

GEM

A community of public scholars demanding and embodying liberation

Newsletter August 2023



Image from Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye's practice/writing
Grafting Flowers, Dreams & Ancestors

Image description: A panel of four images, the left one twice as wide as each of the other three columns. Each shows a section of a collage: trails of pencilled words as the stems of many colourful pressed flowers, a row of dried leaves and plants creating their foundation.

Dear friends,

As summer vacillates between spring and autumn, and the world somehow keeps turning, through tragedy, celebration and everything in between, we find ourselves emerging to reconnect with you. Our outward silence has been filled with inner reflection, planning and practicing, and a variety of beginnings, endings and continuations. Read on to know a little more of what we have been doing, and thank you as ever for allowing us to move at a pace that is livable.

With love and appreciation, GEM Collective



Call Me By My Name

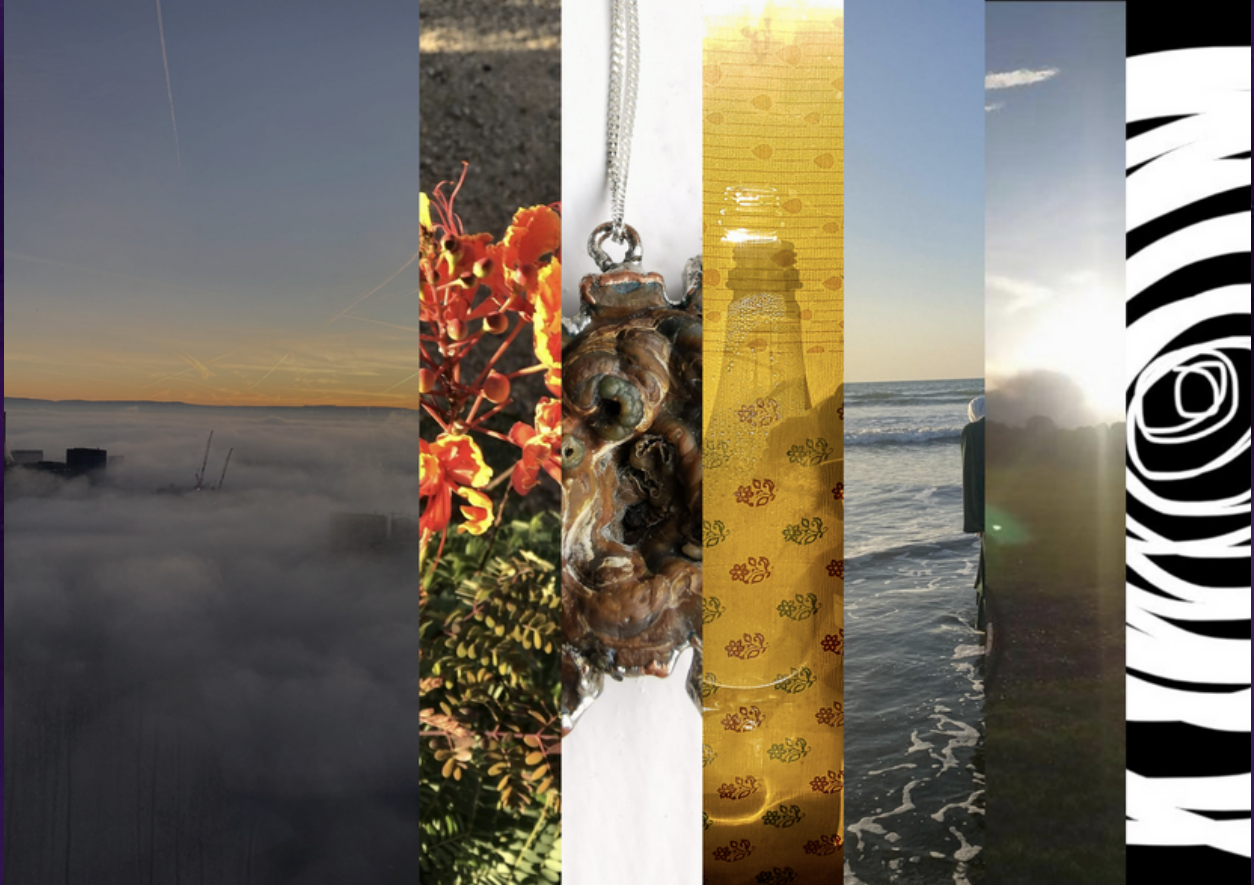


Image description: Image is made up of 7 panels/strips of different images, with the left-most panel being double the width of all the others. From l-r, images show glimpses of: cloud cover with a sunset in the background; a deep orange plant; a fossilised butterfly; a bottle behind a yellow scarf; someone standing at the edge of the sea; a sun-burst across a field; a white spiral on a black background.

We wanted to find a way to share more of who we are, to give you a glimpse of the GEM members, those holding up the tent, or trusting in the starry sky of constellations that we are creating together. But the standard headshot and bio didn't fully serve to bring out the other elements of our selves. So here we are, in our own words, a brief window into our worlds, one where the view may change depending on the day.

Come through, meet with us, call us by our names.



Black Presence

These past months have witnessed a further unfurling of the Black Presence project, with sharings from a number of Black GEMS.

Dream Event by Sahra-Isha Muhammad Jones

Sahra-Isha recollects the Black Presence gathering held in July 2022, a space for dreaming together and also one which held room for our collective grief and remembrance of Azeezat and others we had lost.


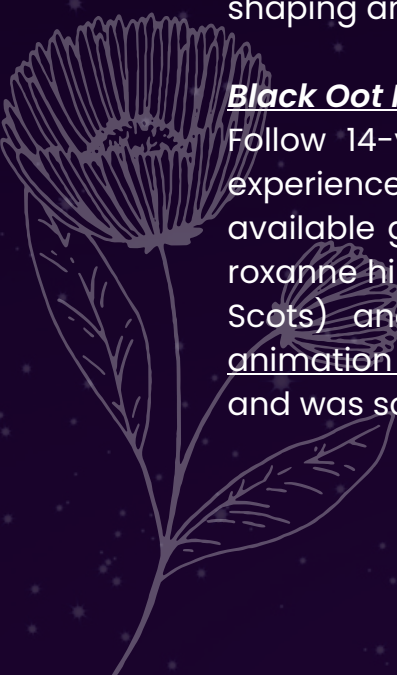
Black Presence: A Gathering of Words by Black GEMS

A poem/sharing/pooling of thoughts, ideas, dreams and plans for what the Black Presence project is and will be, written by Azeezat, Francesca and Katucha.

Grafting Flowers, Ancestors & Dreams by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye

As part of last summer's gathering, Ogoegbunam created this contemplative, vulnerable and ultimately powerful sharing where she responded "to the poem written by Azeezat Johnson, Francesca Sobande and Katucha Bento and to Azeezat's scholarly and personal legacy by shaping an experimental practice-process".

Black Oot Here: Dreams O Us co-authored by Francesca Sobande



Follow 14-year-old Ola's thoughts and dreams in this story about the experiences, history, and lives of Black people in Scotland. This freely available graphic novel is co-authored by Francesca Sobande and layla-roxanne hill, illustrated by Chris Manson, and translated by Lesley Benzie (in Scots) and Naomi Gessesse (in Scottish Gaelic). The accompanying [animation](#) was created by Oran Rose O'Sullivan/Leeds Animation Workshop and was soundtracked by the dreamy music of Nathan Somevi.



How We Build Home

After 6 months (with some closure part way through), *How We Build Home* ended its stay at Museum of the Home in January. Since that ending there has been a period of recovery and reflection on the time spent in a space that invited us in but managed somehow to remain a discomfoting residence. The exhibition's outing allowed for some beautiful sharings in the form of creative workshops facilitated by Jess Rowley, Watan (SLRA Men's Group), Olumide Popoola, Alaa Al-Saraji and Oluwatosin, and sowed the seeds for how things can be different in future iterations.

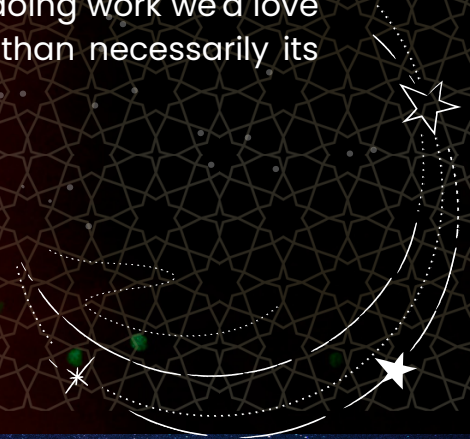
We are currently dreaming of the next sharing of the project, considering ways to bring it to community spaces rather than more commonly considered institutions, thinking of how to bring it to places where people already are, places where people already feel at home.

Meanwhile, we are putting together a film of the exhibition and look forward to sharing it hopefully later this year with an online event, then making it available on the GEM site.

Sitting In The Process Together

Originally planned with Azeezat as an interactive part of the *How We Build Home* exhibition, this element of the project has been on the back burner for a while, but is slowly coming to the forefront. A series of talks, conversations and gatherings with a variety of people doing work we'd love to know more about and share for its process rather than necessarily its outcome.

We'll keep you updated as things progress.



Things that have struck us

Home is Not a Place

A collaboration between Photographer Johny Pitts and poet Roger Robinson whereby they travelled together around the British coast seeking the answer to the question "What is Black Britain?". Their exhibition recreates a warm home space, familiar in so many ways, inviting visitors to enter and dwell a while.

"The intention is for the gallery space to function as both a diaspora home and dreamscape...moving away from the anthropological, and towards something more egalitarian. Our collaborative project is from Black Britain, rather than about Black Britain; we weren't seeking to explain - people and places will be apparent to anyone from those locations." - Johny Pitts

Exhibition is currently at Photographer's Gallery until 24 September.

Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes

Arriving to a soundscape of danfo conductors calling out destinations and precautions to passengers and revelling in recognition of South London and Lagos combined made so much of this exhibition feel like being home.

"Known as 'Little Lagos', Peckham is home to one of the largest Nigerian diaspora communities in the UK. *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* is a major group exhibition looking at the connections between Lagos in Nigeria and Peckham in south east London."

The exhibition is co-curated by Folakunle Oshun, founder and director of the Lagos Biennial, together with South London Gallery. Runs at South London gallery until October 2023.

Maslaha - Coming Home Project

"A politically conscious, needs-based community support service for Muslims harmed by the criminal justice system.

...our initial focus is providing a free, confidential therapeutic service provided by Muslim therapists and created in partnership with community organisations and those who have been through the prison system."

A project co-developed by Maslaha, The Lantern Initiative and Dr Tarek Younis - email cominghome@maslaha.org for more information.

Members' updates

Nejma Collective

The Nejma Collective are excited to be expanding our core team to include ten new volunteers who will be focusing on growing Nejma's capacity to be in solidarity with our siblings in prison, and also to build strategies around pen-pal relationships; researching and sharing the unique information our siblings share with us; and dreaming about how to raise funds without being beholden to institutions or forced to become a bureaucratic machine.

Over the summer we visited HMP Downview, a women's prison in Surrey, to spend time with the women there during the blessed days of Hajj. GEM member, Suhaiymah, led an impromptu poetry workshop with some of the women who shared beautiful complicated tales about where they 'come from' in the most qualitative and sensory ways. Such poetry feels like the very reason poetry was made.

Remember you can [join Nejma's mailing list](#) to keep up to date with our latest projects and strategies around working with our friends in prison, [here](#).

Seeing for ourselves: and even stranger possibilities

Our member, Suhaiymah, has a new book coming out on 28 September with Hajar Press. This book is an attempt to explore why we yearn to be seen when we are already so visible; how we want to be perceived; and whether we could ever truly see for ourselves.

The blurb reads, "In memoir, vignettes, poetry and essays, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan records her observations from the stands at the dizzying circus of being seen and unseen. She surveys the criminalising stadium of civic life, the open-air arenas of family, friendship and grief, the performative pageantry of the public eye and the unclad secrets of the self in solitude, paying attention to what's on show and what goes undetected.

Perhaps the strangest, most exciting possibilities are opened when we surrender to another kind of sight. Submitting to the gaze of the Unseen and the All-Seeing, Manzoor-Khan invites us to close our eyes and discover what it would mean to look with our souls instead".

The book can be [pre-ordered here](#).