

**TRANSNATIONAL**

**EMBODIMENTS**




awid



# **TRANSNATIONAL EMBODIMENTS**

**2022**



Feminists have long asserted that the personal is political. **Crear, Resister, Transform Festival** created spaces for feminists to discuss issues around body, gender and sexualities, and explored the interconnections of how these issues are both deeply embodied experiences, and simultaneously a terrain where rights are constantly disputed and at risk in society.

The power of feminist movements lie in how we organise and take coordinated action, not only amongst our own communities and movements, but with allied social justice causes and groups. This space provided opportunities for movements to share and strengthen organizing and tactical strategies with each other.

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has made the failures of neo-liberal capitalism even more apparent than ever before, exposed the cracks in our systems, and highlighted the need and opportunities to build new realities. A feminist economic and social recovery requires all of us to make it together. This journal edition in partnership with **Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research**, will explore feminist solutions, proposals and realities for transforming our current world, our bodies and our sexualities.

awid

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Editors' Note</b> <i>Chinelo Onwualu and Ghiwa Sayegh</i>	5
	<b>Crear   Résister   Transform: A Walkthrough of the Festival!</b> <i>Ghiwa Sayegh</i>	10
	<b>Sexting Like a Feminist: Humor in the Digital Feminist Revolution</b> <i>Chinelo Onwualu</i>	14
	<b>Communicating Desire and Other Embodied Political Praxes</b> <i>with Manal Tamimi, Lindiwe Rasekoala, and Louise Malherbe   Podcast credit: Zuhour Mahmoud</i>	21
	<b>Celluloid Ishtar</b> <i>Hind and Hind</i>	30
	<b>Illumination by the Light of the Full Moon: An African BDSM Experience</b> <i>Akosua Hanson</i>	44
	<b>Disintegration</b> <i>Ester Lopes</i>	52
	<b>Mango</b> <i>Jurema Araújo</i>	57
	<b>A Joy to the World: Six Questions with Naike Ledan</b> <i>Naike Ledan interviewed by Chinelo Onwualu</i>	64
	<b>Embodying Trauma-Informed Pleasure</b> <i>Tshegofatso Senne</i>	71
	<b>Hospital</b> <i>Photos by Mariam Mekiwi</i>	81
	<b>Moving Conversation</b> <i>Yannia Sofía Garzón Valencia</i>	86
	<b>A Collective Love Print</b> <i>The Circle's Conspiracy of Writers   Wazona Zondon</i>	95
	<b>Credits</b>	103



# **EDITORS' NOTE**

## **Lost For Words**



**Chinelo Onwualu**



**Ghiwa Sayegh**

*When we are desperate for change, as we are both in illness and insurrection, our language drains of complexity, becomes honed to its barest essentials. ... As illness and revolution persist, though, the language made in them and about them deepens, lets in more nuance, absorbed in the acutely human experience of encountering one's limits at the site of the world's end.*  
Johanna Hedva (<https://getwellsoon.labr.io/>)

When we began scheming for such an issue with Nana Darkoa, ahead of AWID's Crear | Résister | Transform: a festival for feminist movements!, we departed from a question that is more of an observation of the state of the world – a desire to shift ground: why do our sexualities and pleasures continue to be tamed and criminalized even as we are told, over and over again, that they bring neither value nor progress? We came to the conclusion that when they are embodied, something about our sexualities works against a world order that continues to manifest itself in border controls, vaccine apartheid, settler colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and rampant capitalism. Could we speak, then, of the disruptive potential of our sexualities? Could we still do that when, in order to be resourced, our movements are co-opted and institutionalized?

When our embodied labor becomes profit in the hands of the systems we seek to dismantle, it is no wonder that our sexualities and pleasures are once again relegated to the sidelines – especially when they are not profitable enough. In many instances during the production of this issue, we asked ourselves what would happen if we refused to accommodate the essential services of capitalism. But can we dare ask that question when we are exhausted by the world? Perhaps our sexualities are so easily dismissed because they are not seen as forms of care. Perhaps what we need is to reimagine pleasure as a form of radical care – one that is also anti-capitalist and anti-institutional.



“

**Why do our sexualities and pleasures continue to be tamed and criminalized even as we are told, over and over again, that they bring neither value nor progress?**

As we enter our second full year of a global pandemic, our approach to transnational embodiments has had to focus on a single political realization: that taking care is a form of embodiment. And because right now so much of our work is being done without consideration for the borders between and within ourselves, we are all Transnationally Embodied – and we are all failing. We are failing to take care of ourselves and more critically, to take care of each other.

This failure is not of our own making.

Many of our parents thought of labor as transactional, something to be given in exchange for compensation and a guarantee of care. And while that exchange was not always

honored, our parents did not expect that their work would provide them fulfillment. They had their leisure, their hobbies, and their communities for that. Today, we their children, who have been conditioned to think of our labor as intertwined with our passion, have no such expectations. We think of work and leisure as one and the same. For too many of us, work has come to embody our whole selves.

However, heteropatriarchal capitalism doesn't value us, let alone our labor or our sexualities. This is a system that will only demand more and more until you die. And when you die, it will replace you with somebody else. Expectations to be online round the clock mean we simply can't get away from work, even when we want to. This commercialization of labor, divorcing it from the person, has infiltrated every aspect of our lives and is being perpetuated even in the most feminist, the most radical and revolutionary circles.



Capitalist expectations have always been particularly pernicious to bodies who don't fit its ideal. And those seeking to consolidate their powers have used the pandemic as an opportunity to target women, sexual minorities, and any others that they see as less than.

This special issue exists because of, and certainly in spite of this.

Almost every contributor and staff member was pushing themselves past their capacity. Every single piece was produced from a place of passion, but also incredible burn-out. In a very real way, this issue is an embodiment of transnational labor – and in the digital world we live in, all labor has become transnational labor. As we have to contend with new borders that do not break an old order but reify it, we experienced firsthand, alongside our contributors, how capitalism drains our limits – how it becomes difficult to construct cohesive arguments, especially when these come with a deadline. We collectively became lost for words – because we are lost for worlds.

Feeling lost and alone in the world of heteropatriarchal capitalism is exactly why we need to re-evaluate and rethink our systems of care. In many ways, we turned this issue into a mission of finding pleasure in care. Because it has become more difficult to construct cohesive arguments, visual and creative mediums have come to the forefront. Many who used to write have turned to these mediums as ways to produce knowledge and cut through the mental fog that's enveloped us all. We brought into the issue other voices, in addition to many whom you heard at the festival, as a way of opening up new conversations, and extending our horizons.

“

**Perhaps our sexualities are so easily dismissed because they are not seen as forms of care. Perhaps what we need is to reimagine pleasure as a form of radical care – one that is also anti-capitalist and anti-institutional.**

As we are robbed of our words, it is our political duty to continue to find ways to maintain and care for ourselves and each other. So much of our current realities are trying to erase and displace us, while still exploiting our labor. Our embodiment, therefore, becomes a form of resistance; it is the beginning of us finding our way out and into ourselves.



# Crear | Résister | Transform: A Walkthrough of the Festival!



*Ghiwa Sayegh* is an anarcha-queer writer, independent publisher, and archivist. She is the founding editor of *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* and the co-founder of Intersectional Knowledge Publishers. She has an MA in gender studies from Université Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint-Denis. She is passionate about queer theory, transnational circulations, and imagined or unknown histories. Her influences are Audre Lorde and Sara Ahmed.

**As heteropatriarchal capitalism continues to force us into consumerism and compliance, we are finding that our struggles are being siloed and separated by physical as well as virtual borders.**

And with the additional challenges of a global pandemic to overcome, this divide-and-conquer strategy has been favorable for the proliferation of exploitation across many areas.

Yet, From September 1 to September 30, 2021, *Crear | Résister | Transform: a festival for feminist movements!* took us on a journey of what it means to embody our realities in virtual spaces. At the festival, feminist activists from across the world came together, not only to share experiences of hard-won freedoms, resistances, and cross-borders solidarities, but to articulate what a transnational form of togetherness could look like.

It is this togetherness that has the potential to defy borders, weaving a vision for a future that is transformative because it is abolitionist and anti-capitalist. Spread out over a month, across digital infrastructures that we occupied with our queerness, our resistance, and our imaginaires, the festival showed a way to deviate from the systems that make us complicit in the oppression of others and ourselves.



Though Audre Lorde taught us that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, Sara Ahmed showed us that we can misuse them. Because we had to make space for assembly, in spite of all the other demands on our time, it became possible to imagine a disruption to the reality of heteropatriarchal capitalism.

Now, if we understand assembly as a form of pleasure, then it becomes possible to make the link between transgressive pleasure and transnational/transdigital resistance. Between the kinds of pleasure that challenges borders on the one hand, and queerness, campiness, land and indigenous struggle, anti-capitalism, and anti-colonial organizing on the other.

This issue attempted to capture a sense of how the festival's exercise in assembly took on multiple shapes and imaginations. Beyond direct collaborations with some of its speakers and dreamers, we brought on a plethora of other voices from the Global South to be in conversation with many of its themes and subjects. Below is a map of some of the festival's panels that most inspired us.



“

**If we understand assembly as a form of pleasure, then it becomes possible to make the link between transgressive pleasure and transnational/transdigital resistance. Between the kinds of pleasure that challenges borders on the one hand, and queerness, campiness, land and indigenous struggle, anti-capitalism, and anti-colonial organizing on the other.**

**Plenary | The revolution will be feminist  
– or it won't be a revolution**  
with Manal Tamimi, Bubulina Moreno,  
Karolina Więckiewicz, and Anwulika  
Ngozi Okonjo.

[YOUTUBE](#)  
[SOUNDCLOUD](#)

**Panel | Pleasure  
Across Borders**  
with Lindiwe Rasekoala,  
Lizzie Kiama, Jovana  
Drodevic, and Malaka Grant.

[YOUTUBE](#)  
[SOUNDCLOUD](#)

**Plenary | She is on her way:  
Alternatives, feminisms and  
another world**  
with Dr. Vandana Shiva, Dr. Dilar  
Dirik, and Nana Akosua Hanson.

[YOUTUBE](#)  
[SOUNDCLOUD](#)

**Panel | Liberated Land & Territories:  
A Pan-African Conversation**  
with Luam Kidane, Mariama Sonko,  
Yannia Sofia Garzon Valencia, and  
Nomsa Sizani.

[YOUTUBE](#)  
[SOUNDCLOUD](#)

**Plenary | Organizing to Win**  
with Nazik Abylgaziva, Amaranta  
Gomez Regalado, Cindy Weisner,  
and Lucineia Freitas.

[YOUTUBE](#)

**Panel | “un”Inclusive Feminism:  
The voiceless girls in the  
Haitian feminist movement**  
with Naike Ledan and  
Fédorah Pierre-Louis.

[YOUTUBE](#)







# SEXTING LIKE A FEMINIST: HUMOR IN THE DIGITAL FEMINIST REVOLUTION

**Chinelo Onwualu**

**Chinelo Onwualu** is an editorial consultant with nearly 10 years of experience in crafting strategic communications for nonprofits across the world. Her clients have included ActionAid Nigeria, The BBC World Trust, Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), and AWID. She has a master's degree in Journalism from Syracuse University and has worked as a writer, editor, and researcher in Nigeria, Canada, and the United States. She is also the non-fiction editor of *Anathema* magazine and co-founder of *Omenana*, a magazine of African Speculative Fiction. Her short stories have been featured in several award-winning anthologies and she's been nominated for the British Science Fiction Awards, the Nommo Awards for African Speculative Fiction, and the Short Story Day Africa Award. She's from Nigeria but lives in Toronto with her partner and child.



On September 2nd, 2021, the amazing feminist and social justice activists of AWID's Crear | Résister | Transform festival came together not only to share resistance strategies, co-create, and transform the world, but also to talk dirty on Twitter.

The exercise was led by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, co-founder of the blog [Adventures From The Bedrooms of African Women](#) and author of [The Sex Lives of African Women](#), who paired up with the Pan-Africanist digital queer womanist platform [AfroFemHub](#), to ask the question: How can we safely and consensually explore our pleasure, desires, and fantasies via text?

Basically: How would a feminist sext?

I believe this is a critically important question because it looks at the larger issue of how one navigates the online world with a feminist understanding. Under capitalism, discourse around bodies and sex can be dehumanizing and distorting, and navigating sexual pleasure in virtual spaces can feel performative. So seeking out avenues where we can explore how we share our desire in ways that are affirming and enthusiastic can push back against dominant models of presentation and consumption to reclaim these spaces as sites for authentic engagement, proving that all sexting should be just that: feminist.

Plus, allowing feminist discourse to embody its playful side in online discourse helps reframe a popular narrative that feminist engagement is joyless and dour. But as we know, having fun is part of our politics, and an inherent part of what it means to be feminist.

Using the hashtag [#SextLikeAFeminist](#), scholars and activists from all over

“

**So seeking out avenues where we can explore how we share our desire in ways that are affirming and enthusiastic can push back against dominant models of presentation and consumption to reclaim these spaces as sites for authentic engagement, proving that all sexting should be just that: feminist.**



the world chimed in with their thirstiest feminist tweets, and here are my top ten.

As these tweets show, it turns out that sexting like a feminist is sexy, funny – and horny. Yet, it never loses sight of its commitment to equity and justice.

**10. I love me some poetry...**



Isabel Marler  
@IsabelMarler

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
The revolution is coming  
And so are you  
[#SextLikeAFeminist](#)



**9. Always good to establish ground rules.**



Isabel Marler  
@IsabelMarler

Leave your biases, preconceptions AND your clothes  
at the door! [#SextLikeAFeminist](#)





## 8. When you've just met and need a good opening line.



Marianne  
@naturalfeminist

Let's take it nice and slow. Orgasms, much like feminist movement building, take time, energy & a little creativity

[#SextLikeAFeminist](#)



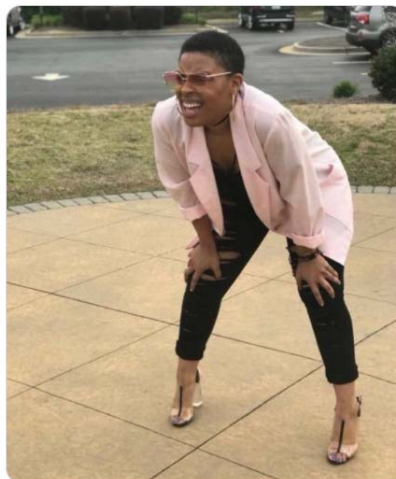
## 7. Come correct! And show your sources...



AfroFem Hub @HOLAAfrica · Sep 2, 2021

You want this p'ssy, let me see that paper. (Seriously, where are your test results? Digital copy is fine.)

[#FeministFestival](#) [#SextLikeAFeminist](#)





#### 6. Always be willing to explore new experiences!



#### 5. For a thorough analysis, we must apply every tool at our disposal...



#### 4. Real feminists don't kink-shame.





### 3. We all appreciate a clear communication of intent.



TheFeministAuthor  
@AmandaTayteTait

No one:

Me:

@AWID: #SextLikeAFeminist

Bae: I wanna squeeze your ass like I wanna squeeze misogynists out of corporate hierarchies



### 2. Who doesn't like a visual cue?



AfroFem Hub  
@HOLAAfrica

'Sexuality is fluid and right now so is my vagina.'

#FeministFestival #SextLikeAFeminist



And my number 1. Because you know it's gotten real when higher powers are invoked.



AfroFem Hub  
@HOLAAfrica

'I want to cum so hard my ancestors awaken and rejoin the struggle.'

#FeministFestival #SextLikeAFeminist







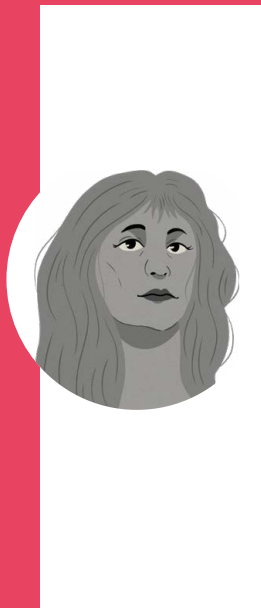


# COMMUNICATING DESIRE AND OTHER EMBODIED POLITICAL PRAXES

*with Manal Tamimi, Lindiwe Rasekoala,  
and Louise Malherbe*

**Podcast credit: Zuhour Mahmoud**

**Louise Malherbe** is a film programmer/curator and a film critic based in Berlin. She worked as a film programmer for the Metropolis Cinema Association in Beirut and is now coordinating the Reel Streams project aiming at supporting the dissemination of independent cinema in the Arab region. She is Head of Programming for Soura Film Festival, a queer film festival focusing on the S.W.A.N.A. region, writes film critics for Manifesto XXI, and recently started curating films and festivals for Cinema Akil.



**Lindiwe Rasekoala** is a life coach who specializes in intimacy and relationship wellness coaching. She is a sexual health enthusiast and online contributor. Through her own experiences and unconventional methods of research, she believes she can bridge the education gap and lack of access to information around sexual wellness. She is a contributor on various radio and television shows, and has completed her coach training with the Certified Coaches Alliance. Lindiwe's mission is to break down the barriers to conversations around sexual wellness and to empower her clients to achieve greater understanding of themselves so that they can experience a more healthy and holistic lifestyle and relationships.

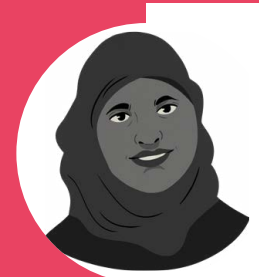


[Listen here!](#)



**Zuhour Mahmoud** is the Communication Strategist at Kohl. She is a writer and an editor, and an occasional DJ based in Berlin. Her work focuses on critical approaches to music, technology and politics and their life cycles within the digital sphere.

**Manal Tamimi** is a Palestinian activist and human rights defender. She is a mother of four who holds a master's degree in international humanitarian law. Due to her activism, she was arrested three times and got wounded more than once, including with live explosive bullets which are banned internationally. Her family is also a target: her children have been arrested and wounded with live ammunition more than once. The last incident was an assassination attempt of her son Muhammad who was shot in the chest, near the heart, a few weeks after his liberation from the occupation prisons where he had spent two years. Her philosophy on life: *if I have to pay the price for being a Palestinian and not for a crime I have committed, I refuse to die in silence.*



# COMMUNICATING DESIRE

**HOST:** We tend to think about communicating desire as something that is limited to the private intimacy of the bedroom and our personal relationships. But can we also think of this kind of communication as a structure, a praxis that informs our work, and how we are, how we do in the world?

**LINDIWE** I believe that unfortunately in the past, expressing your sexuality has been limited. You were allowed to express it within the confines of your marriage, which was permitted, there have always been taboo and stigmas attached to expressing it any other way. When it comes to communicating, obviously the fact that certain stigmas are attached to expressing your sexuality or expressing your desire makes it a lot harder to communicate that in the bedroom or intimately with your partner. From my personal experience, I do believe that obviously if I feel more comfortable expressing myself outside of the bedroom on other matters or other topics, it's easier for me to build that trust, because you understand conflict resolution with that particular person, you understand exactly how to make your communication special towards that particular person. It's not easy. It's something that is consistently done throughout whatever your engagement is, whether it's your relationship or whether it's casual and just in the moment. But I believe that confidence outside can definitely translate to how you communicate your desire.

**MANAL** Since childhood, a woman is raised with that, "you're not allowed to talk about your body, you're not allowed to talk about your desire," which puts a heavy responsibility on women, especially girls in their teens when they need to express themselves and talk about these issues. So for me I think this is a big problem. You know, I have been married for more than 25 years, but still, until now, I cannot talk about my desires. I cannot say what I want or what I prefer, because it's like I'm not

“

**LOUISE:** We know now, because of the internet and sharing knowledge, that women and queer filmmakers have been trying and making films since the beginning of cinema. We only realize it now that we have access to databases and the work of activists and curators and filmmakers.



allowed to go beyond this line. It's like haram, despite it being my right. This is the case for all my friends, they just can't express themselves in the right way.

**LOUISE** Personally, I find that expressing our desires, my desires, however that expression comes in hand, has to do with the other, and the gaze that the other would have on me. So this is also something that we can link to cinema. And the gaze I would have on myself as well: what I think I am as an individual, but also what society expects of me and my sexuality. In the past, I somehow did the analogy between what happens in the bedroom and what happens in the workplace, because there is sometimes this dynamic of power, whether I want it or not. And oftentimes, verbal communication is harder than we think. But when it comes to representation in film, that's a totally different game. We are very far away from what I guess all of us here would like to see on screen when it comes to just communicating sexual desires inside or outside the bedroom.

---

## ONLINE AND EMBODIED

**HOST:** We can think about the digital world as embodied: while it might be virtual, it is not less real. And this was made clear in the context of AWID's feminist realities festival, which took place entirely online. What does it mean then to talk about sexuality, collectively, politically, in online spaces? Do we navigate virtual spaces with our bodies and affects, and in this case, what are the different considerations? What does it do to communication and representation?

**LINDIWE** Social media makes you feel community-based. When you express what it is that you want or like, there is someone who's either going to agree or disagree, but those who do agree make you feel that you belong to a community. So it's easier to throw it out into the universe, or for others to see, and potentially not get as much judgment. And I say this very loosely because sometimes, depending on what it is that you're expressing, it either will get you vilified or celebrated. But when it comes to the bedroom, there is an intimacy and almost a vulnerability that is exposing you and different parts of you that

is not as easy to give your opinion on. When it comes to expressing your desire, speaking it and saying it and maybe putting a Tweet or a social media post, or even liking and reading other communities that are same-minded is a lot easier than telling your partner, “this is how I want to be pleased” or “this is how what I want you to do next,” because of the fear of rejection. But not only that, just the vulnerability aspect – allowing yourself to be bare enough to let the other person see into what you are thinking, feeling, and wanting – I think this is

where the difference would come in for me personally. I feel it is a lot more community-based on social media, and it’s easier to engage in discourse. Whereas in the bedroom, you don’t want to necessarily kill the moment. But I think that also kind of helps you understand going forward, depending on the relationship with the person, how you would engage thereafter. So I always know that if I try to communicate something and I fail to do so in the moment, I can always try to bring it up outside of that moment and see what the reaction would be so I know how to approach it going forward.

**“ LINDIWE: When you get out of the shower, you get out of the bath, and you’re putting lotion on your body, look at every part of your body, feel every part of your body, know when there are changes, know your body so well that should you get a new pimple on your knee, you are so aware of it because just a few hours ago it wasn’t there.**

**LOUISE** You know the question in films is, I don’t know if the male gaze is done intentionally or not. Like we don’t really know that. What we know is that the reason why sexuality in general has been so heteronormative and focused on penetration and not giving any space for women to actually ask for anything in films, is because most of the people who have been working in this industry and making decisions in terms of, you know, storytelling and editing have been white men. So rape revenge is this very weird film genre that was birthed

in the 70s, and half of the story would be that a woman is being raped by one or multiple people, and in the other half, she would get her revenge. So usually she would murder and kill the people who have raped her, and sometimes other people next to them. At the beginning of the birth of this genre and for 30



years at least, those films were written, produced, and directed by men. This is why we also want so much representation. A lot of feminists and pioneers in queer filmmaking also used the act of filming in order to do that and to reclaim their own sexuality. I'm thinking about Barbara Hammer, who's a feminist and queer pioneer in experimental cinema in the U.S. where she decided to shoot women having sex on 16mm, and by doing so reclaimed a space within the narrative that was exposed in film at that time. And there is also then the question of invisibilization: we know now, because of the internet and sharing knowledge, that women and queer filmmakers have been trying and making films since the beginning of cinema. We only realize it now that we have access to databases and the work of activists and curators and filmmakers.

---

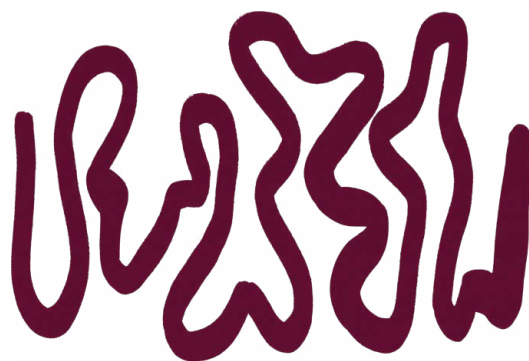
## RESISTING COLONIZATION

**HOST:** And this opens up the conversation on the importance of keeping our feminist histories alive. The online worlds have also played a crucial role in documenting protests and resistance. From Sudan to Palestine to Colombia, feminists have taken our screens by storm, challenging the realities of occupation, capitalism, and oppression. So could we speak of communicating desire – the desire for something else – as decolonization?

**MANAL** Maybe because my village is just 600 residents and the whole village is one family – Tamimi – there are no barriers between men and women. We do everything together. So when we began our non-violent resistance or when we joined the non-violent resistance in Palestine, there was no discussion whether women should participate or not. We took a very important role within the movement here in the village. But when other villages and other places began to join our weekly protests, some men thought that if these women participate or join the protests, they will fight with soldiers so it will be like they're easy women. There were some men who were not from the village who tried to sexually harass the women. But a strong woman who is able to stand in front of a soldier can also stand against sexual harassment. Sometimes, when other women from other places join our protest, they are shy at first; they don't want to come closer because there are many men. If you want to join the protest,

if you want to be part of the non-violent movement, you have to remove all these restrictions and all these thoughts from your mind. You have to focus on just fighting for your rights. Unfortunately, the Israeli occupation realizes this issue. For example, the first time I was arrested, I wear the hijab so they tried to take it off; they tried to take off my clothes, in front of everybody. There were like 300-400 people and they tried to do it. When they took me to the interrogation, the interrogator said: “we did this because we want to punish other women through you. We know your culture.” So I told him: “I don’t care, I did something that I believe in. Even if you take all my clothes off, everybody knows that Manal is resisting.”

**LINDIWE** I think even from a cultural perspective, which is very ironic, if you look at culture in Africa, prior to getting colonized, showing skin wasn’t a problem. Wearing animal skin and/or hides to protect you, that wasn’t an issue and people weren’t as sexualized unless it was within context. But we conditioned ourselves to say, “you should be covered up” and the moment you are not covered up you are exposed, and therefore it will be sexualized. Nudity gets sexualized as opposed to you just being naked; they don’t want a little girl to be seen naked. What kind of society have we conditioned ourselves to be if you’re going to be sexualizing someone who is naked outside of the context of a sexual engagement? But environment definitely plays a big role because your parents and your grannies and your aunts say “no, don’t dress inappropriately,” or “no, that’s too short.” So you hear that at home first, and then the moment you get exposed outside, depending on the environment, whether it’s a Eurocentric or more westernized environment to what you are used to, then you are kind of free to do so. And even then, as much as you are free, there’s still a lot that comes with it in terms of catcalling and people still sexualizing your body. You could be wearing a short skirt, and someone feels they have the right to touch you without your permission. There is so much that is associated with regulating and controlling women’s bodies, and that narrative starts at home. And then you go out into your community and society and the narrative gets perpetuated, and you realize that you get sexualized by society at large too, especially as a person of color.





## RESISTANCE AS PLEASURE

**HOST:** And finally, in what ways can our resistance be more than what we are allowed? Is there a place for pleasure and joy, for us and our communities?

**LOUISE** Finding pleasure as resistance and resistance in pleasure, first for me there is this idea of the guerrilla filmmaking or the action of filming when you're

not supposed to or when someone told you not to, which is the case for a lot of women and queer filmmakers in the world right now. For example, in Lebanon, which is a cinema scene that I know very well, most of the lesbian stories that I've seen were shot by students in very short formats with "no production value" as the west would say – meaning with no money, because of the censorship that happens on an institutional level, but also within the family and within the private sphere. I would think that filming whatever, but also filming pleasure and pleasure within lesbian storytelling is an act of resistance in itself. A lot of times, just taking a camera and getting someone to edit and someone to act is extremely hard and requires a lot of political stance.

“

**MANAL:** Once I asked some women, 'why are you joining [the protests]?' And they said, 'if the Tamimi women can do it, we can do it also.'

**LINDIWE** I have a rape support group. I'm trying to assist women to reintegrate themselves from a sexual perspective: wanting to be intimate again, wanting to not let their past traumas influence so much how they move forward. It's not an easy thing, but it's individual. So I always start with understanding your body. I feel the more you understand and love and are proud of it, the more you are able to allow someone else into that space. I call it sensuality training, where I get them to start seeing themselves as not sexual objects, but as objects of pleasure and desire that can be interchangeable. So you're worthy of receiving as well as giving. But that's not only from a psychological point of view; it is physical. When you get out of the shower, you get out of the bath, and you're putting lotion on your body, look at every part of your body, feel every

part of your body, know when there are changes, know your body so well that should you get a new pimple on your knee, you are so aware of it because just a few hours ago it wasn't there. So things like that where I kind of get people to love themselves from within, so they feel they are worthy of being loved in a safe space, is how I gear them towards claiming their sexuality and their desire.

**MANAL** You know we began to see women coming from Nablus, from Jerusalem, from Ramallah, even from occupied 48, who have to drive for 3-4 hours just to come to join the protests. After that we tried to go to other places, talk with women, tell them that they don't have to be shy, that they should just believe in themselves and that there is nothing wrong in what we are doing. You can protect yourself, so where is the wrong in participating or in joining? Once I asked some women, "why are you joining?" And they said, "if the Tamimi women can do it, we can do it also." To be honest I was very happy to hear this because we were like a model for other women. If I have to stand for my rights, it should be all my rights, not just one or two. We can't divide rights.







# CELLULOID ISHTAR

*Hind and Hind*



**Hind and Hind** were the first documented queer couple in Arab history. In today's world, they are a queer artist from Lebanon.



### Sequence 1

When I was 6, I learned that my grandfather owned a movie theater. My mother recounted to me how it had opened in the early 1960s, when she was also about 6 years old. She remembered that they screened *The Sound of Music* on the first night.

I would pass by the theater every weekend and watch my grandfather play backgammon with his friends. I didn't know he was living in the theater, in a room right under the projection booth. I later learned that he moved there after he and my grandmother separated and after the theater closed, in the 1990s, shortly after the Lebanese civil war had ended.

For years and until he passed away, I would mostly see my grandfather play backgammon in the unmaintained reception area of the movie theater. Those repeated scenes are all I remember of him. I never got to properly know him; we never talked about cinema, even though he spent all his time in a run-down movie theater. I never asked him what it was like to live in a place like this. He died when I was 12, on Christmas Eve, from a fall down the spiraling steps that led to the projection booth. It is almost poetic that he passed away in movement, in a house where moving images are perpetually suspended in time.



**Transnational Embodiments**  
Celluloid Ishtar, Hind and Hind



## Sequence 2

In the spring of 2020, my cousin called me to say he had cleaned up my grandfather's movie theater and asked me to meet him there. The two of us had always dreamed of renovating it. I got there before he did. In the reception area, the film poster frames were still there but the posters were gone. I knew there must have been some ticket stubs left somewhere; I found them stacked away in a small rusty tin box, on a shelf in the ticketing booth, and I pocketed some.

I began to walk around. On the main stage, the projection screen was quite dirty and a little torn on the side. I glided my index finger on the screen to remove a patch of dust and noticed that the screen was still white underneath. The fabric seemed to be in good shape too. I looked up to see that my grandmother's curtains were still in place. They were made of white satin with a little embroidered emblem over the bridge of the curtain, representing the theater. There was a main seating area and a gallery. The chairs seemed to be very worn out.

I noticed the projector peeking out of a small window at the very end of the balcony seating area. I led myself up the spiraling steps of the projection booth.

The room was dark, but a source of light coming from the dusty windows revealed a stack of film reels tossed in a corner. Lifeless celluloid strips were tangled up against the foot of the film projector. The dusty reels were all Western, Bollywood, and Science-Fiction genre films with bad titles like *The Meteor that Destroyed Earth*, or something of the sort. My attention was caught by the dusty film strips – mostly snippets cut out from reels. One by one, the short strips depicted different kissing scenes, what seemed like a suggestive dance, a nondescript scene of a gathering, a close-up of a woman lying down with her mouth open, opening credits to a Bollywood film, and a "Now Showing" tag that went on for several frames.

The Bollywood film credits reminded me of my mother. She used to tell me how they would hand out tissues to audience members on their way out of screenings. I kept the kissing scene and suggestive dance strips; I assumed they had been cut out for cen-





sorship reasons. The close-up of the woman reminded me of an excerpt from Béla Balázs' *Visible Man*, or *The Culture of Film*, *The Spirit of Film*, and *Theory of the Film*. He said that close-ups in film provided a

silent soliloquy, in which a face can speak with the subtlest shades of meaning without appearing unnatural and arousing the distance of the spectators. In this silent monologue, the solitary human soul can find a tongue more candid and uninhibited than any spoken soliloquy, for it speaks instinctively, subconsciously.

Balázs was mostly describing the close-ups of Joan in the silent film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. He pointed out how, "...in the silent (movie), facial expression, isolated from its surroundings, seemed to penetrate to a strange new dimension of the soul."

I examined the film strip further. The woman looked dead, her face almost mask-like. She reminded me of Ophelia by the painter John Everett Millais. In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag says a photograph is "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask." These death masks are like a presence that reminds of an absence.

I remembered encountering a discourse between death and photography in Roberto Rossellini's forgotten film *The Machine that Kills Bad People*. In this film, a cameraman goes around taking photographs of people, who would in turn freeze, and are later suspended in time. French film critic André Bazin used to say that photography snatches bodies away from the flow of death and stores them by embalming them. He described this photographic mummification as "the preservation of life by a representation of life."

This projection booth, its whole layout, all the things that looked like they were moved, the celluloid strips on the ground, everything my grandfather left a mark on – I felt very protective of.

Underneath the strips was an undone dusty film reel. It seemed like someone had been watching the reel manually. At that moment, my cousin made his way up the spiraling steps to find me examining it. He rubbed his fingers along his chin and, in a very-matter-of-fact way, said, "You found the porn."

### Sequence 3

I looked at the film strip in my hand and realized it was not a death scene. The strip was cut out of the porn reel. The woman was moaning in ecstasy. Close-ups are meant to convey feelings of intensity, of climax, but I had never really used Balázs' theories to describe a porn scene. He wrote how "the dramatic climax between two people will always be shown as dialogue of facial expressions in close-up." I pocketed the film strip and I named the woman Ishtar. She has lived in my wallet ever since. It seemed strange to compare the close depiction of Joan's fears and courage with Ishtar's facial expression in ecstasy.

According to my cousin, my grandfather's brother would wait until my grandfather left the theater and, instead of closing, invite his friends for some after-hour private screenings. I didn't think much of it. It was a common practice, especially during and after the Lebanese civil war. After the war, television sets were almost in every Lebanese household. I even remember having one in my bedroom in the late 1990s, when I was around 6 years old. I was told that buying porn films on VHS was popular at the time. Mohammed Soueid, a Lebanese writer and filmmaker, once told me that movie theaters used to screen art films and pornography from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, so that they could survive. I also heard that projectionists would cut up porn reels to make different montages, so that they could screen something different every night. Eventually, people stayed within the comforts of their homes to watch VHS tapes on their televisions, and movie theaters began to run out of business.

### Sequence 4

My cousin went back downstairs to go through an archive of paperwork in the office space. I stayed in the booth and began to slip the film strip between my index and middle finger, sliding it up with my thumbs and slowly running the frames through my hands. I lifted the strip against the dusty window and squinted to make sense of the monochrome vignettes. In this series of frames was an extreme close-up of a dick shoved into a vagina. It went on for several frames until I came across a knot in the film, and I imagined the rest.





### Sequence 5

*Hank is showcasing his hard-on in front of Veronika who is lying in bed across a Louis XIV secrétaire knockoff. She gets up slowly and slides the thin strap of her see-through négligé off her left shoulder. Hank unties her veiled robe, turns her around, slaps her ass, and pushes her down against the secrétaire. He thrusts his dick inside her pussy repeatedly as the back of the furniture bangs against the wallpaper-adorned wall.*





### Sequence 6

I was always attentive to the interior décor, ever since I was told by my Women in Porn Studies professor that the largest porn archives in North America are interestingly used to examine the middle-class furniture of that epoch. So, while Veronika is bending over and being taken from behind by Hank, a university research assistant could very well be trying to guess the design of the gold motif on the *secrétaire*, or study the rococo relief on a wooden chair in some corner.

For a moment, the booth became a space for female sexual imagination, disrupting a space otherwise promised for the freedom of male sexuality. I was sure that only men were able to access movie theaters that screened porn films. The film reel was too entangled to undo in a projection booth where dust had accumulated for over a decade, so I stuffed it into my duffle bag and walked out of the theater.

I am not sure what came over me, but I felt compelled to keep it. I wanted to feel the thrill of safeguarding something mysterious, something unorthodox. In my mind, I was sure people knew I was hiding something as I walked down the street. A feeling of guilt intertwined with pleasure came over me. It felt kinky.







### Sequence 7

*I got into the house, preoccupied with the thought of having a porn reel in my duffle bag and the stream of thoughts that had unfolded on my walk home. I immediately went to my bedroom. In some distant part of my mind, I remembered that I shared a wall with Layla's room next door. She was probably not home, but the possibility of being heard excited me. I closed my bedroom door and I took the film strip of Ishtar out.*

*I imagined her dressed in a light green veiled dress, dancing seductively in front of me, swinging her hips sideways and smiling with her eyes. I got onto my bed. I slipped my fingers into my panties. I lifted my hips. I trailed my hand down my thighs to part them, and slid two fingers in. I tensed up as I palpated my various creases. I moaned before I could stop myself. I panted and swayed. The rays of sun coming through my window planted reluctant kisses onto my skin. I held my breath in and my limbs quivered. I swallowed my breath and laid flat on the mattress.*

### Sequence 8

When I was an undergraduate student, I had taken an introductory film class and Professor Erika Balsom had scheduled a screening of Bette Gordon's *Variety*. I was excited to watch producer Christine Vachon's first film before she moved onto producing films that are now part of the New Queer Cinema movement. *Variety* was described as a feminist film about Christine, a woman who begins to work as a ticketing clerk in a porn movie theater in New York city called The Variety Theater. Christine overhears the films at the theater but never goes in. Eventually, she becomes interested in a regular customer, whom she watches closely. She follows him to an adult shop where she stands aside and flips through adult magazines for the first time.

Christine's voyeurism was displayed in different ways throughout the film. The script was also ridden with excess, and erotic monologues that would be considered obscene or vulgar.

In a scene set in an arcade, she reads erotica to her boyfriend. The camera goes back and forth between a close-up of her boyfriend Mark's butt as he was playing pinball, swinging his hips back and forth against the arcade machine, and a close-up of Christine's face as she recited her monologue.

### Sequence 9

*"Sky was hitchhiking and he got a ride from a woman in a pick-up truck. It was late at night and he needed a place to stay, so she offered him her place.*

*She showed him to his room and offered him a drink. They drank and talked and decided to turn in. He couldn't sleep, so he put on his pants and walked down the hall to the living room. He was a stop short of being seen, but he could see. The woman was naked and spread on the coffee table with only her legs dangling over. Her whole body was excitingly white as if it'd never seen the sun. Her nipples were bright pink, fire-like, almost neon. Her lips were open. Her long auburn hair licking the floor, arms stretched, fingers tickling the air. Her oiled body was round with no points, no edges. Slithering between her breasts was a large snake curving up around one, and down between the other. The snake's tongue licking toward the cunt, so open, so red in the lamp light. Hot and confused, the man walked back to his room, and with great difficulty, managed to fall asleep. The next morning, over strawberries, the woman asks him to stay another night. Again, he couldn't sleep [...]"*





### Sequence 10

When I was 23, Lynn, the girl I was dating from film class, surprised me by taking me to watch erotica short films on Valentine's Day. The event took place at The Mayfair Theater, an independent old movie theater. The architecture of the theater recalled North American Nickelodeons, but with a campy touch. Its balconies were decorated with life-size cardboard cutouts of *Swamp Thing* and *Aliens*.

That year, the festival was judged by adult star Kacie May and the program consisted of an hour and a half of short films. The content ranged from soft-core machismo-ridden shorts to scat fetish films. We watched a few minutes of what seemed to be heterosexual soft porn. It followed a couple who start making love in a modern living room space, then move to the bedroom. It was mostly footage of them kissing each other, touching each other, and making love missionary-style. Then a woman with a short brown bob crawled onto the bed, licking the back of her own hand in short strokes. She meowed and crawled over the unconcerned couple. They continued to make love. She crawled out to the kitchen, picked up her empty bowl with her teeth, and placed it onto a pillow. She kept walking over them until the end of the short. It seemed quite absurd. I began to laugh, but Lynn looked a bit uncomfortable. I then looked to our left, watching other audience members chugging beers and inhaling popcorn while laughing hysterically. Their uninterrupted laughter and loud comments really set the tone of the festival. Watching the audience became more interesting than watching the erotic films. The Mayfair Theater often showed cult films, and watching cult films is a communal experience.

It's not exactly how I imagined my mother's uncle watching porn in my grandfather's theater. Movie theaters were openly screening porn films at that time, but I could not picture it happening within my mother's hometown. I pictured him watching the film from the projector in the booth, so he could quickly stop the screening in case any unexpected guests decided to stop by. His friends sat on the balcony in the back. No one could get in from there unless they had a key, so it was safe. They had to think of everything. It was a conservative Christian neighborhood and they would not want to cause any trouble. They were most likely overcome with excitement and guilt. The voices of loud homoerotic banter merged with sound bites of grunting and moaning, but they reminded each other to keep it down every few minutes. They took turns to check the windows to make sure the sound was not loud enough to alarm any neighbors. Sometimes, they would turn off the speaker and there would be no sound.

### Sequence 11

After a political protest in 2019, I came across a bookstand on Riad El Solh street, close to Martyr's Square in downtown Beirut. Towards the end of the table, past the copies of Hugo and de Beauvoir, I found a stack of erotica novels and adult magazines. They were all translations of Western publications. I really did not care which one I picked; I just knew I wanted to own a copy for the thrill of it. I looked for the most interesting cover art.

As he was giving me my change back, the vendor asked me, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

He scanned my breasts, gliding his eyes downwards. He probably assumed I worked in the porn or sex industry. I looked into his eyes and said, "No." I turned around, ready to walk away with my magazine. He then stopped me to say that he had a large archive in his basement, and that he regularly sold porn collections and publications on EBay, to Europe and the USA. Although I was interested in rummaging through that archive, I was not comfortable enough to take his offer. It did not feel safe. I asked him where he found these novels. To my surprise, they were produced in Lebanon.

Walking towards the Riad El Solh statue, I read through the journal I had bought and found the format of the text somewhat canted; the font was a bit smudged, making it illegible. The photographs inside were comprised of faded pornographic collages. It looked raw; I liked that. The title of the novel read, *Marcel's Diaries*.

The cover art was clearly a magazine cut-out pasted over a blue sheet. In the picture, a shirtless woman is grabbing her lover's head, digging her fingers in his hair, while he is kissing her neck from behind. Her skirt is zipped down. Her lover has his hand on her lower right hip. She has her hand over his. Her lips are puckered up and open, almost like she is moaning with pleasure, her 1970s straight blonde hair running down her chest and partially covering her nipples.

I opened the first page. The preface read

”شهوات  
وشذوذ“

which either translates to



"Desire  
and deviance"

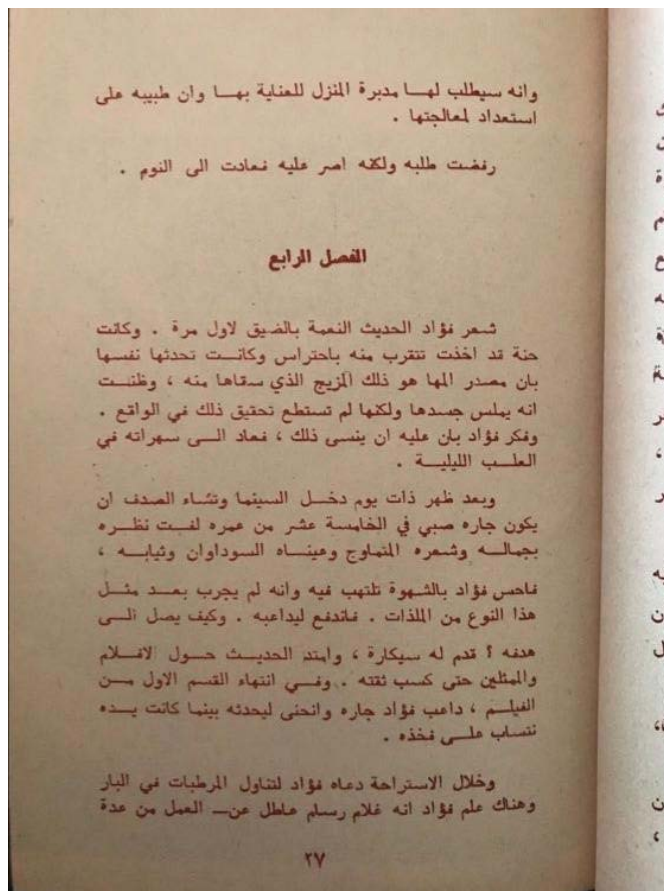
or to

"Desire  
and kink"

I read through the first chapter and I found that whoever translated the text had changed the main character's name to Fouad, an Arabic name. I assumed they wanted their Lebanese male audience to identify. As I read through, I found that all of his lovers had foreign names like Hanna, Marla, Marcel, Marta.

### Sequence 12

I realized on page 27, chapter four, that Marcel was one of Fouad's lovers.





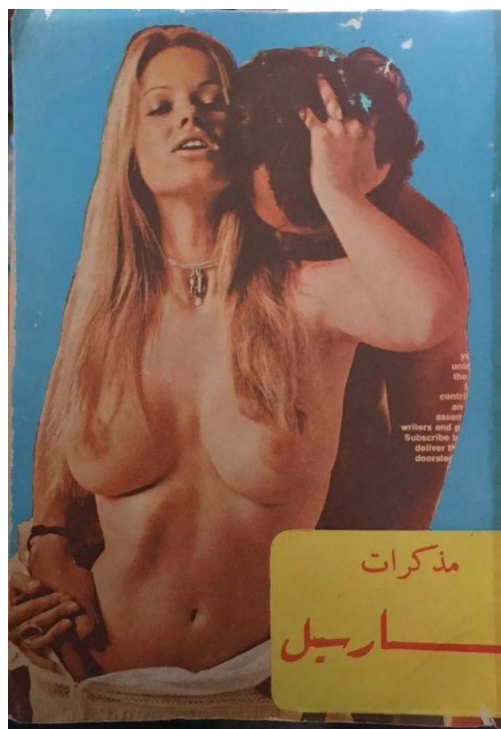
### Sequence 13

The scene took place in a movie theater. Movie theaters were often spaces for sexual freedom in North America, especially since the 1970s after the sexual revolution.

I also assumed they kept all the other foreign names so that it sounds exotic and less taboo. Pornography and erotica were attributed to West Hollywood, despite the fact that the Arab world historically produced erotic texts. Erotica became taboo, and the only way to safely produce it was to market it as foreign, as exotic.

It is interesting how the *exotic* covers for the erotic. The difference between the two adjectives is rooted in their Greek etymologies: exotic is from *exo*, “outside,” meaning alien or foreign. Erotic is derived from *Eros*, the god of sexual love. So, what’s exotic is mysterious and foreign – what’s erotic is sexy.

In Lebanon there is a thin line between the exotic and the erotic in cinema, like the thin line between art films and porn films. In 2015, during a conversation with filmmaker Jocelyne Saab in a Vietnamese restaurant in Paris, I learned that she had to shoot her art film *Dunia* a second time to change the dialect from Egyptian to Lebanese. She told me that her actors were Egyptian, and that she wasn’t strict about the script. She was not allowed to use Egyptian dialect. It had to be in Lebanese because the producers were concerned about the borderline erotic scenes in the film. So, they made it foreign.









# ILLUMINATION BY THE LIGHT OF THE FULL MOON: AN AFRICAN BDSM EXPERIENCE

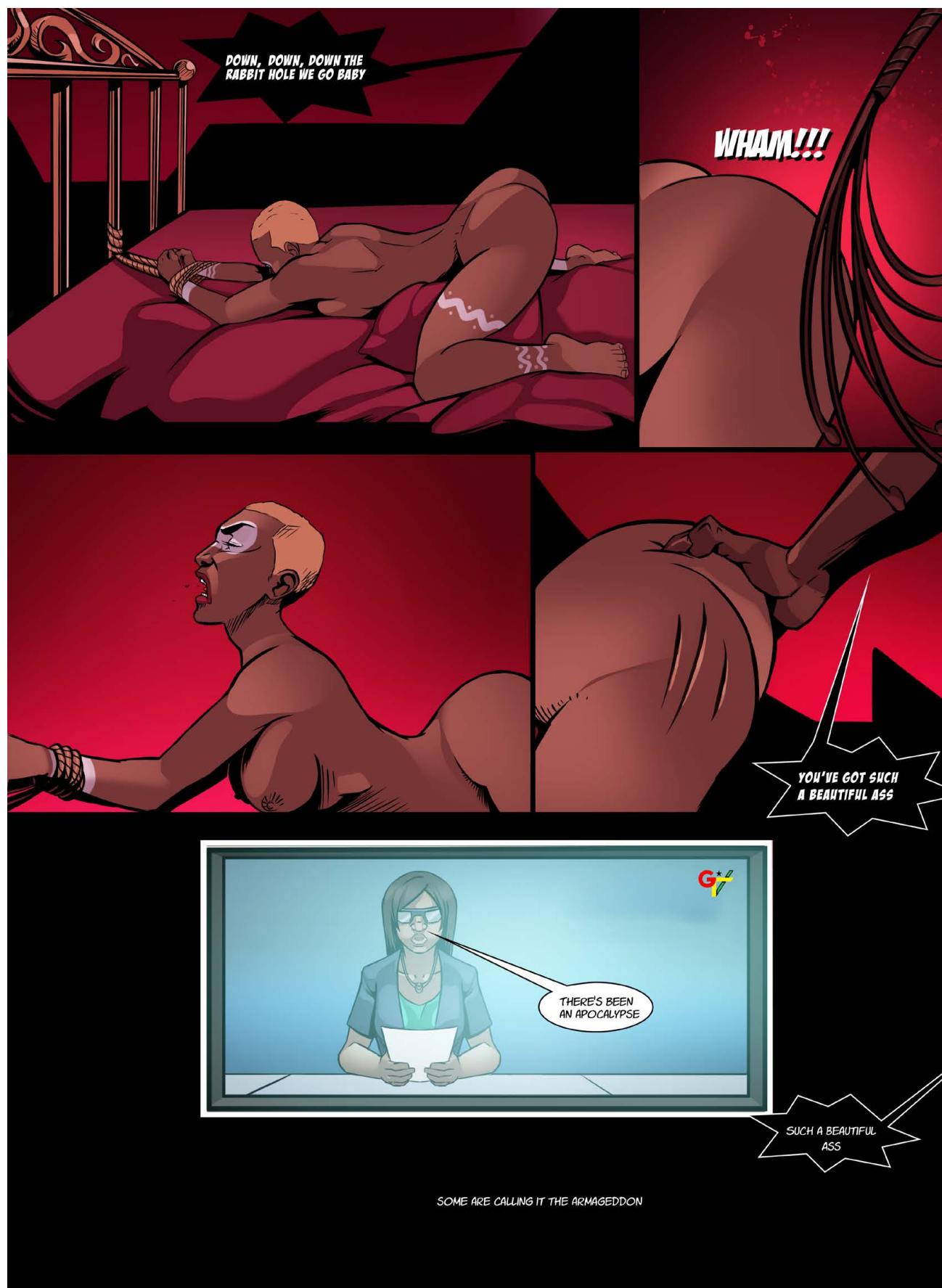
*Akosua Hanson*



**Akosua Hanson** is an artistic activist, based in Accra, Ghana. Her work spans radio, television, print media, theatre, film, comic art exhibitions, art installations, and graphic novels. Akosua's activism has been centred around pan-Africanism and feminism, with an interest in the intersection of art, pop culture, and activism. She has a Masters in Philosophy in African Studies with a focus on Gender and African Philosophical Thought. Akosua Hanson is the creator of *Moongirls*, a graphic novel series that follows the adventures of four superheroes fighting for an Africa free from corruption, neocolonialism, religious fundamentalism, rape culture, homophobia and more. She works as a radio host at Y 107.9 FM, Ghana.











## Ever experienced moments of deep clarity during or after sex?

In these panels, the Moongirl Wadjet is engaged in BDSM lovemaking with a two-gender daemon. Of the four Moongirls, Wadjet is the healer and philosopher, the conduit of the Oracle. She does this to launch a scientific and spiritual process – an experiment she calls “Illumination by the Light of the Full Moon” – through which she traces a vibrational time arc between her memories, sensations, emotions, visions, and imagination. It is a form of vibrational time travel in order to discover what she terms as “truth-revelations.”

During the experience, some of Wadjet’s hazy visions include: an approaching apocalypse brought about by humans’ environmental destruction in service to a voracious capitalism; a childhood memory of being hospitalized after a mental health diagnosis; and a vision of a Moongirls’ origin story of the Biblical figure of Noah as an ancient black Moongirl warning of the dangers of environmental pollution.

More than a fun kink to explore for the sensations, BDSM can be a way of addressing emotional pain and trauma. It has been a medium of sexual healing for me, providing a radical form of liberation. There is a purge that happens when physical pain is inflicted on the body. Inflicted with consent, it draws out emotional pain – almost like a “calling forth.” The whip on my body allows me to release suppressed emotions: anxiety, depression, my sense of defenselessness to the stresses that overwhelm me sometimes.

When engaging in BDSM as an avenue for healing, lovers must learn to be very aware of and responsible for each other. Because even though consent may have been initially given, we must be attentive to any changes that might occur in the process, especially as feelings intensify. I approach BDSM with the understanding that in order to surrender pain, love and empathy have to be the basis of the process and by that, I create space or open up for love.

“

**It is important that African BDSM is given this platform of representation when so much of BDSM representation is white.**



The engagement with aftercare after the infliction of pain is a completion of the process. This can be done in very simple ways such as cuddling, checking if they need water, watching a movie together, sharing a hug or just sharing a joint. It can be whatever your chosen love language is. This holding space, with the understanding that wounds have been opened, is necessary to complete the process of healing. It is the biggest lesson in practising empathy and learning to really hold your partner, due to the delicacy in blurring the lines between pain and pleasure. In this way, BDSM is a form of care work for me.

After BDSM sex, I feel a clarity and calm that puts me in a great creative space and spiritually empowers me. It is an almost magical experience watching the pain transform into something else in real time. Similarly, this personally liberating experience of BDSM allows Wadjet to access the foreknowledge, wisdom, and clarity to aid in her moongirl duties in fighting African patriarchy.

---

*Moongirls* was birthed during my tenure as the director for Drama Queens, a young artistic activist organization based in Ghana. Since our inception in 2016, we've employed different artistic media as part of their feminist, pan-Africanist, and environmentalist activism. We used poetry, short stories, theatre, film, and music to address issues such as corruption, patriarchy, environmental degradation, and homophobia.

Our inaugural theatre production, "The Seamstress of St. Francis Street" and "Until Someone Wakes Up" addressed the problem of rape culture in our communities. Another one, "Just Like Us," was arguably one of the first Ghanaian theatre productions to directly address the country's deep-seated issue of homophobia. Queer Universities Ghana, our queer film workshop for African filmmakers, has trained filmmakers from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda. Films birthed during the workshop, like "Baby Girl: An Intersex Story" by Selassie Djamey, have gone on to be screened at film festivals. Therefore, moving to the medium of graphic novels was a natural progression.

About seven years ago, I'd started a novel that I never completed about the lives of four women. In 2018, the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) opened up a grant opportunity that launched the production of the project and my uncompleted novel was turned into *Moongirls*.

There have been two seasons of *Moongirls* made up of six chapters each. Con-



tributing writers and editors for the first season were Suhaida Dramani, Tsiddi Can-Tamakloe, George Hanson, and Wanlov the Kubolor. Writers for the second season were Yaba Armah, Nadia Ahidjo, and myself. Character illustrations and conceptualizations were by Ghanaian artist Kissiwa. And AnimaxFYB Studio, a premium animation, design, and visual effects studio, does the illustrations.

---

“

**During the experience, some of Wadjet's hazy visions include: an approaching apocalypse brought about by humans' environmental destruction in service to a voracious capitalism; a childhood memory of being hospitalized after a mental health diagnosis; and a vision of a Moongirls' origin story of the Biblical figure of Noah as an ancient black Moongirl warning of the dangers of environmental pollution.**

Writing *Moongirls* between 2018 and 2022 has been a labour of love for me, even, a labour for liberation. I aim to be very explorative in form and style: I've dabbled in converting other forms of writing, such as short stories and poetry, to graphic novel format. By merging illustration and text, as graphic novels do, *Moongirls* aims to tackle the big issues and to honor real life activists. My decision to centre queer women superheroes – which is rare to see in this canon – came to mean so much more when a dangerous backdrop started developing in Ghana in 2021.

Last year saw a marked hike in violence for the Ghanaian LGBT+ community that was sparked by the shutdown of an LGBT+ community centre. This was followed by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of people suspected to be on the queer spectrum, as well as of those accused of pushing an “LGBT agenda.” Crowning this was the introduction in Ghanaian Parliament of an anti-LGBT bill named “Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values.” This bill is arguably the most draconian anti-LGBT bill ever drafted in the region, following previous attempts in countries like Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya.

I remember quite vividly the first time I read the draft of this bill.

It was a Friday night, typically a night I take off to rest or party after a long work week. By sheer luck, the draft was leaked and shared with me on a WhatsApp group. As I read it, a deep sense of fear and alarm made burnt toast of my Friday night chill. This bill proposed to slap any LGBT+ advocacy with five to ten years of imprisonment, and to fine and imprison people who identify as LGBT+ unless they “recanted” and accepted conversion therapy. In the draft bill, even asexual people were criminalized. The bill went for all fundamental freedoms: freedoms of thought, of being, and the freedom to hold one’s personal truth and choose to live your life by that truth. The bill even went for social media and art. If it passed, *Moongirls* would be banned literature. What the bill proposed to do was so evil and far-reaching, I was stunned into a depression at the depth of hate from which it had been crafted.

Scrolling through my Twitter timeline that night, the terror I felt inside me was mirrored. The timeline was a livestream of emotions as people reacted in real time to what they were reading: disbelief to terror to a deep disappointment and sorrow when we realized how far the bill wanted to go. Some tweeted their readiness to fold up and leave the country. Then, in the way Ghanaians do, sorrow and fear is alchemized to humour. From humour came the zest to upscale the fight.

So, the work still continues. I created *Moongirls* to provide an alternative form of education, to provide knowledge where it has been suppressed by violent patriarchy, and to create visibility where the LGBT+ community has been erased. It is also important that African BDSM is given this platform of representation when so much of BDSM representation is white. Sexual pleasure, through BDSM or otherwise, as well as non-heterosexual love, transcend race and continent because sexual pleasure and its diversity of experience are as old as time.







# DISINTEGRATION

*Adapted from a tale by Ester Lopes*

*Photos by Mariam Mekiwi*

*Costume design and modeling by El Nemrah*



**Ester Lopes** is a dancer and writer whose research focuses on the body, gender, race, and class relations. She is a Pilates instructor and art educator. Ester graduated in Contemporary Theater – Creative Processes (at FAINC) and in Dance and Body Consciousness (at USCS). Her musical specialization includes popular singing and percussion. She received training in Novos Brincantes with Flaira Ferro, Mateus Prado, and Antonio Meira at Brincante Institute in 2015 and 2016.



**Mariam Mekiwi** is a filmmaker and photographer from Alexandria and living and working in Berlin.



**El Nemrah**



**On Wednesday a note arrives  
with an address on the back.**

*5 pm, tonight.*

The handwriting on the invitation—  
coily and brusque—  
I've seen it five times in five years.

My body rouses,  
feverish.

I need to fuck myself first.

The tide is high tonight and  
I get  
off.

I want to slow everything down,  
taste time and space, etch them  
into memory.

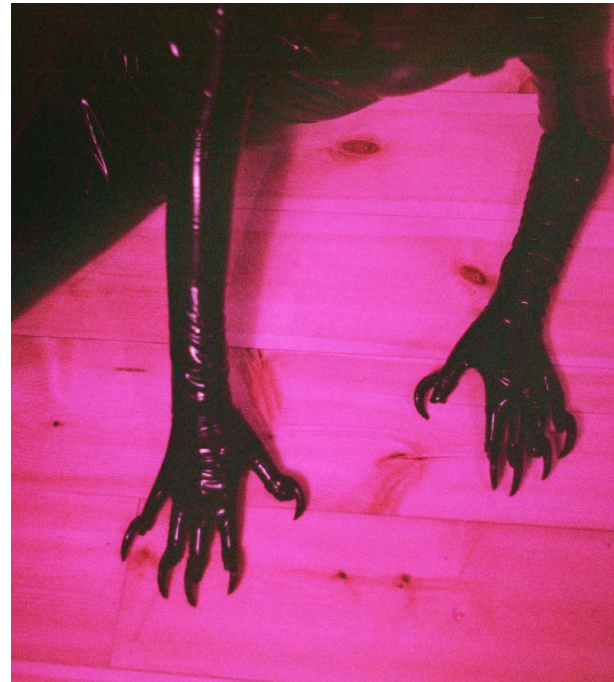
\*

I've never been to this part of town before.  
Unknown places excite me,  
the way limbs and veins and bones  
resist decay,  
their fate uncertain.

At the door, I think twice.  
The hallway is pitch black  
and it makes me pause.

On the other side,  
a portal of smell and color  
opens like a curse,  
into a sunny afternoon.

The breeze  
makes my hair dance,





piques its curiosity,  
compels it to move.

I hear the wheelchair whirring,  
shaping the shadows.  
Then I see them:  
a lynx face  
and a body like mine  
and I find myself desiring both  
again.

The creature motions me closer.

Their gestures write a sentence;  
as I move toward them,  
I notice its details:

*wither, flesh, bliss*

On their command, the vine that covers the hallway  
hugging warm stones,  
snakes up the wall.

It becomes a verb,  
“to climb,”  
and I’m reorientated when their claws point  
to the vine-bed in the center.

I hear the wheels behind me,  
then that sound.  
It reverberates  
like no other.  
Their long black wings  
elevate toward the ceiling  
then they lunge forward.

The feline vision scans every detail,  
every change,  
every longing.





Can desire liquefy your muscles?

*Can it act sweeter than the strongest  
of tranquilizers?*

A lynx sews the world  
across our differences,  
weaving lace around my knees.

Can desire crush the distance of the world,  
compressing the seconds?

They come closer still,  
lynx eye meeting human eye,  
sniffing the air,  
turning body into  
urgency.

They beat down their wings.  
Stirred,  
the vines tangle around my waist/waste.

Their tongue thins time,  
shifting grounds,  
soothes, with their magic,  
what stirs beneath.

*I see the world in you, and the  
world is exhausted.*

Then they plead:

*Let me feast on you.*











# MANGO

**Jurema Araújo**

*Jurema Araújo* is a teacher-poet from Rio de Janeiro. She contributed to the magazine *Urbana*, edited by the poets Brasil Barreto and Samaral (RIP) and to the book *Amor e outras revoluções* (Love and Other Revolutions) with several other writers. In collaboration with Angélica Ferrarez and Fabiana Pereira, she co-edited *O livro negro dos sentidos* (The Black Book of Senses), a creative anthology on black women's sexuality in Brazil. Jurema is 54-years-old; she has a daughter, three dogs, a cat, and many friends.

## Suck it with me?

Mango is my favorite fruit.  
I open my mouth  
and suck it all,  
Its flesh caught between my teeth  
that turn soft not to hurt it  
and I press it between my tongue and the  
roof of my mouth,  
then I take it out to suck on every part of it  
with the juice running down my mouth  
drenching myself in this tasty nectar  
and putting it all in my mouth again  
because mango is seed and honey;  
it is fiber and flavor.  
And when it is over, I am entranced,  
honeydewed, sweetened,  
my lips all wet.  
Ohhh, what is mango for if not for smearing.

## Chupa Comigo?

*A fruta que eu mais gosto é manga!  
Porque eu abro a boca  
E meto toda pra chupar!  
Se os dentes a prendem  
Fazem macio para não machucar  
E eu pressiono entre minha língua e  
meu céu  
Depois tiro pra sugar cada parte  
Sentindo o caldo escorrer boca afora  
Me molhando com esse néctar gostoso  
E metendo toda na boca de novo  
Pois manga é caroço e é mel,  
É fiapo e sabor  
E quando acaba, estou extasiada  
Melada, docinha  
Com os lábios molhados!  
Aaahhh, manga é pra se lambuzar!*

---

## Introducing The Black Book of Senses

I'll admit it: when Angélica and Fabi invited me to curate a collection of erotic texts by black women, I didn't know what curatorship was. I understood the erotic well, but curatorship... I smiled, feeling shy and flattered. I think I thanked them – at least I hope I did – and thought to myself: what the fuck is it?! This fancy word I'll have to learn the meaning of while doing it, what is it?

Now at this point, I know what it is to be a curator: it is making love with someone else's texts, with someone else's art, with the intention of putting a book together. And that is exactly what I did. I undressed each text of every author of this book with a literary lasciviousness. And I got involved in the words and senses of others. I was penetrated by poems I didn't write; tales I didn't even dare to imagine turned me upside down, messing with my feelings, with my libido. And it was a wonderful and unusual orgasm: ethereal, corporeal, sublime, at once intellectual and sensitive.



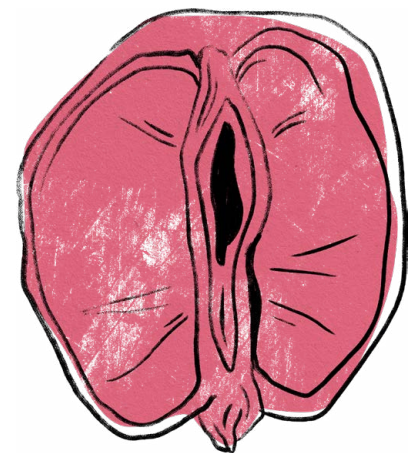
These texts pulsed like a clit hardened by desire, drenched, dripping joy in every reading. Words that swallowed me with their naughty significance, making me dive deeper into this wet universe.

These black women went to the bottom of their arousals and turned their deepest erotic fantasies into art. These works are impregnated with each writer's own way of experiencing sexuality: freely, blackly, for ourselves, in our own way, empowered.

I chose to spread the texts throughout different parts of the book, each one organized according to the most delicate, explosive, evident, or implicit content they presented.

To open the door to this “involved blackessence,” we have our *Preliminaries* section, with texts that introduce readers to this world of delights. It is a more general, delicate caress to acknowledge the subjects addressed by the texts in the rest of the book.

Then comes the heat of *Touch*, addressing what the skin can feel. That energy which burns or freezes our bodies, makes our hormones explode and starts to awaken the other senses. And although there are many of us who are voyeurs, the contact of skin with a wet and warm mouth is exciting, like wandering through the softness of whomever is with you. We are seduced by the firm or gentle touch that gives us goosebumps and that lovely discomfort that runs from the neck down to the back and only stops the next day. And the warmth of the lips, the mouth, the wet tongue on the skin – oh, the tongue in the ear, hmmm – or skin on skin, clothes moving over the body, almost like an extension of the other's hand. If there is no urgency, that wildest arousal of the pressure of a tight grab, a bit of pain – or a lot, who knows?



The *Sound* – or melody? – section shows us that attraction also happens through hearing: the voice, the whispers, the music that enables the connection between the bodies and can become the theme of desire. For some of us, someone with a beautiful voice would only need their vocal cords, because that harsh or heavy or melodious sound would be auditory sex. Their loud swearing or sweet words whispered in the ear would be enough to give us hair-raising shivers from neck to coccyx.



In *Flavor*, we know the tongue does a good job tasting the most hidden places and wandering through the body to delight itself. Sometimes this organ is used, boldly, to taste the other's nectar. The idea of someone sharing their strawberry or a delicious, juicy mango through bites and licks – or licks and bites – melts us. But nothing is more delicious than tasting the caves and hills of the person

you are with. Stick your tongue deep inside to taste a piece of fruit... or spend hours tasting the head of a cock in your mouth, or suck on a delicious breast to taste the nipples. This is all about memorizing someone by their Flavor.

“

**Every time a black writer transforms the erotic into art, she breaks these harmful racist chains that cripple her body, repress her sexuality, and turn us into the object of another's greed. Writing erotic poetry is taking back the power over her own body and roaming fearlessly through the delights of desire for herself, for others, for life.**

There are texts in which the nose is what triggers desire. The *Smell*, my dear readers, can awaken us to the delights of desire. Sometimes we meet a person who smells so good, we want to swallow them right through our nose. When you run through the other person's body with your nose, starting with the neck – wow, that delightfully uncomfortable shiver that runs down the spine and undresses the soul! The shameless nose then moves to the back of the neck and captures the scent of the other in such a way that in the absence of that person, smelling their same scent evokes, or conversely, invades in us olfactory memories that bring the arousing smell of that person back.

We then get to *Look* – for me, the betrayer of senses – in which we perceive desire from a point of “view.” It is through sight that the texts present desire and arousal, through which the other senses are brought about. Sometimes a smile is all it takes to drive us crazy. The exchange of glances? That look that says “I want you now.” That look of possession that comes to an end when you stop fucking, or not. That one is very particular; it draws the other who won't be able to look

away for long. Or the sidelong glance – when one looks away when the other turns their head, like a cat-and-mouse game? Once we are caught red-hand-



ed, there's nothing else to do besides breaking into a wide smile.

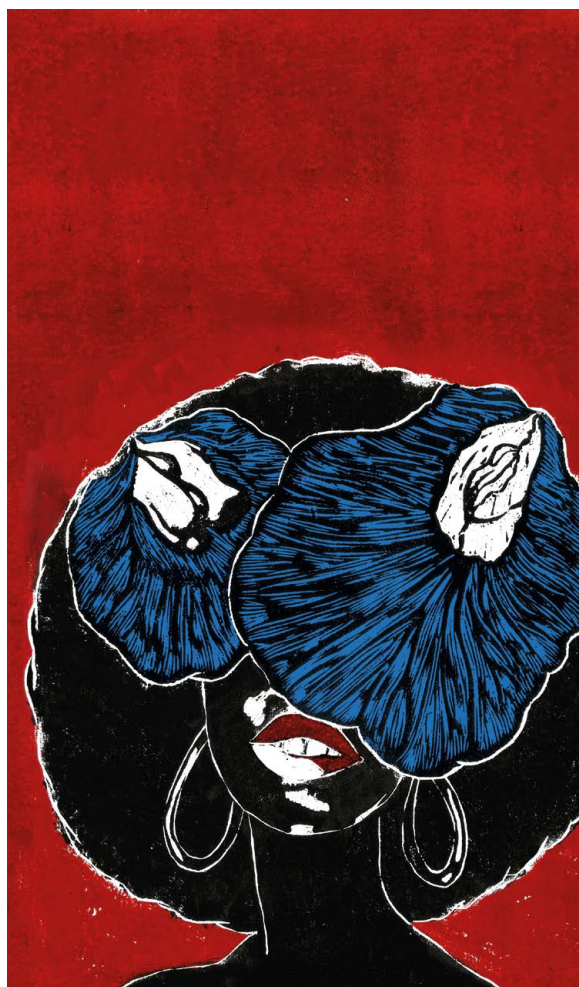
Finally, the explosion. Wandering through *All senses*, the texts mix feelings that seem like an alert, so there is the greatest pleasure, that orgasm.

Of course, there is nothing explicitly separating these poems and tales. Some are subtle. Arousal engages all our senses and, most importantly, our heads. That's where it happens, and it connects our whole body. I organized the poems according to how they came to me in each reading. Feel free to disagree! But to me, there is a sense through which desire goes and then explodes. Realizing which one it is, is delightful.

Being able to turn arousal into art means freeing ourselves from all the prejudice, prisons, and stigma this white-centric society has trapped us in.

Every time a black writer transforms the erotic into art, she breaks these harmful racist chains that cripple her body, repress her sexuality, and turn us into the object of another's greed. Writing erotic poetry is taking back the power over her own body and roaming fearlessly through the delights of desire for herself, for others, for life.

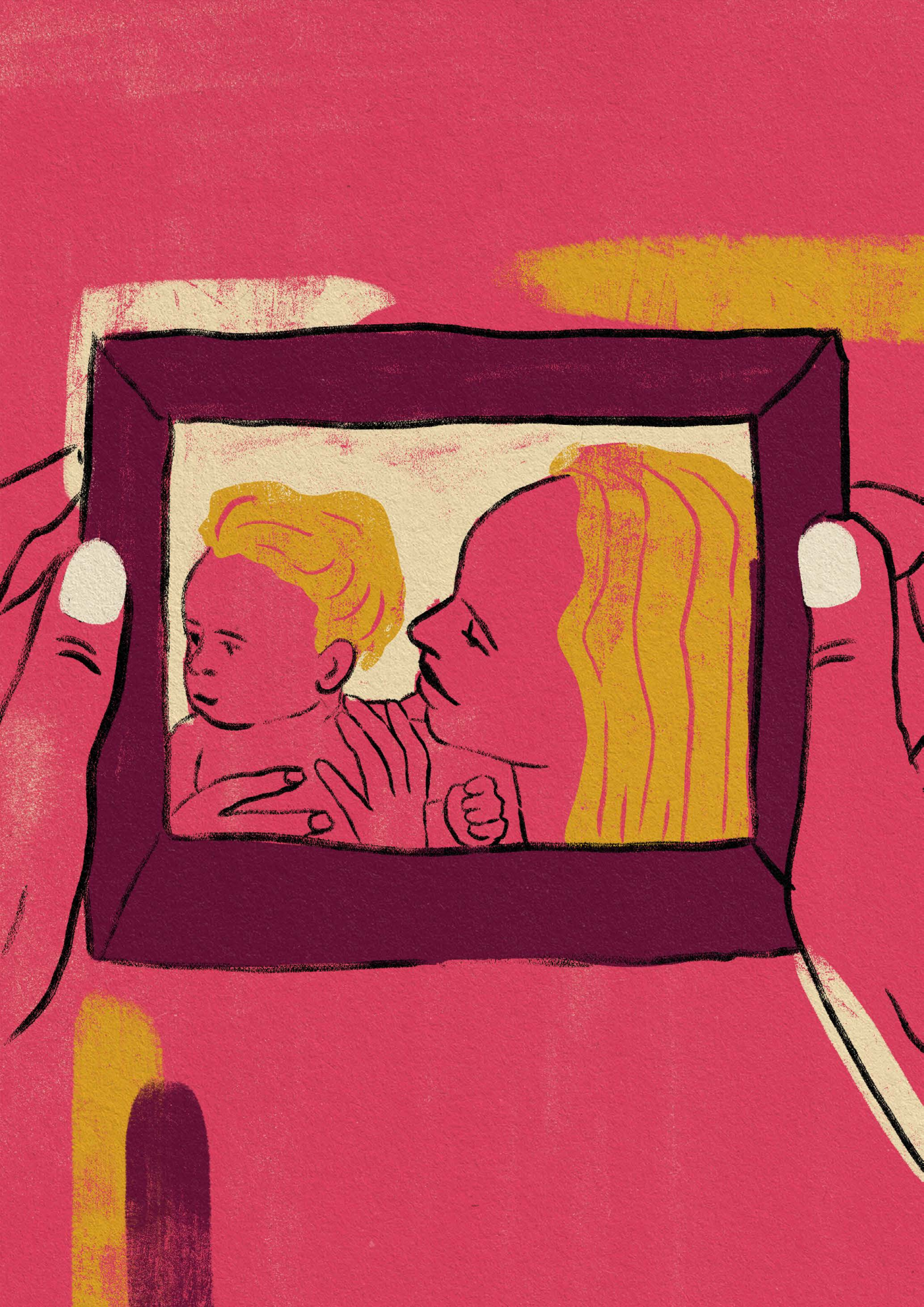
The literary erotic is who we are when turned into art. Here we show the best of us, our views of love drenched by pleasure, seasoned by the erogenous, spread through our bodies, and translated by our artistic consciousness. We are multiple and we share this multiplicity of sensations in words dripping with arousal. Yes, even our words drip with our sexual desire, drenching our verses, turning our sexual urges into paragraphs. To come, for us, is a breakthrough.



It is necessary to make our minds, bodies, and sexuality black, to reestablish our pleasure, and take back our orgasms. Only then will we be free. This whole process is a breakthrough, and it happens painfully. But there is happiness in finding ourselves to be very different from where we had been placed. I feel like I am yours, I am ours. Taste, delight yourselves, feast on these beautiful words with us.

This text is adapted from the introductions to "[\*O Livro Negro Dos Sentidos\*](#)" [*The Black Book of Senses*], an erotic collection of poems by 23 black female writers.







# A JOY TO THE WORLD: SIX QUESTIONS WITH NAIKE LEDAN

*Interviewed by Chinelo Onwualu*



**Naike Ledan** is a social justice defendant, a committed feminist that brings forward 20 years of experience in human rights and health justice advocacy, women's empowerment, the fight for universal access to basic services and social inclusion, as well as civil society capacity building. She has built extensive work in Canada, West and southern Africa, as well as in Haiti, in civil rights advocacy, capacity building for CSOs, while emphasising the social determinants of structural exclusion. She values the principles of shared leadership, anticolonial, anti-oppressive, and anti-patriarchal spaces. She is actively engaged in supporting community-led organizations of People Living with HIV (PLHIV), Adolescent Girls and Young Women, Men that have Sex with Men, Transgender individuals, People Who Use Drugs, Sex Worker Professionals and Prisoners (KPs), and/or other affected groups. She has supported grassroots initiatives for United Nation Development Program (UNDP), Organisation of American States (OAS), UNAIDS, the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) amongst others, particularly in creating bridges between these International/Regional Organizations and LGBTQI+ CSOs and advocates. She holds a M.Sc in International Development from the Université de Montréal, and is pursuing a post graduate degree in Public Health at New York University's Global Institute of Public Health.



**CHINELO** You're billed as a trans rights activist; I'm curious about how you made that journey.

**NAIKE** So, I grew up in Haiti until I was 18, then I lived in Montreal for 19 years. Coming back to Haiti in 2016, I thought I would be coming back home, but the place had changed and I had to readjust. I did not necessarily reconnect in the way that I'd expected to with childhood family and friends. I came back as an expat with a comfortable work situation, and I felt very much like a foreigner for a very long time. And at the same time, I felt very much at home because of the language, the understood silence, the not having to explain when we start singing a commercial – you know, that thing we share, that energy, that space, that spirit.

What helped me was, I loved the work of going into the country and documenting people's knowledge. So I left the comfort. I became a country director of a regional organisation that was queer as fuck! Most of my work was to find resources and build the capacity of civil society. My strategy was to go into the countryside, look for all these little organizations, help build their capacity, and fund them. I was not interested in politicians and shaking hands and taking pictures <laughs>. I had a very good ally, Charlot Jeudy – the [queer] activist that got killed three years ago in his house. We got very close after



My return to self-love – I would call “rebirth” – coinciding with giving birth to my first child, giving birth to myself, and falling in love with my queerness or same-gender lovingness. (Photo credit: Naike Ledan)

an Afro-queer film festival we were planning got banned in Haiti. But it made a lot of noise and sparked conversations about queerness everywhere, so Charlot introduced me to every little CSO in every little corner of the country. And I would just be there to help organisation[s] with registering legally or building their strategic plan. So it's been a lot of these kinds of work that made me a queer activist and by extension, a trans activist. Although I don't call myself that – an activist. It's such a loaded word, you know? And it's something people call you. I think I'm just a lover and a fighter <laughs>.

**CHINELO** Tell me about the workshop you conducted with AWID for the festival. What was it about and what was the context?

**NAIKE** International media doesn't really talk about Haiti, but with a political environment that is as bad as ours, the economic environment is even more catastrophic. Being a more middle class Haitian, speaking different languages, having different passports, I was initially hesitant to take the space. But I



My deep self awareness during my childhood years and my engagement in questioning inequalities and injustice at a very young age (+/- 4 years old). (Photo credit: Naike Ledan)

often see myself as a bridge more than someone that would talk about themselves. That is how I came to invite Semi, who is a brilliant young trans woman from outside Port-au-Prince, to take the space to talk for herself and walk us through the ecosystem of the realities for trans women in Haiti. We ended up building a session about uninclusive feminism – or, I would say, formal feminist spaces – and how trans girls in Haiti do not have spaces where they can contribute to women's knowledge and sharing of women's realities. So the AWID festival was the opportunity for me to give the space to the women who should have it. We had a wonderful time; we had wine online while hosting the conversation. My co-facilitator, Semi, shared what it is like to be a trans child/girl/woman at different stages of her life. She also shared the dangers of the street, of poverty, of exclusion, of "not passing," and her victories as well.

**CHINELO** What is the relationship of trans women to feminist organizations in Haiti? What has been your experience with that?

**NAIKE** It's been really hard – heartbreaking, actually – the experience of trans women in Haiti. From not existing at all to just being extremely sexualized. The other thing that's been happening is how they're being killed, and how those killings have gone unreported in the media. This is how non-existent, how erased trans women are. They're everywhere but not in job settings, not



in feminist settings, not in organizational settings. Not even in LGBT organizations. It's only recently, and because of a lot of advocacy push, that some of these organization are kind of readjusting, but in feminist spaces, this is still out of the question. We are still having to deal with the old exclusionary discourse of "They're not women. Of course, if they can pass..." The culture of passing, it's a risk management conversation – how much you pass and how much you don't pass and what it means for your body and the violence it inflicts. In the trans-exclusionary realities we live in, which are reproduced in a lot of feminist spaces, those that pass completely may be considered girls, but only to a certain extent. But how about falling in love, how about having a conversation, how about being in the closet, how about wanting a certain aesthetic, or a career? So really, the conversation about hormone therapy becomes about risk reduction, as Semi herself shared at the workshop. But we don't have the option of hormone therapy, we don't have the medical framework nor the system to support those who would like to pursue that option.

“

**I came back as an expat with a comfortable work situation, and I felt very much like a foreigner for a very long time. And at the same time, I felt very much at home because of the language, the understood silence, the not having to explain when we start singing a commercial – you know, that thing we share, that energy, that space, that spirit.**

**CHINELO** When you talk about the way that trans people and queer people are thought of in society, it sounds like it might be similar to Nigeria, which can be a deeply homophobic environment.

**NAIKE** Haiti is a very complex country in a very beautiful way. Nothing is simple, you know, nothing is ever one way. Haitians are very tolerant – and they're also very homophobic. You're going to find regions in the countryside where people aren't that homophobic at all because all the Vodou temples there, and this is a religion that respects life. One basic principle of the Vodou religion is that all children are children. So, there is no right or wrong in the religion. For the longest time, people thought of Haiti as a haven, a place where people are tolerant – we're talking 70s, 80s, pre-HIV, 90s even. Then you had the earthquake [in 2010] where around 300,000 people died. And then all this money came from the south of

the US through the Evangelicals to rebuild the country and find Jesus. So, the homophobia in Haiti is very recent. In the depth, in the heart of the soul of the culture, I cannot really say that it is homophobic. But in the everyday life, it surely lands on the skin of queer people, that violence. And that of women, of poor women, of dark women as well, because colorism runs deep in the Caribbean.

**CHINELO** How have you managed this?  
What's been your strategy for survival?

**NAIKE** I'm really in love with my work. I love working. When I first arrived, I was working with this horrible NGO but I was doing amazing work. I was always in the countryside, conversing and learning from people, from women. And that filled my heart for so long because I'm very much in love with my culture, with black people, with black women – old black women, black babies. It just fills me up in a spiritual way. When we were in Canada my kids were in these all-white schools and tokenized. They did not speak Creole nor French. And now, they're running free in the yard and starting to fight in Creole. I also found hubs of survival with the people I met. I created bonds with the queers and others who were weirdos like me and it's been really wonderful. But now I'm struggling because I don't feel safe in Haiti anymore. We have about 40 kidnappings per week in Port-Au-Prince – and it's been like that since 2018. I've developed anxiety and panic attacks. So It's time to go, and I've been asking myself, "where is home?" I spent 19 years in Montreal but I never felt at home there. When I left, I never missed it so I don't want to go back. I've been crying a lot lately because it feels like entering a second exile.



My return to Haiti as part of my de-colonizing process, and choosing to physically position my senses and my family's senses to magic and blackness uncompromisingly. (Photo credit: Naike Ledan)

**CHINELO** What's your relationship to pleasure, leisure, and rest?



**NAIKE** My relationship with pleasure, leisure, and rest are for me one and the same. It is the lived moment when I indulge in the heat of the sun on my face for exemple. It is pleasure, leisure, and rest at the same time.

**Pleasure:** My go-to space, most solely a haven of celebration of myself. I reserve myself the power and the right to be loud or quiet in the enjoyment of the pleasure I experience. All the pleasure I viciously and abundantly indulge in, including and not limited to the pleasure of solitude and silence.

**Leisure:** biking, music festivals, eating, wine discoveries, dancing in Haitian traditional Vodou dances are amongst many that occur at the moment.

**Rest:** is what I live for. As an overachiever and a person that is literally in love with work, it is a paradox how lazy I am. No one knows that because all of what the world sees is this: an accomplished overworker. They do not know how I can just, uncompromisingly and profoundly indulge in idleness.

“

**Rest: is what I live for. As an over-achiever and a person that is literally in love with work, it is a paradox how lazy I am. No one knows that because all of what the world sees is this: an accomplished overworker. They do not know how I can just, uncompromisingly and profoundly indulge in idleness.**







# EMBODYING TRAUMA-INFORMED PLEASURE

*Tshegofatso Senne*

[Listen here!](#)



*Tshegofatso Senne* is a Black, chronically-ill, genderqueer feminist who does the most. Much of their work is rooted in pleasure, community, and dreaming, while being informed by somatic abolitionism and disability, healing, and transformative justices. Writing, researching, and speaking on issues concerning feminism, community, sexual and reproductive justice, consent, rape culture, and justice, Tshegofatso has 8 years of experience theorising on the ways in which these topics intersect with pleasure. They run their own business, Thembekile Stationery, and their community platform Hedone brings people together to explore and understand the power of trauma-awareness and pleasure in their daily lives. Tshegofatso works with young people across the continent, hosting workshops, mentoring them around issues of pleasure and liberation, and using creativity and storytelling as fractal solutions to social injustices. Their TEDx talk “Reimagining BDSM” looks at the tenderness and love that reveals itself in a lifestyle often only seen through an extreme lens. Tshegofatso believes deeply in the individual and collective potential of regenerative and sustainable change, pleasure, and care work.

## The body. The most permanent home we have.

The body, not the thinking brain, is where we experience most of our pain, pleasure, and joy, and where we process most of what happens to us. It is also where we do most of our healing, including our emotional and psychological healing. And it is where we experience resilience and a sense of flow.

These words, said by Resmaa Menakem in his book *My Grandmother's Hands*, have stayed with me.

The body; it holds our experiences. Our memories. Our resilience. And as Menakem has written, the body also holds our traumas. It responds with spontaneous protective mechanisms to stop or prevent more damage. That is the power of the body. Trauma is not the event; it is how our bodies respond to events that feel dangerous to us. It is often left stuck in the body, until we address it. There's no talking our body out of this response – it just is.

Using Ling Tan's Digital Superpower app, I tracked how my body felt as I travelled around different parts of my city, Johannesburg, South Africa. The app is a gesture-driven online platform that allows you to trace your perceptions as you move through locations by logging and recording the data. I used it to track my psychosomatic symptoms – physical reactions connected to a mental cause. Whether that be flashbacks. Panic attacks. Tightness in the chest. A fast heartbeat. Tension headaches. Muscle pain. Insomnia. Struggling to breathe. I tracked these symptoms as I walked and travelled to different areas in Johannesburg. And I asked myself.

Where can we be safe? *Can* we be safe?

Psychosomatic responses can be caused by a number of things, and some are not as severe as others. After experiencing any kind of trauma you may feel intense distress in similar events or situations. I tracked my sensations, ranked on a scale of 1-5, where 1 were the instances I barely felt any of these symptoms – I felt at ease rather than on-guard and jumpy, my breath and heart rate were stable, I was not looking over my shoulder – and number 5 being the opposite – symptoms that had me close to a panic attack.

As a Black person. As a queer person. As a genderqueer person who could be perceived as a woman, depending on what my gender expression is that day.

I asked myself.



Where can we be safe?

Even in neighbourhoods one might consider “safe,” I felt constantly panicked. Looking around me to make sure I wasn’t being followed, adjusting the way my T-shirt sat so my breasts wouldn’t show up as much, looking around to make sure I knew multiple routes to get out of the place I was should I sense danger. An empty road brings anxiety. A packed one does too. Being in an Uber does. Walking on a public road does. Being in my apartment does. So does picking up a delivery from the front of the building.

Can we be safe?

Pumla Dineo Gqola speaks of the Female Fear Factory. It may or may not be familiar, but if you’re someone socialised as a woman, you’ll know this feeling well. The feeling that has you planning every step you take, whether you’re going to work, school, or just running an errand. The feeling that you have to watch how you dress, act, speak in public and private spaces. The feeling in the pit of your stomach if you have to travel at night, get a delivery, or deal with any person who continues to socialise as a cis man. Harassed on the street, always with the threat of violence. Us existing in any space comes with an innate fear.

Fear is both an individual and a socio-political phenomenon. At an individual level, fear can be present as part of a healthy well developing warning system [...] When we think about fear, it is important to hold both notions of individual emotional experience and the political ways in which fear has been used in different epochs for control.

– Pumla Dineo Gqola, in her book *Rape: A South African Nightmare*

South African women, femmes, and queers know that every step we take outside – steps to do ordinary things: a walk to the shops, a taxi to work, an Uber from a party – all of these acts are a negotiation with violence. This fear, is part of the trauma. To cope with the trauma we carry in our bodies, we develop responses to detect danger – watching the emotional responses of those around us, reading for “friendliness.” We’re constantly on guard.

Day after day. Year after year. Life after life. Generation after generation.

On the additional challenge of this learned defence system, author of *The Body Keeps Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk, has said

It disrupts this ability to accurately read others, rendering the trauma survivor either less able to detect danger or more likely

to misperceive danger where there is none. It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability.

As Resmaa Menakem has said, trauma is in everything; it infiltrates the air we breathe, the water we drink, the foods we eat. It is in the systems that govern us, the institutions that teach and also traumatise us, and within the social contracts we enter into with each other. Most importantly, we take it with us everywhere we go, in our bodies, exhausting us and eroding our health and happiness. We carry that truth in our bodies. Generations of us have.

So, as I walk around my city, whether an area is considered “safe” or not, I carry the traumas of generations whose responses are embed-

ded in my body. My heart palpitates, it becomes difficult to breathe, my chest tightens – because my body feels as though the trauma is happening in that very moment. I live hyper vigilant. To the point where one is either too on-guard to mindfully enjoy their life, or too numb to absorb new experiences.

For us to begin to heal, we need to acknowledge these truths.


These truths that live in our bodies.

This trauma is what keeps many of us from living the lives we want. Ask any femme or queer person what safety looks like to them and they’ll mostly share examples that are simple tasks – being able to simply live joyful lives, without the constant threat of violence. Feelings of safety, of comfort and ease, are spatial. When we embody our trauma, it affects the ways we perceive our own safety, affects the ways we interact with the world, and alters the ways we are able to experience and embody anything pleasurable and joyful.

“

**The body; it holds our experiences. Our memories. Our resilience. And as Menakem has written, the body also holds our traumas. It responds with spontaneous protective mechanisms to stop or prevent more damage. That is the power of the body. Trauma is not the event; it is how our bodies respond to events that feel dangerous to us. It is often left stuck in the body, until we address it. There’s no talking our body out of this response – it just is.**





We have to refuse this burdensome responsibility and fight for a safe world for all of us. Walking wounded as many of us are, we are fighters. Patriarchy may terrorise and brutalise us, but we will not give up the fight. As we repeatedly take to the streets, defying the fear in spectacular and seemingly insignificant ways, we defend ourselves and speak in our own name.

- Pumla Dineo Gqola, in her book *Rape: A South African Nightmare*

Where can we be safe? How do we begin to defend ourselves, not just in the physical sense, but in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual senses?

“Trauma makes weapons out of us all,” adrienne maree brown has said in an interview conducted by Justin Scott Campbell. And her work, *Pleasure Activism*, offers us multiple methodologies to heal that trauma and ground ourselves in the understanding that healing, justice, and liberation can also be pleasurable experiences. Especially those of us who are the most marginalised, who may have been raised to equate suffering with “The Work.” The Work that so many of us have gone into as activists, community builders and workers, those serving the most marginalised, The Work that we struggle in order to do, burning ourselves out and rarely caring for our minds and bodies. The alternative is becoming more informed about our trauma, able to identify our own needs, and becoming deeply embodied. That embodiment means we are simply more able to experience the world through the senses and sensations in our bodies, acknowledging what they tell us rather than suppressing and ignoring the information it is communicating with us.

Being constantly in conversation with our living body and intentionally practising those conversations connects us to embodiment more deeply; it allows us to make tangible the emotions we feel as we interact with the world, befriend our bodies, and understand all that they try to teach us. When understanding trauma and embodiment paired, we can begin to start the healing and access pleasure more holistically, healthily, and in our daily lives without shame and guilt. We can begin to access pleasure as a tool for individual and social change, tapping into the power of the erotic as Audre Lorde described it. A power that allows us to share the joy we access and experience, expanding our capacity for happiness and understanding that we are deserving of it, even with our trauma.

Tapping into pleasure and embodying the erotic gives us the expansion of being deliberately alive, feeling grounded and stable and understanding our nervous systems. It allows us to understand and shed the generational baggage we’ve been carrying without realising; we can be empowered with the knowledge that

even as traumatised as we are, as traumatised as we potentially could be in the future, we are still deserving of pleasurable and joyful lives, that we can share that power with our people. It is the community aspect that is missing from the ways we care for ourselves; self-care cannot exist without community care. We are able to feel a deeper internal trust, safety, and power of ourselves, especially in the face of future traumas that will trigger us, knowing how to soothe and stabilise ourselves. All this understanding leads us to a deep internal power that is resourced to meet any challenges that come your way.

As those living with deep generational traumas, we have come to distrust and perhaps think we are incapable of containing and accessing the power we have. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde teaches us that the erotic offers a source of replenishment, a way to demand better for ourselves and our lives.

For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavours brings us closest to that fullness.

I don't say any of this lightly – I know that this is easier said than done. I know that many of us are prevented from understanding these truths, from internalising or even healing them. Resistance comes with acts of feeling unsafe, but is not impossible. Resisting power structures that keep the most powerful safe will always endanger those of us shoved to the margins. Acknowledging the traumas you've faced is a reclamation of your lived experiences, those that have passed and those that will follow; it is resistance that embodies that

knowledge that we are deserving of more than the breadcrumbs these systems have forced us to lap up. It is a resistance that understands that pleasure is complicated by trauma, but it can be accessed in arbitrary and powerful ways. It is a resistance that acknowledges that our trauma is a resource that connects us to each other, and can allow us to keep each other safe. It is a resistance that understands that even with pleasure and joy, this is not a utopia; we will still harm and be harmed, but we will be better equipped for survival and thrive in a community of diverse care and kindness. A





resistance that makes way for healing and connecting to our full human selves.

Healing will never be an easy and rosy journey, but it begins with the acknowledgment of the possibility. When oppression makes us believe that pleasure is not something that we all have equal access to, one of the ways that we start doing the work of reclaiming our full selves — our whole liberated, free selves — is by reclaiming our access to pleasure.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has said in her article in *Pleasure Activism* (to which she contributed),

I know that for most people, the words “care” and “pleasure” can’t even be in the same sentence. We’re all soaking in ableism’s hatred of bodies that have needs, and we’re given a really shitty choice: either have no needs and get to have autonomy, dignity, and control over your life or admit you need care and lose all of the above.

The power that this has? We understand our traumas, so we understand those of others; we embody the sensations we experience and tend to them rather than distract and avoid. We access pleasure in ways that make us want to share that joy with those in our communities. When we are trauma-informed, we give ourselves more room to experience all this and give ourselves, and others, permission to heal. Imagine, a community in which everyone has access, resources, and time to live pleasurable lives, in whichever way they want and deserve. In which spatial traumas are lessened because the people that occupy them are trauma-aware, are filled with a tender care. Isn’t that healing? Is that not working through generational traumas? Does that not build and sustain healthier futures for us all?

It is time we reconnected with the ancestral knowledge that we deserve to live full lives. We need to get back in touch with our natural right to joy and existing for ourselves. To feel pleasure simply for the sake of it. To not live lives of terror. It sounds radical; it feels radical. In a world where we have been socialised and traumatised to numb, to fear, to feel and remain powerless, to be greedy and live with structural issues that lead to mental illness, what a gift and wonder it is to begin to feel, to be in community with those who feel, to be healthily interdependent in, to love each other boldly. Feeling is radical. Pleasure is radical. Healing is radical.

You have permission to feel pleasure. You have permission to dance, create, make love to yourself and others, celebrate and

cultivate joy. You are encouraged to do so. You have permission to heal. Don't bottle it up inside, don't try to move through this time alone. You have permission to grieve. And you have permission to live.

- adrienne maree brown, "You Have Permission"

Somatic embodiment allows us to explore our trauma, work through it and make meaningful connections to ourselves and the collective. Doing this over time sustains our healing; just like trauma, healing is not a one-time only event. This healing helps move us toward individual and collective liberation.

In "A Queer Politics of Pleasure," Andy Johnson speaks about the ways in which the queering of pleasure offers us sources of healing, acceptance, release, playfulness, wholeness, defiance, subversion, and freedom. How expansive! When we embody pleasure in ways that are this holistic, this queer, we are able to acknowledge the limitation.

Queering pleasure also asks us the questions that intersect our dreaming with our lived realities.

Who is free or deemed worthy enough to feel pleasure? When is one allowed to feel pleasure or pleased? With whom can one experience pleasure? What kind of pleasure is accessible? What limits one from accessing their full erotic and pleased potential?

- Andy Johnson, "A Queer Politics of Pleasure"

When our trauma-informed pleasure practices are grounded in community care, we begin to answer some of these questions. We begin to understand the liberating potential. As pleasure activists, this is the reality we ground ourselves within. The reality that says, my pleasure may be fractal, but it has the potential to heal not only me and my community, but future bloodlines.

“

**Feelings of safety, of comfort and ease, are spatial. When we embody our trauma, it affects the ways we perceive our own safety, affects the ways we interact with the world, and alters the ways we are able to experience and embody anything pleasurable and joyful.**



I am a whole system; we are whole systems. We are not just our pains, not just our fears, and not just our thoughts. We are entire systems wired for pleasure, and we can learn how to say yes from the inside out.

- Prentis Hemphill, interviewed by Shar Jossell

There's a world of pleasure that allows us to begin to understand ourselves holistically, in ways that give us room to rebuild the realities that affirm that we are capable and deserving of daily pleasure. BDSM, one of my deepest pleasures, allows me a glimpse into these realities where I can both feel and heal my trauma, as well as feel immeasurable opportunities to say yes from the inside out. While trauma keeps me stuck in a cycle of fight or flight, bondage, kneeling, impact, and breath play encourage me to stay grounded and connected, reconnecting to restoration. Pleasure that is playful allows me to heal, to identify where traumatic energy is stored in my body and focus my energy there. It allows me to express the sensations my body feels through screams of pain and delight, to express my no with no fear and revel in the fuck yes. With a safety plan, aftercare, and a deeper understanding of trauma, kink offers a place of pleasure and healing that is invaluable.

So whether your pleasure looks like cooking a meal at your leisure, engaging in sex, having bed days with your people, participating in disability care collectives, having someone spit in your mouth, going on accessible outings, having cuddle dates, attending an online dance party, spending time in your garden, being choked out in a dungeon,

I hope you take pleasure with you wherever you go. I hope it heals you and your people.

Recognising the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.

- Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"







# HOSPITAL

*Photos by Mariam Mekiwi*



*Mariam Mekiwi* is a filmmaker and photographer from Alexandria and living and working in Berlin.

*“Now might be a good time to rethink what a revolution can look like. Perhaps it doesn’t look like a march of angry, abled bodies in the streets. Perhaps it looks something more like the world standing still because all the bodies in it are exhausted—because care has to be prioritized before it’s too late.”*  
- Johanna Hedva (<https://getwellsoon.labr.io/>)

## **Hospitals are institutions, living sites of capitalism, and what gets played out when somebody is supposed to be resting is a micro-cosm of the larger system itself.**

Institutions are set out to separate us from our care systems – we find ourselves isolated in structures that are rigidly hierarchical, and it often feels as if care is something done to us rather than given/taken as part of a conversation. Institutional care, because of its integration into capitalist demand, is silo-ed: one person is treating your leg and only your leg, another is treating your blood pressure, etc.

Photographer Mariam Mekiwi had to have surgery last month and documented the process. Her portraits of sanitized environments – neon white lights, rows after rows of repetitive structures – in a washed-out color palette reflect a place that was drained of life and movement. This was one of the ways Mariam kept her own spirit alive. It was a form of protest from within the confines of an institution she had to engage with.

The photos form a portrait of something incredibly vulnerable, because watching someone live through their own body’s breakdown is always a sacred reminder of our own fragility. It is also a reminder of the fragility of these care systems, which can be denied to us for a variety of reasons – from not having money to not being in a body that’s considered valuable enough, one that’s maybe too feminine, too queer or too brown.

Care experienced as disembodied and solitary, that is subject to revocation at any moment, doesn’t help us thrive. And it is very different from how human beings actually behave when they take care of each other. How different would our world look like if we committed to dismantling the current capitalist structures around our health? What would it look like if we radically reimagined it?





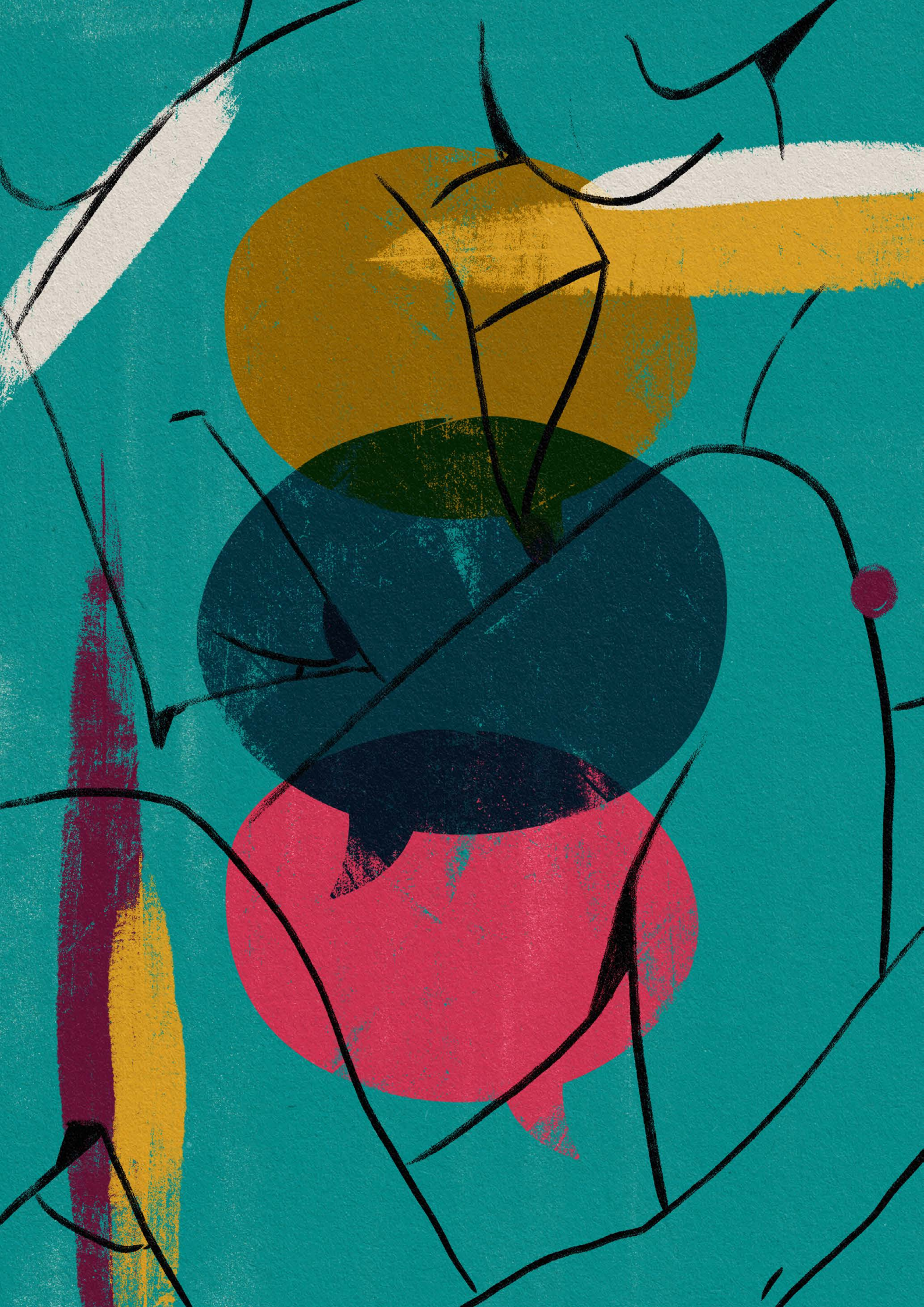


“

**Her portraits of sanitized environments – neon white lights, rows after rows of repetitive structures – in a washed-out color palette reflect a place that was drained of life and movement. This was one of the ways Mariam kept her own spirit alive. It was a form of protest from within the confines of an institution she had to engage with.**









# MOVING CONVERSATION

*Yannia Sofía Garzón Valencia*



I am a Black woman and a community weaver. I live in Santander de Quilichao in Cauca, Colombia. I am interested in the creative processes that organize sustainable collective life. I like exchanging thoughts and cooking, investigating and analyzing, planting seeds and learning from plants, reading and playing. I am currently coordinating the [observatory of gender-based violence against afro-descendant communities in Colombia](#) (t: @VigiaAfro).



*Thank you, Ángela and Pilar.*

### **The three of us were “sharing” the afternoon in a neighborhood south of Bogota.**

The three of us were “sharing” the afternoon in a neighborhood south of Bogota. There was an unusually large green playing area and we sat on little wooden stools under an elderberry tree. We were finally experiencing that other form of love – that pleasure of being together and listening to each other. For me, these kinds of chats are among the expressions of love that life had only recently allowed me to enjoy. I had not known this other form of love – the kinds found outside workshops, activist spaces, classrooms, or workplaces – to be possible. Yet we three friends spent the afternoon amongst ourselves and we did not pretend to be blind to the color of our respective skins. Rather, it was a lived factor that allowed us to intimately discuss the similarities and differences in our childhood and youthful experiences.

Those chats were unrelated to any upcoming activities of the Black movement in Colombia, but they still nourish me and acquire new meanings. Our closeness was woven through coming together, recognizing each other, and identifying the uniqueness of our liberations. And by realizing there is not just one but many paths to liberation – those paths we inhabited every time we said “no” and rebelled. Far from feeling discomfort, we met in an authenticity made of weakness and strength, one which brought us closer instead of separating us.

Our purpose on that beautiful afternoon was to just be – to have an awareness of simply being amongst ourselves. We walked through our pasts so that the memories that stayed with us were those we decided to keep as ours, and not those that fear let through and found a place for. We remembered exact fragments of TV shows, and sang songs written by artists who had taught us about loving well, hating well, cursing like the worst villain, and suffering like the best leading lady.

We told each other about our school pranks, and what remained in our subconscious after being exposed to the many ways the media repeats the same thing – after the teachers and nuns at school overexposed us to stories so that we would identify with and appropriate Cinderella’s aspirations for our own lives. This would set the tone for the rest of our story: the drama of the impoverished and diminished girl who is yet to achieve her full value through an act that redeems her condition. And that act can only be brought about by the gaze of a male who, at the very least, is white, hence deserving of what is between our

thighs – his “main aspiration” – and the “perfect realization of our dreams,” which we are told should then be our main aspiration.

There were three of us there that afternoon. Each had been brought up in a different part of the country, but it was fascinating that we could all still quote fragments and situations from songs and soap operas that often – as we realized by getting to know each other – shared codes or symbols that were replicated, with a few variations, in our homes, in our first relationships, and in our neighborhoods and schools. Brought up by “dramas” (is that what that very successful genre is called?) where the more you suffer, the more you deserve, the issue of “how and in which situations it is acceptable and legitimate to suffer” becomes an important mandate on how the person who suffers should be seen, what they should do, and whom they should be. Some of us managed to liberate ourselves and “learn” a definition of love that could only be learnt in adulthood, shattering illusions, and accepting natural sin. And becoming aware of the industrial production of a virgin, which we may refuse to look like as she has no place in our understanding, and the disappointment this alienation brings.

After singing, we reviewed our early sexual explorations. I never thought that most people experienced them before the age of nine and that even in adulthood, those experiences, those memories, remain a heavy burden. Even today, in thousands of places, millions of girls and boys see their innocence curtailed by lack of trust and the ignorance we present them with when they try to explore their bodies. Blaming curiosity is a most efficient control mechanism. We went back to the brief conversations we had when we changed the history of our lives from cursed Black beings to a perspective that rebirthed us. We remembered how many of our aunts and female cousins left their homes, their core, their roots, to seek a future outside, elsewhere.

The future comes with a price: it demands that those relationships that marked our childhood are reshaped and confined to oblivion. They are our foundations, but they are not relevant if we want to move ahead. For us, advancing was to learn by heart what we do to ourselves with the opportunities we find elsewhere. That it is elsewhere, and not within us, that opportunities lie, that we are





“

**She learned that to care for her belly, she needed to keep her tissues warm, to avoid the cold that comes through the soft spot on the top of the head, through the feet, the ears, so it would not hurt particularly at moontime. For that, you need to be careful about what you eat and what you don't eat, how you dress and how you walk, as all that has to do with girls' health. The woman elder says that, from her devoted grandfather, she learnt that cramps became more common when houses no longer had floors made of mud and/or wood. When concrete and tiles came, when the material making up the house allowed the cold to come in through the feet, tension also grew in the belly tissue.**

indicated that shouting a greeting to an acquaintance on the other side of the street was indecorous; good manners dictate that you must cross the street. By the same token, men must remove their coats and place them over puddles

available, that we need to be *outside*. However, for many of our aunts and female cousins, the few opportunities to enroll and stay in an evening class or take a sabbatical from domestic work were paid for by becoming the first sexual experience of relatives living in the future. A future for which others before them had also paid for, and whose price they had already forgotten. The demand for this payment arrived with the same inevitability as a public utility service bill. We will not take up that legacy.

In Colombia and Latin America, there was an etiquette manual called *La urbanidad de Carreño* (Carreño's Etiquette Manual). It was mandatory reading until the 90s in both public and private schools. The manual conditioned how bodies were perceived and my mother, taken in and brought up by Carmelite nuns, *knew it by heart*. The first time I read it I had to stop more than once to rub my stomach, which hurt from laughing so much. It has ridiculous instructions such as: take a shower with your eyes closed and turn off the lights to wear your nightclothes. Different chapters address how one is to behave at home, in the street, and during a dinner or lunch party – in short, the norms of good taste and etiquette. The ethical core of good citizens was the urbanity that allowed one to distance oneself from rural life. The same manual

of water if accompanying a woman whose shoes should not get wet. I thought about greeting someone across a river, and how it is so hot where we live that we don't require coats.

The manual's author, Mr. Carreño is the opposite of the grandfather of a woman elder born in Turbo. She told me once that her grandfather was a wise man, that he told her about birthing and how to take care of her body. She learned that to care for her belly, she needed to keep her tissues warm, to avoid the cold that comes through the soft spot on the top of the head, through the feet, the ears, so it would not hurt, particularly at moontime. For that, you need to be careful about what you eat, how you dress, and how you walk, as all that has to do with a girl's health. The woman elder said that, from her devoted grandfather, she learnt that cramps became more common when houses no longer had floors made of mud and/or wood. When concrete and tiles came, when the material making up the house allowed the cold to come in through the feet, tensions in the belly tissue also grew.

Surprised again. Such a distance between Don Carreño and the wise grandfather in terms of being aware of life – as distant as the mandates of proper behavior that stifle your impulses and senses, even the most common sense that values health. At that moment, I was able to understand one of the many ways that concrete obstructs the earth's breathing, and our own as part of her. I had not realized there was, and still is, the architecture and materials for taking care of our bodies. In Colombia, as well as in other countries, the materials used to make houses are taken as indicators of multidimensional poverty. A house built with concrete moves the home away from being considered poor. This is just one disappointing example of how progress pushes us to abandon the relationship between our environment and our body. Good taste and urbanity pushes us outside: to move forward, they lie, you have to go out there.

It bothered us to realize that neither our mothers nor fathers had spoken to us about menstruation, except when the brown stain had already smeared our knickers. They failed to preserve us from the shame that was supposed to be a natural feeling once menstruation had come. Along with menstruation came the belly cramps often endured in silence, because there was work to be done; some cramps were due to cysts, hematomas, or fibroids that killed the grandmothers who had discovered and forgotten the healing treatments, and then were forgotten themselves. That our mothers and fathers' breaths turned colder and colder, but the Outside froze familiarity and, instead of warming our bellies, passed judgment with advice similar to warnings of *the only thing men care about*. This was applied to all men – legitimizing the plundering role of the



phallus, as if its only option was to take what we have between our legs. The multiple versions of that truth were replaced by an unmovable and deeply-set naturalization: telling all women that we must preserve ourselves for one of them, for the one that will first introduce his penis inside us, for the one that will give us something in exchange, and that *we are women only because we aspire to and let him put it inside us*. As a girl I explored little penises and clitorises and, in between games among girls, the question was whispered: whose turn is it to play man and whose turn is it to play woman? And the answer: the beginnings of little orgasms, regardless of with whom. I guess the same must happen among male bodies.

The experiences and explorations of our aunts, female cousins, and acquaintances focused on the body and its nudity as taboo. They avoided expressing and naming it, to the point of covering it up, assigning new names to its excreting, expelling, procreating, and, just for us women, its receiving functions. Once I heard a woman elder in a workshop say that when she was living with her grandmother, her memory was of this old woman sleeping with one eye open, the other closed, and a rifle by the mattress. The softest night sound was enough for her to grab the rifle and aim. This is a common situation in the Colombian Pacific, where some harmful behaviors are normalized. Married and single men who like a young woman would enter her room at night – we call it *gateada*. It was a risk: if those with authority in the home realized what was happening, abuse or not, the man could be hurt or even killed.

This practice of taking the law into one's own hands has failed to put an end to *gateadas*, even today. In that same workshop – as I kept telling my sisters – other participants said that neither they nor their mothers would leave their daughters alone with their fathers at bath time, unless the girls were wearing un-

“

**I was able to understand one more among the many ways in which concrete obstructs the earth's breathing, and our own, as part of her. I had not realized there was, and still is, architecture and materials for taking care of our bodies**

derwear. I remembered then my father's voice saying, when I was seven, *your mother never let me bathe you*. After sharing this, another woman responded that, in contrast, her father would give her a bath naked in the courtyard of her childhood home until she turned seven, and then her eldest brother did it until she turned nine. She never felt anything strange in the way they looked at her; for them, it was just another task in caring for the most spoiled child in the home. She remembered being seen for what she was: a daughter child, a sister child, who did not like the water.

Once again childhoods, yesterday and today. We were surprised by that story, and it comforted us. Even I had seen things being different elsewhere; my daughter's father bathed her in the tub until she was almost two. Even before turning two, he would give her a few soft slaps upwards on her bum, to make it bigger, as he said. Here, we could also speak of other dimensions of how we construct our bodies, but that is a different story. For me, it was one care task, among many, that we agreed to divide between ourselves before the baby was born. And the decision to not see every man as a lurking rapist does not mean they are not rapists, but instead that they can stop being so. There are also men and male bodies that have been brought up to never be rapists.

This is still happening. It happened to a friend of ours and to my own daughter. I thought: how can it be that some women are coupled with men they cannot trust to care for their daughters? I am sure that my mum loved my dad. And even though we seldom speak about the woman she was before becoming my mum, I know her experiences of abuse cannot be compared to the brutality and over-tolerance of those of today. But that is still a decision many women in many places make, and that leads to other questions. How often, how repeated were cases of abuse in our extended families to make women openly, or in indiscernible ways, forbid their partners from bathing their daughters? Is it related to the media overexposure we are subject to almost from birth? What makes family ties blur and turn into just bodily-satisfaction exchanges? Is it the proximity to urban values that cares so much about the right shapes of female bodies as objects of desire, and pushes male bodies to behave like owners and conquerors, fulfilling the mandate to mimic media representations so they feel safe in their identity? Is it concrete and other codes, like the Carreño etiquette, that sustain it? Is it encouraged by the need to forget certain relationships as the price of progress, that insistence on "doing for the outside?" What happens to what we learned in our times, those of us who, in secret or not, undertook sexual explorations as children? Were they erased by guilt? Were they the seeds of mistrust and shame in nudity? Were they the seeds of mistrust and shame of being inside oneself? Indeed, aren't these learnings possibilities



to trust in, understand the nudity of bodies as part of respecting oneself and others? These questions emerge in trusted spaces, where the fear to say what one thinks and feels is driven away by the intention of accompaniment. I imagine how many of us there are in all corners of this planet and I am certain these are not new questions, that messages in them are repeated, and that we find ourselves living the answers.







# A COLLECTIVE LOVE PRINT

*The Circle's Conspiracy of Writers I*  
**Wazina Zondon**



Also known as the Teta Research Network, *The Conspiracy of Writers* was founded in 2021 in the context of Kohl's weekly writing circles. The Network is a transnational group of queer and feminist writers who engage in collective writing, thinking, and world-making. The conspiracy's members are: Ahmad Qais Munhazim, Ahmed Awadalla, Alina Achenbach, Barbara Dynda, Cindy Salame, Dalal Alfares, Debarati Sarkar, Farah Galal Osman, J. Daniel Luther, Jean Makhoul, Lina Koleilat, Hanna Al-Taher, Maria Najjar, Maya Bhardwaj, Madhulika Sonkar, Malek Lakhal, Myriam Amri, Niharika Pandit, Nour Almazidi, Roya Hasan, Sara Elbanna, Sara Tonsy, Sherine Shallah, Wazina Zondon, and Zenab Ahmed.



**Wazina Zondon** ([wazina.com](http://wazina.com)) is an Afghan raised in New York City. Her storycollecting and storytelling work centers collective memories and rites of passage in the diaspora. As an informal and undisciplined performer, Wazina is the co-presenter of Coming Out Muslim: Radical Acts of Love, a personal storytelling performance capturing the experience of being queer and Muslim alongside her creative counterpart and sister in spirituality, Terna Tilley-Gyado. Currently, she is working on Faith: in Love/faith in love which (re)traces her parent's love story and family's inherited love print.

Love is a contraband in Hell,  
cause love is acid  
that eats away bars.

But you, me, and tomorrow  
hold hands and make vows  
that struggle will multiply.

The hacksaw has two blades.  
The shotgun has two barrels.  
We are pregnant with freedom.  
We are a conspiracy.

It is our duty to fight for freedom.  
It is our duty to win.  
We must love each other and support each other.  
We have nothing to lose but our chains.

- "Love" by Assata Shakur

## **"If we can inherit trauma, can we inherit an imprint related to love?"**

That is the question Wazina Zondon asks in her collective memoir *Loveprint*. *Loveprint* is a wandering, an overlap, a deviation that (re)creates, at the intersection of interviews and personal essays, our family's stories and insights on love, partnership and romance. Under Wazina's guidance, the circle's conspiracy of writers came together and attempted to reproduce this literal blueprint in the form of collective writing, where our different stories, our genders and sexual identities complement and contradict each other. With our voices overlapping, we complete each other's sentences to create a conversation, a memorial, pieces of ourselves that speak to a "we."

### **What are the origins of your love print?**

I am a so-called "happy accident." There is much narration about this – an accidental life, one that is entirely wanted at the same time. I feel this shaped my way of loving, I don't just fall in love; I risk the slips that lead to the fall. Perhaps it made me an *amor fati* kind of person.



I was told that I was an unwanted child. So I grew up to become an unwanted adult. The origins of my love print are based on being eternally unwelcomed. I am not a fruit of love or any happy feelings but rather one pain and burden. I don't have a love print – at least not in this sense.

I know for a fact that both my parents were in love at some point, but mental health is such a demon, and until one confronts their demons, there is no winning.

I will never associate “love” with my parents or normative family. Love growing up was full of violence and responsibilities I didn't sign up for or was even ready for. For the longest time, it felt like life and love were about carrying a big rock uphill. While my parents “loved each other,” it was a toxic ethos of violence, jealousy, and insecurity to grow up in. I grew up wanting to crave stability, and this is what is me now. I am a risk taker, but never in my “love space.”

I don't know why my mother chose to host a child (me) within her. *She does not love in this form.*

My mother tells me that if I have to think about “finding” love, I should never look at her marriage as a template. My love print comes instead from my raising dogs for the last two decades (18 years to be precise). The other way around is true as well – they raised me. I understand more and more about love and its many layers in their company.

I haven't known love from a “print.” In our household we don't talk about love. I had to teach myself how to love. It was hard work. Still, I fail and still, I keep on trying and I fail everyday. Perhaps failure is my love print.

My love print is the care, warmth, and understanding I give to others surrounding me, whether a stranger, a friend, a relative, a lover. *My love print is political – uncalculated and unthought of.*

I was born under heavy shelling.  
*My love print is the negative  
print of that.*

## Lessons learned about love

I know more about what love is not than I know about what love is.

Love is neither anxiety nor panic.

Love is not asking permission to live or breathe. It is always about love and there is no love without freedom.

Everything you do is about using your heart except love. Love is about using your mind.

Sometimes I fear that my love language is lost in translation.

--- *There are many ways  
to map the origins  
of how to  
how not to  
love  
not love  
love just enough  
love far too much  
some love  
some loss  
to love  
to love lost ---*

I cannot stand the idea of the couple. I cannot stand the idea of living alone while aging either. I am tired of doing the chores alone, moving houses alone, paying rent and bills alone... I imagine getting a stroke alone, and it scares me. I have no plan of "partnering up." I want a world where I can get married to a friend, buy a house with a friend, not have sex.

Loving many does not corrupt a love shared between two, and whether love is romantic or not is really not that important.

When I reflect on the shoddy state of my relationships, I realize that I am in the relationship I was trained to be in. With all my "radicalness" I have not yet unlearned shitty gendered norms.



My need for stability feels “not radical” enough. I want to get out of this labeling. I want something I never had. I want to make it beautiful. I want to feel beautiful and safe – and only stability makes me feel that. Safe, sound, knowing home is neither about violence nor strife.

--- Love print – love to smell the books to see  
where they were printed  
I try to think of the origin of my  
understanding and practice of love  
Do we need origin, it is not the same as purity?  
No purity or origin of love.  
Why is it understanding and practice,  
and not “emotion” that comes to mind? ---

*When I call my parents, I don't hang up the phone after we've said  
goodbye, so I can hear the sounds of home.*

### **What do we need to be/feel loved in death?**

During my Sunni burial, I want all the women and men to come together for my burial. What's with not being able to go say goodbye to dead people from a different sex? It will be Sunni because my mother would want it to be. It will be eco-friendly; no need for the headstone. I love all burial rituals. Quran is good, but I also want music. I really like Asmahan, Um Kulthum, and The Stone Roses.

I have a Monday-Friday playlist and two different ones for the weekend: one for Saturday and one for Sunday playlist. I would like those who loved me to play the music that I used to listen to, respecting the days – with some margin of tolerance as long as they stick to the playlists.

I want to be surrounded by the one(s) who have loved me, even for a moment. And in music and embowered in fresh cut flowers. I don't want to be discovered dead; I want to pass away mid-laugh with loved ones.

*I want to be remembered as someone who loved.*

I don't need to feel loved in death. I need the people around me to feel I loved them, even after I die. Being loved in death is about those who are alive. So I think more about how we come together as a living and loving community in the death of those we love and live with. How we take their memories with us. How we become archives of their lives.

*--- Sometimes, you can only love people in their death. ---*

I have to think back to the body being connected to a space. My family is very tiny and although we come from different places, it is as if every generation moved somewhere new. Perhaps this is the reason why death is not connected to a special place, a cemetery. It is common in our family to bury the dead without names or gravestones, or to distribute the ashes in the wind. I feel at peace with this kind of spaceless remembrance. The idea that my ashes fertilize new life gives me the sense of being loved, being remembered through recreation. My grandmother died earlier this year due to complications after the vaccination. Two hours after she died, my family sat laughing tears about her jokes, her hilarious way to tell stories. We laughed and loved, and it was as though she sat with us again. This is what would make me feel at peace – fertilizing soil, fertilizing conversations, and collective remembrance.

*--- There were  
Two streets that I used  
To walk  
To run  
To play  
To stay*

*There were  
Five hours when the sun  
Was hot  
The sky was blue  
The earth was green*

*There was  
A flower I could  
Smell  
Touch  
Squeeze*



*Crush*

*There were  
The friends I could  
Caress  
The food  
I could  
inhale  
The language  
That would roll off my  
lips*

*There might still be*

*Those many places*

*And things*

*And people*

*After me ---*

Perhaps a promise that I will be “spatially commemorated” as a plant and taken care of in turns until it becomes a tree is enough. No name, no plaques – just the plant/tree, and knowing that it will be cared for. As for my body, I want to be cremated without any rituals and my bone ashes set free in the Arabian sea.

*I need my body to be treated as subversively as it's lived.*

I do not want to be buried next to my family. In this tiny drawer next to all of the people who never knew me. Trapped in death as I was in life. I want to be cremated, and my ashes finally set free.

I want to be allowed to pass, not hang in the in-between, so it is a presence, an active process, a trespassing.

I will ask of you:

- To release me and let me pass
- To not let nostalgia muddy this moment because I will ask only for the normalcy of your expressions
- I have snuck the gentle glimpses and hoarded away the already small and large ways you loved me in order to be sustained. I kept myself alive on these
- To set a finite amount of time to grieve
- To be reminded there is no separation in the beauty of loving; it is infinite and it regenerates without the body

I want to be remembered for the love I put into the world.

I want my body to be given away, and my organs to further fuel love in (an)other live(s).

--- *The smell of jasmine* ---



# CREDITS

## **Editorial Team**

### **Co-editors**

Chinelo Onwualu  
Ghiwa Sayegh (Kohl)

### **Design and Illustration**

Sophia Andreazza

### **Communications**

#### **Strategist**

Zuhour Mahmoud (Kohl)

### **Arabic Editor**

Sabah Ayoub (Kohl)

### **Translation Manager**

Maya Zebdawi (Kohl)

## **AWID's Team**

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah  
Lola Silva  
Kamee Abrahamian  
Tanya Lallmon  
Maria Olivo  
Marianne Asfaw  
Ana Abelenda

## **Arabic Translators**

Lina Yahya  
Marina Samir  
Maya Zebdawi  
Nidal Majeed  
Rania El Ghazal  
Rola Alaeddine  
Viviane Akiki

## **English to Spanish**

### *Translators*

Gabriela Adelstein  
Maria Luisa Peralta  
Alejandra Sarda  
Gabby De Cicco

### *Proofreaders*

Alejandra Sarda  
Gabby De Cicco  
María Eugenia Martí

## **English to French**

### *Translators*

Camille Dufour  
Morgane Boëdec

### *Proofreaders*

Nathalie Thériault

## **Portuguese to English**

### *Translator*

Luiza Martello

### *Proofreader*

Shaina Greiff