

Grafting Flowers, Ancestors & Dreams

A Contribution to the Programme

Black Presence: A Dialogue with Azeezat Johnson's Legacy

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Geographies of Embodiment (GEM) Research Collective



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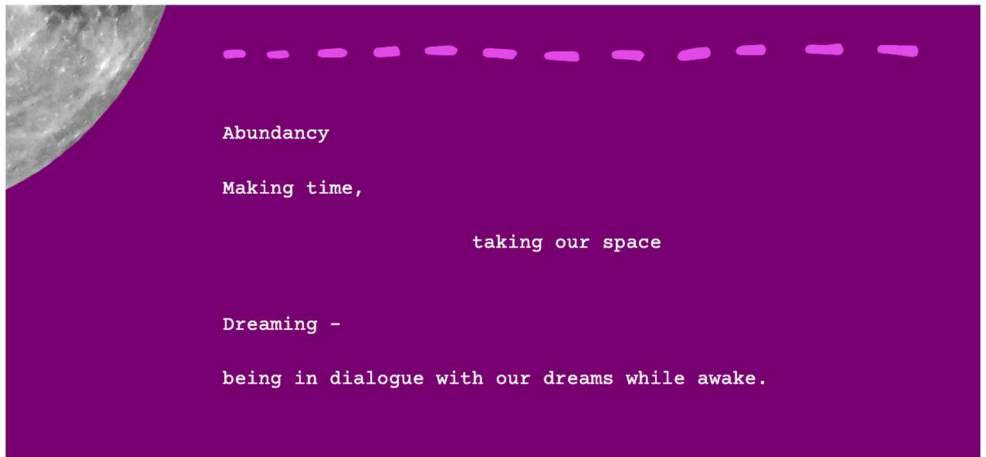
our forefathers, plants and nature
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My dreams and my ancestors, our knowledges and our shared love for flowers come together in beautiful ways. In this contribution, I respond to the poem written by Azeezat Johnson, Francesca Sobande and Katucha Bento¹ and to Azeezat’s scholarly and personal legacy by shaping an experimental practice-process:



In this practice-process, I gather my dreams and ancestors, our knowledges and love for flowers, grafting them together in material, embodied ways. I offer, to think with Azeezat, Francesca, and Katucha, a way to think about “abundancy,” a

¹ Black GEMS (Azeezat Johnson, Francesca Sobande, and Katucha Bento) and inspired by Oluwatosin Daniju (2022). “Black Presence: A Gathering of Words.” GEM Research Collective, p. 1.

way to think about “making time,” a way to think about “taking our space” and a way to think about “dreaming - being in dialogue with our dreams while awake.”²

To do this, I share stories, I share one of my dreams, I share knowledge and ways of doing that I’ve learned from my mother and our ancestors, and a process that I am using to be “in dialogue with [my] dreams” within my waking life.

Part I: A Dream

In February 2022, my maternal grandmother, now an ancestor, visited me again through a dream. For years - on the waking side of this life - she and I built our own rituals of walking together, of sitting together and admiring the flowers, plants, and trees that my mother - her daughter - had tended to in the gardens at my parents’ home. In this dream, my grandmother and I walk together along a road, hand in hand, talking.

² Black GEMS (Azeezat Johnson, Francesca Sobande, and Katucha Bento) and inspired by Oluwatosin Daniju (2022). “Black Presence: A Gathering of Words.” GEM Research Collective, p. 1.



From right: My father and maternal grandmother and grandfather

Derek Ofodorinwa, independent scholar-teacher of Ọdịnani (traditional cultural beliefs and practices of Igbo peoples), explains that “an ancestor is a person that you descend from,

someone who helped create you that is no longer with you in physical form.”³

In Igbo metaphysics, dreams are liminal spaces where our ancestors, who live on, can commune and communicate with us (we who are animated through human life). Through dreams, ancestors make themselves seen and felt by us in this world of the living, and can guide us in the continuation of our intergenerational cultural traditions.⁴ In this dream, my grandmother and I commune together. We are bound, hand-in-hand in dreamy communion, through more-than-living relation also tied to our love for flowers. I inherit my love for and learning from flowers from my mother’s people. Our love for flowers animates a relation, and this relation grafts together life and death, wakefulness and dreaming, in ways that teach me and allow me to experience these things as entangled, timeless, essential and inseparable.

Our love for flowers, plants and nature joins us in an intergenerational relation.

³ Derek Ofodorinwa (2021). “Ancestors Explained – Why Are Ancestors Important?” *The Medicine Shell*. Online. Accessed July 1, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9rEKOIKN8w&t=937s>.

⁴ Emmanuel M. P. Edeh (1985). *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, p. 20, 24-25.

Part II: Grafting

Graft is a word that my mother, a gardener, redefined for me. My grandfather, my grandmother's husband and my mother's father, passed away when I was three years old. My mother tells me stories of him - a school headmaster, landscaper, and gardener who experimented in grafting together different plants. He would carefully select two or three different plants, she told me, and join and tend to them in a process that enabled these plants to learn to grow together. These stories describe his love for grafting together different plants, creating ways for these joined plants to live – blooming and fruiting – together.

She said: “I remembered growing up watching this grapefruit tree growing also orange in some branches and sweet tangerine in another branch, but [when I was young] I didn't know how he did it.” She describes this grafting process, from her memories of her father's experiments and from her own intimate knowledge tending to roses:

You can graft like two three plants into one stalk or one tree... You start with one plant, a main stem. And then you sort of peel out the rose from the branch. You peel it out and from that other

plant that you are grafting it to, you scratch out an area where you want to attach the peeled-off rose part. You glue it there, attach it there, and then you use a tape and tape it round tightly, you know, to cover all the spaces. And then you leave it, you put it in a well-prepared place for it. You put it there, you water it, you just water the soil, and you leave it there and very soon, they will join together.

In a co-authored article on plant grafting, plant biologists Wang, Jiang, and Wu describe the process as follows: “Plant grafting is a vegetative propagation technique that connects two severed plant segments together. The chimera, consisting of the scion and rootstock, survives as a new individual after wound healing.”⁵

It is the dream with my grandmother that continually reminds me of our shared love for flowers. It is these conversations with my mother, in which she shares her knowledge and learnings inspired by and rooted in our

⁵ Jing Wang, Libo Jiang, & Rongling Wu. (2017). Plant grafting: how genetic exchange promotes vascular reconnection. *New Phytologist*, 214(1), p. 56.

ancestors. It is her love for the practice of gardening, of putting her hands into the earth, of carefully tending to each flower and pouring into them love and care and water so that they grow. It is my maternal grandfather, whose practice of grafting as a material process brings two and more plants to grow together. It is the dream, itself a process of grafting, as a way of bringing together my grandmother and me, hand-in-hand, that creates new modes of existence. These inspire for me a method, a practice of bringing together the dream with my grandmother, this shared intergenerational love for flowers that exists between all of us, as a way to think about and honor Azeezat, her contributions and her legacy. As a way to think about ways of creating space, of creating abundance, of “being in dialogue with our dreams while awake.”⁶

Part III: Grafting: Flowers, Ancestors & Dreams

By the time I started a PhD at the University of Sheffield in fall 2017, Azeezat had already finished hers in the Department of

⁶ Black GEMS (Azeezat Johnson, Francesca Sobande, and Katucha Bento) and inspired by Oluwatosin Daniju (2022). “Black Presence: A Gathering of Words.” GEM Research Collective, p. 1.

Geography there, earlier that same year. In her PhD research, Azeezat attended to Black Muslim women in Britain and their use of clothing practices to negotiate comfort in home spaces.⁷ In her further scholarship, Azeezat witnessed the multi-dimensional, institutional racial violences of the university (our university, and UK universities more generally), and she advocated for de-centering this site of knowledge production.⁸ She also reflected on doing research with racialized-as-Black subjects as a Black Muslim disabled woman in a university structured through whiteness.⁹

I began my PhD in Architecture but in my third year transferred to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. I first encountered Azeezat through her writings. It was a time when I most needed them to help me understand my own experience as a Black woman researcher in a UK university who was navigating its structural and interpersonal racisms.

⁷ Azeezat Johnson (2017). Getting comfortable to feel at home: clothing practices of Black Muslim women in Britain. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(2), 274-287; Azeezat Johnson, (2017). 'You're Othered here and you're Othered there': *Centring the clothing practices of Black Muslim Women in Britain* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield).

⁸ Azeezat Johnson (2018). An academic witness: White supremacy within and beyond academia. *The fire now: Anti-racist scholarship in times of explicit racial violence*, 15-25.

⁹ Azeezat Johnson (2020). Throwing our bodies against the white background of academia. *Area*, 52(1), 89-96.

The exploitation, extraction, and sharing of my intellectual ideas without consent by my first supervisor necessitated my changing first supervisors and then departments in the third year of my four-year PhD program. As I navigated this deep disruption, it was Azeezat's writings that helped me on my own path. Her words affirmed my experience in an often unkind university space and showed me how we as racialized-as-Black scholars might find each other and make space together through our work.



Dr. Azeezat Johnson (Image by Oluwatosin Daniju)

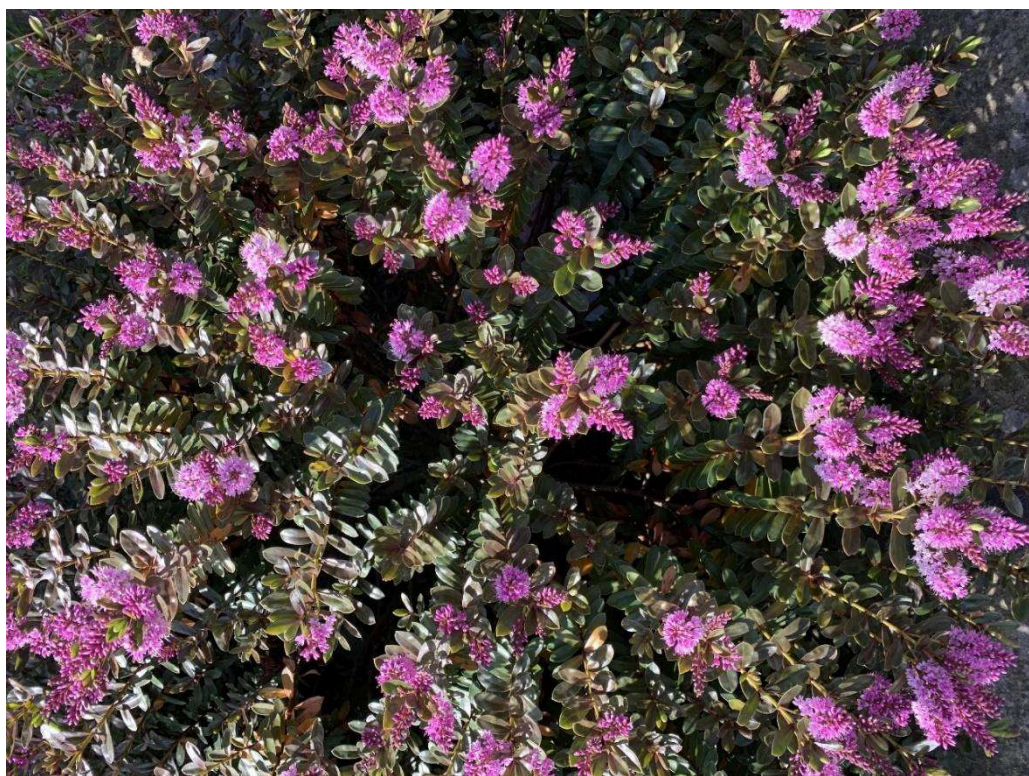
When thinking-doing-writing this contribution, I was living in Sheffield, and I wanted to be deliberate and site-specific in my practice of responding to Azeezat's legacy. I began from

departments, located together in the Geography and Urban Studies and Planning Building. Behind this building is Weston Park, a beautifully landscaped green space filled with grasses, plants, and flowers. The curated, beautiful aesthetic of this park belies the intimate violences of the surrounding university campus, and I sought to instantiate a deliberate practice of recognition, remembering and also caring creation. I wanted to remind myself that even in this unkind place, I could choose and create my own beauty.¹⁰ That even from this place, I could gather and graft together something else for us, for myself and for Azeezat.

Over the course of a few weeks, I continually returned to the park. Each time as I wandered around, I held onto my dream, my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother, Azeezat, our experiences at University of Sheffield, her words, my own experiences, my learnings. And I took from the park beautiful flowers. This was not a vindictive practice, but rather one of love and care. From this place of hurt and exclusion and pain and alienation, I reflected on the ways we find each other – sometimes in our words and writings, sometimes in person – and how across space and time we reach out to one another.

¹⁰ Christina Sharpe (2019). “Beauty is a Method.” *e-flux journal*, 105: 1-3. http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_303916.pdf

As we find each other, we make something different,
elsewhere. With each flower, stem, petal, bit of soil, I was
helping make another space where we might gather together,
a more affirming place for our full Black beings.





Derek Ofodorinwa relates that “in ọdị́nala ndi Igbo, an individual’s life is not a book but rather a page in the middle of a story that stretches to the beginning of existence.”¹¹ As I reflected on this statement, I wondered to myself. *Which books felt meaningful? Which books represented my ancestors’*

¹¹ Derek Ofodorinwa (2021). “Ancestors Explained – Why Are Ancestors Important?” *The Medicine Shell*. Online. Accessed July 1, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9rEKOIKN8w&t=937s>.

and my connected trajectories, stretching in continuity from the beginning of existence into the present moment and also beyond? I turned to the books of some African scholars, African and Black feminists whose work and thinking I am learning from: Ifi Amadiume¹² and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí¹³ and Petero Kalulé¹⁴ and Saidiya Hartman¹⁵ and Audre Lorde.¹⁶ I pressed each of the flowers I collected into meaningful pages within these books, through a slow process of flattening them through pressure and over time. The process takes several days, and as the days passed, their moisture slowly seeped out, and the process produced dried, paper-thin petals, leaves, and stems and flower-stained pages. This was a practice of working with these flowers and plants, sourced from spaces intimately tied to painful experiences of exclusion, but also finding each other, and situating them – and my own life – in books that shape me.

¹² Ifi Amadiume (2015). *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.

¹³ Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁴ Petero Kalulé (2019). *Kalimba*. Cornwall: Guillemot Press.

¹⁵ Saidiya Hartman (2019). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. London: Serpent's Tail.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde (2018). *The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. London: Penguin Classics.

I experimented with pressing hydrangeas between the words of Audre Lorde in her essay on “Uses of the Erotic,” where Lorde writes:

The erotic functions for me in several ways and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.¹⁷

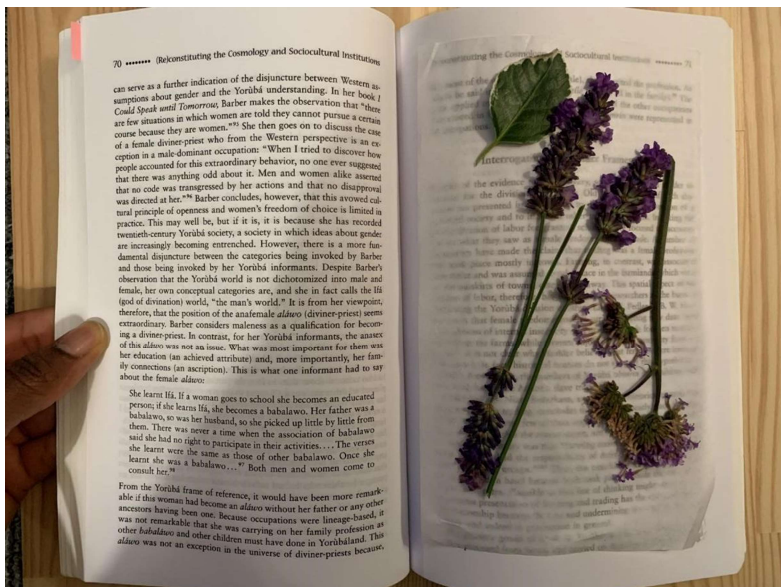
Reading this essay again, I reflected on a conversation with Azeezat, where we talked about reading each other’s work and shared a mutual appreciation for each other’s writing. I think about that conversation as our own bridge of Black relation across our difference.

I also returned to the words of Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí in *The Invention of Women*, where Oyěwùmí problematizes our westernized presumptions of gender (not part of traditional Yoruba culture and social organization!). I placed lavender

¹⁷ Audre Lorde (2018). *The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*. London: Penguin Classics, p. 70.

between two pages where Oyěwù mí critiques Karen Barber's gendered understanding of the babalawo in Yoruba society: A babalawo is a diviner, a spirit guide in Ifa, but Barber locates the *woman* babalawo as “extraordinary” based on her incorrect (westernized) understanding of (projection onto) this lineage-based profession.¹⁸

When I read Oyěwù mí's saltiness toward this and other scholars in this book, Azeezat's laugh sounds in my ears.



¹⁸ Oyèrónké Oyěwù mí (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 70

When Petero Kalulé sent me their poem-book *KALIMBA*, they had placed lavender between two pages. When I first opened their book, the scent – and the tenderness and care with which they thought of me – wafted from its pages. This small action reminded me of care within/without the academy, its presence in the small actions we do for each other: The words we write and share with each other can also be felt, experienced, and can enact tenderness. Their action and the tenderness behind it also informed this experimental practice in deep ways. As I placed branches of reddish and green *Berberis* leaves between pages of their poem “The truth,” I reflected on the words they wrote:

how do you exit a poem ?
you do-
n't, you
may walk out of it unsung, outsung
null, w-
rung in vex perpetua, but soon

you
return
keyed to the latches of its music, 2

greet it, hug it &
chime endless in C-
ipience, inside the room of its
doors¹⁹

Their words remind me that books and their prose, text, stories, lyrics, poems, and ideas are world-making spaces, also spaces that we inhabit – endlessly – sitting within, greeting and conversing with others in intellectual, emotional, and corporeal ways. Their words make us feel: enable us to feel seen and heard and listened to and touched.

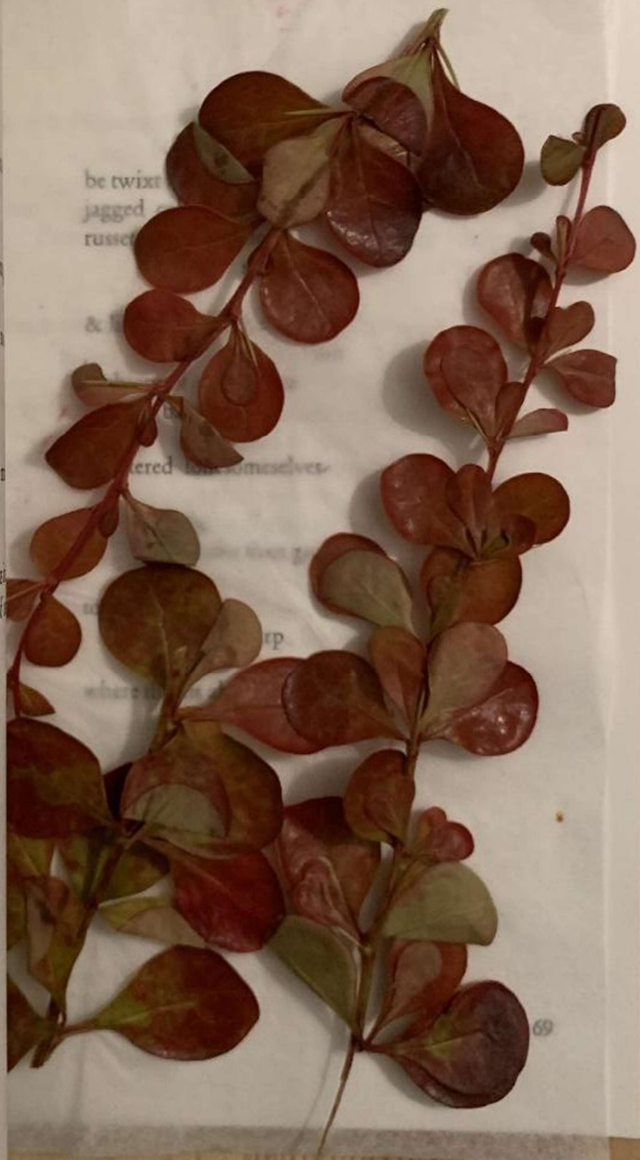
¹⁹ Petero Kalulé. (2019). "The truth." *KALIMBA*. Cornwall: Guillemot Press, p. 68.

The truth
— for Matana

how do you exit a poem
you do,
n't, you
may walk out of it unscathed
null, w
rung in vex perpetua, but

you
return
keyed to the latches of its

greet it, hug it &
chime endearment
ipience, inside the room of
doors



I returned to these books and each author's words, ideas, and offerings, and I pressed these flowers and leaves and plants into their pages. I worked across multiple times: the *lifetimes of and between ancestors*, each making their own page within an endless story that stretches across time; the *lifetimes of plants and flowers*, both in the ways they grow over years from the soil into the air and each year as their bulbs emerge into flowers; the *timespan in which I picked, pressed, and placed these flowers between pages* to shape something new through the way I gathered them together, and the *evolution of this experimental practice* as I moved between these ideas.

This process of pressing flowers – of bringing together the flowers and plants with these books and pressing them together for days or weeks, also produced something new. The marks and stains on these pages from these flowers shaped a relation that continues to remind me of this process – and remind me of my ancestors, including Azeezat - each time I return to these books.

Uses of the Erotic

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.

It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been

Uses of the Erotic

warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honour and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

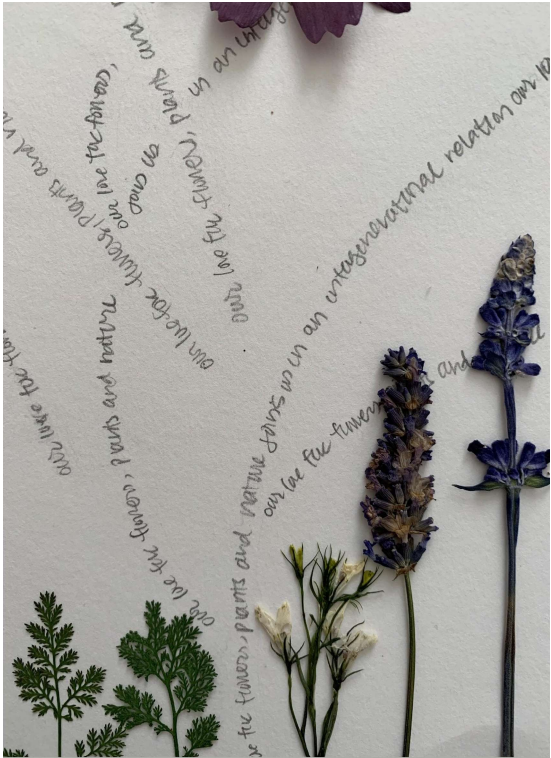
It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go

I turn to pencil and paper to meditate on the thinking that comes up for me again and again as I am working through this process. First, this one:

Our love for flowers, plants and nature joins us in intergenerational relation.

I use this meditative sentence over and over, using it produce new shapes on the page, like the stem and branches of a tree or plant.

I placed the pressed flowers on this canvas, layering these materials and processes together to build something new, as a way of gathering these flowers, and ideas, and practices learned and shaped through ancestral influence. And it becomes my own process of making something new and something beautiful.



Something deeply connected to my relations.

I am interested in the layers and the textures and the different arrangements...

...and I am performing these relations.

I am learning from my grandfather and my mother's own skill for landscaping, and my grandmother and my shared appreciation for this world's natural beauty.



I return, again, to Azeezat, Francesca and Katucha's poem.

What else do you get to dream of beyond the words that you
have to use in this world?

What else do we want to dream of beyond what we have now?

Revolutions and the sun.

“revolutions are just evolutions happening again and again” -
Wasi Daniju

Stretching the possibilities of meaning,

Black people's different cosmo visions.

Thinking beyond time as something "out there" (again).

Repeating and remixing,
returning to our words and worlds,

creating more space

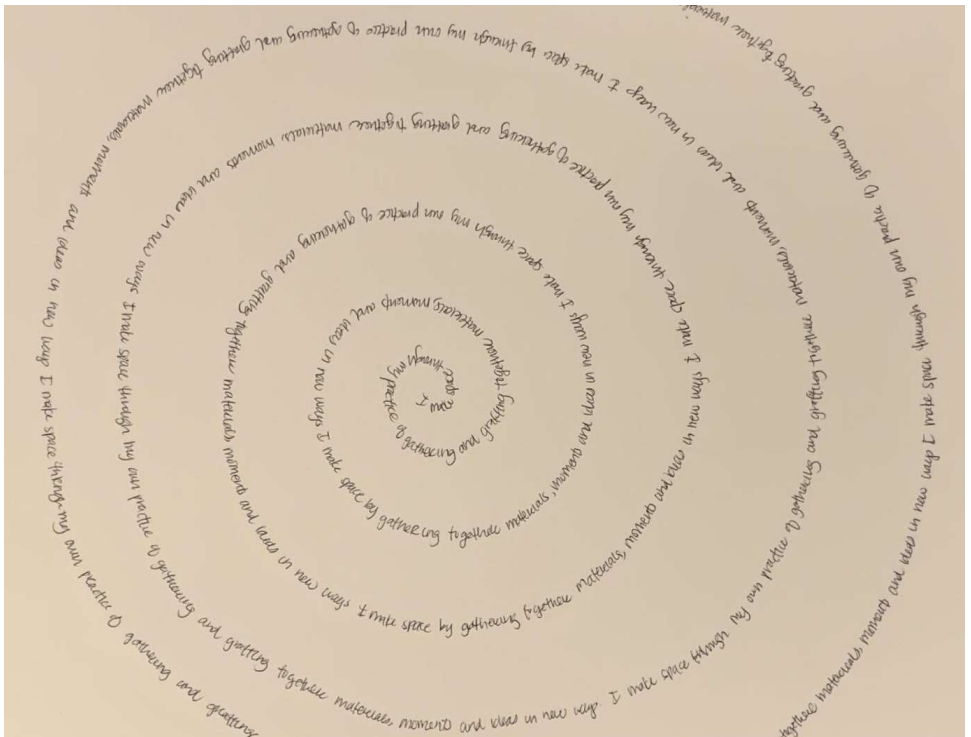
for us to breathe through

In astronomy, constellations are groupings of stars that were
imagined—at least by those who named them—to form
conspicuous configurations of objects or creatures in the sky.
I wonder: Who names these constellations? Who says what
shapes these clusters of stars form? What if we imagined

constellations as spirals, cycling around and around in endless evolutions? What if we imagined time as these constellations – “just evolutions happening again and again?”

From these questions, I shape a new meditation:

I make space through my own practice of gathering and grafting together materials, moments, and ideas in new ways.



Each part of the process layers and builds upon the next: our university experiences, our writings, my ancestors, me, Azeezat, these flowers growing in Weston Park, my walks throughout the park, collecting them, the processes of selecting books, of picking pages and pressing the flowers in between. I am shaping constellations. I am shaping space – this constellation – through my own practice of gathering and grafting together materials, moments, and ideas. Within this constellation is all of us: my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother, my dream, each and every plant and flower we have seen and loved.



And to center her Black presence, it is at the center of this space that I place Azeezat. It is a space of love and care, of laughter, of life and death, and hope and grief, and I like to think that it can hold everything for us.

