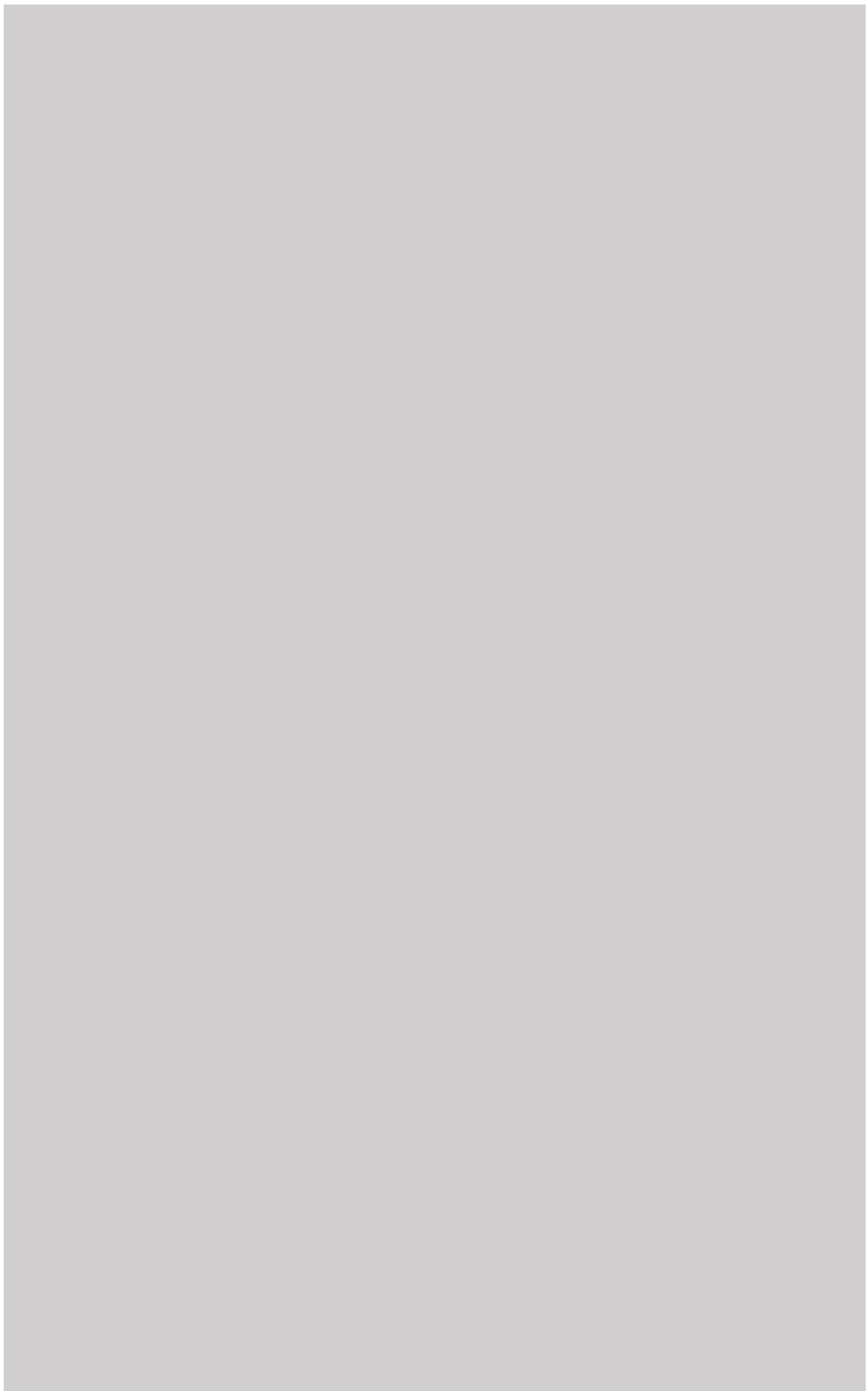


teaching my daughters
the art of breathing

Djénéba Diallo





teaching my daughters, the art of breathing

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*“may these words always remind you your breath is sacred words
bring out the god in you”*

Suhair Hammad

**teaching my daughters
the art of breathing**

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*Do not be small
in your greatness.*

Confused memories

Bamako, yesterday I dreamed of you,
Afternoons gambolling in your gardens,
Flowery and beautiful,
The smell of my childhood.

Your women praying in the yard,
Daddy was coming to my house,
through your dynamic streets,
we were free to run, to dance,
to breathe, to live.

Your sun,
radiant and powerful,
Kissing our melanin.

Painful,
Afternoons braiding my hair.
My friend's wedding on a Sunday.
Grandmother teasing me in Bamanankan,
Kassonké, Malinké and Fulani*,
*Toroma Naloma** she often said laughing.

The harmattan,
your phonetics,
sweet diversity,
your people free,
to eat from the fruits of your soil,
ripe mangoes,
fresh bissap and ginger.
Remembrance of Bamako.

Bamako, you were one of a kind!
A place of birth,
filled with passion and confusion,
painted with compassion and perfection,
lost memories,
prodigious, entangled stories.

Yesterday I dreamed of you,
waking up to those memories,
and a few migrants to read those lines.

Neïssa's self-esteem

There,

They say we are oreos,

Dark like cocoa outside,

But, pale like milk inside,

Toubabou! *

They call,

Mocking the way we walk,

Teasing the way we talk.

Here,

Exotic,

They state,

Like goods from the other side of the world,

Their voices veiled with toxic curiosity,

Fake authenticity.

Never enough for here,

Never enough for there,

Neither lost pieces,

Nor pieces shackled.

We are right here.

We do not need to piece

ourselves together,

We are whole – at peace!

Nomads!

We say,

Bearing our continent's heartbeat,
The adopted lands polyphony,
Never enough for here nor there,
But enough for ourselves.

Neïssa's self-esteem – An interview

How did you present yourself then Neïssa?

I belittled myself, I presented myself with vulnerability. It was a consequence of constantly being reminded of my differences in the only spaces I could feel home. I internalized the assumptions I heard about my otherness. Yet, convinced that they were erroneous reflection of my being.

How do you present yourself now Neïssa?

I am proud of having the privilege to see the world from so many different angles. It is freedom to perceive our reality from a larger spectrum. I am in love with my unique and inspiring experiences on this earth.

Therefore, I don't tolerate words or actions of self-blame or any type of aggressions directed to my essence. I ignore sometimes, make fun when in the mood or speak up when there is room for discussion. I am at peace all the time.

*The tongues of Ba Sali, Ba Djénné, Ba Marième and Maliba**

The mother tongues are the Mother tongues,
spoken by the first land,
and by the homeland,
chosen by nature,
native to the soul,
language of the heart,
reflection of the mind.

Every day I am,
reaching out to you,
seeking a connection,
to your loving nation,
seeking your validation,
from my daily frustration.

Powerful, tender energies,
divine resilience,
amazing synergies,
breath-taking eloquence.

Every day I pray,
To follow your pace,
To mimic your grace.

What your mother could not tell you, Aïssata

Aïssata was still a child then,
her mother captured a few memories,
now on the pages of her heart written,
before leaving- Home.

Swallowed by the flying bird,
somewhere between air and earth,

there she landed,
ignored by a grandmother who left without consideration,
ignored by her aunties who did not bother to care.

In a place where her own blood,
left the innocent child she was,
eat misery,
swallow instability,

Aïssata felt an unspeakable type of insecurity,
nourishing her endless sensitivity,
her confused identity.

Why am I here?

She constantly asked weeping.

Louder, stronger, the tears heavier.

Why did we leave?

This place, I hate!

why am I here?

Why? Tell me mom?

Longing for her father's absence,
confused by her mother's silence,
home has failed her.

Home stopped being safe.

Home ceased being love.

Home was not,

Home,

anymore.

Sisterhood

Joy.

Joy was joy.

A joyful heart.

A joy to my soul.

A shelter to my insecurity,

In a place, I was not belonging.

She was a comfort to my existence,

A sister in my hood,

A confidant in my school.

Our paths separated,

once the sisterhood faded.

confusing as it was,

there were no deep feelings involved.

For the upcoming

sister friends,

soul twins,

spirit supporters,

nerve calmers,

broken-heart healers,

she paved the way.

Ancestor's connecting,

genuine debating,

life-crisis managing,

honest dialoguing,
connection beyond traveling.

Joy was joy.
Nothing but inspiration,
and elevation
in a difficult hood.

Aminata is Afro-European

As a teenager,
my history teacher
gave me the most serious speech I ever heard.

After class she took me apart from the other pupils,
she was concerned about my school-less behaviour,
although school a place of self-expression,
and still there was no space left for self-reflection.

Stop affirming your black identity she said,
Me, being a woman first was her priority.
But ironical and foolish her discourse of feminism,
wrapped in colour-blindness and denial sounded.
She never had faced the prejudices of being black,
nor did she have to think about intersectionality,
a connection between being a woman and black,
a discourse of the most privileged,
leaving marks in a mind under healing process.

Not an act of discrimination,
a structure of racism!

Aminata is Afro-European – An interview

What did you feel this day Aminata?

This day I felt heavy. I was a teenager on a self-discovery journey trying to make sense of my own history.

Getting to know the role Africans played in that history we are taught at school was important for me. I was a young Black woman, who wanted to know more about her ancestry.

The only time I heard about Africans during history classes was during a slavery and colonization class, which underlined their own responsibility in the plea that affected them. I knew that there were more to that narrative. That day, I was upset, as if my body did not have its place in this classroom.

What do you feel today Aminata?

I still feel confused sometimes, when people try to compare my history of prejudice and injustice, here, to the stares they experience in - what they refer as - exotic countries.

The socio-historical and cultural context is of great difference. I belong here, I grew up here, I live here – injustice has direct and lasting consequences on my being. The stares they experience are not pessimistic nor aggression to their identities.

I feel light most of time, as I have done the work necessary, educated, healed myself outside the classroom.

I also feel compassionate for those denying the history of others, undermining other experiences to boost their own ego. The racist structure we live in and the denial of this structure do not affect my mental health as it used to.

Habiba's lessons on freedom

1. Independence is both sweet and sour.
2. It sometimes equals instability.
3. The more you learn to love your company the fuller you feel,
4. Free time should be used for creating.
5. Independence can wait,
6. Because starving sucks.
7. Know your roots, your purpose, your interests, your goal.
8. Submit to spiritual laws.
9. Relationship with oneself first.
10. Self-love, self-care, time with oneself.
11. Lust and love are different concepts
12. I am not stupid I just was never loved
13. Being stuck requires internal change.
14. Internal change implies external move.
15. There was a reason to my leaving.
16. Moulding your life is painful.
17. No problem is solved by simply leaving.
18. Independence is not freedom.

Feeling good

It never feels good
not to feel good.

But not feeling good
is sometimes good.

Sadness
breaks you
only to repair you.

It feels good to let yourself be,
to sit with your emotions.

To understand,
to rediscover,
to seek and long
for yourself.

That is not beauty but a standard

How can you let their standards of beauty invade your mind?

when you have seen your great-grandmother,

fearless tattoos surrounding her mouth,

fullness hips dancing from left to right,

curvy.

Her hair, her crown,

short and kinky,

conveying admiration and dedication,

to every man and woman,

setting eyes on her.

Mariam, Maïmouna, Mamy you are Ma-jes-tic

Magic,

Is that melanin.

Divine,

that hair.

Melodic,

That skin.

If your mind is chained,

and these words,

taste bitter,

remember your grandmothers.

honourable dances and songs

echoing throughout your hometown,

Look at your aunts,

defying circumstances,

winning untold battles.

The ancestors never lie,

seek for their energy,

majestic and electrical.

Break free,

Unchain your mind.

Mariam, Maïmouna, Mamy you are Ma-jes-tic – An interview

What is your relationship with your beauty, Mariam, Maïmouna and Mamy?

We feel beautiful, we think beautiful, we are beautiful (*laughs*). Our beauty is part of our heritage. Our confidence in our beauty stems from our confidence in our own people's beauty.

How can't we think we are beautiful? How could we think otherwise when we came from queens? Our mom, our aunties and grandmothers are women who shine through holding a type of beauty that we were always humbled by.

We are reflections of those women, we carry their light. We would never accept someone criticising their glory. We, as a family are majestic and naturally us, Mariam, Maïmouna, Mamy, carry ourselves that way.

When has it become so taboo?

When has it become taboo?

To condemn oppression,
The agony of other nations,
Affliction of mankind.

Is it to make them feel comfortable?

We feel the weight,
chose to rise above it.
Only to end up
crumbling under it.

Our tongues,
Yet too foreign in our own mouths,
Apologizing for every part of us that whispers,
colonization, death, feminism,
slavery, war, racism.
Still we stroke their ego.

We let it become taboo.
For us to crawl under the burden
Of so many untold stories,
And defeated glories.

The thoughts of Fathim from Africa to India

Eyes wide-opened,
when I Pass,
Their children hands,
They grab,
Their children,
They beat,
After a talk with me,
What did I do wrong?

Disdain in their eyes,
I see,
As if my body,
Covered with stains and sin,
My tongue cursing my ancestors' honour,
Why do I feel this bad?

But our neck the same pigments,
Carry,
Our mouths similar stories,

Telling,
Heavy words expressing a narrative,
eradicated from popular culture.
A history of exploitation and desolation.

Our mouths are shaped
The same
Some fuller,
some darker,

some wiser,
but just the same.

Millions of people like me,
like us,
the same eyes
carrying,
the same mind
holding.

So why do I feel ashamed.
when walking down our streets?

Home for the first time

Home,
not a place
but a feeling.
I am happy,
At ease
and nothing
is,
the cause
of it.

Words for Bintou

It hurts.

in the body, in the mind,

in the soul.

How to stop that type of pain,

When there is nothing hold on to?

Dear Bintou,

You have a vision,

a love,

a mission.

Do not let your own mouth,

Nor those tongues of foreigners,

take over your perceptions,

invade your psyche,

leave indelible marks

in your mind,

that says otherwise.

Say Sorry ...

For no reason
I have mistakenly
misjudged you,
mis-led you for years.

How badly I treated you
sin ningún respeto *.
Blaming your uncoolness,
trying to turn cool into school,
to boost my ego.

You always had my back
every actions,
every destination.,
how Sorry I am,
sorry for those irreversible years of hurtful judgements.

My precious heritage,
passed from one generation
to another,
you have never betrayed me,
now I understand that anything but acceptance is insane.

Now I understand that this skin, this hair,
this body is not mine.
They belong to my great-grandmothers,
my grandmothers and my mothers.

Sorry dear thighs, legs, belly...

Sorry dear body

I love you.

Why?

When they hurt,

We all hurt.

When they cry,

We all cry.

When they lose a life,

We all mourn.

For centuries,

Of struggles and suffer,

Our pain has turned to normality.

Raw is our humanity.

A Revolution is now to come.

Families torn apart.

Broken lives, shackled destinies.

The drowning in the Mediterranean Sea,

The torture across the mount Sinai.

Our uncles risking their lives to reach Libya.

Uncle Mohamed

and Toumani

-

died in Tripoli.

European citizenship

Tanty.*

She was very sick.

Nobody could help her, here.

She needed to leave, to live.

For months she has tried,

to get,

a Schengen visa.

She finally obtained her visa.

-

She died one day later.

Quite simply

Either you break

or you rest.

You breathe

or you fall apart.

Make art with your heart

Your material struggles.

Your personal struggles.

Your history.

Love them.

Do not pick pieces of yourself
to shy away from.

Love your art in its entirety.

It is yours

only yours

to accept,

to love and

to transform.

Make art with your heart.

Make the pieces of you,

you are ashamed of

be the pieces of your pride.

Make love with this intrigued infinity

of possibilities

that offers the present.

Hawa's gifts

You cannot slow down the beat of my drum,
lower the tone of my alto voice,
shame the imperfection of my body.

For I will not lend my soul to your expectations
nor dance to the rhythm of your assumptions.

The rhythm of my songs.

The rhythm of my soul.

Notes

Toroma Naloma: My homonym, the little brat – said jokingly, as grandmothers and great-daughters often carry the same name.

Toubabou: Word for European or White used in some West African countries.

Bamanankan, Kassonké, Malinké and Fulani: West African languages

Ba Sali, Ba Djénné, Ba Marième: Ba means mother in Bambara, Maninka, Dioula

Maliba: The great Mali

Tanty: An endearing words used to aunts similarly as aunty or to older women

Sin ningún respeto; Without respect in Spanish