

*Content warning for mention of **Family trauma, Abuse, and Suicide.***

1. “I Think it’s in the eyes” Interview with Kawtar and Avery

What is your name: Kawtar with her partner Avery from Canada

(@Garconmanque.e @Blush.party)

Age: K:24 A:23

Country of Origin: Morocco, Came to Canada as a student

Pronouns: She/Her

Sexuality: Lesbian! But personally it is very intimate and the term is not all-encompassing.

Very brings up the point that no one is truly able to live up to every single requirement for any gender they are assigned to even if they are cis and heterosexual, it takes a lot to fulfill gender. Avery explains that lesbian on its own is a separation from men and therefore disqualifies you from the traditional femininity; this is what she most aligns with

How old were you when you realized you were queer?

K: Pretty late but it was obvious to others; I was around other queer people but believed I was straight. My first crush was a really feminine man and I realize now I was responding to just his femininity. I think I was 17 or 18 when I really started realizing, but when I realised, it was so natural. I think it took a while to realize because I had a lot going on at home and was moving around so I didn't have time to think about it. When I was preparing to move to Canada, I remember being really excited to go to the Gay Village and meet people.

A: I was 13. When my friends would ask me who I had a crush on, I'd pick the name of a random boy that I tolerated because I didn't want anyone to know. My first crush was a trans guy who transitioned after we were together so I thought yeah I must be bi.

What was the experience of your queerness in your country? / did you learn to hide it

K: I was friends with queer people, we gathered together but everyone does things in secret so we just didn't talk about queerness family. I thought of myself as an ally to my friends. They knew I was sporty and hated dresses, dressed more sporty but I had longer hair that balanced the look out. My family didn't really associate that with queerness because it just wasn't connected to that. Now that I'm in Canada, I think it will be hard to pretend I'm not different because if I didn't come to Canada I don't think I would have been my full self.

The Law and culture: Torture, Criminalisation, People set up gay people from dating apps to attack them. There's a lot of violence so it's not safe or legal to be your real self.

Do people assume you're queer as soon as they meet you: K: Yes yes yes

How do you know without asking that someone else might be queer:

K: For me, it's the eyes. I feel like I know when there's a very different kind of eye contact that is definitely not just friendly and you can tell.

A: If someone is wearing the most extra outfit. It doesn't matter if it's super feminine or masculine, just a really expressive style sometimes. I think the way that queer people walk is usually different. There's a way they carry themselves. I feel like every woman I am attracted to walks with their pelvis out!

What is your general relationship to sex like? Did you experience shame about sex and sexuality even after moving?

K: When I was in Morocco I barely thought about sex but I always thought about shame because there's so much that is taboos already. There are a lot of people in the community that are always watching and gossiping about other people's business. I'm open to exploring myself now because I can but shame is always in the back of my mind. With my partner I feel more comfortable but with people I'm just meeting I'm less comfortable but the more I grow the easier it gets.

How do you challenge that shame and push past it to feel complete freedom?

K: I don't have anything but I really should develop some ways. When the shame hits it can take you to a dark place. I notice my shame more when I'm not surrounded by other queer people.

A: We're not in a world made for us. Even in movies they always talk about masturbation but that doesn't predominantly involve people with vaginas and if it does it's two white women and two femmes.

How do you show love to your partner and how do you like to share and receive love and reassurance from your partner?

A: We create recipes together and have our own secret language

K: Yeah there is so much harmony when we are cooking together. We don't even have to talk to understand each other since we've been together for 3 years.

A: I love having someone to wash my back! Cooking and eating together obviously. But seriously like every couple we had to find a way to communicate.

K: Yes I feel like a lot of Moroccan culture isn't really communicative so I had to learn and choose to talk about how I felt.

A: Yeah I need things to be resolved immediately while Kawtar takes some time. I feel like I have to talk about things immediately or I can't fall asleep!

Conclusion

We talked about the fact that we are dedicated to learning about ourselves and getting free from heteronormative expectations and the shame that comes with deviating. We all discovered that our childhood best friends are also gay even though we did not know it at the time. We talk about the intimate experiences of sharing food and eating together (They made me an amazing pasta and fed me wine all night). Finally we discussed community building and the lack of Lesbian and non-male queer spaces within the queer community. We always have to do extra work to counter the lack of spaces for lesbians in any city. Many queer spaces are catered only to gay men so we experience difficulty finding safety in our nightlife and places to simply flirt with each other. In the summer, Avery and Kawtar, through their endeavours (@Blush.party, @Garconmanque.e) hosted events that hosted queer women and non-men. In attending some of these events and speaking to several people, you could see the excitement they all felt, especially after a year of lockdown and vaccinations being rolled out. Everybody came dressed all the way up, very expressive with fresh haircuts. Respectful flirting and encouragement filled the space.

2. “نقشها ليك ؟” *Interview with Gaia*

What is your name: Gaia, It wasn't always my name, I felt so uncomfortable with the name my parents had given me. I felt like I didn't have a real name. So I started researching the Tamazight language which I had no real access to. Language is how they class people and they put this language at the bottom of the list. I started saying all these old names out loud and Gaia kept coming back to me. It was the name of an old democratic king. I think the name has different origin sources but I like the connection I found.

Age: 21, but I don't know how old my soul is!

Country of origin: Morocco

Pronouns: They them but lately (I've been gravitating towards She/her mostly in French)

Gender Identity, Sexuality: I Identify as a Trans Non-Binary person. I identify as Asexual and a little bit of a lesbian.

How old were you when you realized you were queer? I started realizing when my parents started expecting me to act a certain way with girls. I would pick a girl to tell them I was in love with just to play along but internally I hated it. I also just never related with boys like I was supposed to. I was 13 or 14 when I started feeling like the performance of straightness was not working out for me. It also took me a while to realize I was trans because I just thought I was depressed and I didn't want to be seen or exist in this physical world. I realized there was something inside of me that I was just expected to ignore forever. I was 16 and in Morocco at the time.

What was the experience of your queerness in your country? / did you learn to hide it: I knew I couldn't stay in Morocco but I also didn't want to go to the colonizer country (France) and become the “other” person which would leave me to be projected upon again. France completely obliterated the identities of the cultures and countries it colonized and constructed like a third of the continent into something it was not to sustain their false fantasy land. France is also heavily transphobic so I knew it would be a bad option.

The law: *Article 489. Punishes for 3 years any act by two people of the same sex that goes against good morals and “nature”.* There's so much work to do.

Is there something you love and miss about your home country

I miss people peeling oranges for me! It's a common gesture for oranges and eggs.

When and why did you come to Canada: I don't know how I got to this place, I wasn't really supposed to. I came here because my parents found out I kissed a boy and I had to leave when I was 17. My mum went through my messages and found out. The schools were also closed so they couldn't keep me. They still managed to make me sign a verbal contract that I would not be in any romantic relationship for the next 4 or 5 years until I figured myself out. I did the opposite of that. This was really hurtful as it led me into an abusive relationship which after I left I really had to do the work and figure myself out more.

Do people assume you're queer as soon as they meet you: I think so!

How do you know, without asking that someone else might be queer: I never want to project my own ideas onto other people like that but the is something because everyone I was friends with before also wound up being queer.

How did you change since you moved to Canada

I used to work on and study genetics and neuroscience and realized the field's direction was towards eugenics so I had to remember science doesn't exist in a vacuum and I don't believe I can be part of it in that way.

What is your general relationship to sex like? Did you experience shame about sex and sexuality even after moving

Being asexual, I still received a lot of judgement, rejection and pressure.

How do you challenge that shame and push past it to feel complete freedom

I've always had that connection to the outside world and nature just because I felt like the weight of expectations within society was too heavy to carry and perform. Now I explore my connection within nature, performance art and dancing. I'm not stuck in my body, that's just another narrative. I just needed agency and understanding that this is my vessel.

Conclusion

The people that they think are lower class are the people who survive a pre-colonial culture through language, storytelling, and naming. We talked about how Non-Binary and agender experience allows for divestment of strict identity roles and allow us to be fluid while constantly investigating ourselves. We talk about how language is manipulated to enforce gender binary but queer people learn to manipulate if for the sake of art, poetry and queer lexicon in our community. We talk about how non-binary identities have to know themselves so much more. The people who accepted and aligned with the gender and sexuality they were born into have not interrogated their own relationship with gender and sexuality, leaving a very political and crucial part of their identity unknown to them. We discussed how feeling rejected from family and initial community drives a lot of queer people into abusive relationships in search of acceptance. We may perform the toxic aspects of heterosexual relationships within queerness. We talked about how heterosexual fear of sex makes queer sex seem like deviation and this also ends up giving shame to everyone not just queer people. We shared how there is a queer magnetism and trans magnetism that we cant name. "Some people are walking around with the cage of gender and some people aren't and sometimes you can see that." "Violence is actually valuable to colonizers"; they are the ones who are allowed to write the stories that we hear about our people and history. They often exaggerate their violence just to seem even more victorious.

3. “Listening carefully” Interview with Princesse

What is your name: Princesse (@QuirNoir)

Age: 22

Country of origin: I am second generation Cameroonian! (Lived in France and now Canada)

Pronouns: She/They

Gender and Sexuality: I'm a Non-binary Fem

How old were you when you figure it out you were queer? When I was around 12 but really took the path of calling myself queer when I was 19!

What was the experience of your queerness in your family and culture? / did you learn to hide it

In my culture it is really related to political power, this is a way that politicians still have power. Homosexuals are seen as agents of destruction. Some people are afraid that queers will have relations with politicians and manipulate them and gain power with that energy. It's very hard to understand from the outside and it's really intense in the culture. In cultural gossip they say that you basically have to have sex with gay men to have power on others. They also view homosexuality is a white thing. In my family, we don't talk about it. When I was 16 I had feelings for a girl but my dad said at the dinner table "If one of you are homosexual, I'm going to kill myself". So I took that in. My mum had more experience because she had come to montreal at 18 and had a mix of friends I lived in Cameroon from 4 to 12.

The law: They can put you in prison for 7 years and they put trans people in even more horrible situations because they don't respect them or their true selves.

Is there something you love and miss about your home country?: I miss the food. You just can't recreate it here. When they cook there everything matters, the environment and material is different. I miss the vibe of community even though there were so many people and a lot of people with no boundaries. The door was always open to others. People are loud and coming to the house at all times to talk

Do people assume you're queer as soon as they meet you: Yeah from my instagram, my fashion, my hair, my septum piercing!

How do you express your identity: Through fashion. The way I dress really matters and the way I express myself through art. (Performance, theater, dance)

How do you know without asking that someone else might be queer: Theres a vibe with a specific fashion mixed with a queer vibes. Of course cisgender and heterosexual people can wear that same style but a lot of them learned it

from queer spaces without even realising. But it has to be mixed with a certain energy. Sometimes you can tell even when someone is extremely feminine or sexy with their style, it's still different from what is normally attractive to the male gaze. You can tell when they're really doing it to express themselves.

What is your general relationship to sex like? Do you experience shame about sex and sexuality

No. I have no shame.

How do you express love as a queer person: Listening. There's a difference in how intimacy is created in queer spaces because you still want to put boundaries, you want to make the person feel safer so there's this honesty with yourself and others that we know the damage that was done and we know we still have so much to work on so you try to be careful with their feelings. You have to really listen and watch the things that may be normalized in the world at large but may be very traumatizing or uncomfortable for the specific person. We make note of things to avoid to be able to make someone feel safe and see them, acknowledge their pain

Conclusion

We all are doing what we can to rid ourselves of shame, investigate our identities constantly. We learn that sharing our experiences and love openly in community and with a partner affirms us. We carry the weight of our family's expectations and decide it is not enough to please them and feel internal pain for the rest of our lives. This is how we create a language for love despite where we come from and who we are expected to be. Our hidden experiences and stories coming to the surface shows us we are not alone and we can find love and family in strangers of completely different backgrounds.

I hope I can continue to hear and share the stories of other people like this through my art and bring to light the beauty in our community. This project will be ongoing.