Storytelling of WomEnhood: Embracing Embodiment in Intimate Spaces

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Abstract

This thesis explores the multifaceted dimensions of womEnhood through the lens of autoethnography. By weaving together diverse personal stories, we aim to underscore the profound significance of intersectionality in shaping narratives of womenhood. We present stories endowed with richness, vibrancy, and expression. Nestled between gender and intersectional feminist studies, the argument set forth is that womenhood can be explored but not necessarily defined, allowing for a space of plurality and nuance.

Inspired by scholarships of among others bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Ursula Le Guin, Linda Lapina, Lola Olufemi, and Minna Salami, we unfold the shades of womenhood otherwise too often forgotten. With the creation of a safe, sacred, and caring space that embraces the power of embodied knowledge, we sought a process that fosters understanding, social transformation, connection, and a sense of belonging. We invite you to join and experience this sacred and intimate space evoked by our collective autoethnography and communal storytelling in a thesis itself laid out as a story.

Key words: Womanhood, WomEnhood, Storytelling, Feminism, Autoethnography, Femininity, Intimacy, Transformation, Healing, Beauty, Sexuality, Intersectionality, Relationality, Intergenerational, Alternative Methodology, Stories.

CONTENTS

Wherever you are beginning this, [as you are about to enter our space], take a deep breath and notice how you feel in your body, and how the world around you feels[1].

Inhale

…

Exhale

Welcome

Perhaps you've encountered projects like this before, or perhaps not; regardless, you are stepping into a sacred space. It is the sacredness of and for the authors, a place that experienced a lot of personal growth. Here, we found something beyond academia. We discovered ourselves and each other – through a profound, rich, and invaluable journey of sensing our world, our bodies. It feels cosmic really, how much this simple idea to create a project that accommodated our life stories became so

transformative

profound

intimate

healing

These pages contain a deep sense of relationality; of love; of care.

This is a space where the authors refused to live divided lives – where bodies met minds, heads connected with hearts, where facts merged with feelings.

We invite you to feel with us, to embrace your own embodiment as we narrate our experiences and emotions.

We invite you into our worlds.

Welcome.

[1] Inspired by brown, adrienne maree, 2017, *Emergent Strategy : Shaping Change, Changi*

Snippets of Our Stories

All my life

I've been told

that my [redacted] is

dirty

d i s g u s t i n g

and *unsightly*

My tiny developing [redacted] decided that I could never [redacted] to what "real" femininity was

I would never look like [redacted]

Who the hell said being [redacted] is a big part of womanhood? I guess I do to myself

I don't wish I was a [redacted] but I wish I could be a girl with the same assuredness that [redacted] are [redacted]

when I walk alone at night, I wish I didn't look like [redacted]

I should have never worn that [redacted] in front of him

I wish my mom didn't feel the need to [redacted] me when my skirt was too high but [redacted]

[redacted] the fear of being [redacted] a "loose girl"

my [redacted] is a crime punishable by harassment.

Comments;

"just this one?"

He responded;

"*I would rather* [redacted] *than ask you [a woman] for money*".

"Shidon quiet, you no know sey nyanga di hot?"

requesting a smaller speculum, [redacted] *His response was* [redacted] *"What's the big deal? Don't you already* [redacted]

Except I didn't [redacted]

"I've never tried a black girl before"

"Someone like you can never [redacted]

"You know your clock is ticking right?"

It feels odd;

discovering after [redacted]

[redacted] years of [redacted]

that it actually

Isn’t dirty.

at all ♥

The Minds Behind The Words

Reflecting, Reimagining, Resisting

A key moment in the development of scholars occurs when they pause to reflect on and reassess the truths they have been taught (Yang et al., 2023)

We have provided ourselves with a space to not only interrogate but also reconcile our personal, historical, cultural and political sensibilities – pause – then engage in collective reimagination of the research process.

This journey began with using each other as mirrors to observe and reflect upon the ways we have been socialized, not only as researchers and scholars, but also as women and individuals. Through this process of critical remembrance, we engage with our past experiences and former selves to question the conditions from which they emerged and envision new possibilities – both for the ways we want the paper to look and the way we want to conduct the research.

Drawing on research traditions that prioritize lived experiences – such as decolonial, intersectional, and feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Linda Lapina, Lola Olufemi, Minna Salami, Ursula K. Le Guin, and more – we have created a space that enables us to resist the pressures of scholarly normativity; "*to participate in the formation of*

counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision" (hooks, 2014). By resisting this normalization, we found ourselves embracing, pursuing – rather than limiting – potential ways of existence as female scholars within academia and society; shaping, rather than conforming, to identities as qualitative researchers; and enjoying, rather than stifling, our human-ness and connections with others. Creating space in such a manner challenged us to unsettle our prior research socialization to imagine more communal ways of being and researching.

Introducing; The Authors

As we delve into the exploration of womanhood, we embark on a collective journey shaped by our diverse lived experiences; with each of us originating from a different part of the world. In this project, we make a deliberate effort to explore, weave together and separate the threads of our identities, cultures, and histories that shed light on the different realities of our experiences with womenhood. Our stories are from a young woman with roots in Nepal raised in Denmark; an African American woman deeply connected to her Cameroonian heritage; a genderqueer girlie from Croatia who's spent half their life in Denmark; and a vibrant Haitian woman from Curaçao. Having lived in multiple countries and societies, we bring uniquely interesting perspectives to the exploration of womenhood. Within this group, one of us has questions on their gender, three of us are women of color, two of whom are Black, one of us is in her 40s and the rest are in their 20s, adding layers of complexity to our dynamic. We are all as similar as we are dissimilar…uniquely balanced.

Dikshya

My story of migration is not particularly special. I'm one of many whose parents upped and left their home country in search of a better future. For themselves, but especially me, their 2 year old daughter. My dad had been the first to immigrate, then my mom when I was 3, then me when I was 5. The 2 years I spent in Nepal without my parents, I really felt what it meant to be raised by a village: my grandma, my great aunt, and my mom's cousins had collectively decided I was their own as much as I was my parents'.

In a way, I'm glad I moved to Denmark at such a young age. I had time to orient myself, I adapted and grew in a way that puts me at a far advantage than some of my friends who feel more out of place living abroad than I do. However, as a woman of colour on white people's land, I cannot shake the feeling that I will

Anda

I was raised within a deeply matriarchal environment, nurtured by the strength and resilience of a single mother. My grandfathers both died before I was born, leaving my maternal grandmother, my namesake, to play a central role in shaping my identity with a profound sense of continuity.

Although born in the United States, I grew up in Cameroon, where families transcended nuclear structures, connections that extended beyond blood ties. At 15, I returned to the U.S., living with various family members across different states before settling in Minnesota. These geographic shifts weren't just relocations; they taught me to adapt and transform to new environments..

Reflecting on my upbringing in Cameroon, my mother's decision to send me back to the U.S. gains added significance, given

Lucija

I had a happy childhood. No father, no problem - because of my loving family. The breaking point of this happiness though was moving to Denmark at 11.

It wasnt really a choice, as my mother got forced out of our country by threats meticulously woven by threads of corruption and apathy. I couldn't imagine living without her, so I came with.

Throughout this mixed childhood, I was often seen as 'quirky' and 'weird'. But this didnt give credit to how strange it was to be different and it naturalised all the difficulties I found trying to adapt to my surroundings, both in Croatia and in Denmark.

The gender stereotypes that were repeatedly and painfully imposed on me and others repulsed me and I started rejecting womanhood because being a woman did not feel right, and it definitelly did not

Brooke

I was born in Haiti but spent most of my formative years in Curaçao after moving there at the age of 5. Yet, my journey with belonging has always been a bit strained. Despite the fact that 80% of people in the country are black, being dark-skinned and Haitian still made it hard. I faced bullying and discrimination in my early years, to the point where I stopped telling people where I was from or claimed to be born in Curaçao - just to avoid such confrontations. As I grew older, my relationship with belonging became complex. I was raised by a 'Kurasoleño' father and a Haitian mother, yet I tried to move as much as I could away from my Haitian identity. But despite embracing the culture, language, and educational opportunities in Curaçao, I still felt somewhat marginalized. Colorism was

never be accepted in the place I call home. I was raised 6,582 km away from people who look like me and act like my parents. I could never really relate to them no matter how hard I try, yet I cannot find the courage to consider myself Danish. This is also where my schooling and academic history come into play I think. Having only attended international schools that were swarming with foreigners, I didn't grow up with shame of my immigrant status. I instead grew up with cultural awareness and sensitivity. Sometimes stepping outside this bubble and encountering racist, xenophobic rhetorics felt like a slap in the face. I've therefore been very drawn to other immigrants, third culture kids, and people who feel they live in a limbo between communities. Projects that I take on, courses I'm interested in, teachers I admire have always, without fail, reflected this

the patriarchal structures and pervasive gender-based injustices prevalent in that society such as powerful men taking advantage of vulnerable young girls - harsh reality that many face in such environments.

Now, living in Denmark, I am immersed in a vastly different societal landscape. My time in the U.S. exposed me to cultural diversity and individualism, which shaped my understanding of issues dealing with inequality and social justice issues.

Through these transitions, I have come to appreciate the nuanced dynamics of familial bonds and the enduring legacy of maternal guidance in shaping my trajectory amidst the complexities of life.

Embarking on a second bachelor's degree in Denmark was a practical decision driven by necessity rather than a pursuit of knowledge. I align myself with a realist perspective in

make life simple.

A few years ago I started realizing that queerness is the right term to describe my life experiences and through the process of rejection and anger, I found healing and the feeling of freedom.

As womenhood continues to guarantee greater suffering and as I continue being perceived as a fullfledged 'woman' by those around me, I also found that something of womanhood is still a part of me; even if only maybe 40% of me feels at home with it and almost no part identifies with the word 'woman'. This is why coming back to womanhood in this project feels like a return to appreciating all womenhoods and all women.

Having been educated in a Montesory system in Croatia and an international school system in Denmark, I was lucky to very naturally encounter a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences, both in

prevalent, and I often wished for lighter skin. Even compliments I received were backhanded; "pretty for a dark-skinned" "pretty for a Haitian".

When I moved to the Netherlands for further studies, I encountered a different dynamic regarding my blackness. Navigating life as a racial minority, surprisingly helped me develop a stronger sense of self. I began to appreciate my heritage, and love myself fully – in all my natural form. I wanted to also reconcile with my Haitian identity, yet I felt like I could never fully embrace this. I wasn't Haitian enough to enjoy the company of nor to have Haitian friends.

I like to think that I am a walking ambiguity. Complex and full of contradictions. I have always been interested in both the arts and STEM. Unfortunately, you must choose one in academia. Of course, I chose STEM because

mindset. I like addressing issues in a way that opens them up to different perspectives of the world, rather than prove the perspective I have or have been told to have. During project formation, I suggested the topic of women in conflict, how their experiences and needs are secondary to men's, and that the idea of 'national peace' and 'state security' do not encompass peace and security for women. However, my group members (before we were even a group) mentioned they wanted to do something more fun for their thesis. Truth be told, I didn't understand this very much. There's so much pain in the world. I'm privelleged enough to have fun whenever I choose to, but there are people who can see only a tiny window of it. Why can't we use the opportunity and platform we've been given to amplify these voices even if it causes us pain or emotional distress. Slowly, I think I came to the

academia, grounded in practicality and a clear-eyed understanding of the job market. For me, education is a pragmatic tool for professional advancement, focusing on acquiring tangible skills and credentials to navigate a competitive landscape. My academic worldview is shaped by a commitment to leveraging education for personal and societal advancement, while recognizing the complexities and challenges inherent in the system. As a Black woman, I didn't really have the choice to consider it any other way.

However, delving into the Global Humanities at RUC has prompted a slight shift in my perspective as the educational system here is markedly different from what I've known. Learning and collaborating in groups with people half my age has been particularly enlightening, exposing me to alternative

regards to gender and life in general. There was more space there to be different than in the rest of society, which was comforting and still makes me feel at home. I immensely appreciate my co-researchers for being here and creating this space of beautiful diversity with me.

Women and feminine others work and have historically worked very hard, face difficulties, and constantly negotiate their spaces in societies, which should be acknowledged beyond just stating it - in a way that hopefully cuts to the core of the reader.

With this research I feel like we are honoring all the women, mothers, and feminine others that came before us, even if the focus is on us in our autoethnographies - we are like reflections of our mothers. Without them, we wouldn't have been the same.

Academically, I believe that our focus has power, and

that's what everyone told me was best. Arts are for hobbies after all. But I wasn't fulfilled. I lacked the arts still. I lacked social engagement within academia. I lacked more creativity, I lacked its meaningfulness for my life. So, that's how I ended up here. And also here in Denmark. I am enjoying this project because I get to engage with all of the above.

Studying humanities has made me realize that as a black woman, I have the potential to use my body as a tool for resistance, change, deconstruction. Even within my academic pursuits, I strive to leverage this power and subjectivity to amplify my experiences and those of the marginalized. If the system won't accommodate us, then it falls upon us to demand change and create inclusive environments where all voices are heard and valued.

And that is also why I chose to work on this project, it felt

realization that you can speak about painful topics without solely channeling your anger and sadness of it.

When one of the keywords, “healing” was brought up in a group meeting, I was a bit stumped. For all the autoethnographical work I’ve done, I always considered the experience of collecting data from myself as emotionally taxing. And it is… you’re using yourself as a research subject; but it also gives you the chance to stop, breathe, reflect, and share some of your burdens or joys. I see my grandma, who has an unwavering sense of womanhood despite the struggles and discriminations she’s faced because of it. Her idea of womanhood was defintetly not informed through formal data dissection or acadamic analyses. It was through lived experiences and the stories her mother passed down to her which she countinues to pass

viewpoints, fresh insights and approaches that I may not have encountered otherwise. This serves as a reminder of the dynamic nature of knowledge and the value of embracing diversity in thought and experience.

As a member of a historically black sorority, I've witnessed firsthand the importance of organizations like ours in a society where the voices of marginalized communities, particularly women of color, are often sidelined, one of the reasons we join these organizations.. They serve as vital platforms for amplifying our voices, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for social change through sisterhood and solidarity.

So… joining a group of women, I've come to cherish and admire for my Bachelor thesis on the storytelling of womanhood felt like the most natural decision.

I just did not

we have decided to use it to give voices to experiences of womanhood. My aspiration in this project is to make ripples of change in the direction which shows more of womEnhoods and my hope is for the reader to *feel*, why this is important to us.

right! What I hadn’t anticipated, however, is how meaningful it would end up being. Therapeutic even. I wish I could convey to you even a fraction of the transformative power we experienced while sharing our stories in that room together.

down to me. While I have heard sad stories from my grandma, in that moment it's just us reaching out to one another, which is anything but sad. Even though our views on womanhood differ quite a lot, we shaped one another in the beautiful moments where our stories were shared. In the face of theory, hypotheses, and conclusions, we should never forget the importance of feeling and experiencing.

anticipate the profound impact this collaboration would have on me beyond academic fulfillment simply by sharing my story and taking theirs with me.

What This Paper is and Setting Intentions

Story is something moving, something happening, something or somebody changing. - Le Guin (2015)

Our autoethnographic stories feature strong elements of plurality in womanhood, demonstrating that this is an aspect that arises organically in its context. It brings us comfort and allows for authenticity. We tried preserving the fine details and depth found in our stories and amplified them through conversations, ensuring we don't assassinate their plurality. By keeping the plurality of meanings of womanhood, we intentionally create ambiguities, where one reader might understand the mentions of, for instance strength, differently to another.

> *"The potential of ambiguity, understood as a 'queer form', is that it holds indeterminate agency and, hence, may rework the relationships between existing norms and their expressions, opening up new opportunities for performing identity within given social contexts." (Risberg & Just, 2016)*

In our pursuit for understanding, we draw inspiration from Ursula Le Guin's writings on feminist science fiction, which can also serve to construct realities. In her essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), Le Guin challenges the prevailing notion of the novel as a vehicle for triumphant (Man conquers space, earth, death, aliens, the future, etc.) or tragic narratives, often embodied by linear and aggressive Techno-Heroic tales. She introduces and proposes a different narrative archetype – the life story. Drawing on anthropological insights, she highlights the significance of the earliest cultural invention: the container; *'A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient'.* While mammoth hunters may have "*spectacularly occupied*" cave paintings, it was the gatherers of nuts, seeds, berries and leaves who primarily provided sustenance during prehistoric times. (Le Guin, 2015). In mainstream depictions and recounts of society however, the "hero's story" remains favored.

Thus, Le Guin's Carrier Bag represents an ideological shift away from the spear (which symbolizes humanity's preoccupation with narratives of domination), towards stories centered on gathering, holding and sharing. The container, or life story, is characterized by beginnings without clear endings, transformations, losses, and myriad complexities – where

one thing is entangled with another, and then another, forming this complex web of relationships.

Within a Carrier Bag story, heroes are absent. Instead, numerous protagonists hold equal significance within the narrative. The portrayal of a singular hero perpetuates a specific historical power dynamic, typically favoring pioneers and saviors who are often male, white, and brimming with unearned confidence. Jordan Flaherty (2016) aptly notes in the book "No More Heroes", the typical savior is someone raised in privilege, instilled with the belief that they possess the necessary answers and skills to save others. Thus, heroism inherently reinforces privilege.

With this in mind, we decided that there will be no 'grand, master' theory or theorist applied to analyze the contexts around us. The lens we use to uncover our topic is one that emerges through collective sharing and dialogue, and theorists we refer to are the ones that resonated with us the most, coming together in a unique patchwork of concepts. Thus, the aim shifts to highlight patterns and encourage the co-construction of our realities, acknowledging the inherent complexities and multifaceted make-up of knowledge. Within our thesis, this approach encourages a more dynamic engagement with various perspectives, recognizing that understanding is not static but rather evolves through ongoing inquiry and dialogue. Thus, recognizing the limitations in seeking definitive answers or claiming mastery over potentially complex subjects. We are advocating for a more open-ended approach to creating knowledge, one that embraces diversity, uncertainty and the ongoing quest for deeper understanding.

The Carrier Bag story, characterized by its absence of heroes, reflects a collective rather than an individualistic effort. Similarly, our thesis embodies this collective approach. It serves as an exploration deeply rooted in intersectionality, embracing complexities, contradictions, tensions, insecurities, provocations, and ambiguities – all of which arise from the art of storytelling and the consideration of the topic of womanhood.

During the research process, we have felt pressure to define womanhood, femininity, and what it means to be a woman. However, we paused to consider: who is it that benefits from these definitions? How do definitions intersect with our complex identities and our pursuit of transformation (and justice)? Are they tools for reimagination and resistance, or would they reinforce existing power structures and norms?

Gender and feminist scholarship are rich with both possibility and contention. Womanhood thus – positioned at the nexus of past, present, and future – demands close attention to intersectional identities and expressions, and a continual reimagining of possibilities when considering our bodies as vessels for the simulation of womanhood. We wish to do so by introducing the messy, nuanced processes of identity rooted in experiences. We hope that the stories we curated can be as touching, complexly problematic, and strangely familiar to you, dear reader, as they were to us.

We refrain from offering a definition of womanhood, recognizing its intersectional entanglement with race, gender, religion, sexuality, spatiality, politics, community, and various other markers of difference. Researching these intersections is inherently complex, just as it is complex to embody and live ‘womanhood’.

Conceptual Conversations

Storytelling and Autoethnography

The Power of Storytelling

In this section, the authors are looking at storytelling

As meSsy

"How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments of life? You don't do that with theories. [...] You do it with a story" (Coles, 1989, p.128)

As a caTalyst

"Story provides the framework for contextual awareness. When we know the story, we see and comprehend the previously hidden or misinterpreted" - (Dennis Rader as cited in hooks, 2013)

As a persOnal property

For me, stories infuse writing with an intimacy that often is not there when there is just plain theory. (hooks,2013)

As a medium foR transmitting pluralities

Stories enchant and seduce because of their magical multidimensionality. (hooks, 2013)

As a form of healIng

[stories] changed my life. For in writing various stories about the me of me and telling those stories in books [...], my wounded spirit began to heal. (hooks, 2013)

As an embodiment of powEr

Stories are a way of knowing. Therefore, they contain both power and the art of possibility. (hooks, 2013)

As the dearest and purest reSource for the marginalised

I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't. - Audre Lorde[2]

We need more stories - bell hooks

[2] Pride #50: Audre Lorde — Activist and author (nbcnews.com)

Oral Storytelling in Women's Narratives

In the age-old practice of oral storytelling, among the most powerful purveyors are elders. Particularly grandmothers, who in many cultures are the custodians of rich oral histories. This vital role is highlighted in Elizabeth Tonkin's work, where she explores the significance of grandmothers in maintaining cultural continuity through the art of oral narration (Tonkin, 1992). They serve as a vital means of passing down wisdom, morals and traditions across generations. Through their stories, these grandmothers play a crucial role not only in entertaining their listeners but in perpetuating a culture's legacy and reinforcing its social values (Opoku-Agyemang, 2008). It highlights the transformative power of these narratives in shaping perceptions, reinforcing community ties, and preserving a rich heritage that might otherwise be lost in the sands of time (Hale, 1998). Moreover, throughout history, stories have played a pivotal role in empowering individuals with limited resources to uphold their values and cultivate community resilience in the face of oppressive forces (bell, 2019).

In the context of womanhood, oral storytelling is especially significant, offering a vital space for women to articulate and share their diverse experiences, contributing to a broader narrative of shared womenhood. We chose to read our personal stories of womanhood aloud to each other. Women's voices have frequently been marginalized, making storytelling a powerful form of personal and political assertion (Gilligan, 2003). The practice of orally sharing our stories is both an act of reclaiming a space often denied to women in historical narratives and a method of strengthening our communal bonds. This method is influenced by the work of feminist theorists like bell hooks, who discuss the transformative power of communal listening (2014).

Therefore, our engagement with oral storytelling is not merely to preserve personal memories; it is also a transformative, intense, and vulnerable experience that deepens our understanding of womenhood and fosters a resilient community of listeners and narrators. This practice aligns with the views of scholars like Leslie Marmon Silko (1981), who describe storytelling as a means to keep culture and history alive, particularly in the context of indigenous and marginalized communities. By intertwining our personal stories with historical discourse and feminist theory, we elevate oral storytelling from a mere method of communication to an essential instrument for creating knowledge.

Autoethnography

Once we committed to using our own narratives of womEnhood, it became quite evident that using autoethnography as our methodological approach would be the most fitting choice.

This process blurs the lines in research as researchers take on the dual role of subject and object of study (Duncan, 2004). The breakdown of these boundaries offers us as researchers a unique vantage point, granting us privileged access to our own thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences. The vulnerability and honesty involved in exposing one's struggles, biases and shortcomings act as a conduit to cultural insight (Adams & Jones, 2011). This method is particularly powerful in the context of our study as it enables each of us to embrace our subjectivity and articulate our stories in our own voice. Thus providing an intimate glimpse into the intricacies of our cultural identity, experiences of race and gender, and the interplay between personal and collective history.

Through autoethnography, we highlight the subjective truth of our experiences, underlining the validity and importance of personal narratives in academic research. This line of thinking delves into the idea that our understanding and interpretation of events are deeply personal and inherently influenced by our individual perceptions, perspectives, emotions, and backgrounds. Meaning, personal experiences are not singular, objective realities but are instead shaped by the unique lens through which each person views the world. It highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing each person's individual narrative as valid and real, even if it differs significantly from others' perceptions or mainstream narratives. It suggests that our personal truths, informed by our feelings, beliefs, cultural identities, and life histories, play a crucial role in how we make sense of our lives and the world around us.

The choice of autoethnography is driven by our belief in the transformative power of storytelling and its potential to challenge dominant narratives within academia. Stories matter and can be a way of actively resisting "the normative use of knowledge as an inherently colonial tool" (Dutta, 2018 as cited in Kelm et al., 2022). Through this approach, we assert that personal narratives are not merely anecdotal but essential to understanding the complexities of identity and culture, contributing to a more nuanced and inclusive academic discourse on womEnhood. Our project aims to bridge the gap between personal experiences and academic inquiry, advocating for a scholarly landscape that values the richness and diversity of women's stories.

Being Feminist Autoethnographers

Intersectional feminist writer bell hooks is inspiring in her ability to find love in the act of writing and live out her passion for self-expression through her work. She writes about being a woman, being black, and being of working class;

*she embraces "**all the markers that situate and locate [her]**". She writes as a "**seeker**" on a "**path about love**" – intertwined with anti-racist and feminist struggles. She writes not to produce quantity, but because of what she wants to say and share with the world.*

*[...] She writes in the feminist movement to show that the words a woman writes – the words a black woman writes – "**can matter as much as those of any man**". She writes to "**leave legacies for the future**".*

(as cited in Mackinlay, 2022; emphasis added)

We mention bell hooks because she offers ways to understand that as auto-ethnographers, we engage in storytelling while theorizing our experiences and stories as inherently political.

By being feminist autoethnographers, we have the opportunity to translate our personal narratives into political realities; through exposing (e.g., power) imbalances inherent in human relationships and the intricate emotional landscapes embedded within these unequal dynamics. Research indicates that, unlike men, women often endure more trauma in their everyday lives, through navigating various forms of violence (Chapola & Datta, 2023). This violence against women can manifest structurally, symbolically, and tangibly. Systemic societal violence against women encompasses emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, and economic dimensions (ibid.). Through our autoethnography then, we amplify the voices of silenced, marginalized, and overlooked communities, creating transitional spaces that occupy the intersections or boundaries of embodied emotions.

"My longing to find sources that would explain black female experience [...] is precisely a reflection of the socialization of oppressed and exploited groups in a culture of domination. We learn that we do not have the power to define our own reality or to transform oppressive structures. We learn to look to those empowered by the very systems of domination that wound and hurt us for some understanding of who we are that will be liberating and we never find that. It is necessary for us to do the work ourselves if we want to know more about our experience, if we want to see that experience from perspectives not shaped by domination".

(hooks, 2015a)

The Reclaiming of Voices

Engaging with feminist autoethnography through storytelling led to the realization that the wisdoms and knowledges of our mothers and grandmothers do not have a place in academia; at least not so long they are accredited to them.

Crediting them directly might not be what our foremothers would do or desire, but in a system that is built around the promise of due credit, fairness, and ownership of ideas, it is questionable to see that some people are not as equally deserving of credit depending on their status in society.

When we hold personal or generational wisdom relevant to what we study in the palms of our hands, we usually have but two choices - to find someone else who has said something similar in a proper publication, or to let it roll out of our palms and seek another argument someone has said before in a proper publication, even if it is not as meaningful or as relevant; such is the cruelty of citation.

The inspiration for this realization comes from the invigorating work of Zoe Todd (2016), an Indigenous feminist writer, writing in academia. Todd's experience at a lecture by Bruno Latour exposes how problematic the current mainstream academic paradigm of citation/referencing is, specifically when it comes to indigenous thought. Let her tell you about the experience herself:

"So, I waited. I waited through the whole talk, to hear the Great Latour credit Indigenous thinkers for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and all relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and action. I waited. I waited, with bated breath, as I do through most of these types of events in the UK—waited to hear a whisper of the lively and deep intellectual traditions borne out in Indigenous Studies departments, community halls, fish camps, classrooms, band offices and Friendship Centres across Turtle Island (North America) right now. European and North American academies are separated, after all, by a mere pond, and our kinship relations and ongoing colonial legacies actually weave us much more closely together than geography suggests.

It never came. He did not mention Inuit. Or Anishinaabeg. Or Nehiyawak. Or any Indigenous thinkers at all. In fact, he spent a great deal of time interlocuting with a Scottish thinker (John Hume), long dead." (Todd, 2016)

Indigenous thinkers and scholars have been the guiding force for many awareness-raising movements about climate and environmental destruction, however their voices are not heard, their wisdoms not respected, their warnings not heralded until they are 'proven' by science and modern scholarship[3].

The parallel emerges in the spaces between intergenerational and indigenous knowledges, and what is considered knowledge. We have been systematically taught to suppress the voices of those who are not already respected in formalized systems such as academia, and attribute their words to others. We are happy to have a chance to move counter this prescribed academic course, by sharing knowledges, wisdoms, and experiences through our stories.

"As argued within Black feminist standpoint epistemologies, this [lived and embodied experience being accepted form of knowledge] is essential as it allows including and foregrounding marginalized perspectives in knowledge production as perspectives that reveal in an embodied and affective way what power hierarchies exist and how they affect lives both 'at the margin' and 'at the center'" (Collins 1999; Dorion 2021a, 2021b; hooks 2000 as cited in Guschke, 2023).

[3] For another example see Aluna (2018), the documentary film about the Kogi people's journey to save the world: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftFbCwJfs1I

WomEnhood World & Sensemaking

……

[O]ur shared space became a world where we could enjoy the relief of unmitigated expression and existence. That space to flesh became a world, wherein each of us was committed to being our authentic, vulnerable, and expressive selves [...] in our unabashed [womenhood] – Yang et al. (2023).

……

Despite its infrequent usage in contemporary literature on gender and women's history, we have chosen to emphasize the term "womanhood" as symbolic of our lived experiences. According to Tara Williams (2021) – a literary scholar – the term "womanhood" first appeared during the 14th century in Middle English, emerging at least 150 years after the similarly constructed term "manhood". Williams argues that its emergence stemmed from a shift in societal perceptions of women's roles and filled "*the gap that had developed between social reality and available vocabulary*". At the time, the English language tended to categorize women in relation to male figures rather than as an autonomous and collective group. Thus, the term provided a new collective identity that departed from the traditional subservient position of women.

Yet, while revolutionary in acknowledging women as a collective entity with an autonomous reality, the term was influenced by gendered assumptions about "femininity" (Williams, 2021). Women were no longer exclusively viewed as "wives, widows or maidens" – the traditional female roles source, but were also attributed specific "feminine" characteristics such as sensitivity, gentleness, and humility (Williams, 2021). This essentialist dimension of "womanhood" accompanied British settlers to the American continent and reached its peak in 19th-century United States with the emergence of 'the Cult of True Womanhood'[4]. Although the phrase remained somewhat ambiguous, it emphasized White women's idealized "feminine" qualities, particularly suited to the domestic sphere.

[4] *Welter, B. (n.d.). The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860 on JSTOR. www.jstor.org.* http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179

Moving Beyond Essentialist Understanding of WomEnhood

While the term ‘womanhood’ is frequently viewed through an essentialist lens, it is conceptualized in this paper as culturally and socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined. Womanhood is neither synonymous with “woman” as an identity nor with “gender”, and it can be both restrictive and liberating in its implications.

We have opted for the unconventional plural “WomEnhood” because although we believe that women share a common experience (also of discrimination and oppression as a social group), it is important to underscore the diverse manifestations of inequalities experienced by different women, resulting in distinct perceptions and therefore experiences of Womenhood.

Our aim is to approach the topic of Womenhood directly with a fresh conceptual perspective that centers women and feminine others. This emphasis is significant because, despite the ongoing discussions among feminists about language and womanhood, many critiques of traditional definitions of femininity often entail instances of women successfully adopting male socialization (Salami, 2020). Yet, there exists a distinction between a woman whose strength derives from imitating men and one whose strength emerges from her intrinsic womanness.

Discussing intrinsic womanness may raise concerns about further essentializing gender constructs. However, the imperative to redefine Womanhood into Womenhood is not about reinforcing essentialism but rather about reshaping these constructs to enrich lives, both individually and collectively. While critiques of the sex-gender distinction often challenge the notion of women as a unified group (Salami, 2020), feminist philosopher Iris Young’s raises the perspective in ‘Intersecting Voices’ that “*Without some sense in which ‘woman’ is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics”* (Young, 1997). However, those belonging to different gender categories can unify through experiences of womenhood too – such as trans people assigned female at birth and socialised into womanhood, or trans people assigned male at birth who resonated with womanhood despite being socialized out of it. Certain expressions and experiences emerge uniquely when the embodied experience is influenced by what we understand as womenhood (Salami, 2020); our conception of womenhood is thus informed by both intellect and emotion; the passion and the mind; the lived, the felt, and the observed.

When we speak of "women" as a category, it is not to imply homogeneity; just as referring to big cats does not mean all felines are tigers, jaguars, lions or panthers (Salami, 2020). Bearing this in mind, we think womenhood could be similarly situated within the debate on the utility of gender studies in writing women's history (see Scott, 1988) womenhood is:

"*at once empty and overflowing. Empty because [it has] no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when [it appears] to be fixed, [it] still contain[s] within [it] alternative, denied or suppressed definitions*".

"It is like water, in the way that water is soft and fluid but also lethal if it floods or engulfs you. It is like a womb in the way that a uterus is an enclosing where everything is created". (as cited in Salami, 2020)

Womenhood then, defies easy definition and carries heavy cultural significance. As intersectionality emerges as a dominant theoretical framework, exploring terms like womanhood (which may be considered outdated academically), becomes valuable precisely because this term remains rich with social meaning. As such, the study of womenhood enables us to explore how women's social and political experiences are neither fixed, permanent nor timeless. "*It is equally an understanding that is deeply personal and thus best unified through creative expression, political conceptualization, and personal experience, by Sensuous Knowledge"* (Salami, 2020).

Thinking Femininity Through Critical, Intersectional Feminist Theory

Exploring womenhood has naturally brought us into contact with ideas about femininity and their connection to one another. We've noticed that we often use these terms interchangeably in our discussions. So, let's take a look into the emergence of femininity and its link to womanhood.

Ulrika Dahl (2012), a philosopher, anthropologist, and scholar in women's studies, acknowledges that although the inquiry into 'what is femininity' dates back to 1949 (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'), there remains a notable absence of scholarly efforts, not only in examining how femininity has been conceptualized, but also in integrating this inquiry into research. Contemporary scholars of Critical Femininities have begun addressing this gap, highlighting the oversimplification with which second-wave feminists portrayed femininity[5] (e.g., Friedan, 1963). Indeed, critical theory, by its nature, seeks to emancipate humanity, and in the context of second-wave feminist theory, this liberation involved scrutinizing how femininity was deployed as a tool of patriarchal control – a construct often equated with ideas of womanhood at the time. For instance, seminal works like Betty Friedan's (1963) 'The Feminine Mystique' argued that patriarchal constructions of femininity confined women to domestic roles, leaving them yearning for fulfillment beyond traditional household duties, such as pursuing careers.

However, as theorists like bell hooks (2015b) argue, works like Friedan's fail to acknowledge that the experiences described were primarily those of white, upper-middle-class, married, heterosexual women, thereby reinforcing whiteness, and heterosexism within the very construction of femininity. Black women, for instance, were systematically excluded from the realm of white domesticity, as they historically worked outside the home, often caring for the children of privileged white women (hooks, 2015b). While Friedan's work is credited with shaping much of second-wave feminist politics, its broad characterization of femininity overlooks the intricate intersectional dynamics that shape feminine experiences.

By framing femininity solely as a source of oppression without considering its intersectionality with race, class, or sexuality, 'The Feminine Mystique' exemplifies the necessity of integrating Critical Femininities with intersectionality. Without an intersectional

[5] During the second-wave feminist movement, there was a perspective that viewed femininity as a tool of the patriarchal system designed to perpetuate women's subordinate status to men. Any effort to emphasize or appreciate femininity, whether through clothing or cosmetics, was perceived (and in certain instances, still is) as indication of women being misled into objectifying themselves for male approval.

lens, gender theory perpetuates a narrow, one-dimensional view of femininity (Dahl & Sunden, 2018).

Intersectional feminism encourages exploration of the historical, ideological, and of course, intersectional foundations of femininity, transcending the notion of femininity as merely an extension or aspect of womanhood. In this context, femininity often becomes stereotyped, simplified, and 'taken-for-granted' as being experienced as pressure to adhere to patriarchal norms (Dahl, 2012; Dahl & Sunden, 2018). Intersectional feminism, however, transcends simplistic views which exclusively link femininity to the oppression, sexualization, objectification and subordination of women (Dahl & Sunden, 2018). It instead prioritizes understanding the lives affected by the discursive institutions that uphold exclusionary practices and representations (Burghardt, 2011). Therefore, taking inspiration from this, femininity in our paper is used to inquire how lives are impacted by the intersectional, cultural, and political norms shaped by patriarchy, and what processes contribute to this impact.

Setting The Scene

Relational Storytelling as our Bridge of Intimacy

When devising this space in which we can share personal stories, we must remain aware of our positions in relation to one another. It is with this relational characteristic that we see a blossoming of connection and development of interpersonal understanding. Through the personal and collective narratives brought to light through stories, we begin to witness the ability of relational storytelling in helping us tie and weave our experiences together, urging empowerment and resistance. We allowed ourselves and our storytelling to be taken on a journey ladled with, *"listening openly, seeking understanding, and recognizing individuals' abilities and limitations to apprehending others' experiences"* (Russell, 2018, p 53). We believe that building community and fostering intimacy holds incredible power for those who feel unrepresented or marginalised in their societies. This type of connection requires vulnerability, and storytelling can serve as such a vulnerable-infused bridge that enables us to cross into each others' worlds. Whether these stories are deep and serious, or light-hearted and humorous, the space requires a listener who is receptive and a storyteller who feels heard. We're not simply providing information about our lives, but creating a space wherein we can co-construct the meanings of our lived experiences.

> *"Storytelling is for an other just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as [a] guide to the other's self-formation. The other's receipt of that guidance not only recognizes but values the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story for the other." (*Frank, 2013 p. 18 as cited in Russell, 2018)

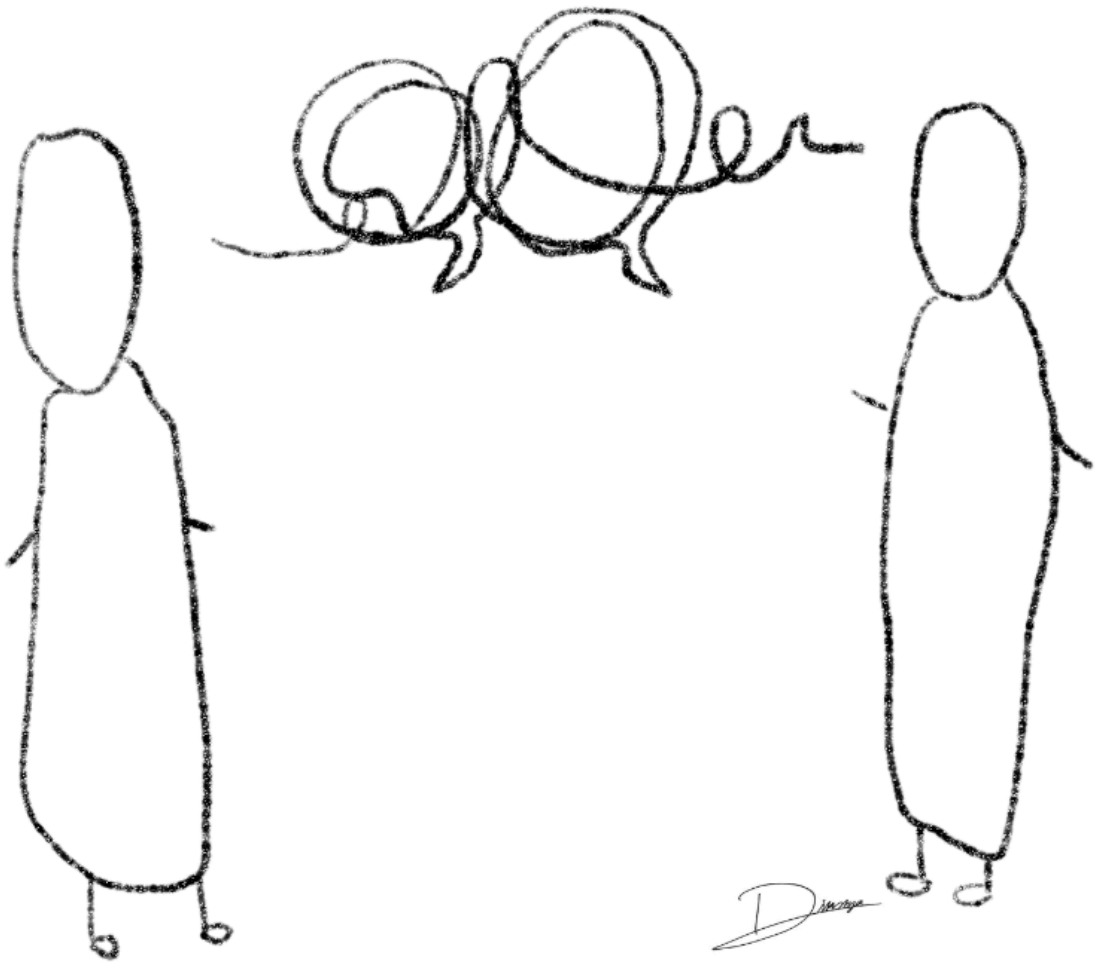
The world tends to feel less lonely and our worries tend to seem more pliant when we start to confide. Both sharing your experiences and witnessing someone sharing theirs can open a door to deeper conversations that must be had in the process of rethinking the world. However, this intimate process precedes and is followed by fears that others might not be able to understand your story, or yourself not being able to contribute to something if you have not experienced something similar.

In all honesty, such concerns collapse once one enters a space of relational storytelling. Similar to Le Guin's carrier bag theory (1986), we wished to create an environment where

there is no pressure to be a hero, or have a grand narrative; no pressure to come up with the perfect response to someone else's story; share how you wish and reply how you feel. When we began extending beyond the individual space, it became abundantly clear that we do not live so far from each other.

From Intimacy to Vibrancy

"While I was listening to your story, I knew that you were telling about YOUR experiences and I was picturing you, yet at the same time, I was also picturing myself in your story…" - Brooke



We are both people and mirrors

Differences are frightening….

When we sit in front of someone and share our story, we are subjecting ourselves to any reaction they might have. Anomalies, contradictions, broadcasting of personal flaws, or disagreements in our experiences can be daunting. Yet differences are a tool we can use to embrace our limitations rather than shun them. These moments of questions and discussions arise when we are confronted with the deeply personal, and can be used to explore new understandings.

"testimony rests on a demand for stories that create possibilities for others to imagine more fully their own realities." (Rusell, 2018)

People often censor themselves to feel accepted, be it in their everyday conduct or in relationships with others.. In an effort to maintain harmony, we tend to prohibit ourselves from discussing the personal and volatile. This is very natural in the art of storytelling, but it limits the ability to seek out issues and phenomena that arise through our differences, or discover a commonality that wasn't considered before. Therefore, we must address how we can feel comfortable with each other while bringing up things that make us uncomfortable.

Differences can fragment communities (Chagnon, n.d.). If we remain reluctant to encounter these differences because they make us uncomfortable or because we dread not being understood, these fragmentations can never mend. Building relations and meanings with others is fundamental to nurture marginalized communities and move towards a more just, empathetic world.

"Yet, equally paradoxically, it is precisely in attending to their difference, to others as others, that enables formations of community, formations that take seriously the burden of justice, that is, the burden of making decisions, evaluations, comparisons, and judgments. (p. 342)" (Chagnon, n.d.)

Yes, we come from different backgrounds and have lived through things another might not relate to. No, this does not mean that we will shy away from each other or ignore the importance of collective talking and listening. The world is vast and diverse and vastly diverse. We exist simultaneously with multiple subjectivities and ways to define our reality. These nuances within ourselves add color and vibrancy to our stories, allowing others to feel and reflect.

Our Space

The four of us all view womanhood differently, yet even in the early stages of this project, before we began confiding in each other, there was a common spark in the air that we all felt. In one of our very first discussions, we each came up with a few words on what we wanted to get out of this…

Healing

Magic *Connectedness*

Intimacy

Birth (From Creation)

Our Stories Coming to Life

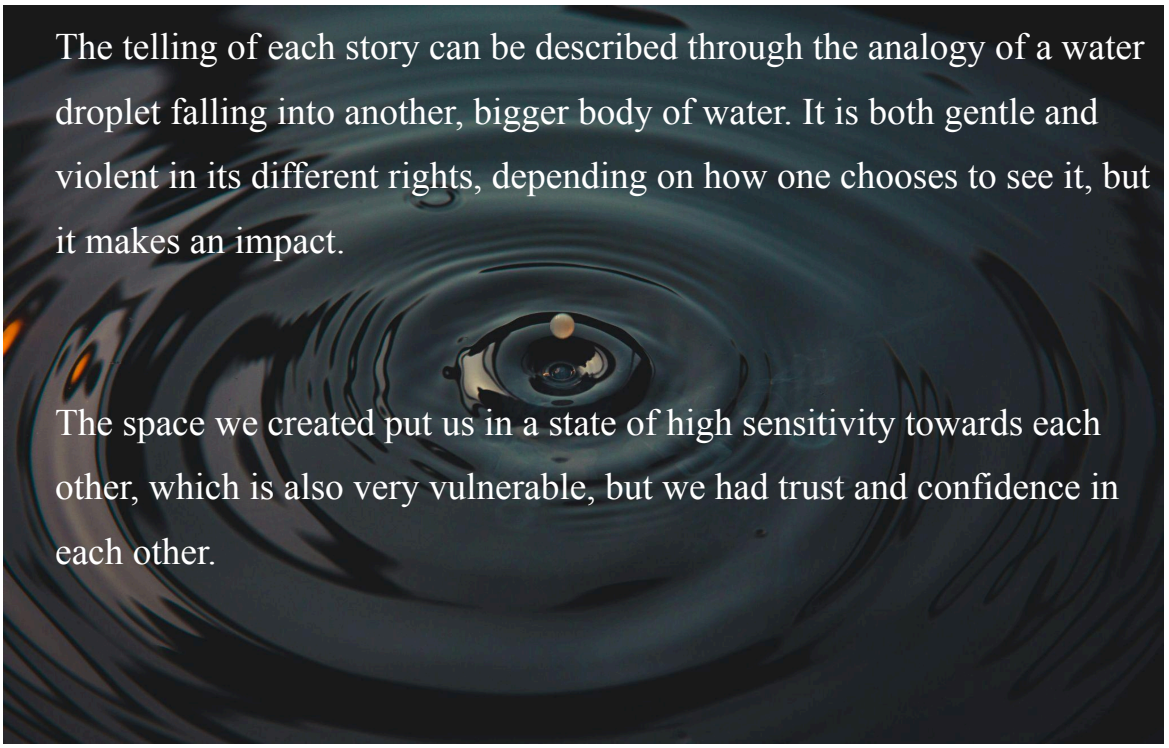
When we began our collective storytelling process, we created a special atmosphere and space between us. We held the space for each other as we listened and felt, and then we expanded it by discussing the stories we just heard.

Creating space - The venue of the storytelling was intentionally set in the dorm room of one of the group members: a setting sprinkled with cozy pillows, snacks, and rays of sunlight. We wrote our stories individually beforehand, and read them out loud, sitting close together, actively listening. The space being quite personal allowed for vulnerability and trust. Emotions ranged from nervousness to excitement, self-doubt to bonding, anticipation to wonder, and they led us to a space of emotional release and healing.

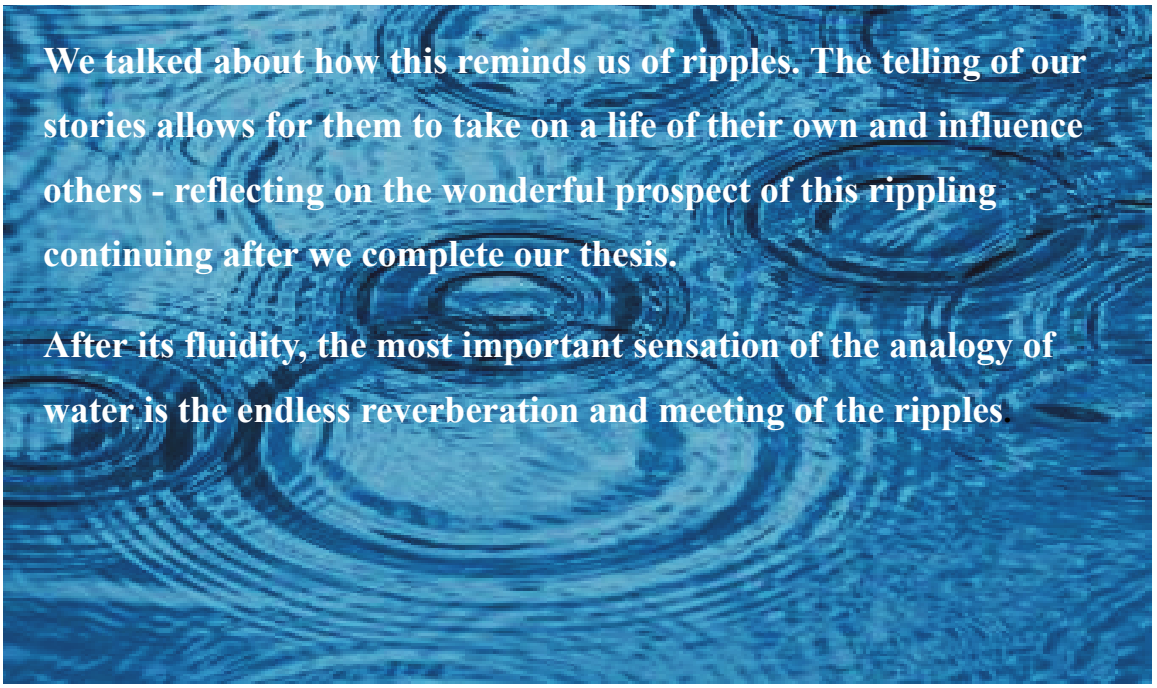
Holding space - We agreed beforehand to listen to each other's stories with no interruption and to face each other with no judgment. The silences we created during these moments were very precious. They gave us a feeling of togetherness and absolute focus on the story being told. Some cried, some sat in wonder, some lived through the other's story, some related, some felt comfort, and some felt discomfort. After each story was told, we all took some moments to process the emotions, feelings, and thoughts brought forward.

Our voices - Listening to each one of us read our stories out loud felt transformative. It did not feel like just an act of reading or speaking, it felt like an act of reclaiming and affirming personal truths. Each word carried with it the weight of personal experience and the power of

ownership. This process felt profoundly validating, a declaration of our reality spoken in our own terms infused with our own emotions. When we were listeners, it created a moment of connection and empathy, recognizing the inherent strength and understanding involved in the process.



Expanding space - Only after reflecting did we engage with each other, mainly every 'listener' with the person who was telling the story. We talked about how elements of the story made us feel, how we saw ourselves in it, what it made us think of and how profound it was to listen.



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The reader can do as they wish with this canvas

Creating Space

"for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" - Audre Lorde (1977)

Storytime

Below is a link to recorded versions of our story:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10x6GRXM1-nNg-WV7YZStyA1NiFL5wgj4?usp=sharing

We encourage you to listen as you read… engage as we engage, connect as we connect.

Dikshya's Story

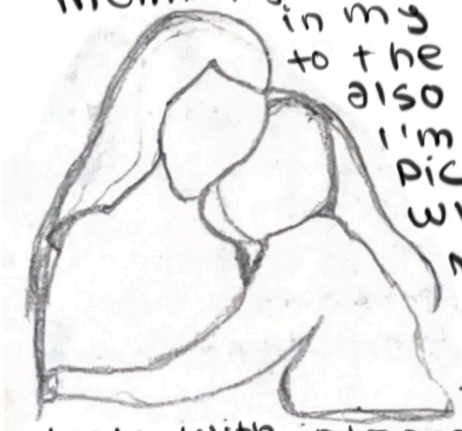
(this is a rendered version for legibility purposes)

WOMANHOOD

Womanhood to me has always been a contested 'thing'. Even when starting this, I was worried about what words to use, which colour pencil I should write with, what song to play in the background, and random things that made me wonder what I'm associating womanhood with. I think womanhood is clean and messy. It's cheery and angry. warm and painful.

Growing up, I had a severe lack of brown female representation and my tiny developing brain decided that I could never live up to 'real' femininity. I was not light-skinned, I was not graceful, I had leg hair and skinned my elbows nearly everyday. In media, of course I had movies from my home country that I always watched, but in my day-to-day, I rarely felt comfortable in my skin. Maybe I could just never be pretty enough. But who the hell decided being pretty is a big part of womanhood. I guess I do to myself. That is something I'm extremely dissapointed in. Why am I sitting here thinking I wasn't fitting into beauty standards and

that's why womanhood felt so far away from me when I have never once thought of another woman that way. I've also never liked the 'masculine'... not to say I don't like men (in any way) but it makes feel awkward and uneasy. I guess even though I felt rejected by the mould of feminity, I never rejected it and instead found so much comfort enveloping myself in it. Moving away from my childhood to now, when I think about the feeling I get hanging out with my girlfriends or talking to my mom, I get a very specific warmth in my body. I feel connected to the people I'm with, but also I weirdly feel like I'm part of a bigger picture. Maybe that's what womanhood is?



Not a set of characteristics or norms, but something that transcends it and deals with interconnections. For me, womanhood isn't the arbitrary definitions of it, but women's shared experiences with it. I've also noticed that throughout this entire thing, I keep wanting to specify that this is how I feel and it's my personal understanding. Women for so long have been confined to male-dominated ideals and we even reproduce them ourselves all the time (intentionally

or unintentionally). That's why it's such a big deal for me to be very clear that i'm not speaking over other women's experiences and thoughts.

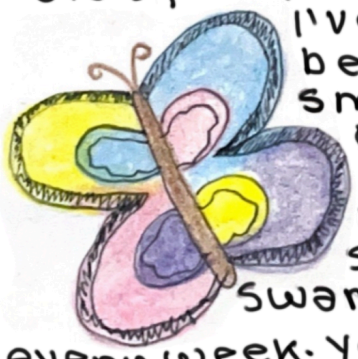
Back to me though, when I was 4 years old, I had a bike that was bright red with flames and dragons. When I wasn't in the school uniform with skirts and tights, my family dressed me in big baggy shorts and football jerseys. My uncle would take me to his barber and tell him to give me the same haircut as him. When it started getting too long, I would pull at my scalp so hard it bruised until they took me back to the barber. I didn't see anything wrong with this. I was a 4 year old who didn't like hair past my jaw. When I moved to Denmark, I was 5. I showed up to the first day of school with my short hair and star wars backpack. Nobody said anything, at least not that I can recall,

but I knew my parents noticed that in a crowd of girls, I looked a little odd. While I spent 2 years without my parents in Nepal, they were settling into life in Denmark, learning and adapting to new cultures and norms. I never got my haircut short again, my star wars backpack became a hello kitty one. I wore A LOT of hello kitty growing up and I still do. I also keep my hair quite long, but whether

or not that's me compensating for my early childhood is too much to dissect right now. I'm a girl who is the only child of 2 Asian parents. While they consider themselves progressive and educated, I alway feared what they thought of me. One day, when I was around 13, I jokingly asked my mom if she dressed me up like a boy because she wished I was one.

She offhandedly said it wasn't on purpose, but if she had the choice, she would've wanted a son. I don't think I said anything back but sometimes now, I remind her of that conversation and she laughs like it doesn't matter I had to hear those words come out of my own mother's mouth. I remember arguing with her one day, not sure about what, but I remember she hit me, then paused and backed up. Before she stormed away, she said she wished she had more kids than me. In the back of my mind, I kind of already knew that I didn't live up to her expectations in many ways. That night, I cried myself to sleep with a million thoughts running around. One of the loudest among them was shame of my womanhood. I loved being a girl, but I also loved my parents. I knew the cruel words my mom had to hear when our family found out she could no longer have any more babies after my birth.

I know my dad's clumsy attemts at connecting with me and pep talks on how I needed to work 3x harder than others to show that I'm capable. I was even hesitant on writing about this because I know they don't love me any less for being a girl, and while they're not peak peak feminism, they hold good values. I just wanted to be perfect enough. I don't wish I was a boy, but I wish I could be a girl with the same assuredness that boys are boys. When I walk alone at night, I wish I didn't look like easy prey, but I do. I wish my mom didn't feel the need to scold me when my skirt was too high, but she does. I wish my distant relatives wouldn't ask, "just this one?" in front of a 9 year old's face, but they did. The women I've met in my life have been the most incredible, smart, and empathetic people you could meet. My best friend since I was 5 lives in Poland, studies medicine and is swamped with exams nearly every week. Yet, she takes the time to text me she applied her lipbalm the same way I did one time in the 8th grade. My mom used to be a teacher, but



had to quit after moving to Denmark. I still see messages on her phone from old students thanking her for everything she's done 20 years later. sometimes in highschool, my friends and I would spend lunch talking to our Englis teacher, and everytime, I felt the need to write down everything she said. Just by the way her words came together, I felt like she knew the answers to questions no one had even come up with yet (I hope she knows how much she impacted me and how much I hope she continues shaping young minds when I think about how they've allprobably had similar thoughts as me and suffered hardships on the basis of their gender, my heart breaks a little. Women, whether assigned so at birth or along the way deserve a lot more than this road paved for them.


One halloween i wore fake vampire teeth. They sunk into the back of my gums and damaged them. I had biweekly dentist appointments for almost half a year. When i look at a picture from this halloween, my first thought is not of the pain that came after, but running around school with my friends making scary noises at each other. When i think of being a woman, i think first of a warm light
I wonder if me at the age of 4 is that different to me at the age of 14 or 40. Are you the same person you were if you don't remember things? Am i not me at 4 years old if i don't remember what my favourtie snack was at the time or am i not in control of who i will be at 40 if i'm not sure what shape i want to take by then.
Am i woman because i am woman or am i a woman because i don't know who i would be if i weren't? I'm scared that without taking apart my legs and holding them between my arms, i'll never fit through the opening. Any opening. Why do i begin to saw off my own limbs before i ask for a different box?
A rusty piano plays as i move from side to side. There's no one in the room, just me. I don't ask where the sounds are coming from, and i move as though i have the time to. How many others are moving the same way as me?
I am 9 years old and crying to some higher power that i don't wish to be me anymore. Why is it that I confess this to a man. I don't remember the last time i felt truly understood by a man, yet when i prayed to God, i prayed to man.

Anda's Story

Dear reader, you are about to take in some snippets of my memories, delving into my womanhood journey through the narration of personal tales and reflections that span from my childhood as a very young girl to the woman I am today.

A GIRL TETHERED TO BEAUTY … THEN CAME KELLY CAPWELL

I am 6, maybe 7 years old, enduring the painful detangling of my tightly coiled 4C type hair. Every tug of the comb elicits tears and protests from my sensitive scalp followed by the precise and painstaking braiding of intricately designed tiny cornrows, that must be tightly woven for neatness and longevity. Despite always loving the final look, the ordeal often ended with me needing pain medication for the resulting headache and discomfort. Laying my head down to sleep at night was usually a very painful ordeal. It Sucked.

My mother, who was unfamiliar with the art of braiding, often entrusted my hair care to the skilled hands of women in the bustling local markets and beauty salons. I was always amazed at how beneath their hands, my hair transformed swiftly and skillfully, a testimony to their mastery. I hated having them do my hair. Despite their efficiency and skill, they had little tolerance for the restlessness of a child. A sharp knock from their knuckles or a swift tap on my head and an order to sit still always ensued. There was a lot of tugging and pulling along with the stern words, **"Shidon quiet, you no know sey nyanga di hot?"** - "Sit still (quietly), don't you know that beauty is pain?". This stayed with me.

I grew up in an African country - Cameroon, yet the stories and characters on our tv screens were mostly European and American. This cultural disconnect, remnants of colonial pasts meant the faces and stories I saw on tv, rarely mirrored my own. Amidst this cultural dichotomy, I struggled to find reflections of myself in the media I so eagerly consumed. One show, Santa Barbara, an American soap opera, held my attention. Among its characters, Kelly Capwell stood out. Her long, flowing sun-kissed hair, epitomized grace and elegance which to my impressionable younger self, was mesmerizing. I was captivated by the effortless way her hair danced in the wind, a stark contrast to my textured locks. In her, I found an ideal that seemed both unattainable and enchanting, a symbol of beauty standards far removed from my own. I would never look like Kelly Capwell.

MUMMY—NAVIGATING BEAUTY & IDENTITY THROUGH HAIR

My tapestry of womanhood is interwoven with the legacy of my mother, a paragon of confidence and elegance, whose presence was both a guide and a mirror. Growing up under her influence, I found solace and pride in our similarities. I am her carbon copy. I look just like her and recognize the power of our shared image in a world that idolized foreign ideals of beauty like Kelly Capwell. The desire to conform to these different standards of beauty was pervasive. I witnessed many strive to exemplify and portray traits that were distant from our own. The use of skin bleaching creams to lighten the complexion, the installation of hair weaves and wigs with a long and straight texture foreign to ours was the preferred hairstyle. Hair relaxers applied to change the texture of our hair from curly to straight was a regular practice. The chemicals destroyed our curls and would sometimes burn and destroy the scalp, illustrating the collective struggle for acceptance in a world that seldom celebrated our own beauty. These efforts, often damaging and painful, highlighted a deep yearning to fit a mold that was not designed for us.

My mother and I through the years.

Growing up, my mother's hair was always meticulously styled. Her regular visits to the hairdressers instilled in me a love for varied hairstyles and an appreciation for the art of hair care. It was more than mere vanity; it was a declaration of self-respect. In our home, unkempt hair was not just frowned upon—it was utterly unacceptable. Neatness wasn't merely a preference; it was a principle. It was how we presented ourselves to the world.

As a child, my hair was mostly kept short as it meant less pain endured during combing. However, as the years passed and I grew older, I yearned for the more elaborately styled hair I saw on other girls in my school and neighborhood. Styles that seemed to dance with freedom and personality. I began to see beauty not as a fixed standard but as an ever-evolving expression of self; Yet it was my mother's journey through grief and transformation that marked a pivotal moment in my understanding of beauty and resilience. In the wake of her brother's passing, she, like the rest of the family, had to cut off all of our hair and keep it short for a year as part of a mourning tradition. It was the first time in my life I saw my mother without hair.

Mummy and I

Her decision to embrace her short hair and own this unconventional look during a period of sorrow was nothing short of inspiring. It prompted a shift in my self-perception because I thought she looked even more beautiful without the hair that was such a big deal in our community and associated with being a woman. In the shadow of my mother's confidence, I found a renewed sense of beauty in our shared appearance. I couldn't help but think, ***"she looks beautiful, I look like her therefore I must be beautiful too"***.

This epiphany marked a departure from my earlier yearnings for long, flowing hair, as I began to see beauty in a different light. Kelly Capwell was not the standard of beauty I needed to aspire to - NOT ANYMORE.

ASSUMPTIONS- I HATE THIS PART

The harsh glow of fluorescent lights bathed the freezing air conditioned sterile room, casted an unwelcoming atmosphere as I sat in the thin hospital gown waiting for the gynecologist. With headphones in place, I sought solace in music, hoping to distract from the discomfort ahead. Every six months since I turned eighteen and I had to go in for pap smears and it felt like an inescapable curse. Though meant to be routine, they turned into distressing experiences due to recurrent abnormal results. Each encounter was uncomfortable, as the last.

The moment the door swung open, my heart sank at the sight of this particular doctor – a stern figure, well into his sixties, lacking any semblance of warmth or compassion. His instructions were sharp and curt, asking me to position myself at the end of the examination bed and place my legs in the cold metal stirrups. I was at my most vulnerable position. Completely naked and exposed. A wave of anxiety washed over me.

My pulse quickened as he produced a speculum, alarmingly larger than any I had ever encountered before. Its size alone ignited a firestorm of panic within me. In prior examinations, smaller, less invasive ones had been used. Despite understanding its purpose, to open me up for cell and mucus collection, this instrument felt like a violation of my body.

Gathering every ounce of courage, I found my voice and dared to speak up, requesting a smaller speculum, hoping for a shred of understanding. His response was a cold and dismissive **"What's the big deal? Don't you already have kids?"** Except I didn't have any kids and had never had a child. His words hung in the air – a bitter reminder of the prejudice and ignorance, underscoring the unfair stereotypes and assumptions placed upon me as a young Black woman—myths of hypersexuality and premature motherhood, wielded like a weapon against my dignity. It stung deeply.

SHADOWS OF CHOICE

In my early twenties, I found myself enveloped in a love so profound it seemed to eclipse all prior romances from my teenage years. His presence was a comforting shield, a sanctuary—a place where safety, protection, and love lived.

As our relationship deepened, so did my resolve to share with him one of the most precious aspects of myself—my virginity. As I stood at the threshold of this momentous decision, I found myself wrestling with the conflicting teachings of my upbringing. Raised in the folds of a conservative catholic faith, I was instilled with the belief that virginity was a sacred treasure, to be safeguarded until the vows of marriage were exchanged. It was ingrained within me that the act of sharing such intimacy outside of the bonds of matrimony was a transgression against the divine, a path fraught with sin and shame. I would end up in hell. Simultaneously, societal whispers painted a damaging portrait of promiscuity, warning of the damning labels awaiting those who dared to stray from the path of chastity. The fear of being branded a "loose girl" loomed over me, threatening to tarnish my reputation and stain my character.

Within these tumultuous clashes of beliefs, existed another realm where my understanding of love was shaped—the realm of literature and films. Immersed in the pages of the countless romance novels I consumed and captivated by the silver screen's portrayal of love, I was entranced by tales of undying devotion and sweeping passion. But in their grandeur, some of these narratives wove a distorted tapestry of what romantic love should entail, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy.

In the convergence of these influences—religious teachings, societal expectations, and the romanticized ideals perpetuated by fiction, I found myself at a crossroads, torn between the dictates of my upbringing and the desires of my heart. Despite this discordance of voices clamoring for attention, one truth remained resolute: the love I shared with my boyfriend was a force too powerful to deny, transcending the boundaries imposed by tradition and convention. And so, with a heart heavy with anticipation and trepidation, I surrendered my virginity — not as a surrender to societal expectations or religious doctrine, but as an affirmation of the love that bound us together, defying the constraints of my faith, society and expectations to forge my own path.

It was a couple of years into our relationship when I found out I was pregnant. I was 22, right in the thick of my university studies; the news hit me like a ton of bricks. It felt suffocating. We were not mentally, financially or emotionally prepared to become parents. I also knew what it meant to be a mother and carry a child out of wedlock. The accusations, the judgment, the labels, the assumptions, the disappointment. This was not going to be considered a blessing, at least not under those circumstances. To his credit, my boyfriend never pressured me into making any decisions and was ready to support whatever choice I made. Despite his support, the decision felt like a mountain looming over me, casting a shadow on everything I thought I knew about myself and my future. It was a tough decision I had to make on my own. I knew what I wanted and needed to do, but this realization brought with it a new wave of conflicting emotions.

Looking back, I can say it was the hardest decision I have ever had to make. The weight of it settled heavy in my chest, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead felt like a fog enveloping my every thought. At that moment, it felt like the only choice I could make for myself, for my partner, and for the future I hoped to build. I made the decision to have an abortion.

My heart bears burdens too heavy to confide.

In the bloom of youth's embrace, I faced life's uncertain dance.
A decision made, left wounds of circumstance.
The choice, a blade that cut through innocence's veil.
Echoes of pain lay in my path, as my whispers turned to screams.

My heart is left cold and empty, stripped bare.
My feelings are frozen in a numbness that grips like a vice.
It keeps scars unseen, hidden beneath a surface of ice.
I seek solace in the darkness only finding despair.

In the stillness of the night,
A flicker of hope ignites a guiding light.
Amidst the shadows, lies a chance to heal,
To let forgiveness bloom, and wounds conceal.

So, I let the tears fall, I let the echoes fade… I let my heart mend,
for in the depths of my sorrow, new beginnings ascend.

I was lucky, I did not have to face this daunting experience alone. My boyfriend was with me offering unwavering support. He sat with me in the waiting room, holding my hand as I waited to be called. But when the moment arrived, I had to go into the procedure room alone, leaving behind the comfort of his presence. I was terrified not knowing what to expect.

The numbness that washed over me during and after the process was unlike anything I had ever felt. A cold and hollow emptiness settled deep in my body, leaving me adrift in a sea of uncertainty. A part of me was gone. It was not an experience I would wish on anyone, yet, if I were to have a do over, I would still make the same decision. Looking at the world today, one where women are denied the autonomy to make such decisions freely, I am grateful for the choice I was able to make, even if it came at a heavy price.

Our relationship ended after five years together. Despite the love we shared, I knew deep down that he wasn't my forever. Our paths diverged, and though he'll always hold a special place in my heart, I had to accept that our journey together had reached its end. If I had kept my pregnancy my life trajectory would have taken a completely different path, and I cannot imagine not being in this here and now. We have remained friends.

It has been decades but the pain remains.

Amidst the turmoil of my emotions, lingers a quiet ache; fear of the disappointment my mother would feel if she knew. I can almost hear the grumbling whispers of her disapproval, see the sorrow etched in her eyes as she grapples with the weight of my decision. The thought of causing her pain adds another layer of heaviness to my burden, a burden I carry silently, tucked away from prying eyes. It is a truth I keep hidden beneath layers of secrecy and shame. The thought of tarnishing the image she holds of me, of shattering her expectations, fills me with a sense of dread that's almost suffocating. Even as I shield her from the truth, I can't escape the nagging guilt that tugs at my conscience, a reminder of the rift between the daughter she knows and the woman I've become. I've confided in my husband and a couple of close friends about my past, but the stigma attached to this decision makes it difficult to share openly. Still, it is a part of my story and I carry it with me, regardless of the judgment or condemnation it may bring.

UNTANGLING MY ROOTS OF BEAUTY AND IDENTITY

In my twenties, I kept my hair relaxed and straight like many around me. It was less about personal choice and more about conforming to societal expectations. It wasn't long before experimenting with my hair became an avenue of self-exploration and a means to heal from the childhood trauma associated with hair styling. Contrary to the old adage “beauty is pain”, I learnt that I could still manipulate my hair without the pain. My hair adventures eventually led me to the bold decision to cut it all off, an act that was liberating but met with mixed reactions within my Cameroonian community where sexual assumptions came into sharp focus based on my hairstyle choice. I later heard rumors that people thought I was a lesbian. While it was normal to have short hair as a child, grown women did not cut their hair and straight women especially, did not cut their hair to look like a “man”.

I eventually grew my hair out but chose to embrace its natural texture, a decision that felt like a true declaration of independence from societal and familial pressures. Despite my mother's disapproval of my “messy” natural hair, as it was not “neat” enough, I felt empowered and liberated. I became a woman who chose to wear her hair in its most natural and pure form not conforming to societal expectations and requirements…. But did I?

This journey took a deeper, more meaningful turn when I met my husband, a Caucasian male from Denmark, who adored my natural hair. I also inadvertently became a role model for his daughter, who was adopted from Africa. I remember her telling me when she was 6 years old that she was happy she was not the only “brown” person in the family anymore.

Guiding her through her own path of self-discovery and self-love in a country where there weren't many examples that reflected her beauty back at her became a mission of mine. I recognized her struggles with identity and beauty standards in a predominantly white country and made it my responsibility to instill self-love in her. Opting to lock her hair into mini dreadlocks was a decision rooted in both practicality and symbolism. I wanted to spare her the pain I endured during my hair care rituals when I was her age and hoped to foster a sense of pride in her heritage and appearance. The locks would also ensure her hair grew longer faster with less manipulations.

I had always wished my mother did my own hair growing up so this is a process I share with my girl. It is a bonding moment for us as we get to share “girl talks”.

Despite the challenges she faced in school, feeling like the odd one out, I remained steadfast in my commitment to nurturing her confidence and self-worth, one lock at a time. She is a Sassy and Confident one. She makes me proud. 🙂

On my wedding day. I was telling her how beautiful she looked in the mirror.

I recall the ache in my heart one summer when she wanted a white doll with long blond hair over a brown one with curly hair like hers. The type of doll she wanted was not the issue. It was that she thought the white doll was more beautiful and found the brown doll ugly. Ironically, both dolls looked exactly the same except for their skin tone and hair texture. Despite my efforts to affirm her beauty, she still yearned to fit in and had a desire for acceptance and did not find that which mirrored "*her beauty*". It was a stark reminder of the external influences that shaped our perceptions of beauty and identity, highlighting the importance of why REPRESENTATION MATTERS.

I also sometimes still struggle with how I present myself in certain scenarios. Even though I wear my hair in its natural form as I will never relax my hair again - I have never worn my hair out to a job interview. I always tame my curls, sleeking back my hair as much as possible to make it look more "professional". I still feel compelled to conform my hair to more

“acceptable” standards, revealing a layer of internal conflict between my identity and the pressures of conformity, a dichotomy that highlights the complex journey of embracing my natural beauty while navigating societal expectations.

LONGING AND LEGACY— ECHOES OF HOPE

“When are you guys having a baby?”, “Why don't you have kids yet?” “You know your clock is ticking right?”, “Don’t you like children?”, “What are you waiting for?” “Oh my God … you guys are going to have such cute babies”, “Your children are going to look so exotic”, “What color do you think your baby will be?”, “did you marry a white man to have mixed babies?”

On top of all these intrusive and sometimes insulting questions - be it out of curiosity or rudeness, my mother's complaints about “people” questioning my childlessness also carries an undertone of disappointment and hurt. She longs for a grandchild. The thing is, I do want another child. It is a desire fueled by a deep love for my husband, and a longing to see our bond mirrored in another soul. I yearn to weave my legacy into the fabric of time, by seeing myself in our child just like I saw myself in my mother. Beneath this longing, is a hidden struggle with infertility, a silent battle that weighs heavily on me, known to few. I am ready to embrace motherhood. The cruel twist of fate—I can’t conceive. It is a bitter irony that gnaws at me, making me question if this is the universe's way of punishing me for the choice I made in my youth.

The decision to bring a child into this world is not one made lightly. As a woman, the pressure to bear children can sometimes feel like an obligation, but in the quiet corners of my mind, doubts linger, questioning if this path is truly meant for me. I carry with me the trauma of childbirth from my experience and from witnessing a dear friend have to deliver stillborn babies. I worry about the world I would bring this innocent life into - a child I will not only have to protect but prepare for the realities of a difficult world, marred by societal biases, racial prejudices, and systemic injustices. The thought of raising a child of mixed race in a society that will have them grappling with their identity, of them not feeling like they fully belong and the fetishization of mixed race children fills me with a sense of dread and unease. And still, amidst these uncertainties, remains a flicker of hope and yearning that refuses to be extinguished.

TODAY— UNRAVELING MY ESSENCE OF WOMANHOOD

Throughout my journey and recollections, I can reflect on a lot that shed light on womanhood and what being a woman means to me. Hair…. It holds profound significance in my life beyond aesthetics, particularly as a black woman. Through my memories and experiences with it, I have come to discover layers of self-expression, cultural and personal connections, and while it doesn't encompass my entire identity, it certainly plays a significant role in it.

My hair stands as the backdrop against which I chart part of my evolution, intertwining traditions and personal growth into the vivid narrative of my origins and essence. From the generational knowledge of braiding to nurturing my natural beauty, each aspect of my hair care journey mirrors facets of my womanhood. This connection, however, is nuanced.

The pride I hold in my hair is often challenged by societal expectations and rigid beauty standards that fail to recognize the depth of a black woman's natural beauty. In the face of adversity, my hair or lack of it, emerges as a symbol of resilience — a reminder of the strength and beauty inherent in embracing my true self, unapologetically illuminated by the triumphs of self-acceptance and the empowerment found in accepting every strand of my unique identity as a woman.

My different hairstyles over time

To me, womanhood is a journey marked by fortitude, and the courage to pilot life's most challenging decisions.

It is claiming the complexities of my experiences, even when they veer off the path deemed acceptable and finding the power within myself to make choices that align with my truth, even in the face of judgment.

It is about honoring the autonomy of my heart, body and mind, reclaiming ownership of my narratives, and standing tall in the face of stigma and shame.

It is owning the weight of my past decisions, yet refusing to be defined by them.

It is forgiveness.

It is understanding that love and loss are often intertwined, and mustering the courage to let go, when necessary, even if it means facing disappointment and heartache.

Above all, womanhood is about owning my imperfections, vulnerabilities, and recognizing my capacity for growth.

It is understanding that my worth transcends my choices.

It is the peace I find within myself.

This is the essence of my womanhood, unraveled and celebrated today.

The vulnerability, bravery and willingness of my group members to share their own deeply personal stories of womanhood ignited a spark in me to delve into the depths of my own experiences. It has unveiled a profound sense of connection, a kinship that eclipses conventional friendships, fostering a collective where we tread the labyrinth of womanhood together.

For this invaluable fellowship, this gift of trust, my heart is filled with endless GRATITUDE.

Lucija's Story

Femininity is for me safe
It is when I don't care
and when I bleed,
when I scream
and when I’m weak,

it is the lovely moments of witnessing
and when I see
Myself in the mirror,
clean, Wrapped in a fluffy bed sheet,
with soft skin and a song in my ear

I couldn’t find a towel (and got so scared for a bit, because ‘Oh no! How am I going to dry off??!’ but there was the bed sheet.
I realized that just because something isn't called a 'towel' doesn't mean that it can't serve the purpose of one, and that I can help myself)
thank you Kate Bush.

It is hugging my pillow tight but not too tight,
soft but not too light,
it is dancing in the rain and broad daylight,
It is being alive in its whole and full right,
with no fear of being misjudged

My ideas of womanhood have been
passed down matriarchically

From my mother and from my grandmother
and from her mother

Sometimes it was awful things, sometimes not
What matters is that I learned to navigate the jumble
and had the freedom to choose what I want to take and what to leave
This wasn't easy always

Kad sam bila mala, ko zgrane pala moja baka kuhala je cvjetna jaja
Pohane cvjetove drveta koje je raslo, idalje raste nadam se, ispred kuće moje
pra-bake, ne sjećam se imena cvijeta

No nije cvijeće i kuhanje jedino što sam naučila od bake.
Ona je puno radila, imala nadnaravno uspješnu karijeru, puno kontakata, red
u kuci, red u glavi, uvijek puno novaca…
Od mame sam naučila isto,
i ovaj stil pisanja, minus the number of tongues in it.

When they lived through war, they were strong, my mother,
her mother, her mother's mother, they all went through war,
and were strong. So so strong
All the time, relentlessly
That was, the way to survive

For me, it was the way I almost didn't survive
I was taught to be strong, I was strong, I am strong
But after I could turn off my emotions with one conscious thought,
I realized I was too strong
The wrong kind of strong, the superficial strong.
Because I was just stuffing things down, like swallowing soup
with an open mouth
I didn't realize how bad it was for years
Until I was thinking of not being here.

Womanhood is a comforting word. It represents the strength,
the responsibility to be strong and to live.

Sometimes I stop to think
and realize that I haven't lived through a war like my mothers did?
So then why does
it feel like it?

All my life
I've been told
that my period blood is
dirty
d i s g u s t i n g
and unsightly

But now I try it. It tastes fine, almost like nothing,
very faintly even of blood,
you know,
the metallic taste blood has after you've cut your
finger on something, or if you bit your tongue too hard.
I slather my teeth in it (with a clean paintbrush I was using to apply it all
over my face like a facemask. While listening to 'Whore of Babylon').
The taste reminds me of water
but if water had a higher pH value or something

It feels odd;
discovering after 20 years of life
and almost 10 years of bleeding,
that it actually
isn't' dirty
at all ♥
- - -

…For me everything related to womanhood is strength,
The way my mind clears when I bleed, the way I know to weep, how wise I can be, how wise my mothers were, how frustrating the world is, how beautiful and intricate handiwork can tell stories, how water flows dynamically, how much there still is to know, and how much I want to know. How much I want to protect other 'girls'…
It seems pretty illusive; this womanhood. Being in so many things.
The more things it is in, the more mental capacity it takes to get it all down and find links
But I can do it somehow. I can understand it in my mind, how it all connects, a little bit, just a little bit, but it's enough.
Because I can, I do it. I enjoy the process too…but it's an effort. And like so many other efforts that I put in, it is hardly understood. WE
understand so many things, and so few of them are understood by others

To meet with them, one has to think and engage and want to understand. To be receptive and curious. And
So
many
people
are just not.
Especially when it comes to abstract ideas, of womanhood

I don’t want to be a woman, actually.
I love my womanhood and appreciate it immensely for all the gifts it has given me, the wisdom, the insight, the beauty both external and internal
But I would rather not
All the challenges and hardships, it’s just hard.
The world is not my oyster, and especially somehow being neurodivergent.
Heck I still don’t have an official diagnosis, or access to any support :(

I had a period when I didnt want the word 'woman' to be used to refer to me, because it doesn’t feel right.
I didn’t want to own it or for it to label me
Now I regret completely rejecting it for a time because it’s a part of me, but I still identify as gender queer
It might be silly; but more than anything, for me it’s a necessity
To be in that middle space, where I don’t have to quite
be just completely a 'woman'

- - -

It’s light out.
Even though it’s the middle of the night
Cities, ah
I find a walk outside a rare treat.
Just a walk for the sake of walking and hanging out with
my tree friends, meeting new tree friends, saying “hi” and
“it’s okay” to birds and getting a weird look back.
I yearn to be outside, and on the ground,
comfortably burrowed in soft soil, or tapping the dry ground
Is this womanhood? I say yes,
but I get how it could be confusing,
Afterall, it is an asexual part of it (/sarcastic)

Brooke's Story

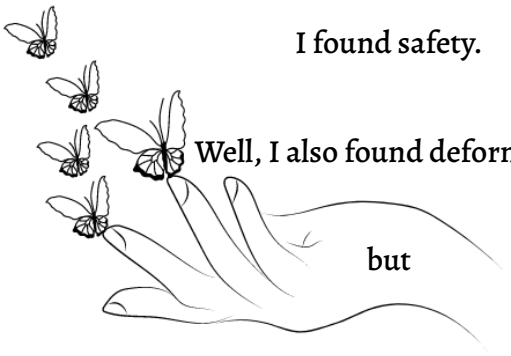
Let's talk about womanhood.

A concept too vast for words.

extending beyond the limits of linguistic expression;

residing in the profound capacity to feel.

Within womanhood, I found a sanctuary,



I found safety.

Well, I also found deformities

but

yet

Womanhood still feels sacred,

while at the same time, it is adorned with vulnerabilities.

Beauty, flaws, all intertwined.

She feels... comfortable,

and is certainly a reminder of a collective voice shared among women.

Womanhood is negotiating femininity

Growing up, my understanding of womanhood was closely tied to my mother's image, together with the way my father treated the women in our household.

My father never really subscribed to the belief in women's inherent weakness or that a woman cannot perform "male" tasks. He made this clear to his daughters. However, he did reserve certain tasks for himself, and believed in gender roles for men … not out of a belief in women's incapability, but rather as a gesture of care, support and appreciation. And while my father taught me practical skills typically associated with masculinity, such as how to do car maintenance, wash, check oil, batteries etc., I also remember him telling me that once I had a man of my own, these were not things I needed to burden myself with.

Whenever I needed to take the car to the mechanic, regardless of his own obligations, he would drop everything just to drive himself to meet me there, sparing me from having to deal with the situation at all. But then he would summarize everything for me in plain engineer language, making sure I had every knowledge for when I had to do it alone.. He never made me feel like he thought I was incapable. On the contrary, he trusted me more than he trusted my brother… yet he never left me to be on my own.

It seems to be a part of our culture tho. Even among my male friends, I observed my femininity reflected in their actions; never being asked to pay for anything, always walking on the inside and safer side of the road, and I can go on. I remember this moment with an old friend who needed 25 cents for bus fare while we were together. He didn't mention that he lacked money to me at the time, but the following day, he was telling me how fortunate he was to find some change in his bag after a thorough search. When I questioned why he didn't just ask me for the money, given that I had plenty, and it was literally just 25 cents, he responded, "*I would rather sleep on the streets than ask you [a woman] for money*". This is the idea of femininity that I grew up with.

My mother, too, was, is a strong believer in these ideals, though she does carry with her a funny mix of contradictions. She is a hard-working woman. Sometimes a bit too hard-working. She is a hairstylist and God, that woman sometimes work from 5/6am in the morning till 12 am in the night. 6 times a week, and only on Sundays does she rests and go to church.

Due to her demanding schedule, she rarely has the opportunity to prepare her own meals. Either my father, aunt, or myself would step in to make sure she had breakfast, lunch and dinner ready to grab during her short breaks. My dad and aunty washed her clothes as well, still do. My mother usually handles everyone's money in the house, she takes care of the finances, pays the bills, does the budgeting, and make all the tough decisions.

My mother's femininity is not defined by domesticity or submission, just like mine isn't; it thrived in her abiding strength and ability to command respect without sacrificing her grace. Just like, I hope… mine is.

But funny enough, she still adheres strongly to certain stereotypes of femininity. Growing up, I never quite fit into the mold of her ideal feminine image. It could be something as seemingly trivial as my preference for shoes or clothes, whether that was feminine enough. Makeup was another point of contention; from when I was 13, she insisted on me wearing powder and lip gloss, convinced that a girl should never walk around with an oily face or without makeup. I wanted to play videogames, but that was not feminine enough. I had a fascination for cars, but that should not be an interest of a woman. I wanted to do kick-boxing, but that too, was not meant for a woman since women are not meant to become "aggressive".

My mother has always encouraged me to care for my hair with the goal of growing it longer. To her, long hair has always been synonymous with femininity. During a visit back home for Christmas in 2022, our conversation took an unexpected turn when she pointed out a few bald spots on my head which was caused by me often holding my hair in a ponytail. She told me that I needed to take better care of it to prevent breakage or me going bald. "***I am your mother and a hairstylist; I can't have my daughter with ugly hair***" she said.

To which I reply that ***its just hair, and if the breakage is too bad, I'll just shave it all and rock a sexy bald head haha***".

She got angry.

"***Do you hate me that much that you would do such thing to me?***" she said "***Are you a lesbian?!!!*****" "*****Woman don't walk around with bald head for no reason, so are you just trying to take revenge on your mother*****"**

"*Wow, chill mom it's just a joke*"

And it was indeed just a joke, because I too had internalized the messages my mother conveyed about hair and femininity. But even though it was just a joke, this joke reflected my desire to challenge the social norms that equate femininity only with long hair. I wanted to speak the idea of short hair as power and as feminine as well. But somehow, that was wrong of me.

Womanhood is strength and confidence because Womanhood can be unfair

For me, failure was not an option. When I first moved to the Netherlands, I did not allow myself to slip up. The pressure I felt wasn't just personal; it carried the weight of countless women, especially black women, whose reputations hung in the balance alongside mine. You see, when you belong to a minority group, every stumble and misstep isn't just yours to bear; your bad action becomes a generalization and a reflection of all the "people like you" (especially in the Netherland).

There was a moment I would never forget, during my studies, where a male teacher's prejudice threatened to undermine everything I had worked for. He handed me a failing grade for a programming exam. I could not understand it because in Curaçao I have already taken programming classes at the same level and has excelled in this… I also did not feel like the exam went that bad. So, I went to the teacher and I pleaded with him to review the exam together, to understand where I went wrong. He brushed off my concerns with dismissive excuses, multiple times: ***"I am very busy these days, maybe next week" "I don't have time for that, you just need to focus on getting better for the re-exam"***

It became painfully clear that he saw me not as a student deserving of assistance, but as an inconvenience unworthy of his time. When I pushed him hard enough, he let slip his prejudice: ***"Someone like you can never get a good grade for my class"***

Now, I do not know if that was because I was a woman or because I was black or probably both but I ended up having to threatened him and actually going to the board at the end with the issue, for him to let me see my exam… an exam which he gave me a 3 (Dutch grading

system) , which I should have gotten an 8. It felt like a mockery of my abilities and hard work.

If I hadn't possessed the strength and confidence to stand up to that racist teacher, he might have gotten away with it. But even though I fought back, the fact remains that he faced no real consequences for his actions. It's a sobering reminder that for 'someone like me' the fight for justice isn't always fair or just.

Womanhood is intersectional

As a woman, a black woman, and a dark-skinned black woman, my experiences of womanhood are entwined with threads of struggle and resilience that extend beyond the realms of privileged womanhood.

Being black in Europe? It's like being under this constant spotlight. People's gazes follow me wherever I go. Adults' stares, children stare, and at times their stares make me feel foreign in my own skin. The reasons for their curiosity? I don't know really – perhaps it's because they think I am beautiful, or perhaps it's because of the sharp contrast of my blackness in predominantly white spaces, or sometimes the fact that I am with a Danish partner. Regardless, their questions and comments, whether well-intentioned or not, highlight the cultural gap that separates us; ***"Which part of Africa do you come from?"*** Sir, I'm actually Caribbean, so I don't know either. ***"I didn't know there were people as dark as you living in Curaçao"***, that's probably because of colorism.

"I want to get my hair like yours, how do you do that?" "How did your hair grow this fast" … really white people, really? You saw me a week ago! it's called braids, its extensions, it is a protective hairstyle. ***"Oh, so it's fake hair" "I think your natural hair looks better"*** … Well, thanks for the unsolicited opinion.

But perhaps the most disgraceful comments come from my own people who see my relationship with a white man as a betrayal of my race. ***"You want mixed children to fix the family race". "You can't be pro-black if you are laying with the enemy" "Don't you want to know what real chocolate dick feels like?"*** Go on then, insult me and reduce me to a mere stereotype for your fetishization!!

"You're so exotic" *they say,*

as if I am a rare object to be admired.

"I've never tried a black girl before", *they say,*

as though I am this mysterious dish to be tasted.

*"**I usually don't go for darker skins but you're actually pretty**",they say,*

as if my worth is determined by their misguided preferences rooted in centuries-old slavery mentality.

But,

Also because of this,

My womanhood became a constant battle against fear.

I experience the fear of every unsolicited advance,

every unwanted touch,

every lingering gaze that robs me from my humanity

and reduces me to a mere sexual object.

I fear to walk alone in the streets at night.

*And sometimes I think, **"you are just overthinking",***

but then I am reminded to why this fear is what's keeping me alive

I have been followed before,

I have been grabbed,

or refused to be left alone for not wanting to give them attention.

I have been pressured into giving out my phone number,

just to escape their persistent advances…

and at times when I have refused, I have been met with hostility,

as if my autonomy is a crime punishable by harassment.

Womanhood is Understudied and unfair accountability

As I mentioned, my mother is strong. And she instilled in me the importance of strength, but perhaps in ways that were overly rigid and unrealistic. To her, womanhood meant possessing a strength capable of enduring any form of pain. At least that is the impressions she gave me.

My periods were painful, but I wasn't allowed to complain of such pain. It did not matter the intensity of my cramps, headache, back pain, low energy, sickness, because despite that, I still had to go to school or work or participate in any activities set for me. And should I ever dare to voice my pain, I would be reminded of the harsh realities of womanhood; where women endure far greater pain such as childbirth, leaving me with no-enough-pain to complain. My mother would remind me that I simply needed to learn to live with it because I am a woman.

Well this seemingly "natural" period brought me a lot of problems. I became anemic, suffering from iron, vitamin D, folate deficiencies, and my body was simply not reproducing enough cells due to heavy menstrual bleeding. So, my sickness finally became a valid one. Because I guess in this world, period is not a valid reason until there is something else that's wrong.

So, there I was, sitting in the doctor's office, asking for options. I needed a solution to lower my blood flow, which could help with my anemia. And my only options were; hormonal contraception. You know, that hormonal THING that gives you psychological problems you never had. Yep. I never wanted to be on birth control because I felt like there was a lack of study on it, plus my female doctor from curaçao advised me against it. So there was I with a dilemma, using something bad, to help fix something bad. But, what the hell, they recommended the IUD and I decided to try it.

Long story short, it did not help. It actually made things worse, causing more bleeding between my periods. I found myself crying more in those few months than I ever had in my life. When I went for a check-up, they discovered that the IUD had shifted, likely due to my heavy bleeding, and needed to be removed immediately. They suggested trying it again, but could not promise a better result so I declined.

So then, they proposed another form of birth control: the arm implant. However, I adamantly refused because I'd rather just have to intake vitamins my whole life than going on birth control again. But the doctors seemed so fixated on this method, pressing me with questions

about ethical practices; "***You are too young to mess up your future***" "***it will be a very responsible thing for you to do***" "***girls your age and race are more likely to get unwanted pregnancies***"… "well… I thought… this was an appointment about my period?... When did it become about you discriminating me and making assumptions about my likelihood to anything?!" It felt like an interrogation and I couldn't help but wonder if they subjected men to the same scrutiny. My boyfriend never had to sit in a doctor's office and answer all these intrusive questions about his actions and pregnancy preventions. Why are we not holding man accountable to the same extent as we do woman?! And why is it, that the medical studies have failed women for so damn long?!

Womanhood and it's expectations on my sexuality

My relationship with the concept of sexuality and womanhood has always been strained. In my perception, womanhood carries a sense of reservation. It doesn't just yield itself for men's use; it waits, it resists bodily impulses, and it demands intimacy. Womanhood cannot be easily obtained, nor can it be freely given without reciprocity. Womanhood cannot love first. It requires gestures of affection, dates, flowers, conversations, chivalry, acknowledgment, humor, and being chased (like my mother would say) – all aimed at ensuring that she won't be taken advantage of and to alleviate any potential shame associated with her actions.

There are some reasons behind my development of this mindset. **First it was the religion;** who taught me that having sex outside of marriage is sinful and would lead to damnation. I was taught that men were more inclined to and weaker than me in resisting and therefore I should help them by not being seductive, not wearing certain clothes that can make them look and desire, because a man desires with his eyes and a woman with her heart. I was led to believe that women were inherently more rational in such matters. I built myself around that. I even signed a stupid card they gave me at church, pledging that I would be abstinent until I'm married. But my abstinence was broken against my will,

which brings me to my **second reason**; sexual assaults. The biggest one, I just turned 17. Didn't tell anyone about it at the time because I felt like it was my fault. It was at night, and he asked me to go for a walk with him, to which I did and to which he took advantage of me. I always told myself that I am at fault because I should have never gone for that walk with him! I should have never worn that short blue dress with cleavage showing in front of him, knowing damn well he was interested in me. I mean, he had been eyeing me the whole day, so I should have known his intentions. How naïve of me!! I should have been clearer that although I was interested in him as well, I did not want him in that way. Well, I mean, I literally said stop, but … but perhaps he did not understand that. When I pushed him off, he pushed me back onto a wall and started fingering me. He told me; ***"look what you have done to me, you made me this hard, you cannot leave me like this without finishing what you started"*** … perhaps … perhaps he misunderstood my push for me signaling that I liked it rough. So, he in fact, forced me to not leave him like that. When he thrusted himself unto

me, I was so scared of being raped that instead of making it clear that I did not want him to touch me, that I did not want him to take out my virginity like this … I instead asked him for a trade-off… for him to let me go if I sucked his dick and finish what I started. I have never done something more disgusting in my life. Volunteering to give my abuser pleasure! How would anyone believe me now? Stupid me, it would have been better if he had just… raped me.

Third reason; the experience after and my mother.

I did not cope well. I became too scared of man. Even in my own home, when my brother passed by my room, I would tense up... even though I trusted him and he'd never done something wrong to me. It didn't matter though, it didn't matter who it was. As long as it was a man, I could not be in their presence without being shitless scared. It took a while before I became more comfortable.

Fast forward, my mother found out I had sex. She was angry. She said there was a devil in me and that I had changed. Little did she know that I was angry too. Angry at man, at God, at myself, at her for judging me.

I had been so faithful to God all this time, yet He betrayed me!. If my body was truly meant to be a temple, how could He allow it to be violated? And if He isn't fighting to preserve the purity of His temple, then why should I?

Little did my mother know why I have changed. That changing was me trying to take care of myself. I no longer wanted my only sexual encounter to be one against my will, until I got married. I no longer wanted to be the odd one out when I heard people talking about their great experiences; and I was simply triggered.

So, from the moment I felt calm with and finally felt trust in a guy again, I saw an opportunity to change that narrative and I took it. He was my friend before he was anything else. Someone who made me feel secure. Yet, I was not fixed. I thought it would help me forget ... and to some extent it did, but it created something far worse; more guilt, more shame, more embarrassment. A Christian girl, that had to pretend in front of her mother, in front of the church that her reality was pure, because she could not explain (an) otherwise.

When my mother found out and cried and cursed me out, that was another reminder why my womanhood should be quiet, silent, secretive, pretending, abstaining, not bursting out her sexuality, not even having one to begin with.

healing

But then I moved to Denmark, and I was met with a very different reality of womanhood. My friends, but also the general consensus of womanhood was one much more open, honest, free spirited, proud and shameless of their sexuality even. I found myself shocked and flabbergasted by how my friends were just casually talking about the things I had been taught to keep hidden and suppressed, as if... it was... normal?!

I found it to be incredibly beautiful. And while I could never fully embrace it, At least, within this version of womanhood, I am able to talk, to express myself, to share my experience, to not hide under a bubble of purity, to be ... proud?! Proud?! Never thought I'd say those words, but I no longer feel shame thanks to the womanhood I was exposed to here.

Somehow,

my womanhood

found healing

and womenhood

became a source

of healing.

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The reader can do as they wish with this canvas

Holding Space

In Lucija's softly lit room,

the air was thick with excitement, nervous anticipation and vulnerability

as each of us got ready to take turns in sharing our stories.

Stories written from the deepest parts of our hearts.

As the first voice broke the silence, it trembled slightly

—not from fear,

but from the weight of the words it carried.

This was not just a reading; it was an offering, a piece of herself shared with us.

We all took our turn, doing the same.

We cried

—oh, how we cried.

Tears streamed down our faces not solely because the stories were sometimes sad,

but because they were true, raw, and resonant.

They spoke of feelings, pain, questions, facts, abuse, curiosities, war, loss, and love.

Of despair and hope, of crushing defeats and hard-won triumphs.

With each word, the boundaries between us ***thinned****,*

stitched closer by shared understandings and silent empathies.

Why did we cry?

Because in each story, we heard echoes of our own lives,

of glimpses into lives we'd never lived.

The stories were mirrors and windows,

both reflecting our own experiences and offering views into worlds unknown.

They reminded us of our vast spectrum of emotions,

and in that moment…

We were united in our collective womenhood and human experience.

The act of crying itself was cathartic,

a physical release from the emotional intensity that the stories evoked.

Each tear seemed to wash away a layer of the walls we'd built around ourselves,

leaving us

more open,

more raw,

more connected.

The vulnerability in the room was palpable, sacred even,

as if by sharing our stories and our tears,

we had created a sanctuary of understanding and acceptance.

This was the evocative power of our storytelling. It was not merely a recital of events but a profound engagement with life itself. Stories animate the inanimate; they give voice to the silent and presence to the absent. When we shared our stories, we offered pieces of our world to each other, and in listening, we received, reshaped, and maybe even replenished our souls.

Expanding Space

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.

bell hooks, 1989.

"*Psst*", whispers Robin Boylorn, "*We don't owe anybody explanations, extensions, sequels or epilogues' on the autoethnographic stories we share*"[6].

Yet, we find ourselves within the same paradox as bell hooks "*This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you*"[7]

[6] Mackinlay, E. (2019). Critical Autoethnography, to Trouble with Words. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 187–220).
[7] bell hooks (1989)

Dear reader,

In this chapter we would like to take you further and amplify some of the less apparent topics that have been brought up by the stories – exploring the less visible facets of the visible themes – that is gender policing, intergenerational tangles, strength, male primacy, and sexuality.

Process of Writing

We took several steps to reach an agreement on the content of this chapter. First, we met four times to connect, discuss, create, sit in silence, and listen to our ideas. We recorded our conversations to guide the final writing stage of this chapter. Sometimes, we wrote separately while still with each other in our ears, and at other times, we wrote collectively. We were inspired by creative writings, the work of decolonial and feminist thinkers, activists, and artists, and real-life conversations between us. Meaning that it involved closely listening to each other, vulnerability, voicing our own opinions, and demonstrating mutual respect for each other's stories as we reflect on them.

Ursula K. Le Guin, in her acceptance speech at the National book awards[8], emphasized that stories should not be treated as commodities or dictated in their form. Instead, each story must create its own rules and obey them. We applied her advice not only to the content of our work but also to our collaborative process in creating this chapter. In this light, we take an approach to writing, presenting the reader with an undisturbed reading experience, free from citations (inspired by Linda Lapina, 2020). These elements will now start appearing in the form of footnotes.

Le Guin's carrier bag theory inspires us to not be *heroes* mastering theories or concepts, using them as tools to dissect our materials. Given that we are engaging in critical, intersectional feminism, it would be a disservice to use tools to fortify rational reasoning by silencing our voices to hear the "wise" that rules.

Rather, the concepts and ideas we know, serve as a container – a carrier bag – filled with diverse, jumbled inspirations drawn from what we have read. Walking through life, we collected the berries of knowledge and ideas that seemed the most juicy, delicious, and beautiful, lovingly storing them in our carrier bags – our headspaces. In this section, the

[8] Ursula Le Guin

sources we refer to are only those that we needed, actually used, and of course wanted to honor; taking some of the berries we each collected out of the bags and making a pie out of them together.

Positioning Ourselves

Finally, this chapter is written from a place that cannot be identified on a map, as it is connected to and informed by various spaces, places, lands, and territories where we are rooted: Curaçao and Haiti, the US and Cameroon, Croatia and Denmark, Nepal and Denmark, our imaginations and our bodies. We sat at a table with snacks and drinks and shared together, while rejecting the certainty of already "knowing" where our narratives will lead.

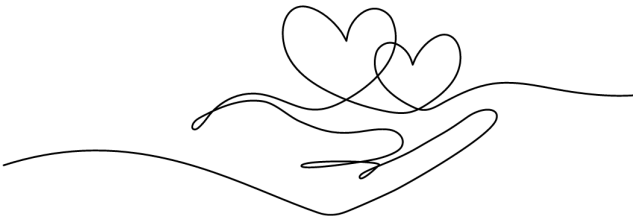
Just as it is impossible to identify one location from which we write, our thoughts are not singular either. Rather, they are the culmination of the thoughts of many other women. What we did and what we told are shaped by the women we admire, love and respect. We present reflections – ripples, if you allow – caused by our stories, and shaped by the women whose stories, poems, books we have read, and art we have seen. In addition, we bring light on our intimacy with the work and words of our ancestors and the women in our families, who raised us and taught us. You can picture them sitting with us at our table.

Now, we invite you to sit with us as well, and join the conversation. We hope that together we can foster more generosity/solidarity for each other's truths as we continue to

share,

hold,

witness space.



Slightly chaotic, like rain drops when it is raining hard outside

The Conversation After[9]

[9] Each initial on the left corresponds to one group member. Writing with 'I'-s instead of 'we'-s and referring to each other's specific stories with names is our way of making it collaborative :)
𝒏:collective narration, 𝒜: Anda, ℬ: Brooke, 𝒟: Dikshya, ℒ: Lucija

Gender Policing

n: In our stories, we got to talk about things that are not talked about much, in academia or otherwise, because they often don't seem important enough. Maybe this is also part of why some difficult and highly toxic patterns of thinking and behaviors carried over in matriarchal lines, still plague us today. If they are never perceived as important enough or coherent enough to talk and write extensively about, to be taken seriously, how can they ever be taken up for discussion, changed, and left in the past?

'Oh it's just hair' or 'Oh it's just nails' or 'Oh it's just because women and men are different'

or 'Oh it just doesn't seem as academic' or

'Oh it's just some pressure to fit in a box'

but it leads to

"Why do I saw off my own limbs before I ask for a different box"[10]

L: I think women and all AFAB[11] people especially are socialized to

SAW OUR LIMBS OFF.

…generationally

…over and over

and even when we ask for another box, it is a slaughter

some make it out, others don't.

Conforming to gender stereotypes like positivity, gentleness, conformity, tolerance, unconditional feminine love and care, quietness, politeness, self-correction, self-blame, etc. can be incredibly harmful when we are faced with abusers of the social conditions that they

[10] Quote from Dikshya's story p.45
[11] AFAB stands for 'Assigned Female At Birth'

see as ‘natural’. There is nothing ‘natural’ about conditions we grow up in if we can trace it back to patriarchism and oppression.

N: The sawing off of our limbs was something we all feel we have experienced. These limbs can be emotional needs, desires of lifestyle, or the hair on our heads. Regardless of what limb we had to cut off, there is an unspoken acknowledgment that if you refuse, you will never fit. And in order to fit, it is you who must bear the pain of your actions, you who is expected to deal with the collateral, and it is you who did not ask for another box that doesn’t require your self-mutilation.

Anda kept on getting her hair straightened painfully for a really long time. Lucija held disgust for what comes out of her body every month for a really long time. Brooke stayed quiet blaming herself for a man’s abuse and assault for a really long time.

D: If the people we love and who love us expect us to saw off our limbs, we see it as normal. These standards of how to be a woman are passed down, and those who passed them onto us have often been victims of the same notions. Though they are aware of the pain that comes along with shaping yourself to fit gender norms, there is rarely any room to challenge the need for it.

N: Needless to say, these things have an impact on a person. They influence a life. We were lucky enough to be aware of the social roles we were relegated to and sometimes, or eventually, we didn’t have to sacrifice our limbs to the box.

Our foremothers and foresisters typically paid higher prices, cut off more limbs, gave up on things, on big, important parts of themselves, stayed in conditions that were bad for them, stayed with men that were bad for them - or risked so much, not to.

“The *enforced* became the *expected* became the *tolerated* became the *accepted*, and she was back at square one.”[12]

B: *“I won’t hold onto the same beliefs on femininity as others have”* is a phrase I’ve heard and spoken myself numerous times. As you may have noticed from the stories, I found some of my mother’s views on femininity problematic. However, I now find myself in the process

[12] Olufemi, L. (2021) *Experiments in imagining otherwise*. Maidstone: Hajar Press. p. 134

of unlearning some of these values, even if I didn't agree with them at the time. And ... **unlearning is challenging**.

I see a significant tension within the concept of femininity as well. Lucija mentioned that femininity is for them safe, and I think many of us can relate to that. Yet in our stories, we all dealt with issues surrounding the space femininity occupies.

n: When we consider the space of femininity, we encounter norms and expectations that dictate how we should appear and present ourselves to the world. This framework can often be restrictive and demanding, imposing significant pressure on us to invest substantial time, energy, and mental resources into our appearance and behavior to meet standards of being "woman enough", "respectable", or "beautiful". This pressure to maintain feminine aesthetics and ways of being is increasingly recognized as a form of labor[13]. Femininity is expected to permeate various aspects of life, and while a significant part of femininity is focused on appearance and aesthetics, it also influences norms, behaviors, and more.

When those around us (especially our parents) validate certain aspects of appearance – such as makeup, clothing, hairstyling (and interests)– as inherently feminine, they overlook the daily struggles of those who do not conform to such norms but are compelled to adopt specific styles in both private and public spheres. In this light, femininity is not experienced in an empowering or inherently positive way. Yet, within our stories and experiences, femininity is not inherently disempowering or inherently negative either.

Gender development, just as the development of femininity, is not a simple process of imprinting it onto a blank slate body, where everyone neatly fits into the binary categories of masculine or feminine. Instead, we navigate gender in varied and dynamic ways, leading to a lifetime of gender development that is anarchic and full of contradiction. The ideas of gender socialization where individuals are neatly determined by rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity does not hold up in practice; rather, gender expression is messy and complex (but we are sure you already know this).

We all experienced the impact of gender socialization, yet we've also embraced it in our lives to varying degrees. In this context, tensions arose as the effects of socialization included feelings of acceptance within femininity, the pleasure of identifying as "girl"/ "woman"

[13] Baker, S. E. (2016). A glamorous feminism by design? *Cultural Studies*, *31*(1), 47–69.

(except for Lucija), but also discomfort from sexism and sexual attention that often accompany perceived femininity.

B: Thank you Lucija!

Reflecting on Lucija coming out as gender queer yet still keeping femininity close, made me consider how queerness can be used as a lens through which to view femininity. What becomes evident in our stories is that while femininity is often associated with notions of objectification, weakness, anti-feminism and heterosexuality, it is not inherently incompatible with concepts such as transformation, pleasure, defying expectations, humor, queer desire (femininity perceived outside normative and heterosexual frameworks) and feminism. In this sense, femininity serves to disrupt the assumed clarity surrounding feminine norms and provides a space for understanding why and how we identify with various gendered expressions. In Lucija's story, I see her as investing herself in new avenues for enacting power among other things.

Femininity and Feminism

N: It has long been perceived that embracing femininity places one in opposition to feminism[14]. Yet, throughout our stories and experiences, we argued that femininity can coexist with feminism because we see and identify with both. However, this wasn't always the case. We reflected upon the ways in which traditional feminism seemed disconnected from our cultural contexts. There were also times when some of us placed feminism in opposition to femininity – or, in Lucija's case, aligned it too closely with femininity. However, if we continue to think of feminism in such terms, we will continue to essentialize its very nature, which is the very critique often directed at femininity from the side of feminism in the first place[15].

A: While I didn't grow up exposed to feminism, I was also raised by a single mother who had to play the role of both mom and dad, was the provider, had to work full time and still provide emotional support to her two girls while keeping her "feminine" aesthetics unchanged and embodying feminist principles. However, with all this being said, feminism

[14] Riley, S. C., & Scharff, C. (2012). Feminism versus femininity? Exploring feminist dilemmas through cooperative inquiry research. *Feminism & Psychology*, *23*(2), 207–223.
[15] ibid.

had never been something that I actively thought about, I feel like I had bigger issues to worry about.

L: I was insecure about not being feminine enough to be a feminist because all the role-models I saw were hyper-feminine, beautiful, perfect, mainly white and blonde, and already so empowered in their feminine beauty. **'**You walk like a man' and 'do you ever try to coordinate your clothes' were the types of comments that made me feel like I somehow wasn't feminine enough to be a feminine person, much less a feminist, until my late teens when I learned more about feminism.

B: I always felt too feminine to be a feminist, even though I never felt feminine enough. I also never felt that feminism accommodated my racial experiences. The feminism I encountered focused heavily on critiquing patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity; of beauty; of values (e.g., the notion that women should prioritize achievements over marriage and children – I always wanted both). I wasn't exposed to inclusive and intersectional ideas about feminism, and despite agreeing with a lot of feminists, I was not interested in exposing myself to more confined boxes.

D: I think race played a huge role in how I embodied femininity. I felt that if I wasn't girly, my brown features would make me appear masculine by default. Yet, there was also this feeling that I wasn't doing justice to the feminist values I held if I didn't know how to kick a ball or if I wore makeup to school. I needed exposure to feminisms that embrace intersectional experiences and the diversity of gender expression to truly feel like I fit in any slots.

N: Both the version of feminism which enforces femininity and the version of feminism which critiques traditional femininity as inherently wrong, are problematic. They still operates within a binary framework, merely attempting to re-mould the power dynamics of gender roles.

bell hooks captures this issue well: "*When Audre Lorde made that much-quoted yet often misunderstood cautionary statement warning us that 't**he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house**,' she was urging us to remember that we must engage in visionary thinking that transcends the ways of knowing privileged by the oppressive powerful if we are to truly make revolutionary change. She was, in the deep structure of this statement, reminding us that it is easy for women and any exploited or oppressed group to become*

complicit in structures of domination, using power in ways that reinforce rather than challenge or change."[16]

This means that we not only lose sight of the need to produce and advocate for a feminism that is directly related to the concrete lives of those most affected by sexist oppression, but we also become engaged in an unproductive and unnecessary power struggle. A struggle that undermines our purpose and diverts our critical energies. Instead, feminism should demonstrate that gender is not a black-and-white issue. It is possible to choose to be both feminine and feminist simultaneously. Else, we risk overlooking the experiences of people outside the gender binary for example, and/or women who do not wish to conform to externally imposed standards.

[16] hooks, bell. (2015a). *Talking back : thinking feminist, thinking black* (2nd ed.)

Beauty Standards

N: Now, let's talk briefly about this thing called beauty standards. Beauty standards and femininity are such tricky things, aren't they? They have been intertwined in shaping how we see ourselves and how we think we should look to fit in, even when we question these standards. This is especially true for women of color. Dikshya's experience reflects not feeling like she conforms to a standard; "*I was not light-skinned, I was not graceful, I had leg hair and skinned my elbows nearly every day. Maybe I could never be pretty enough*" Because she didn't fit this narrow definition of beauty, she felt like womanhood was out of reach for her - She wasn't light-skinned, and in so many places, light skin is unfairly seen as the gold standard of beauty[17]. She felt she wasn't graceful, like grace was some kind of ticket to being considered beautiful. Then we have her skinned elbows, a sign of her active, adventurous spirit, which only made her feel more out of place. How many of us have felt like this? That if we don't tick all the right boxes, we're somehow not enough? And making choices to get closer to ticking the right boxes shapes us over the years.

A: It makes me think, when did we start equating beauty with femininity so tightly?.

B: I find it a bit ironic, though, considering the reasons why Dikshya didn't feel she was pretty enough – something I've also struggled with. Yet she saw a dark-skinned woman with afro hair, with leg and arm hair, and thought I fit into the beauty standard?!. This standard of beauty is so elusive, isn't it?

L: Maybe it also has to do with how we impose these standards on ourselves as opposed to on others. Sometimes the things that I say to and think of myself, I would never say to someone else. Usually because I know that they would be hurtful or harmful, and just not nice. Dikshya also speaks out about this in her story: "*That is something I am extremely disappointed in. Why am I sitting here thinking I wasn't fitting into beauty standards and that's why womanhood felt so far away from me when I have never once thought of another woman that way*."

N: The beauty standards seem like a very internalized thing, and even if we recognize that applying them to others just doesn't make sense, we end up reproducing them fervently for

[17] Hunter, M. L. (Hunter, 2002). "If You're Light, You're Alright": Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color. Gender & Society, 16(2), 175-193.

ourselves and holding ourselves accountable. These standards of beauty are culturally and historically specific ideals that dictate how women should look, which a lot of times fail to accommodate for the diversity of women's appearances and experiences[18]. By conflating femininity with beauty standards, we as a society reduce women's worth to their physical appearance, undermining their individuality and agency.

A: In my story, the hyperfocus on appearances also shows: *"In our home, unkempt hair was not just frowned upon—it was utterly unacceptable. Neatness wasn't merely a preference; it was a principle. It was how we presented ourselves to the world".* Brooke's mom insisted from a young age that she wear makeup and lip gloss, believing a girl should never be seen without it. I don't know if Brooke realizes this, but I have noticed this ingrained habit of randomly reapplying her lip gloss all the time (I mean, my girl's lips stay looking fly no doubt) …. However, does this speak to the deep-rooted nature of these beauty norms and expectations and their impact on self-perception and behavior. And to be fair, I can not stand the sight of chapped lips and tend to always have it with me insisting on my bonus daughter to apply lip balm anytime I see her with dry lips. This is something I have learned from a young age that I am also passing down to mine.

And let's talk about hair for a minute. Hair can be such a loaded issue. I've been thinking a lot about the significance of hair, especially for Black women and how it's so much more than just a style. It's a big part of our identity and history. Traditionally, hairstyles in African cultures have been rich with meaning and creativity, reflecting community, status, and personal expression.[19] Yet, in many societies, natural Black hair has often been stigmatized and subjected to racism.

[18] Craig, M. L. (2002). *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. Oxford University Press.

[19] Carlys-Tagoe, (2022, October 4). A brief history of Africa's traditional hairstyles and their meaning. Face2Face Africa. Here's a brief history of Africa's traditional hairstyles and their meaning - Face2Face Africa

"Hartona: The Grandest of All Preparations for the Hair" [20]

The pressure to conform to a certain beauty standard can make something as personal as hair a battleground. It's frustrating that there's so much pressure to conform to these narrow beauty ideals, often pushing Black women to straighten their hair or wear wigs to fit in. This isn't just about looks; it's about feeling accepted and avoiding judgment or discrimination, especially in professional settings. The racism associated with Black hair can manifest in subtle ways, with microaggressions like the unsolicited opinions and comments in Brooke's stories about her braids, *"Oh, so it's fake hair" "I think your natural hair looks better"* or overtly, such as discriminatory dress codes that deem natural hairstyles as unprofessional. Most black women will tell you that this is something that they have to deal with on a regular basis and let me tell you, it is exhausting.

n: It is disheartening to think that even today, some employers view natural hairstyles like afros, braids, or locs as 'unprofessional'. This is why initiatives like the CROWN Act,[21] which aims to end hair discrimination, are so important. They represent a step towards recognizing and respecting our right to wear our hair naturally without facing racism or bias.

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[20] Ngoupande-Nah, N. (2024). The right to be beautiful. In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 62–85). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003425380-5

[21] The CROWN Act, which stands for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair," is legislation aimed at prohibiting discrimination based on hair texture and protective hairstyles. This includes styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots. About — The Official CROWN Act (thecrownact.com)

A: My decision to keep my afro messy despite my mother's preferences, or cutting off all my hair as an adult despite my community's disapproval is like a small act of rebellion but also a powerful statement. Why should neat and tidy, or long hair be the only way to be beautiful? To Brooke's mom, *"long hair has always been synonymous with femininity"* and she is not the only one who thinks this, but the question is why?

B: Racism, Eurocentrism, White supremacy?!! Beauty has long been associated with straight hair, white skin, and European features, while through racial polarization, ugliness has continuously been attributed to "frizzy" hair, Black skin, and Black physical traits. Yet, despite their obvious harmful impact on Black people, we continue to perpetuate them ourselves! Terms like "nappy", "kinky", "undefined" and even "messy", Anda, are still being used by black people themselves to describe afro hair. If we keep thinking about our hair this way, it affects other areas, like in the workplace you mentioned, because "professional" can't be "messy". Even now, as I embrace my natural hair and try not to reinforce these stereotypes, I still use a lot of products to define my curls and lay my edges sleek and silky. I still struggle with leaving it in its most natural form, because I don't feel like it looks good. There is still a long way to go!

D: I noticed that in all our stories, we have struggled with masking parts of ourselves, being afraid of challenging norms (despite how strong-willed we are), and feeling like our perception of femininity is not how others would like us to be. Brooke and Anda were told how to wear their hair, Lucija was told their monthly menstrual cycles were ugly. But I don't think anyone is listening to what they believe and what they want to do. Why must they blanket their struggle under layers and layers of how femininity should be? However, when we came together, we were able to express what femininity truly means to us. We slowly let go of external expectations and began to challenge what's been fed to us without the guise of shame (over our own body no less!). We began to form a space of care and understanding, anger and sadness, hope and determination.

Intergenerational Tangles: The Pressure Cooker

A: Oh, the weight of familial expectations! It is astounding how deeply familial expectations can shape us. Whether it's the pressure to maintain a certain image, step into roles like marriage and motherhood, or conform to behaviors expected to accompany womanhood, the influence of family is profound and far-reaching. These expectations can feel like a tightrope walk over a canyon of cultural norms and personal ambitions[22]. How do we find the courage to tread this line? How do we honor our heritage while also pursuing our own unique paths? We get to tell our stories in our own voice is what we do.

In our collective narratives, the struggle to meet these expectations emerges as a common thread. Take Dikshya, for instance, who fears what her parents think of her and lives with the thought that she doesn't live up to their expectations. Those who know us best can overlook the essence of who we truly are. Why do we often feel that we fall short in the eyes of those we love?

And then there is me, wrestling with guilt and shame from choices I made that veered away from my mother's expectations and hopes. Each decision, heavy with the weight of potential disappointment, challenging my sense of self and duty. How do we reconcile the need to make personal choices with the expectations set before us?

N: Similarly, there were moments in which we questioned the things taught to us about femininity and ways of being, but sometimes didn't confront them due to shame of conceiving womanhood in unconventional and 'ugly' ways. This shame, while it might have triggered our desire to bring about change, can also trap us in toxic bubbles that do not allow free expressions of our thoughts.

A: Brooke feeling as though she's falling short of her mother's ideal of femininity makes me think of the cultural and societal constructs of femininity that often create conflicts in identity among young women, leading them to question their own worth and the authenticity of their gender expression[23] (For the record, the grace and elegance you embody, would still shine through you regardless of your physical appearance. It is innate and exudes from your

[22]Hill Collins, P. (2000). Black feminist thought : knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (2nd edition.). Routledge.
[23] Chrisler, J. C., & McCreary, D. R. (Eds.). (2010). Handbook of Gender Research in Psychology Volume 2: Gender Research in Social and Applied Psychology (1st ed. 2010.). Springer New York.

presence and if you did decide to one day cut those gorgeous locks of yours, you would still be the amazingly fly Brooke that we have all come to know and love… just saying).

L: People who love you and whom you love also hurt you. It makes the pain hard to talk about and the situation ambiguous. Oftentimes the gender and beauty policing that our parents imposed on us had good intentions behind them, but bad outcomes.

B: I find myself thinking... I wish I knew my mother's and her mother's stories as well as I know my own. Perhaps then I could better understand her – and the tensions between us being so full of love, respect, and admiration for each other, while at the same time being able to harm each other in ways told in the stories. Dikshya experienced that harm too, so did Lucija, so did Anda.

I find myself wondering how their experiences felt to them at the time. Our mothers whom through their generations and their mother's generations endured upheavals from war, racism, sexism, oppression, strict parenting, natural disasters (especially true for Haiti), and other challenges. Our mothers who might have unintentionally transmitted their anxieties to us without realizing how it contributed to maintaining a culture of insecurity. Yet, just as it is challenging for us to unlearn these patterns now, it must be even more difficult for them, especially without being exposed to the same intensity of social justice and change that many of us experienced.

I find myself thinking... How do we navigate understanding this, having compassion for them, while at the same time maintaining compassion for ourselves?

D: Yeah… I also feel guilty for having said unsavoury things about someone who gave me life and continued to do so for 20 years. So much of who I am is from watching my mom conduct herself, listening to her advice, and taking precautions from her epxeriences. When I got older and began growing into my features, people started telling me I resemble my mom, physically and through my behaviour. Given all our differences and arguments, that was still one of the highest compliments I've ever received. Like Brooke just expressed, I wish I knew my mom's stories as well as I do my own… But it's quite powerful that despite it, my mother and I somehow mirror each other's journeys. I hope she knows that my critiques and challenges are not to dismiss her or her values, but rather to internalize what I've learned and put it back into the world.

n: In a way, it indeed feels unfair to consider problematic things our mothers tried passing down to us as oppressive. They too, live in the margins[24], fighting to be heard and seen as humans with value. Through the stories, all of our mothers are portrayed as strong women who tried their very best to make us strong women. It is abundantly clear how much inspiration and knowledge we have drawn from the women who came before us, yet we also owe it to them to go past that.

"I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there" – bell hooks, 1989

[24] See bell hooks' explanation of the margins, a site in which the marginalised are from, and a site of resistance, radical opennes, and possibility - hooks, bell. (1989). CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, *36*, 15–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111660

This Thing Called Strength

A: When Dikshya said "*when I think of being a woman, I think first of a warm light*", I found that the imagery of a warm light encapsulates the essence of what womanhood and strength are for me. The thing is, it is more than just a visual; it is a feeling, an aura, an experience. Warm light is comforting and nurturing much like the way women often embody roles of caretaking and emotional support. It is a light that gently envelopes, creating a sense of safety and belonging. What Dikshya was able to do, by sharing that one line in her story was create a ripple of all these thoughts and feelings in me. When I think of the women in my life, I see this light in their acts of kindness, their resilience and their ability to find hope in the darkest of times.

I sometimes wonder if thinking of women this way, romanticizes the struggles that come with being a woman but I give myself the permission to do so because the light associated with it also represents a source of strength and should be romanticized. It is not harsh or blinding but steady and unwavering much like the inner strength women possess. I see it in the way Lucija talks about the women in her life and their experiences with war. The warmth of this light evokes a sense of connection reminding me of the bonds we share and the shared understanding that can only come from lived experiences. However, this light sometimes shining amidst struggle is what is necessary to foster resilience and hope.

B: I hear you. Yet, I also believe that romanticizing strength can be a little bit problematic. While sitting at the table, witnessing Lucija recount this challenging part of her story, where the concept of strength led them to suppress and misunderstand their emotions, eventually leading to a condition they called alexithymia (a term I just learned of)... Seeing how she continued expressing and describing her process with anxiety, and the process of working with psychologists to help understand what she feels and wants, was really inspiring. It made me realize that perhaps I'm not there yet. I too have a superficial and unhealthy relationship with strength, and I think many women do, especially Black women;

"*Stereotypes and clichés about mental illness are as pervasive as those about race. I have noticed that the mental illness that affects white men is often characterized, if not glamorized, as a sign of genius, a burden of cerebral superiority, artistic eccentricity—as if their depression is somehow heroic. White women who suffer from mental illness are depicted as idle, spoiled, or just plain hysterical. Black men are demonized and pathologized. Black*

women with psychological problems are certainly not seen as geniuses; we are generally not labeled 'hysterical' or 'eccentric' or even 'pathological'. When a black woman suffers from a mental disorder, the overwhelming opinion is that she is weak. ***And weakness in black women is intolerable***."[25]

I remember an incident last year where I was assaulted at night. It triggered my past traumas, making it almost impossible to not feel disgust and uncomfortability with my boyfriend touching me. For weeks, I experienced emotional ups and downs, eventually realizing that this incident was still the cause. My boyfriend asked if I ever thought of seeking help from a psychologist. I was... a bit surprised that he would suggest such a thing. The idea of visiting a psychologist or therapist was so foreign to me. I had always believed I was mentally and emotionally too strong to, strong enough not to; need a psychologist. That is also what I said; I can handle it on my own.

We often take the idea of strength for granted, yet it can have serious repercussions. For a long time, my strength also meant suppressing my emotions. Oftentimes in my culture, women were being labeled as sensitive, emotional, crazy, complicated, so I had to do in public things that did not show me as sensitive, emotional, crazy and complicated. Anda resonated with this, reflecting on how she would never do or react in a dramatic way because that was what was expected of people who look like her. She learned to internalize her feelings and suffer in silence.

Strength became synonymous with not being vulnerable. I never shared my problems with anyone, at least from the earliest moments I can remember having them. My burdens were mine and God's to bear. Whenever I expressed feeling "a bit stressed", I was met with a wall, "What can someone so young, with no children, no financial issues and no responsibilities, possibly be stressed about? Stop saying that". In the Haitian culture, somehow a girl cannot have emotional bagagges, So, I built a wall to hide my bagagges.

Lucija suppressed their emotions to the point where they stopped feeling them or knew how to process them. I stopped complaining and expressing what I truly felt, hid my emotions and problems to the point where it felt normal to do so and wrong to do otherwise.

[25] Danquah, M. N. (1999). *Willow weep for me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression : a Memoir*. One World/Ballantine.

I hate labeling myself. I don't think I've ever been depressed or anxious, but then again, how would I know? I was never given the space to understand or label these feelings. When I was sexually assaulted, I had to be strong and put on a facade the next day because I had a competition to go to, about to be around a bunch of people, including him, who made jokes in front of everyone. If I showed vulnerability, they would know. I felt sick! so sick! But luckily I was a girl, I could just say that I got my period.

For Lucija's mother and grandmother, "*it was the way to survive*", for her "*it was the way she almost didn't survive*". For me, it has also always been my way to survive, to tough it out.

But, there is a thin line between thinking you're surviving... and denying your internal battles. Yet, unlearning years of conditioning is hard.

Male Primacy[26], Women's Burdens

A: As Dikshya aptly shared, *"women for so long have been confined to male-dominated ideas and we even reproduce them ourselves all the time (intentionally or unintentionally)*". Her reflections add another layer to the role of religion in womenhood as she questions why divinity is often portrayed as male, especially when women feel misunderstood or oppressed by men. She recalls, "*I am 9 years old and crying to some higher power that I don't wish to be me anymore. Why is it that I confess this to a man. I don't remember the last time I felt truly understood by a man, yet when I prayed to God, I prayed to man.*"

This misalignment makes me question how religious and cultural norms shape our gender identities from a young age, how deeply embedded these norms are, and how they dictate how we see ourselves and how others see us.

D: A daughter's role in a traditional South Asian family is a helper of the house, caretaker of their parents, siblings, and grandparents. When a guest comes through, you serve a glass of chai, smile politely, and do your best to upkeep your image. When the daughter gets married, she is sent to her husband's family home where she will continue her role, but now as a wife. I have mentioned many times before that my parents are not fans of this idea. I have never been under the impression that they believe my female disposition means I must follow this daughter-to-wife pipeline. They explicitly view it as degrading, an undermining of my intelligence, and a ridiculous phenomenon.

However, my parents are human too. I do think a part of them remains disappointed that their only shot at a baby was a girl in a world where girls are simply not favored. *"We celebrate when sons are born, but when someone has a daughter, we hear phrases like, "it's okay," instead of congratulations, indicating there isn't anything worth celebrating"*[27]. It's hard to unlearn years of conditioning, and though they wish a different fate for me, there is undoubtedly a voice in the back of their heads that believes their lives would be easier had I been a boy. I can't recount all the times my mom has said it's up to me to show how capable

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[26] noun: **primacy**
1. the fact of being pre-eminent or most important. Oxford Languages Dictionary through Google

[27] Johal, R. (2022, October 26). *How son preference in the South Asian community contributes to the cycle of abuse and violence*. https://www.5xfest.com/5xpress/how-son-preference-in-the-south-asian-community-contributes-to-the-cycle-of-abuse-and-violence

and independent I am. I have to show that I can take care of my parents once they're old; that I can find a successful career; that I can be my own person. It's an intimidating weight on my shoulders that I feel uncomfortable labeling as a 'burden'. If anything, it's a privilege to be told this when I know what the alternative would be… Still, it's sometimes as though my parents need me to prove it to them as much as I do everyone else.

Living with this looming presence of male superiority was hard when I didn't have the means to understand or express why I felt so shitty every time my parents brought up my gender. I feel for South Asian women everywhere who have had their agency snatched by centuries of discrimination, objectification, and victimization; South Asian women who have been told to be a good daughter and a good wife; South Asian women who have never believed they had autonomy over their sexuality; Diasporic South Asian women who fight against racial prejudice on top of prejudice from their own race. The strength of these women is beyond me, and the lack of space where this can be addressed deeply hurts me. It's hard when the thing that discriminates against you is seen as a part of your culture. How do you balance between social justice for your gender and validation from your people? As someone raised elsewhere, I fear I have even less say in these matters. I do not wish to be viewed as a whitewashed outsider imposing westernized values, but vicious cycles of repression must be talked about. It is not fair to women anywhere that we keep silent of our struggles or hold ourselves back from sharing in consideration of a mindset that has placated us into stripping what makes us dimensional.

Sexuality

D: I don't know if I have ever felt comfortable in my sexuality. Not that I was reclusive or didn't put myself out there, I just never felt that my sexuality was my own. I think part of it is because people have a cruel way of speaking of female-presenting bodies. When Brooke 'joked' to her mom about shaving all her hair off, her mom responded that it would have been a horrible act of revenge against her (despite it being Brooke's body). Throughout their lives, Brooke, Lucija, and Anda have heard countless disgusting comments. I have heard things about my size and the curves on my body that I never imagined would come out of someone's mouth. And that is despite all my parents' efforts to shield me from such words. Small remarks and sly jokes are things that pile up and torment you until the line between your bodily autonomy and others' opinions are irrevocably blurred.

L: Constantly being sexualized is a very limiting box that society tends to put feminine bodies into. My body, it's 'curves', and all the external is paid so much attention to that I feel I could easily become just that, unless I put effort into forcing the acknowledgement of a person inhabiting it. As if the most important part is my body, how much it attracts attention, and how exciting it is for others to look at.

D: Brooke's joke to her mom, while an attempt at being light-hearted, came from a place that was questioning what we're told about femininity. It was just the only way she could express it. I noticed that I do that quite often as well. On both femininity and sexuality, which I see as walking hand in hand. Femininity is so so intensely determined by what men view as beautiful or what would attract the right man. I had a point in my life where I was really questioning whether I want the kind of future with a husband and kids. However, it was very clear to me that straying away from that was absolutely unacceptable. My parents were vocal about the fact that marriage should be the last thing on my mind. I had to focus on myself. But there was still a strange fear that my whole life is me training to be the perfect woman for some man, even if it wasn't. I remember being 13 years old, fighting internal turmoil, not knowing what I was attracted to. Yet, the scariest part of it was not being sure if there was anyone I could even confide in. There's such an unshakeable voice in the back of my head saying I shouldn't stray too far away from heteronormative femininity, so in conversations with my family wherein I even hint at anything, I cannot take myself seriously. It's always masked as a joke or an exaggeration of my 'radical' beliefs. I still struggle to view sex as something I'm a part of instead of something that simply happens to me. I consider myself quite open and experimental. I speak my mind, I question the world, yet I shy away from the happenings of my own body.

Black Womenhood and Sexuality

B: When Anda shared her experience of being stereotyped as a hypersexual black woman by a doctor, it triggered something in me, as I've encountered similar situations in Europe; where white men have made comments insinuating that, as a black woman, I must inherently embody hypersexual characteristics or exoticism in the bedroom. Throughout Anda's stories, I reflected upon my own troubled relationship with sexuality, and how many black women that I have spoken with have actually had a toxic relationship with sexuality as well. I reflected upon the extent to which the historical construction of Black sexuality is still relevant, as the stereotype of the sensuous Black female is omnipresent.

It's all a complex interplay of things really; from representation, to religion, to history, and the inherent pain ingrained within them. I read this book once on black womanhood[28], that highlighted how the sexuality of black women is historically denigrated. Misrepresentative depictions have long served as a cornerstone for justifying sexism, racism, class oppression and sexual exploitation of black women.

It's no secret that for centuries, blackness stood as the antithesis of 'whiteness', with the latter symbolizing virginity, virtue, beauty, purity, God... while blackness was associated with sin, filthiness, ugliness... evilness – physical depiction that evokes images of strangeness, grotesqueness, and a lack of femininity[29]. Dark skin, in particular, carried a significant social stigma, with dark-complexioned women being perceived as abnormal, unkempt, and mentally unstable.

During the era of slavery, the deliberate desexualization of black women served as an ideological justification to deny the reality of their sexual abuse by white enslavers. Such falsehood realities were also constructed the other way around with the creation of a hypersexualized, promiscuous feminine stereotype, in order to rationalize/justify the sexual exploitation of black women, as many biracial enslaved people were born from these interracial sexual assaults[30]. White men shifted the blame for their sexual misconduct onto the supposed allure of black women, thus absolving themselves of guilt. Despite being two contrasting representations of black womanhood, the desexualized and hypersexualized

[28] Bryson, C., Légier, A., & Ribieras, A. (2024). Womanhoods and equality in the United States. In *Routledge eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003425380
[29] ibid
[30] ibid

archetypes were essentially two sides of the same coin. The former contributed to the construction of a physical ugliness, while the latter portrayed moral depravity.

A: These assumptions of hypersexuality often follow Black women into highly personal spaces as well, including the doctor's office which don't just dismiss our health concerns, but play into the harmful stereotypes of Black women as inherently sexual and destined for motherhood.

N: Patricia Hill Collins explains how these stereotypes are used to control and judge Black women's bodies, silencing their voices and experiences in medical settings[31]. Furthermore, black historian Darlene Clark Hine suggests that the trauma of rape during slavery led black women to adopt a "culture of dissemblance"[32], in which, under this facade of openness, they kept matters of intimacy, privacy, and sexuality to themselves. This culture of secrecy extended to all aspects of intimate life, including their own bodies. Perhaps this silence regarding sexual matters served as a collective form of resistance. Yet, the church was also involved in regulating and controlling Black women's bodies, both through sermons and a system of punishment for those who were engaging in premarital sexual relationships. "Offenders" were exposed and reprimanded in front of the congregation and often coerced into marriage by church ministers.

B: This really resonates with me! Within my religious community, I too had been taught that sexuality should be kept private. There was an implicit understanding that even if I were to lose my virginity outside of marriage, it should remain a secret.

And do not get me wrong, I don't wish to speak so negatively about religion, as it has imparted much wisdom to me! So much good came with it, like my groundedness, spirituality, peace of mind, and selflessness, and for that, I am truly grateful. Yet, there are aspects of my own story that make me reflect on religion's harm. Like how it dictates how I should dress and behave to avoid tempting a man. Or the other ugliness I have mentioned in my story. Truth is, I was so influenced by these ideologies that I didn't need religion to physically punish me for any perceived transgressions, like in the old days. The guilt, shame, and self-disgust I felt were punishment enough.

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[31] Hill Collins, P. (2000). Black feminist thought : knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (2nd edition.). Routledge.
[32] Hine, D. C. (1989). Rape and the inner lives of Black women in the Middle West on JSTOR. *www.jstor.org*. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692

... I can't help but wonder whether our community is still influenced by the legacies of slavery (well, seems obvious no?), which may be why the expression of sexuality for a black woman, including myself, and you Anda, continues to be viewed as taboo.

A: It really shows the dual role religion plays in our understanding of womanhood…while it can be a source of comfort and community, it also imposes rigid rules on how we express our sexuality. This duality is something I have also grappled with.

I was raised to believe that virginity was a sacred treasure to be kept until marriage. Brooke had a similar experience.

While these religious teachings provide a moral framework and a sense of belonging, they can also place an unfair burden on women. Stripping us of the right to explore and express our sexuality freely. The pledge of abstinence, while meant to symbolize religious commitment, often becomes a source of pain when it takes away our personal choices, turning what should be a personal decision into a traumatic experience.

I faced conflicts between my religious beliefs and considering an abortion, which brought about an intense inner turmoil of guilt, shame and heartbreak, something I have to live with daily. This, compounded with the idea of eternal damnation for this act is simply distressing. Adding to the fact that for some women, abortion is health care, we need this process to be destigmatized for the experiences of others.

B: When you told your story about the abortion, I couldn't help but think that you are brave. Not at all in a negative sense. I think you have great courage. Throughout my life, I've held strongly against abortion. It's not hard to guess where this stance originated or what influenced it. However, as I grew older, I found myself becoming more neutral towards it. I didn't want to contribute to the problem of believing I had the right to dictate what women should do with their body. Yet, deep down, I knew I still had an unease towards it.

When you shared your story with me, I was forced to confront my own beliefs and emotions. It was a bit confusing to be honest. Perhaps because you are a dear friend whom I deeply respect and admire, Anda, I love you. But here I was, faced with a reality that didn't align with my beliefs. Surprisingly, instead of feeling shock or disappointment, or looking down on you as I might have in the past with other women, all I felt was more love, more appreciation, and more connected to you.

I know that we come from similar backgrounds in terms of ideologies and religious beliefs, so I understand that it must have been fucking hard. Both to experience and to share. Yet, you did so courageously. Through your story, you allowed me to step into your shoes to some extent, seeing you through your experiences rather than my own views on the matter. And for that, I am deeply grateful to you. You made me realize that the kind of womenhood I aspire to see in everyone is one where their stories, no matter how difficult, are received with the same love and compassion with which I received yours.

Well, I've also come to realize that I can be somewhat of a hypocrite at times. I've judged other women using the same principles that I object to for myself. I've leaned on religion, while simultaneously opposing its authoritarianism. Who is to dictate what's right or wrong?

I've stated before that I am neutral, but I now understand that this neutrality stemmed from the wrong reasons. I am not neutral in the way that neutrality means not taking a stance. I stand with women who go through difficulties like this. I came to realize that regardless of the decision you made in that moment, both actions required a great amount of strength. One choice is not weaker than the other. Even if in a parallel universe you had chosen differently, my love and appreciation for you would remain unchanged from what it is now.

"*We must make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped*"[33].

[33] hooks, b. (2014). *Black looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge.

Sexual Injustice

Researchers conduct five times as many studies into erectile dysfunction (ED) as premenstrual syndrome (PMS), despite only around 19 percent of men suffering from ED and 90 percent of women experiencing symptoms of PMS.[34]

L: It's beautiful that some women can give birth. Most mothers gain a deep connection with the process of birth and carrying a child. But children are huge responsibilities, and pregnancy is not always something that a woman or person with a uterus can control. Sure, we can have some influence on it, but on its most bodily level, it is not something we can consciously control, whether that is because the choice was altogether violently taken away from us or if it is that few percent chance that always remains when consensually, sexually active.

In an unwanted pregnancy situation, we are lucky if we find ourselves with a partner as supportive as Anda had, or in a society where the freedom and opportunity to choose how to proceed with it is present. Even in the best case scenario, everything from that point on happens in the body carrying the uterus. In the worst case scenario in terms of support…it is the same of course. The burden of responsibility, the burden of choice, the burden of consequence - they are all being carried by the same body, and the same person.

To me, it is terrifying to no end to have the realization that something has been set in motion INSIDE your body, and will run its course unless you actively do something about it. However, this bodily reality in relation to something as commonly romanticized as pregnancy never occurs in a body that doesn't have a uterus. The sad irony is that it is exactly this body, and person within it, that usually sets off the process. Some men do not care or understand this and many other things to the point of committing rape. Similarly, like living in an illusion, such a big body of heterosexual porn perpetuates bad standards and practices which have direct and devastating consequences on female bodies. If they could feel the terror and loss of all power that routinely arise in female bodies, would porn culture be different? Would the same atrocities of rape and assault be committed?

[34] England, C. (2016, August 19). Erectile dysfunction studies outnumber PMS research by five to one | The Independent. *The Independent*.

N: Even in Denmark, a country heralded as highly-developed and highly happy, the culture around sexual practices is such that the incidence of diagnosed Chlamydia Trachomatis infections in women are rising and invasive 'female' birth control methods with serious side-effects are the norm.
In the meantime, the research for a 'male birth control pill' allegedly goes slowly for the following reasons:

> *"Why? Researchers are after a lot in an ideal male pill. Of course, it should be effective,*
> *and also:*
> - *Cheap*
> - *Easy to use*
> - *Free of serious side effects*
> - *Easily available*
> - *Reversible"*[35]

The argument outlined in this 'medically reviewed birth control guide' is an unsavory joke to anyone with experience with female birth control. All of the above are shortcomings of female birth control, and yet it is routinely used and the symptoms borne by millions of women around the world[36].

L: Brooke has felt the consequences of this system herself, experiencing serious side-effects of an IUD. The burden of birth control falls on the female body, and it is just taken so lightly by society. I am quite aware of this burden and the consequences it can have for me, I have had multiple pregnancy scares due to my irregular menstrual cycles, and have dealt with the pain of thinking I might have unknowingly caused myself to miscarry a fetus due to passing abnormally large and formed blood clots. Yet, I have never discussed the issue of possible pregnancy before being sexually involved with a partner. It somehow feels like the biggest taboo I could mention, and that is so problematic.

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[35] See the original 'Birth Control Guide' input on 'Why is There no Male Birth Control Pill' here: https://www.webmd.com/sex/birth-control/male-birth-control-contraceptives-pill
[36] For more on the burden of birth control see: Kimport K. Talking about male body-based contraceptives: The counseling visit and the feminization of contraception. Soc Sci Med. 2018 Mar;201:44-50. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.040 .

I have been convinced that pulling out would be fine, that wearing a condom is unpleasant enough for me to take on risks to absolve my partner from doing it, to "*be careful how you wash that off your torso, we would not want to have to*

'p i l l y o u'"

As if we somehow non-verbally agreed that if there was a risk of me becoming pregnant I would put my body through that to avoid the risk.

N: Speaking of taking control of our bodies, the impact of the social stigma around menstrual bleeding, and it being perceived as dirty are harmful to both the self-perception of the person who is bleeding and potentially their health if it isn't managed properly. There seems to be this transnational culture of period blood being perceived as dirty, unsanitary and therefore disgusting, sometimes too taboo to even talk about.

L: I think this has been evident to all of us our whole lives but it was really reaffirmed in the way we talked about it as it was prompted by my story. I was incredibly nervous and afraid of being judged for what I wrote and did, Anda thought it was really brave, and we all shared the sentiment of literally tasting the blood as being highly unusual. When I started experimenting with my period blood, by using a menstrual cup instead of pads or tampons, it opened up a path for interacting with my blood in more profound ways. Since it was collected in a cup inside my body, without being soaked up into cotton and exposed to air, I could look at it, smell it, and become more comfortable with it. After more than a year, I started experimenting with it, which eventually led to using it as a face mask and it coming into contact with my mouth.

I think it is crazy how there is such a stigma around something so simple and natural in a healthy body. How does this culture of hate impact our perceptions of ourselves, and the world experiences we have, moving through life month by month? Since when have periods been considered disgusting? Where did this idea come from, why, and from whom?

A: It is a harsh reality knowing that our bodies and sexuality are often seen as something to be policed and commented on rather than respected. So, what can we do about this? Our stories offer some ideas. I pushed back by requesting a smaller speculum, and Brooke questioned her doctor's assumptions. These small acts of defiance are powerful. By standing up for ourselves, we start to reclaim power over our bodies and our sexuality, pushing back

against racist and sexist narratives that have oppressed us for so long[37]. These moments of self-advocacy are vital for redefining our womenhood and taking control of our bodies.

N: Yet, in Ireland 2018, on a trial where a 27-year-old man was accused of raping a 17 year old girl, "*the defence lawyer told the jury: 'You have to look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front.' The [...] man was found not guilty of rape shortly afterwards*."[38] Similarly, no prison time was given to a man in Idoha, who had raped a 14 year old girl, as the judge instead blamed the rape on the "*social media system*" entangled with the "*sexual proclivities of young people*"[39].

B: And while we could continue, I believe the point is clear. I don't wish to speak poorly about males, but I am frustrated with the system. We seem to live in a culture that will blame almost anything except the actual abusers who commit these deliberate acts of violence. It starts with the innocent 'boys will be boys', transforms into 'it was just a compliment', 'she was asking for it' and 'he just couldn't help himself', and it only gets worse from there.

My mother tells me I should not walk around without a bra, because showing my nipples signals that I want to be looked at, thus giving men reasons to desire **and thus** making it unsafe for me. Dikshya's mother felt the need to scold her when her skirt was too high, probably out of concern for the same thing.

N: This is mass indoctrination: we are systematically being taught from a young age to shame, blame, stigmatize and sexualize our bodies – through a system where our natural bodies are deemed (in the same breath) as disgusting, sexy, explosively dangerous, and unacceptable. The notion passed down at an impressionable age is that boys will inevitably harass, that girls hold the responsibility of protecting themselves, and that female bodies are to blame for influencing boys' behavior.

B: And everybody remembers their first time and the times after that. I am that girl who's first must have been around 8 and was touched inappropriately by her own uncle. The girl who was put on another church uncle's laps and touched by her tights and was told to not tell anyone, else she'll get in trouble. The girl who, in scout camp was told by a boy that he was

[37] hooks, bell. (2014). Ain't I a Woman : Black Women and Feminism (2nd edition.). Taylor and Francis, an imprint of Routledge.
[38] Irish outcry over teenager's underwear used in rape trial (bbc.com)
[39] Idaho judge says rape is 'a direct consequence of the social media system' | Idaho | The Guardian

watching her boobs as she slept. The girl who was grabbed while swimming by the same boy without her permission. The girl who was 17…

The girl who asked for a condom to a supposed friend but was told that it does not feel good for him and that she won't get pregnant on the first try. The girl who sat in the classroom as an exhausted female teacher shared her feelings of being misunderstood, only for male classmates to make jokes about how she was not getting enough dicks in her life to keep her happy. Countless times, that joke has been made towards an expressive woman.

The girl who became a woman and was told by an old man that she looked good from behind. The woman, who's training a new male colleague on his first day of work, only for him to ask; "how does the saying go, the darker the berry the sweeter the juice right?"

... and the list goes on

n:

and on,

and on.

Closing the Space

“[we] keep reminding [ourselves] that this [thesis] is not finished;

[we] could always add something to it.

[...] always pick the stitches and seams until the thing falls apart,

ready to be assembled again.” - Olufemi, 2021

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Concluding Thoughts

Thank you for staying with us throughout our journey.

This thesis has been an act of feminism;

One that embraced embodied realities

One that found joy in (re)reading,

(re)listening, and

(re)visiting each other's stories and thoughts.

One about forming friendships in intimate spaces,

About finding love through knowing and caring for each other,

Through valuing each other's stories and lives.

Writing this thesis has been about (re)constructing a framework

To help us become better group members, scholars, friends, partners and activists.

To engage in a collective weaving that

held us,

healed us,

harmonized us,

helped us carry life to others…

We walked the footsteps of brilliant people who came before us, treaded our own path, and hoped to inspire you to join us.

We demonstrated the ramifications that come with choices about our lives and bodies being made on account of fulfilling societal expectations or abating perceived pressures.
We have also argued that every choice should be open for every woman and feminine others who would want to choose it - being feminine, having traditionally masculine interests, wearing hair in meticulous and intricate styles, walking around with greasy tangles, choosing to keep a pregnancy, choosing to abort it, choosing the role of a mother, choosing to not be a mother, etc.

There is a difference between choosing to be and being expected to be in any of these ways, because just the pressure of expectation robs us little by little of our freedom of choice and agency in our own lives. We walk this tightrope on the daily, trying to find the balance. Steeping in the plurality of possibility.

By taking each other's histories seriously, we gave them meaning, transforming individual pain into collective strength. It has been an act of rage and frustration at seeing patriarchal structures and their enablers attack our dignity and autonomy.

But it has also been, and hopefully will mostly be, an act of hope. We aim to write our way into a world where others, especially girls, women, AFAB people, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ peoples, can also write, speak, and tell their own stories – through resilience and solidarity, echoing that they are not alone in their journey.

We hope that me, we, they, and us can be talked about!
We hope that my story, our stories, and their stories inspire and motivate more conversations. Because even though these concluding thoughts mark the end of our stories in this paper,
in reality,
our stories never end.
Thank you for staying with us throughout our story of womEnhood.

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Guiding Lights - Sources Woven into our Project

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