

CSDM

A COMMUNITY OF PUBLIC SCHOLARS DEMANDING AND EMBODYING LIBERATION

Newsletter October 2022



Collage by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye

Image description - an arrangement of pressed/dried flowers and leaves laid over handwritten words, surrounding a framed portrait of Azeezat Johnson, in which she is wearing dungarees with a repeating floral pattern, a headwrap and large wooden earrings which say "Black Lives Matter". She is gazing upwards and smiling, one hand also reaching up, palm open and towards the camera (portrait by Oluwatosin Daniju).

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'un

Indeed to Allah we belong, and to Allah we shall return.

Dr Azeezat Johnson ~ 11/03/1988 - 07/03/2022

GEM REMEMBERS

AZEEZAT

Dear friends,

We begin this long-delayed, this necessarily delayed, newsletter by remembering the person because of whom this Collective exists, and quote some of her own words.

“Remembering the words of Nathaniel T  l  maque: whether you’re looking up at the night time or daytime sky, the constellations are always there. Whether we are visible to one another or not, we’re all always present.”

Azeezat, Extending Starry Nights



Photo Portrait of Azeezat by Oluwatosin Daniju

ID: photographic portrait of Azeezat Johnson, in which she is wearing dungarees with a repeating floral pattern, a headwrap and large wooden earrings which say “Black Lives Matter”. She is looking at us and smiling.

Collage by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye

ID: an arrangement of pressed/dried flowers and leaves laid over handwritten words in a spiral.



Background Image: collage by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye

ID: an arrangement of pressed and dried flowers and leaves laid over handwritten words formatted in the shape of stems and leaves.

GEM REMEMBERS

AZEEZAT

For all of us at GEM, Azeezat's absence is marked by her continued presence - she remains with us in so many ways. We were blessed to know her, and remain blessed to love her. We did not intend to be absent from you all for quite so long, but chose to allow ourselves grace in tending to our grief and loss.

We appreciate you allowing us this time of relative silence and introspection, and hope that those of you who knew and love her remain gentle with yourselves.



We intend to make dedicated time for memorials to Azeezat in the future - for now we celebrate Azeezat's boundless capacity for dreaming and bringing different imaginations to life, for her centring of the lives of Black women and genderqueer folk, and for the brilliance she brought to everything she did.



ID: Photo of Azeezat Johnson seated on a panel, holding a microphone, wearing a blue headscarf and smiling to someone or something out of frame.

Portrait by Oluwatosin Daniju.

Background ID: collage by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye: an arrangement of pressed/dried flowers and leaves laid over handwritten words formatted in the shape of stems and leaves.



I think I've shrunk from writing any kind of tribute or 'in memoriam' to Azeezat,

because that would force the issue of her no longer being here, which just feels as incorrect as it is unthinkable. Daniel José Older wrote "the dead are so alive" (Shadowshaper, 2017) and I can't think of a better example of this than with Azeezat. Her absence is marked most deeply for me by how present she remains, every day and in such a multitude of ways.

I feel so blessed to have gotten to know and love Azeezat, to have shared in her dreaming, to have basked in the warmth of her love, revelled in the sharpness of her wit and grown in the generosity of her joy and wisdom.

In founding and developing the GEM Collective, Azeezat brought to life yet another strand to her legacy. She taught us how to move at a more human pace, even whilst the instinct would be to match the emergency tempo of the world. She demonstrated how to reflect at length, taking time to know which way we want to go, rather than springing into (re)action. Most significantly for me, she taught us how to love, actively, how to grow in relationship in ways that can be challenging and deeply uncomfortable, but which lead to a truer encapsulation of love than we usually get to witness, talk less experience. And in laying these foundations, and building so beautifully upon them, Azeezat ensured she will remain present, always.

Oluwatosin Daniju





We have been trying to find the words

to express all that we want to about Azeezat Johnson, including her profound love and ever-present legacy, but we know that no words could ever do this justice.

While writing this we were reminded of our many conversations with Azeezat about both the power and limitations of words - from our discussions about Black time, Black space, and Black rhythms to how we would play with the poetics and possibilities of words and their different forms.

What Azeezat so generously shared and reflected on about language, love, and dwelling together, continues to encourage and support others to dream in ways that celebrate the lives of Black people and the beauty of how Black presence transcends time and space. More than that, how Azeezat moved with such care and hope for a better world has forever impacted the lives of many people who will always cherish who she is and will hold her in their hearts.

GEM Collective's "Black Presence" group has involved ongoing conversations and collective dreamings about Black gatherings and gentleness, which are conversations and dreamings that could never be contained by the pages of documents or the words that are found on them. What we mean is that when we think of our time spent with Azeezat, we often think of what Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye poignantly refers to as "constellations of relations of care".

Azeezat's love continues to be in orbit of all that GEM does, and is. Her friendship is ever felt and the way that Azeezat wrote about, spoke of, and embraced the wonder in dreaming remains at the heart of what we hope GEM will continue to do. Dear friend, thank you for being all of who you are. We love you.

Francesca Sobande



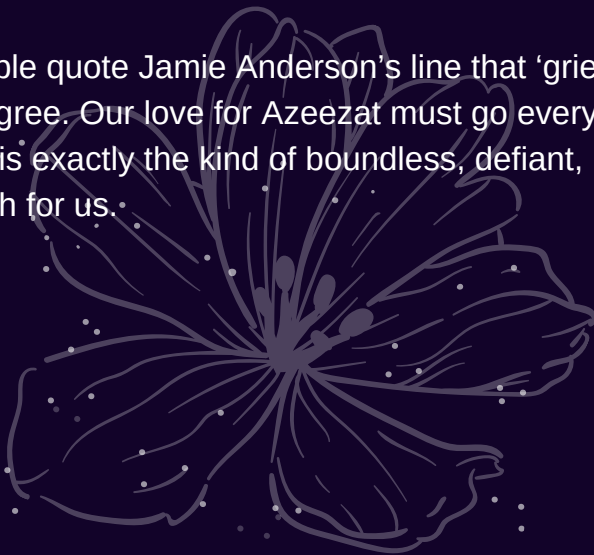
There would never have been enough time

to learn and love with Azeezat, no matter if we had had an eternity. She is only 'gone' in so far as her soul is no longer in this dimension with us, but we are still sitting with her words, her care, her provocations, her hopes and her encouragement.

I cannot think of anybody who I learnt so viscerally about love and pain with - and by that I mean specifically how we can pain one another even as we love one another, and that that is something we must respond to, not attempt to shy away from. Something we must tend to, not merely witness. There is something so brave in that notion that few of us like to sit with: a commitment to complexity, a commitment to care, and ultimately, a commitment to ourselves and the belief that we can do better because we deserve better. With Azeezat I learnt that love is a constant transformative process, and so, it is perhaps just part of continuing to learn with her that we now allow our love for Azeezat to continue to transform us and our worlds.

We have all sensed that there is no GEM without Azeezat, but also that her flight from this world is perhaps a manifestation of precisely the invitation she dared us to: to dream on. To push our imaginings further and further, to care regardless of carelessness being the default around us.

People quote Jamie Anderson's line that 'grief is just love with no place to go'. But I disagree. Our love for Azeezat must go every place and colour all our dreaming because that is exactly the kind of boundless, defiant, radiant possibility that Azeezat made feel within reach for us.



Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan




BLACK PRESENCE PROJECT



The Black Gem Project was borne out of a desire to co-create space for the imagining of new possibilities for Black presence, dreaming, and gathering in the wake of hyper-visible anti-Blackness both within our lived and digital realities. The Black Gem Project grew from the vision, work, and love of Dr Azeezat Johnson. Collectively, we aim to co-create space for dreaming, writing, sharing, and being in ways that are rooted in the many different rhythms of Black lives.

The Black *Presence* Project which is one of many aspects of the wider Black Gem Project, was created by Dr Azeezat Johnson, Dr Francesca Sobande and Dr Katucha Bento. This culminated in a July 2022 online workshop gathering funded by London Arts & Humanities Partnership (LAHP). We had been working on organising this workshop with Azeezat since early 2021 and it particularly foregrounded the work of early-stage Black PhD researchers, creatives, and activists. The session focused on Azeezat's writing on "Black presence" and "Black dreaming", and the many ways that Azeezat brought us together.

The session welcomed profoundly moving contributions which intertwined visuals, music; poetry on themes of memory, nature, loss and healing by Kiara Mohamed Amin, Dr Keisha Bruce and Dr Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye. The image at the start of the newsletter is part of the response created by Dr Ogoegbunam Okoye for the session. We thank everyone for what they shared.





HIJAB ON/ WEBCAM OFF

Created by Sahra-Isha Mohammad-Jones, Azeezat Johnson and Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Hijab On/Webcam Off is a project reclaiming conversations around hijab from the mainstream where it is often the prerogative of non-Muslim, white supremacist, patriarchal and secular-imperialist narratives; or a topic of discussion amongst men where it becomes a symbolic reference to Muslim women.

During the pandemic many of us experienced the intrusion of workplaces and other meetings and events into our personal spaces be they homes, bedrooms or anywhere else via webcams. With this came the expectation that our cameras should be on. For those of us who wear hijab, this created conditions where we had to put our hijabs on even within our personal or familial spaces because of intrusion from outside. This got us thinking about the line between the public and private, indoors and outdoors, as well as considering questions of performance and performativity.

We also wanted to build on these thoughts for a more expansive conversation about escaping the secular paradigm altogether. In the same way that reductive conversations around hijab hide the depth of the term حجاب in the Quran referring to a barrier or separation between Paradise and Hell; between Allah and mankind; between the Prophet SAW when he recites the Quran and those who disbelieve in it, and more; the depth of our worldview is hidden when we must translate it into a secular paradigm. Through "Hijab On/Webcam Off" we want to think through and resist the hegemony of secular knowledge itself.

You can listen to our opening discussion [here](#) and we hope to produce more.

HOW WE BUILD HOME

“This project began first and foremost to, and for, us: Wasi Daniju and Azeezat Johnson. It’s about us choosing ourselves and each other, trusting that choice as the grounds for a completely different reality. And that’s been heavy work: we’re having to imagine hope and ease while still facing the brutalisation and inequities that inform our realities...

Throughout this project, both of us speak to how this process of home-making has included searching and stretching ourselves, to see the most gentle versions of ourselves and reach for the same in someone you love.”

On Tuesday 26th July we launched the first set of installations of *How We Build Home* at the Museum of the Home. The launch was live streamed (with a few glitches!) and can now be viewed [here](#), along with some previews of current installations.

You can read many of the readings shared at the launch here on GEM’s website, where you can also view in full Oluwatosin’s short film, *All The Women In Me Are Tired*.

Following a period of closure due to flooding at the museum, *How We Build Home* will be reopening on **Tuesday 25th October**, we hope you will be able to visit the installations and take part in upcoming activities - more details soon on the GEM website. We’re so glad to be sharing this with you all, especially those who have participated in and supported GEM Collective from the start. As we build, we welcome ourselves home.



Above: HWB installations, including a beautiful large-scale patchwork quilt made by the South London Refugee Association’s (SLRA) Women Group. Made between April 2020 and July 2021, the group met weekly online to support and care for each other, be creative and organise for change within the UK’s hostile immigration systems. [Read more >>](#)

GEM



OTHER PROJECTS

Sahra-Isha

ASRA Club: community space centering Muslim women in sports, wellness & sisterhood



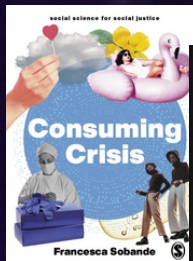
Oluwatosin Daniju
Photography portfolio

Postcolonial Banter
Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan



**TANGLED
IN TERROR**

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan
**Uprooting
Islamophobia**



Francesca Sobande and Layla-Roxanne Hill explore the history and contemporary lives of Black people in Scotland.

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan's Debut poetry collection from Verve 2019

