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SANCTUARY

Grater Expectations

Stairway to H(e)aven

Patriarchy Prohibited! Hampstead Heath Offers a Haven

by Geraldine Austin

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There are three Hampstead Heath ponds. The mixed pond is shut in the winter, but open all year round are the men-only and women-only ponds. The men's pond is triple the size of the women's, fixed with a diving board and a wood-panelled changing hut. A walk past it is an ovular-shaped reminder of male privilege. There is a sinister irony that patriarchal insecurity about size extends to ponds! Nonetheless, there is also something comforting about the discrete, well-trodden muddy path that leads into a nondescript thicket of trees surrounding the women's pond. There is something beautiful about a gate that you can almost hear saying: "Men, you shall go no further; women, enter freely with the mild but necessary fee of £2.50 plus a student discount." You almost cry when the elderly lady says, "tap your card here, my love." And you do, indeed, feel loved.

The price is a bargain, given that walking into the Hampstead Heath ladies' pond is a cheat code to achieving nirvana. At the ladies pond, you'll find soulfulness –groups of women grinning (not grimacing!) in ice-cold water as they gracefully granny-breaststroke clockwise. A low chatter emanating from the water. Topics of conversation drift from the stock market to supportive chats about their lost loves. Viewed from afar, the heartfelt advice feels somewhat out of place as it floats across the water, dodges around a duck and reaches the person it was intended for all along. It's enough to make you giggle at the subliminal absurdity you are involved in. What are you doing in a sticky, probably eel-filled puddle?

At the Hampstead Heath ponds, you'll find women over 40 in various pond collectives, each of which has its own meticulously designed logo embossed on neon beanies. In the water these shockingly bright hats warm their ears but also allow members to spot and glide over to their favourite swimming companions. Here, you may be tempted to stereotype these divisions as products of bitchiness that are creating hierarchies and disparities among the women. However, after a swim past them you'll discover that within these societies women that respect and appreciate each other are simply denominated by their mutual love of the ponds. Their interactions produce laughter, not bitterness. There is enough space for neon beanies of every colour and hue. This sense of camaraderie infuses into the turbid water.

When it is your turn to get into the brown puddle, all the air seems to be wrestled from your body. Your teeth clamp together in the nauseating awareness of the flimsiness of your muscles. You can hear your own blood, foul in the moment. The ache grows unbearably and that duck from earlier...yeah, it is definitely laughing at you. A stray thought struggles through your frozen brain, “if mother nature is capable of this cruelty, she must be a man!”

If you are thinking of going to the ponds for the first time you have to be warned: nothing about the process for a first-timer is enjoyable. No matter how much I, the person who dragged you here, tries to convince you that “it’s not that bad”, I am telling you a stinking lie and at this point, half-naked and in what I imagine are comparably labour-like aches, you want to slap the liar who figuratively impregnated you. Nonetheless, I lied to you for your own good. What I didn’t mention is that the key to surviving this temporary frostbite is to allow the masochism —

— because, suddenly, you go numb. The once patronising duck nods – it knows you know. The water that surrounds your skin no longer holds friction; it mixes with your matter. Your body extends beyond itself, diffusing into the pond. You are no longer encumbered with the expectations of femininity that are crushing your body. The unbearably cold water hurts, but, in between your wheezing breaths, it heals. You may no longer need those 9-minute yoga tutorials with the unrealistically bendy pretzel chick mocking your attempt at a tree pose. Dunking your junk in a grimey pond on the regular might just be all the spiritual alignment you need.

Gifts of Love

by Claudia Nashef

Part 1: Nourish Me

When I eat well
my stomach thanks me with
gargled gurgles and gurgling gargles.

My blood runs, sprints,
around my body to help her.
This onerous work she does for me
- my body -
leaves my forehead warm and toasty.

So when I feel hollow
- I feed her -

And she greets me with her chitter chatter
and warmed insides.

These gifts of love I give myself.

Part 2: Lay Me Down

Follow what I say, I promise you,
I have your best interests at heart.

Sit on the floor, preferably not carpet, and
ensure that there is space both in front and
behind you. Hold your knees to your chest and
squeeze.

R e l e a s e.
Don't forget to breathe now.

Feel the floor push up against your weight,
gently.

Feel her support, feel her holding your toes
with concrete firmness.

Let her hold you, for she is kind.
Extend your legs so that your calves and thighs
hold her too.

Now from the base of your spine, roll back.
Turn each vertebra in turn until your head can rest.

Take Your Time.

We are in no rush.

Feel her hold you up as you hold her down.
Embrace the balance of gravity through which you,
together,
inspire inertia.

Perhaps when you rise so will she.

Lie here for a little while.
Breathe into the feeling of your body on the floor,
the floor on your body.

Breathe.

Breathe for these gifts of love
we give to ourselves.

Part 3: Recipe for Re-entering a Body

Ingredients:

a mug,

a teabag,

some milk,

a confused sentence - one that floats between skull and hairline
time.

- 1) whether sitting or standing, staring formlessly,
wrapped in a computer screen,
you must blink.
take a deep open-mouthed breath,
stretch your lungs and rise as your stomach expands.
lean into your moving rib cage.
exhale slowly, *fully*.
- 2) prepare your station with two hands:
mug on countertop.
open the packaging that holds your teabags.

if it is plastic, feel its cool malleable hardness,
scratch an edge on your palm lightly,
hear the crinkle.

if it is cardboard, enjoy the soft click of it opening.

take a teabag, feel the granules through the textured bag.
roll it between your fingers, careful not to break its skin.
revel in this.

put teabag in mug.

- 3) turn on the kettle and as it begins to power
feel your feet on the floor.
the weight of your body on your feet on the floor.
build up the weight as the power builds,
with your ankles, your shins,
your knees and then your thighs.

feel the rise in tension as the water becomes more erratic,
as you build towards your floating sentence.

here you open the gateway for re-entry.

4) once boiled, pour the water.
listen to the rising pitch in sound as more water pours in.
do you hear a song? a melody? a phrase? a lull?

5) now, the milk. its cold condensation
on the side of its container
leaves your hands slightly wet.
your two hands.

rising in swirling amber clouds in your mug,
what does it look like? what faces can you see?
cloud gaze a little while.

6) when thinking of the stark temperature difference between the
liquids,
try not to think about whether or not the milk should have gone in
first.
it will only halt your progress.

7) remove your teabag with a metal spoon that clinks;
consider its symphony.
now hold your mug close to your heart and let its heat
amble through your fingers and its steam sweat your chin.

8) when you are ready, take another large breath.
sip.

as you drink, feel the warmth of the hot tea
slide down your throat and into your stomach.
in doing so, pull the sentience back
back into yourself.

the weight, the warmth, the sentience will spread, lightening you.
that weight is not just something you carry.
it is something you are.
those sensations are something you experience,
not just your body.

please rest into your fingertips and teeth and neck and ankles.

if necessary, repeat
for the gift of love it is to live in yourself.

The LGBTQ+ - A Universal Sanctuary?

by Maryam Badghisi

The LGBTQ+ community has always been a sanctuary for many: a safe space where individuals are free to express their sexualities and genders in ways that are not often accepted around the world. Yet, it's also important to think about what's lost as pride flags are waved in unison across the globe. Does the LGBTQ+ community truly take into account the history of gender and sexual expression around the world? What is the cost of the universalisation of Western terms such as gay and transgender? When "universal" becomes synonymous with Western, homogenisation comes at the expense of complex, varied, and rich cultural histories. As a result, conventional forms of LGBTQ+ expression, such as hanging pride flags and calling oneself bisexual or lesbian are acts that are tinged with the invisible powers of the Western world, functioning as products of neo-colonialism, especially when performed by people from the former colonies of the Middle East, Asia or Africa.

This does not mean that people from these areas cannot identify as LGBTQ+ but rather, this process destroys authentic forms of indigenous expressions of sexual and gender identities. For example, there doesn't exist an LGBTQ+ label for [muxes](#), the third gender in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca, who don't fit into the conventionally dichotomous gender categorisations. Instead, they are labelled as gay or trans women, erasing the ethnic identity to fit Western colloquialisms. Such attempts to universalise LGBTQ+ rights as assumed in the West, especially when organised by human rights organisations such as [Amnesty International](#), are akin to neo-colonial influence.

This is ironic as queer gender and sexual expression was deeply ingrained in indigenous cultures prior to colonisation. For example, [King Mwangi II of Buganda](#) (present-day Uganda) engaged in sexual relations with men and had an openly gay monarch during 1835. During the same time, men were [sentenced to death](#) for homosexual sex in England. The opposite is seen in the world today, with Uganda having [extreme anti-LGBTQ rights](#) and a death penalty for anyone engaged in same-sex relations; while in the UK, [Prime Ministers](#) urge the Commonwealth to be accepting of homosexuals. Similarly, Pre-colonial India had [open attitudes](#) regarding gender fluidity and sexuality, but this quickly changed after British rule. Only recently have laws been amended to accept [Hijras](#) or the third gender (different to transgender women) which previously used to be openly accepted in the culture.

The expansion of fundamentalist Christian attitudes from the British Empire during the colonial era erased the unique cultural norms surrounding sexuality and gender, forcing countries to adopt Western values and laws. This was justified by "civilising" indigenous communities. However, the British were just as quick to disavow the same Christian attitudes when their people revolted. The West, at present, now condemn their former colonies for not being accepting of LGBTQ+ rights and once again, propagandise their values as the "right" kind, mirroring their historic imperialist agendas. As a result, indigenous people are torn between attempts to express their sexuality and gender through culturally-specific ways or emulating Western conventions to feel a part of a sanctuary.

However, the issue of whether it is even possible to revert to historical forms of LGBTQ+ expression arises, especially when many of them are long forgotten. Even if members of the LGBTQ+ community began to use forms of indigenous expression, it would still be difficult for them to foster a safe space, which in turn may not provide the sense of belonging and comfort that the Western LGBTQ+ community provides. This is because these expressions may not be well-received, especially in countries which are reluctant to revert back to their historical liberal norms and be accepting to this community. This can hold especially true for LGBTQ+ individuals in Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen that face a [death penalty](#) for same-sex relationships.

While the LGBTQ+ community is a beneficial sanctuary to many, the lack of intersectionality can thus limit certain forms of LGBTQ+ expressions and reinforce cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, understanding one's cultural roots of gender and sexual expression can be the first step towards decolonising this sanctuary.



Inadvertent Sanctuaries: The Male Voice Within Gendered Discussions

by Luke Muschilli

I recently attended a seminar on a topic that I am incredibly interested in: Women's Health and Reproductive Health from a Global Perspective. It started with some group introductions, and before we dived into the discussion, the seminar leader reminded us that this seminar "was a safe space for *us girls*". Going back to the seminar information once again, I checked if there was a gender restriction on this session. There wasn't. Yet, the assumption that this discussion topic would only attract a female audience was surprising to someone who identifies as male, which got me thinking about how certain topics within academia, over time, have become increasingly gendered by default.

Having a female-only space for academic discussions is incredibly beneficial. Allowing individuals who identify as female to share their unique experiences to an understanding and non-judgemental audience undeniably increases engagement and enjoyment of academic debate and discussion, creating a sanctuary within the competitive academic sphere. However, my unexpected experience in this session made me wonder whether some of these sanctuaries are unintentionally created by a lack of male engagement in academic discussions about sex and gender.

There appears to be a general perception among men that they do not have a role to play in discussions about gender and sex, contributing to a lack of their critical engagement. This often begins at a young age; I remember being routinely split into groups of boys and girls in my first sex education session to learn about our respective reproductive anatomy. This led to a large number of my male friends having shockingly little understanding of women's reproductive systems, as well as developing a surprising ambivalence towards the topic. I think this is so ingrained into the male psyche that it can be difficult to counteract, no matter how conscious my friends may be of the problematic nature of their apathy. Such a manufactured sex split also contributes to the harmful stigmatisation of women's bodies and experiences. By increasing men's engagement in conversations about gender and sex, we can work to address these prejudices and misconceptions.

With this lack of awareness from a young age, there is a clear mismatch in the knowledge that men and women have on topics surrounding sex and gender. I have spoken to many people

who feel they would be able to contribute very little to discussions surrounding such topics due to a lack of background knowledge and paralysing fear of not knowing what to say. When coupled with the fear of vulnerability that is perpetuated by toxic masculinity, this perceived inability to contribute inevitably restricts some men from critically engaging in discussions about sex and gender.

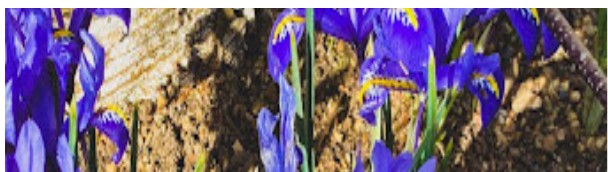
In turn, it is not uncommon for men to feel as if there are a lack of spaces in which they can explore their own feelings about gender and sex without judgement. Some men feel as if their questions would be considered "stupid" or "offensive" and thus they may never ask them. This prevents common misconceptions and misunderstandings from being addressed and countered. There is a definite need for spheres in which women are able to debate and articulate their own experiences to a female-only audience, but there also need to be spaces in which men are able to ask questions and participate in discussions without feeling judged.

During the Reproductive Health seminar, I wanted to contribute to a discussion around a topic that I am very passionate about. Due to the unfortunate combination of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors discussed in this piece, I felt as if my role in the discussion was diminished. I made very little contributions throughout, and regret that I felt this way. The male voice is not irrelevant in discussions surrounding sex and gender. I made the mistake of feeling this way, and I encourage others to speak up and engage in these discussions. They concern all of us, and everyone's voice is valuable in these conversations. It is equally important that when entering these discussions, we construct a space in which people are allowed to make mistakes, and that if these are made they are counteracted in a constructive and non-judgemental way. Male disengagement is upsetting, but we can all work together to combat this, to ensure that everyone has a space in which they can make their voice heard.



On Shrinking Violets

by Kirtana Krishnakumar



These are netted irises. But when I saw them, I thought of shrinking violets—often obscured in the shadows.

When Dr. Larabee asked Akeelah about her dreams, she didn't know. She just wanted to win the spelling bee. He said he'd help. But she couldn't be a shrinking violet.

“You have to stand up and show them what you can do.
All right?”

Her blouse had violets on it that day.

When Dr. Larabee had stopped coaching Akeelah, her mother had noticed. She was wearing the shrinking violets again.

“You know, Akeelah, you ain't short on people who want to help you. I bet you, if you just look around, you've got 50,000 coaches. Starting with me.”

Akeelah stopped wearing violets.

And Pine Trees

by Kirtana Krishnakumar



My first friend was a pine tree.
She was short and strong,
gracefully gnarled, and her roots unfurled across Gates Elementary's playground.

I leaned into her embrace at recess.

She let me.
I tried to become the shrinking violet in her shadow.
She didn't let me.

She captivated me with the life in her branches. She danced to the rhythm of my words. She saved my dreams in her hollow.

Her branches carved me a workspace, a place to grow, a place without judgment. Her uneven roots taught me how to balance. Her foliage sheltered my mind's churning chaos.

All the while, she was growing amidst onlookers. She took space without disclaimers.

Maybe, one day, I can too.

But Also Vines

by Kirtana Krishnakumar

They have a dream to touch the sky. They defy the outsiders who invade their habitats. They make themselves known. We admire them.

But sometimes their passion hurts their own. Even the pine trees. At first they simply lean. By the end, they steal, just like their oppressors.

They forget to invest in supportive tissue. They have no one, so they cling to everyone. They steal from everyone.

Taking space is hard.
Growing is harder.

Some never try, fearful of their own strength.

Others climb regardless—hopeful to survive.

Can you blame them?



5 Compelling Reasons to Become a Stay-At-Home Daughter

by Francesca Parrotta

1. Laziness is revolutionary!

How? By staying in your room and doing nothing. In a world dominated by burnout and mental illnesses, staring at the ceiling of your house in your pyjamas for six hours straight is a radical act of rebellion.

2. Make a crucial contribution to the global economy!

(Hooray! Your unnecessary spending is at least somewhat useful!)

Think of all the couriers who have been delivering your meals for the past three weeks! Think of all the video games you've been buying and all the Netflix shows you've been bingeing! Wait, didn't we just say that being a stay-at-home daughter was supposed to be anti-capitalist? Well, don't worry about that. You're at home, so no one is there to criticise you anyway (maybe just your dad).

3. The Internet is all about connection!

Instagram, to connect through photos. TikTok, to connect through videos. Twitter, to connect through word (no one said they would be kind). The online world is full of places to discover fascinating things and share your "passions". Of course, you will instead spend 90% of your time mindlessly scrolling, but it's nice to tell yourself otherwise.

4. Reclusion is inspiring!

If everything else fails, give up resting, put the Internet aside and let yourself discover the power of inspiration. According to my Instagram Explore page, the Count of Montecristo developed a healthy taste for deceit and violence before going on a murderous quest for revenge – all while bored out of his mind in prison.

5. Free training for the upcoming apocalypse!

It is a universally acknowledged truth that the world will collapse sometime soon. And once everyone will be living in bunkers, you will be boasting the advantage of years of practice by telling youngsters of all the heroic deeds you accomplished before disaster struck. Or at least if you were living in the same bunker. Unfortunately years of isolation also made you allergic to human contact. Oops.

Are Women-Only Communes the Solution to Patriarchy?: Why 70s and 80s Radical Separatist Feminism Won't Work Today

by Ginny Kelly

Bernadine Evaristo's Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* features a series of intersectional narratives that encapsulate twelve women's experiences of identity in Britain during the 20th century. One of the characters joins a female commune with her partner during the 1980s. While the story details an abusive lesbian relationship, where the protagonist feels trapped but later supported by the commune, to many women at the time, a women-only commune would seem close to utopia.

Anyone can join a commune. Communes are spaces where members live together, sharing responsibilities and possessions, hoping to isolate themselves from modern civilization and become self-sufficient. This often involves returning to nature, but not always. Many women formed communes, on account of their experiences of gender-based violence as well as discrimination in the patriarchally-structured society, in the 1970s and 80s. They acted as sanctuaries where women's solidarity was most felt. Today, as with before, the concept of a female commune may seem unrealistic, undesirable and at times *problematic*. So why were women-only communes popular amongst feminists in the first place?

The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire started as a protest against the housing of nuclear weapons at RAF Greenham Common in September 1981. Within six months, it transformed into a permanent women's camp - a type of commune that is less disconnected from the world and only houses people for temporary periods - as a constant protest. This movement finds its roots in the resistance led by a Welsh women's group, *Women for Life on Earth*, where 250 women marched to Greenham Common. During the protest, the authorities arrested 34 attendees; one person died in the struggle. This protest was then transformed into a camp in March 1982 that lasted 19 years, evolving beyond a protest centred around the cruise missiles. Soon after, women's role as mothers in society was proclaimed as the impetus of the protest. Pictures of their children, for example, were hung on the fence surrounding the base; at one point 50,000 women formed a circle around the base holding mirrors towards it, literally asking the men in there to *reflect*.

Despite being demonised in the press as witches living in an exclusive coven – the history of witchcraft accusations is in itself an interesting story of misogyny and ostracisation of feminist women – the protest was successful. Multiple military exercises were peacefully blocked by the camp, and the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty ordered the cruise missiles with its personnel back to the US throughout 1991 and 1992. This example illustrates not only the powerful integrity of dissent in the face of a smear campaign, but more importantly, the power of women's solidarity and mutual support.

A more controversial example of a women's commune is the Womyn's Land movement during the 1970s which originated in the US with some projects in Australia. Womyn's Land aimed to form a commune of lesbian women in line with the radical feminist theory of Lesbian Separatism. Lesbian Separatism centred on the belief that women need to live separately from men in order to restructure the current patriarchal society and connect fully with the earth by learning practical skills. As an extension of this, Political Lesbianism was also adopted, whereby women actively chose to engage in romantic and sexual relationships only with other women in order to fully disconnect themselves from men and the state's use of the heteronormative couple for organisation and control. While Lesbian Separatism worked for some women in Womyn Land spaces in Oregon and Michigan, specific Womyn's Land spaces have been widely criticised, along with Lesbian Separatism as a concept. Certain spaces excluded women of colour, trans women, heterosexual women, bisexual women, non-binary people and even infant male children whose mothers may have lived there. Furthermore, it was only accessible to those who could afford to live in isolation without external support.

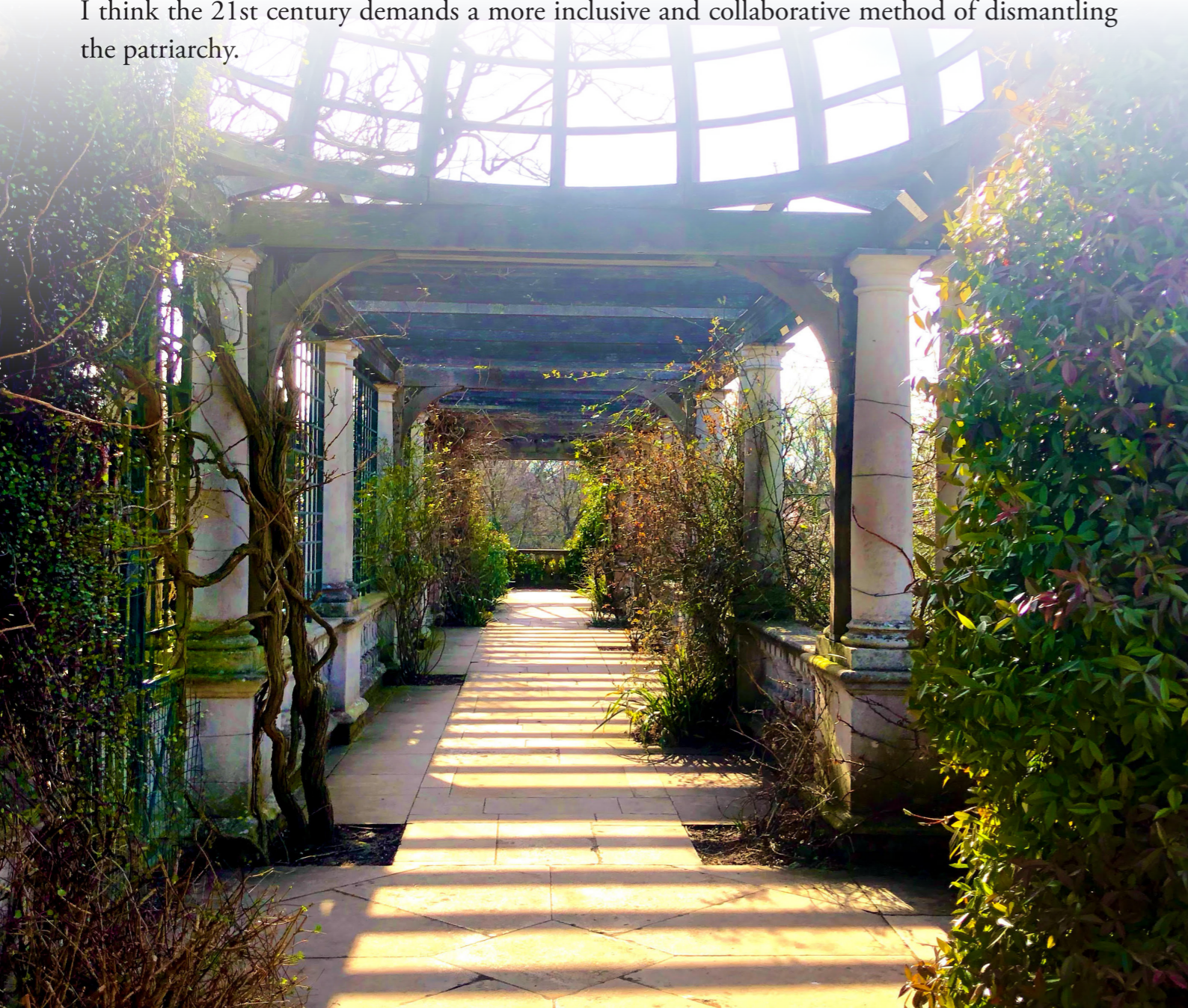
To me, and to many, this exclusion not only is hurtful, but also hypocritical. Although there is a need and the right for marginalised groups to have their own spaces away from the oppression and exclusion that they experience in society, if these spaces are branded as for women but actively exclude certain women, they discourage women's solidarity rather than facilitate it. Today, where transgender rights are hotly debated, this type of outright exclusion would not be tolerated, especially if no congruent inclusive communes were created.

So, would a women's only commune work today? It would, for some people. Some Womyn's Land collectives still exist in the wilderness of the US where lesbian women live permanently, and several female travellers halt on their journey. Yet, they remain on the fringes of modern society. Women's communes which aim to block out the world won't be able to change it. Unless a significant section of society chooses to join women-only communes and actively reject the current society, their impact would be minimal. As history has shown us, these

women would likely be demonised and ostracised in the same way 1970s radical feminists and the early modern witches were. You need to be included in a society and system so your calls for change are relevant and substantiated.

Although permanent women-only communes may not be the answer to structural patriarchy, temporary women-only spaces might. In terms of domestic and gender-based violence, women-only spaces organised by Refuge and Women's Aid provide support for women facing such trauma.

Being able to speak and exist in spaces theoretically free from the pressure of patriarchal ideals can be extremely useful in undoing millennia of patriarchal socialisation, but these spaces seem to exist in a feminist's utopian fantasy. We must instead champion a variety of spaces so everyone, regardless of sex assigned at birth, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or geography, can learn the value of gender equality, reflect on their own biases and use this to challenge patriarchy. Women-only communes may work for some people, but ultimately, I think the 21st century demands a more inclusive and collaborative method of dismantling the patriarchy.



Don't Ask, Don't Tell

by Anna Papaoikonomou

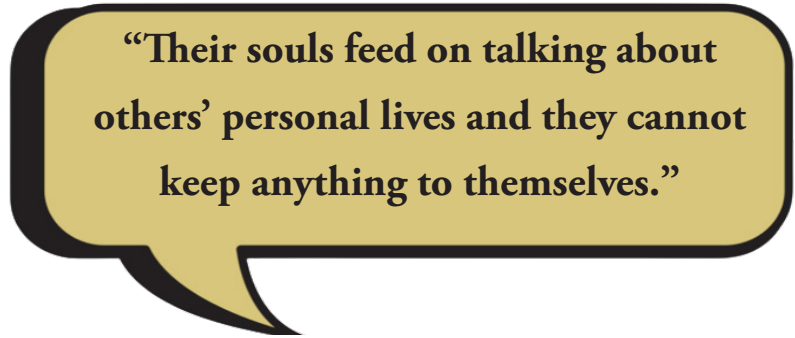
I love casual girls' nights! Curling up with my closest friends, looking unapologetically cute in my matching pyjama set, and, let's not forget, adorably recapping every recent interaction is my favourite part of my night routine. You see, I gossip a lot. The highlight of my day is going home and giving my gals a detailed rundown of the relationship drama in my workplace. After a failed date, I spend hours shit-talking their "serious" skateboarding career or the shoes they chose to wear. And I've always thought this was a bad thing.

"Women are too much drama, that's why I hang out with men."

We have grown up in an era where mean girls are characterised as bitchy, hyperfeminine devils and gossiping is a woman's ultimate vice. But what even *is* gossip? Why do we see it as a negative activity that only women engage in?

After hosting endless wine nights about this topic (they were purely for research!), it was confirmed that women do, in fact, gossip more than men. But, I also don't think that is necessarily a bad thing. Dictionaries define gossip as informal reports of an intimate nature, especially about the private affairs of others. But if those private affairs also include you, is that gossip?

Many of my female friends discuss their sex lives openly. They usually come back from their dates with endless gossip, or feedback, if you will. In comparison, my male friends rarely share their sexual experiences. Some say this is because women simply cannot keep their mouths shut.



“Their souls feed on talking about others’ personal lives and they cannot keep anything to themselves.”

Perhaps a different explanation lies in the fact that as they grow up, women feel the need to overcompensate for the routine stigmatisation of sex and female pleasure they felt throughout childhood. Oversharing through gossip can not only help break down taboos and promote sexual liberation, but it can also foster a sanctuary characterised by similar experiences. What is better than knowing that Joe from Hinge actually acted very weirdly towards your friend last week before going on a date with him? Or learning that the lovely “feminist” guy from your course gropes women in his spare time? Gossiping allows us to review our unpleasant experiences and come to terms with them. By sharing one’s traumatic experiences of an intimate nature with one’s friends, we can warn and inform them at the same time. Moreover, hearing different responses to it can also help one feel validated and not alone.

At the same time, gossiping can help us realise where we stand. My friend Zoe noted, “I love gossiping! It is fun but it can also be essential. It’s good for discerning others’ moral values and figuring out where you stand on issues in a casual context.” Think about all the times a topic someone has gossiped about revealed their political or social viewpoints. If someone approached me, eager to share the latest rumour they heard, and started to slut-shame another woman, I would immediately know that our moral values do not align. I can then choose between having an honest conversation about it with them, or eliminating myself from their company.

Gossiping has taught me a lot of things – not just about other people, but also about myself. Hearing a rumour that defames a person I barely know? I instantly know how to exit that conversation. Heeding a warning about the microaggressions experienced by my female friends? I can now easily identify these red flags myself. I strongly believe that gossiping allows me to bond with other women over all types of common experiences, both horrifying and pleasurable. It provides me with valuable insight into how everyone interprets the shared experience of womanhood. If feminist movements can arise from gossiping in kitchens, who’s to say it isn’t productive?

Are Girls’ Schools in the UK a Sanctuary of Sisterhood or a Place to Perpetuate Internalised Misogyny?

by Ginny Kelly and Milla Waldron

When we first met, we bonded over the fact that both of us attended girls’ schools. Upon further discussion, we discovered that we had shockingly different experiences.

Milla

I did not enjoy my time attending a girls’ school in England. Sometimes, I question why I decided to stay there during sixth form when I had the option to attend a co-ed school. However, I cannot help but believe that had I not attended a girls’ school, I would not have started to question my identity.

In hindsight, my school was a place where internalised misogyny overshadowed many of my experiences. The heavy policing of uniforms is just one example. I understand that this was not atypical of British secondary schools but when I think back, I am amazed at how it was mainly female-teachers who enforced the regressive regulations. They often commented on how our shirts draped our torsos in a way that outlined our breasts or that our skirts were too short. Although their comments were prompted by the presence of male teachers, I often wondered where to draw the line between cautious modesty and sexualisation of teenage girls.

Sexism also undercut teachers’ desires for us to succeed academically. Some particularly emphasised that we shared exam boards with boys’ schools in order to encourage competition with them. Not for our own sake. Not because education gives us an opportunity to grow our minds. But because our achievements had to be compared to boys’ to be noteworthy.

Whilst I’ve discussed the negative atmosphere, my school community felt like a sisterhood all the same. The community that existed within the student body made me feel safe and comfortable to explore my identity and sexuality. My peers were open-minded and supportive so no one felt afraid to discuss different aspects of what constituted us.

Ginny

While I cannot idealise my school experience in retrospect, I can neither belittle it. Overall, it was a good experience. We were given assemblies on how to assert ourselves in a boardroom and how toxic masculinity stigmatises mental illness. Our grading system was discreet to minimise toxic competition. We had buddy systems and houses to encourage cross-year bonding, while prefect gowns were abandoned as elitist. Although physical fights were practically nonexistent, the conflict was usually, stereotypically, verbal, centring on cliquy friendship groups. At the end of the day, we consistently supported each other's successes.

However, a careers workshop at a neighbouring boys' school, where at least three boys told me they were going to be prime minister, made me grateful for my school. Although in theory my school's motivational talks had equipped me with confidence, I found that about 80% of my schoolmates felt uncomfortable talking in this new environment. This shocked me because it didn't match the participation levels at our school. While at times the boys may invoke a teenage hormonal reaction, I felt the shyness was completely down to the alienating masculine culture we were not yet accustomed to. Other than fostering an aversion to privileged arrogant men, this experience made the nurturing nature of my school evident.

Although the pressure to become a "woman in STEM" simply to rebalance gender statistics wound me up, the main goal of my education remained preparing us for a society that would ultimately try to dismiss, silence and demonise us. I know that my sense of feminism, women's solidarity and self-worth were definitely found in this girls-only environment.



The Perfect, Pink Pussy

by Katherine Graham

"Have you ever seen "The Pussy Chart"?"

Oh – hell yeah. You mean that compilation of 30 different coochies in all shapes and sizes? I know the one.

On searching up "The Pussy Chart", you will come across lists of articles proclaiming that "all labias are normal". Yeah, yeah, self-love n' all dat, but where is the good stuff? Click over to Google Images and thousands of vulvas pop up, with some given amusing names – Ms Tulip, Ms Curtains and Ms Puffs. This great expanse of coochies is supposedly normalising vulva-variety instead of opening the door to harsh judgement. I scroll through reams of genitals, rating their appearance by their similarity to the pussies of porn, before picking out which one most looks like mine – and how oh-so-pretty it is compared to others.



Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. What's that now? This chart is not merely for us ladies to ascertain which numbered-puss is in keeping with our own? Oh no, it is never that simple. It is actually a proposal of self-gratification that offers up an excellent opportunity for misogyny to rear its ugly head. There I sit, gawking at (it is crucial to note that I am not observing) the projection of pictured pussies, proclaiming how ugly one is whilst noting the perfection of another – comparing, with all true feeling, which cooter is "cuter". We are really out here defining genitalia, that is crucial to the creation of life, in the same manner as we would a young kitten – pun intended? As we gaze, we unravel, through our devastating decrees, the gains made in the "love the skin you're in" movement without even realising it. Propagating

porn's perception of the idealised cooch as our OWN unique perception. Something isn't sitting quite right here.

The sanctuary of our beautiful bodies is being violated by our internalised, patriarchal, male-gaze-defined understanding of beauty. And you know what's worse? It is us women that are on the front line, pushing into our own safe zone with cruel comments on the composition of our coochies. Not this again, guys. I thought we'd figured internalised male-gaze out when we blasted 'Ain't Shit' by Doja Cat. What happened to dump trucks and double DD's? What happened to "no need to stress, we're body positive now"? Unfortunately, such positivity only lasts until a new wave of self-hatred and systemic misogyny washes over us.

It seems impossible to escape the feeling of inadequacy within ourselves – we must sit, detained by social media, at the table of liposuctioned, lip-filled, gym-going women, and are forced to drink that sickening sweet elixir of self-hatred to complement this feast of insecurity. Even the compensatory body-positive movements bitter the flavour of this meal: a "normal" body is now one that is "body-positive", yet that same refined "ideal body" remains ever thus. It is an impossibility that "no one should strive for" – okay, right. So it's still out of reach? So it's still on a pedestal of perfection? Great – I feel super positive now. And just when we thought every part of our bodies had been unscrupulously critiqued, we are now accosted with the prospect of owning a faulty fanny. One that is too dark, too misshapen – let alone too hairy!

The plump and pinkified pornstar pussy is a new and terrifying insecurity. And it is distressingly novel:

@iamcardib **6th July 2020**
"I am bleaching my f***ing cootie cat. Yep, Fatima got me right. I'm in my crib getting my vagina and my underarm bleached."

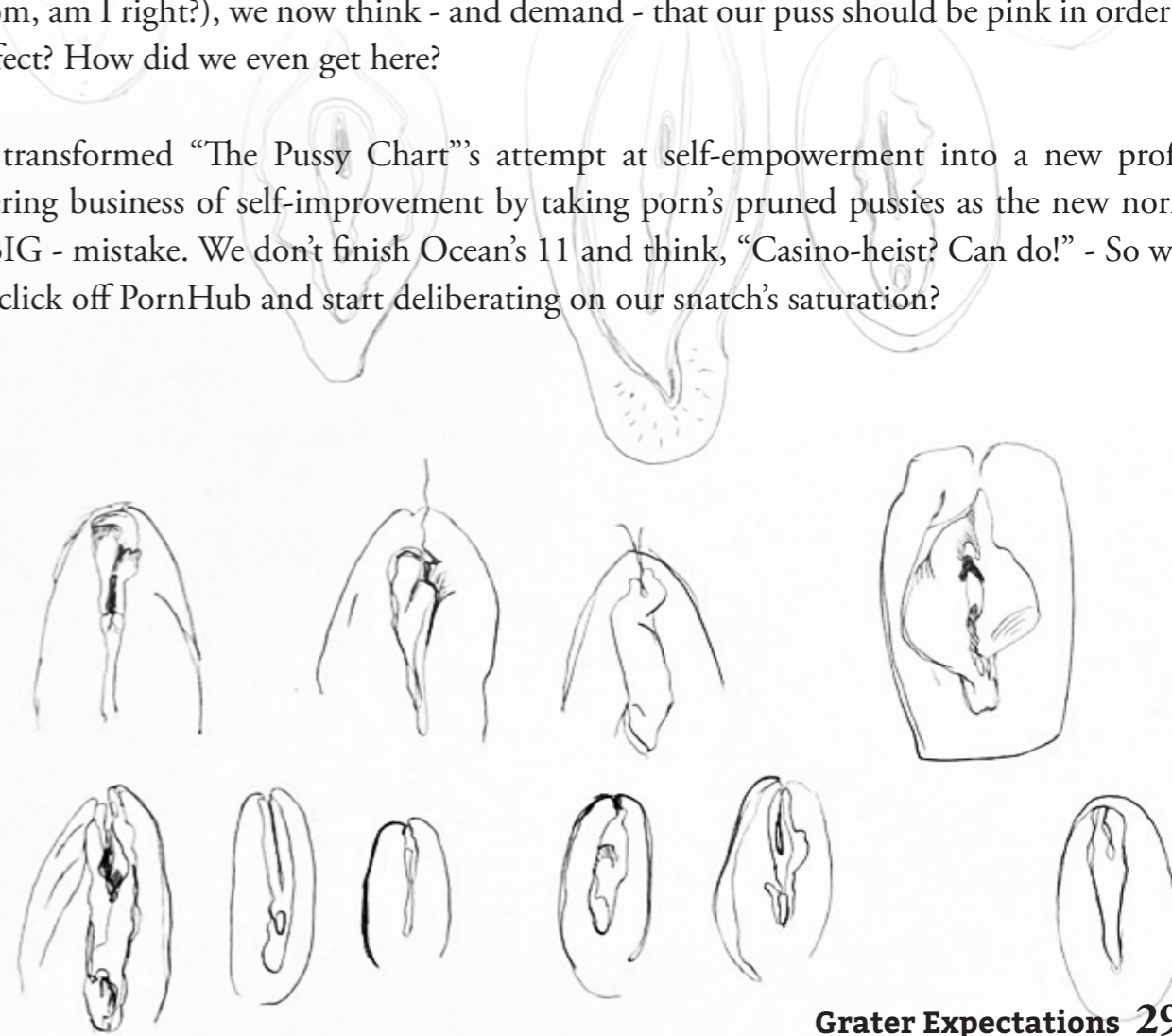


This is what Cardi B recommended to her Instagram followers who were "lookin' to get bright down there". Okay, Miss B, fairs. You're promoting a beautifying brand just like any other influencer. I've known about the best LA face-lift clinics and the infamous Teddy Bear Hair

tablets for some time now, but since when was there an option to botox and bleach my "cootie cat"?! I hear the Bodak Yellow B*tch's advice and gasp in horror at the thought of placing a new element of my body under the proverbial microscope – who thought such a thing was possible? – with surgeons ready and waiting to cut and dye what I, mere seconds ago, thought was normal, into something new and perfect. Porn's "perfect" people getting at it are a bad enough addition to my intrusive thoughts, but now I'm knee-deep in Amazon reviews trying to figure out if I'll get an allergic reaction to intimate bleaching, without even considering if "I'll get bleach on my tee-shirt and then gon' look like an asshole". The hairy days are long gone – we like the shaved look now, we say so ourselves. But, what's this? There's skin beneath the hair? Okay. Time to replace the shame of a pubed-up punnai with the new-found humiliation of an ill-coloured cooch.

This poisonous masking of misogyny and racism has recalibrated our minds to pine after the "ideal", rather than loving and desiring the bodies we have already. Without even realising it, we are saying – with all our chest – that we prefer to have a hairless vulva because we feel "cleaner" or "prettier", that we want that flawlessly-formed pornstar puss to feel confident and sexy, and finally, just when we'd altered everything we could to be "faultless" (lmao. Faultless to whom, am I right?), we now think - and demand - that our puss should be pink in order to be perfect? How did we even get here?

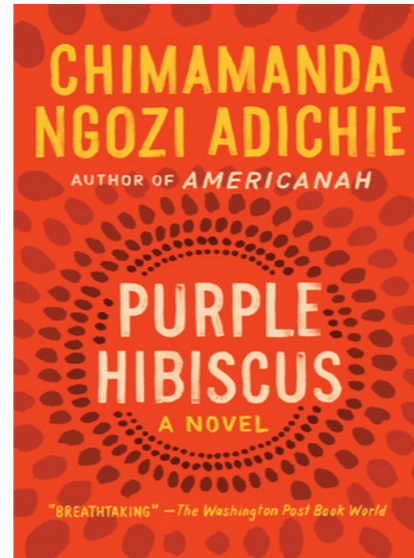
We've transformed "The Pussy Chart"'s attempt at self-empowerment into a new profit-mongering business of self-improvement by taking porn's pruned pussies as the new norm. Big - BIG - mistake. We don't finish Ocean's 11 and think, "Casino-heist? Can do!" - So why do we click off PornHub and start deliberating on our snatch's saturation?



Grater Recommendations from us to you!

TO READ: *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Set in post-colonial Nigeria, *Purple Hibiscus* explores the formation of a female identity from the perspective of a gifted fifteen-year-old girl Kambili Achike. Fleeing from a military coup and the religious violence of her Catholic father, Kambili goes to live with her free-spirited aunt Ifeoma, who helps Kambili redefine her notion of womanhood and reconnect with the traditional Nigerian culture. Despite the difficult themes the novel deals with, it is a page-turner centering on female solidarity and Adichie's profound love for Nigerian culture and scenery – something that encouraged me to seek out an African art exhibition and learn more!



TO WATCH: *Raw* by Julia Ducournau (2016)

This coming-of-age body horror film follows the story of Justine – a college fresher and a lifelong vegetarian who unexpectedly develops a craving for human flesh. This film is worth watching for its exploration of the relationship between bodily transformation and selfhood, as well as its non-romanticized (read: not male-gazey) portrayal of the female body and the dark-funny relationship between Justine and her sister Alexia. Also, *Raw*'s director Julia Ducournau is the second woman director to ever win the prestigious Palm D'Or award, which she got in 2021 for her film *Titane*!



TO FOLLOW: [@sadie.samet](#) on Instagram

Sadie's page is full of *lesbicious* comics that capture a wide spectrum of experiences of a queer woman – from the scary process of approaching other women (and asking lesbian-coded questions to figure out if they are also gay) to coming to terms with queerness growing up. I'm a long-term fan of her 'growing up gay' series – it's relatable and heartwarming in its conversations about default heterosexuality, being a tomboy, challenging homophobia, and first queer love. It's like talking to a queer sister who went through all things gay and is there to speak to other queer girls – out or closeted – to remind them that they can and should be who they truly are.

Hi guys, gals, and nonbinary pals,

Fun fact: Sanctuary, the community-focused one-word theme of this issue of Grater Expectations, was born out of a heated debate. We spent a few hours discussing what is a sanctuary – a safe space, a warm home, or an isolated medieval castle for Catholic nuns? Committed to discussing community and safe spaces, our debate made us realise something important – a safe space is not always about peace and warmth. Sometimes, it's also about isolation and feeling excluded by the people and places that promised belonging. After all, is it even possible to create a safe space without having to exclude someone to achieve safety?

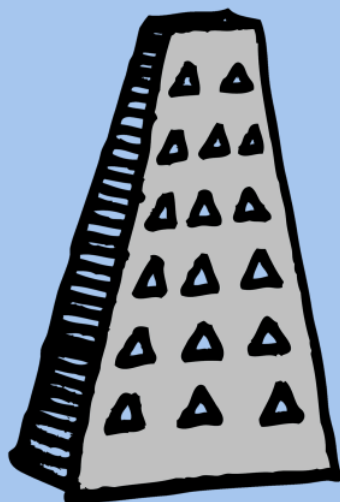
It was exciting to hear a diverse range of experiences with communities and safe spaces – from finding harmony within one's body to rethinking the benefits of going to an all-girls school. We also had lots of fun moments along the way: the photo-walk around Hampstead Heath, a debate over a TED-talk about men's rights movements, and collaborative writing sessions that turned into chats about gossip in high school and the wisdom shared by ladies in an all-women's pond. These shared moments made the zine feel like a little 'safe' community – which hopefully felt inclusive and welcoming (and if it didn't...at least you'll have some nice material for an opinion piece!).

Finally, we want to say a massive 'thank-you' to all our writers for their work and willingness to share personal experiences – this issue would not have been the same without each of you.

Sending a portion of friendly vibes!

Your not-so-cheesy editors,
Abeer and Mel

Grater Expectations is an intersectional feminist zine under UCL's investigative magazine *The Cheese Grater*.



Through exposé, poetry, art, and more, *Grater Expectations* aims to inform, entertain, and satisfy your appetite for feminism.

Send in your submissions or any questions for the next issue:

zine@cheesegratermagazine.org

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