at the idea of releasing an album when traditional means of marketing were impossible.

The planned videos were scrapped, and the album was put on hold. But Kehlani decided to give herself the green light and go ahead anyway. She released a lo-fi visual for "Toxic" on her MacBook and uploaded it. The label told her she was free to do what she wanted but she'd be on her own.

So she went to Best Buy, bought a camera, and taught herself Adobe Premiere Pro. Together with her photographer, she shot and released visuals for her third album. "People were more impressed with me shooting a video at my house than they were with me when I got a crazy-ass budget," she said.

*The lesson for Kehlani was clear: when she acted in alignment with her authentic self, magic happened. Everything else was background noise.*





# Gabby Rivera

Telling your own stories

Gabby Rivera is a queer storyteller, self-proclaimed joy-advocate, and the first Latina to write for Marvel Comics. Her critically acclaimed debut novel *Juliet Takes a Breath* was listed by *Mic* as one of the 25 essential books to read for women's history month and called "f\*\*king outstanding" by Roxane Gay. As an activist, Gabby's purpose is rooted in advancing the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, particularly in minority communities—a purpose she's stayed committed to in all her written work. "When I'm here writing these stories and trying to figure out myself in my place and how I can interact and connect with my communities, I think of my grandmothers. I think of how they both believed in this country so much, and they both believed so deeply in the American dream," she said in an interview with *The Beacon*. "I don't care about white writer societies or mainstream or anything like that. We're going to be dikes, we're going to be queers, we're going to be in love, we're going to be happy, and we're going to live triumphantly to the end of our books and our movies, and that's *Juliet Takes a Breath*."

## Joy as Action

Her career and love for literature began at the age of 17, where Gabby would often spend her evenings attending poetry slams at local cafes.

Eventually, she began performing on stage. Even in her earliest days as an artist, she drew her inspiration from stories written by Black, Brown, and queer artists, which allowed her to find belonging through the community.

*"You can't assume that everyone who's brown, beige, or likes rice and beans is Latinx, it's complicated."*

Her literary novel, *Juliet Takes a Breath*, is a semiautobiographical coming-of-age novel about a gay Latinx woman learning to fall in love with her identity. The book addresses important issues of representation and intergenerational cultural differences by exploring the relationship between the main character, Juliet Milagros Palante, and her white feminist boss, Harlow Brisbane. Ultimately, the story is set to remind young readers to trust in their own power and create space for themselves in both Latinx and feminist communities.

Gabby continued to teach through her writing at Marvel Comics. Between 2017-2018 she penned the solo-series *America*, a comic about America Chavez, a 19-year-old Latinx girl who has the ability to travel through different portals and dimensions. "I wanted America Chavez to be like a safe and gentle place where people, especially young people of color, could pick up the comic, and be like, 'Oh I feel loved, I feel cared for, I don't feel stressed.' I don't want to create art that harms my people and my communities," said Gabby.

### Healing Through Stories

In true Gabby fashion, she created a series that not only acted as a safe space for marginalized youth but also expanded what was possible.

"You can't assume that everyone who's brown, beige, or likes rice and beans is Latinx, it's complicated," she said. But she also wanted her writing to heal those that have suffered and hold those that caused harm in the real world accountable through fiction.

The villains in her comics were modeled after the white supremacists in Charlottesville. "I didn't have to make this up, it was just me trying to grapple with what I see all around me, and the ways that they [white men] present themselves as aggressive and violent toward us," she said. "To everybody who in any way can connect with America Chavez, I offer peace and the right to sit in the sun. You do not have to keep up with capitalism, you do not have to keep up with a routine that doesn't serve you, or doesn't serve your joy. And when everything is painful, you still have the right to sit in the sun and heal."

*"Your work is to heal, to love yourself, to find all the things that you need to say and say to them when it feels right."*

Her focus is on healing herself and those who recognize themselves in her work. She hopes to remind the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who identify as Latinx, that their journey is theirs alone. "Your family [and] your relatives have to go on their own journey and that is not your work as much as you probably feel like it is. Your work is to heal, to love yourself, to find all the things that you need to say and say to them when it feels right, but your job is not to meet anybody's hand through your queerness."