

In *Reverie*: Two Love Letters to Vinah

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Abstract

This text stages an expansion of further possibilities for Vinah, one of the characters in the video essay/essay film *Reverie* made by Nobunye Levin and Palesa Shongwe, through drawing on the structure of the film and the performance talk that accompanied its screening. In *Reverie*, the character of Vinah is mobilised in a critical engagement with Lionel Rogosin's film *Come Back Africa* (1959), in which she first appears. Vinah is cited as an example of the gendered nature of waiting and cast as a character that is deployed to examine the tensions and possibilities between dreaming and freedom among a cast of other women, including the makers of *Reverie*. In the film, the makers explore the concept and state of reverie as a political tool for “emancipatory dreams” and dreaming—a tool of political action to ward off the inertia of despair—in relation to this cast of women, including Vinah. This text further contemplates Vinah's role in *Come Back Africa* towards imagining a further set of possibilities for what she might dream of and how this might exemplify freedom for her. This is offered in the form of two love letters to Vinah in which the makers directly address her in their reflections and further imagining through reverie.

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Preamble

Prompt/Context

Reverie emerged out of over a decade of love and friendship and creative collaboration, formally in the production of films and informally through conversations about each other's work.^[1] Palesa has appeared in two of Nobunye's films as a performer *I am Saartjie Baartman*^[2] and *SpilLover*^[3] and Palesa has cited Nobunye's ideas around the use of aesthetics as a tacit influence in some of her early and more recent work, namely *Atrophy*^[4] and *11-19*.^[5] Fragments and out-takes from each of these films appear in *Reverie*.

We are both concerned with the politics of aesthetics in relation to decolonial feminist film praxis that works to realise a transformation of representational practices in cinema and in the “world” through cinema's relationship to “world-making”. Our shared preoccupations are made manifest in different ways and cohere and diverge in

our approaches to our individual films. What sutures our work and our collaborative life in all its forms is a politics of “feminist love praxis”,^[6] which guides how we aim to “do life” and our dreams for the world. Broadly conceived, “feminist love praxis” is about a refusal of the innocence of love in order to consider it as a “practice of freedom”,^[7] and as a transformational space^[8] for feminist love praxis.^[9] This is an approach to feminism that is multi-dimensional in its operation and analysis, a “feminism of totality”^[10] “a methodology that aims to take into account the *totality* of social relationships”^[12] akin to Françoise Vergès’ theorisations of what she calls “a decolonial feminism”.^[13]

“Feminist love praxis” is a “practice of freedom”^[14] that seeks “to transform the world beyond recognition”,^[15] and is thus a project that looks for total emancipation from interlocking structures and forms of oppression. Although the term and its theorisation emerge from Nobunye’s research, it has been a feature of our practice and collaboration before we had the words for it much like dreams and dreaming.

Love and imagination/dreaming are twin flames they are powerful social forces that galvanise political movements and provide the impetus and form for different political praxes.^[16]

The politics of dreams and dreaming feature in our films *SpillOver*, where one of the fragments in the film considers dreaming in relation to self-making through self-love for black women, *uNomalanga and the Witch*, where dreaming is a site for the exploration of desire and generative transgressions against patriarchal Christian prescriptions of acceptable forms of love, and *11-19*, which lays recollected dreams over scenes of the Swiss city of Winterthur, in an experimental reflection on displacement and the loss of the ability to dream.

It is this mutual preoccupation with dreams and their link to freedom that leads us to *Reverie*, the first film we have made together. As our first co-authored work, it instantiates the beginning of a direct collaboration as a filmmaking duo and begins to enunciate our shared ideas as a dream for cinema and its function in transforming the world.

Orientation

The public presentation of *Reverie* takes the form of a screening and a performance talk that, combined, operate as a kind of expanded cinema, where facets of the film’s form and concept spill over into the screening room through their embodiment in the performance and the performers. In this fragmentary poetic text, we deploy the epistolary form, call and response, conversation and the structural “logic” of reverie and thereby extend the logic of expanded cinema to stage aspects of the performance talk and also allow the conversation and form in the film, which expanded into our performance, to spill onto the page. Although *Reverie* is theoretically a “finished” piece, it remains, like all dreams and those states that lie “in between”, always unfinished in its conceptualisation as a film continuously in process.

To Begin Again...

NOBUNYE: An unfinished film...

PALESA: To begin again.

NOBUNYE: Here we stage an expansion, overlapping with and extending from *Reverie*, to imagine further possibilities for Vinah in *Reverie*. Vinah, whom we both have loved. In the structure of this expansion, we borrow

from the structural logic of reverie found in *Reverie*.



Still from *Reverie* (2023), citing *Come Back Africa* (1959)

Reverie lies at the nexus of videographic criticism and the essay film. It is a work in process, revealing knowledge as open-ended. It is a work of epistolary, ephemeral impressions organised through the “logic” and action of reverie, where echo and resonance are considered. Freedom and pleasure are imagined through the aesthetic and form of states of reverie, where the haptic achieved through the use of dissolves and superimposition of multiple images, sometimes in conjunction with slow motion, and the layering of image and sound is also conjured as a further site of freedom and pleasure.

Reverie enacts a relational reverie, where a series of women dream of one another in call and response a freedom dream tracing the reverberations of various “freedom dreams” in the audio-visual bonds between different fragments.^[17] In this tracing of the notion of a freedom dream is the consideration of the concept and state of reverie as a political tool for “emancipatory dreams” and dreaming.^[18] A tool of political action to ward off the inertia of despair.

The Set-Up

Dear Palesa,

Do you remember the dreaming in *Félicité*?^[19] In the film, moments of crisis for the central character, Félicité, are punctuated by a recurrent dream: in a forest, she wanders and encounters, in a state that appears to be neither wakeful nor asleep. A somnambulist.

These moments are unexpected and sublime.

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Excerpt from *Félicité*, Alain Gomis, 2017.

In classical cinema, the dream is a causal object of the narrative. It exists to serve the narrative and its goals towards narrative closure. There are of course exceptions, but ordinarily the dream is absorbed by the film's narrative logic. The narrative is the ascendent and all the affective and productive powers of the dream are sublimated to it.

In *Félicité*, Gomis frees the dream from this hierarchy. The dream co-creates the narrative, but remains discrete, never reabsorbed or explained.

Dear Nobunye,

I recall what you said about how the surrealists exploited the dream in cinematic gestures performed to disrupt bourgeoisie rationalism. And I recall you mentioning Julie Dash, who in *Daughters of the Dust* employed the dreamt world through film style and language to reproduce the syncretic metaphysics and vernacular of the characters she depicted.^[20]

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Excerpt from *Reverie*, Nobunye Levin and Palesa Shongwe, 2023.

My dearest Nobunye,

In *Reverie*, we spoke of what you described as the capitalist, racist and hetero-patriarchal “dream machine” of the Hollywood industrial mode. We have refused its presumptions of what will kill us, how we will die, how we shall be resurrected and what to dream for and of. Like *Félicité*, we are somnambulists, and have chosen our own rapture.

Because, like the filmmaker Djibril Mambety, we know that cinema must be reinvented, and reinvented each time, we return, you and I, to films we've seen together, made together and loved together.^[21] We return each time with a “new cinephilia” that refuses to look only where the camera directs us to look, that delays the flow of narrative, and returns us again and again, that opposes, searches and wanders.^[22]

We never walk into a film alone. Vergès, hooks, Mistry, Minh-ha... all walk with us. Because, for you and me, cinema is not only what we dream of, but the way we dream. And so, when the act of watching invites us to sleep, we keep an eye half-open and proclaim:

We are dreaming of different women dreaming of themselves.

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Excerpt from *Reverie*, Nobunye Levin and Palesa Shongwe, 2023.

To dream is serious work.

NOBUNYE: In her essay “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, Maria Lugones asserts, “[f]eminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it.”^[23] In *Reverie* we explored the concept and state of reverie as a political tool for emancipatory dreaming for women.

NOBUNYE AND PALESA: We explored how reverie might transfix us in a new form of oneiromancy. Utopian thinking that forms part of decolonial thinking.

PALESA: In *Reverie* we have spoken of reverie as filled with errant ideas fugitive, ephemeral and disobedient just like film fragments.^[24] Fragments we retrieved from our existing films and deployed in *Reverie*. We revisited our imagined failures and used out-takes further fragments just as dreams might recollect the passing detritus of the day.

NOBUNYE: We have employed “repetition and return” to look at the woman in the pool doing nothing for no one.^[25] A body at rest, in reverie.

We have sometimes held these images of the woman in the pool “a minute too long” to be in reverie *with* her,^[26] through stretching out the cinematic image to allow space and time for associative thought, the interpretation of cinematic form and style, and reflection on resonance,^[27] transforming the act of “looking at” into one of “being with”.



Still from *Reverie* (2023)

NOBUNYE: *Reverie* emerges from a “feminist love praxis”,^[28] which is found in our collaboration both within the film and historically, experimentally employing out-takes and fragments from our previous works in critical conversation with the film *Come Back Africa* (1959)^[29] and YouTube clips of the South African singer and activist Letta Mbulu. In *Reverie* we propose reverie as a political concept to dream of Vinah in *Come Back Africa* otherwise and as a refusal against the inertia of despair.

In a poem, Dorothy Chan says, “our loved ones *will* appear when we’re asleep.”^[30] And so in reverie neither quite awake nor asleep we wonder further for you, Vinah. We dream further of different women dreaming of themselves.

Circling

The obsessive circling of a subject.^[31] To dream otherwise of Vinah.



Still from *Reverie* (2023) citing *Come Back Africa* (1959)

Come Back Africa details the plight of Zacharia a man driven by famine to seek work in the mines of Johannesburg, like tens of thousands of black men (and women) forced off the rural homelands of South Africa in search of providence. As titles near the opening of the film state, “[t]his film was made secretly in order to portray the true conditions of life in South Africa today. There are no professional actors in this drama of the fate of a man and his country. This is the story of Zacharia.”

Zacharia’s story, orchestrated as both fiction and document of reality, filmed in secret, presents a study of how Apartheid necessitated, restricted and shaped the movements of black bodies. Their itinerancy and continual displacement are characterised by Zacharia’s migrations from village to city, job to transient job, one job dismissal to another, underground and over, between suburbs and ghettos... He is constantly moving. For him, there is no place or time to stand still.

PALESA: When Zacharia’s wife, Vinah, appears in his cramped room, he receives her with a weary ambivalence. She has brought their children to Johannesburg to join him, propelled by lack, but also a wilful refusal to wait for money, for him, for life. I felt I saw my grandmother, who made the same journey to Johannesburg in the 1950s, who arrived in a room much smaller and less solid than Vinah’s and had to wait out a storm that eventually tore off the roof. We fixated on Vinah, and, in *Reverie*, we returned to her, searching for her like Saidiya Hartman does when she writes, “I have endeavoured to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known.”^[32]

NOBUNYE: We looked for you, Vinah. We looked at you in all your moments in *Come Back Africa* and looked for

you in your absences. We looked for you, again and again.

Letter 1:

Dear Vinah,

We found you in a one-room house, with your children and husband, sometimes alone, and mostly waiting.

We mostly see you through the prism of Zacharia's Johannesburg, alongside him and waiting for him or in crisis. A Johannesburg that maps the oppressive topography of his blackness in Apartheid South Africa. We understand your life as being under this same burden, only worse because you're a black woman. While searching for you we learn more about Zacharia.

We see him move from the mine to the madam's house, to a tavern, into another woman's arms, and then to the room where he and we find you. He knows you from before. We do not.

In his Johannesburg, you walk alongside him through Sophiatown to enquire about a place to stay. During your walk, you come across a wedding party, a street band and a church service, and in this way you are briefly suspended from the abjection of Apartheid to participate in the quotidian and enjoy a moment of revelry. We also see you drag your son away from a street fight. And sometime after this we see you declare to your husband that you must work as a domestic worker one of the only jobs available to black women at the time. To make more money. To move your children away. We recognise that dream. It is emblematic and does not alarm us. He refuses to let you leave, for fear that the Apartheid pass laws will mean he will be unable to see you.

While we recognise his anxiety, we also observe how your movement is once again determined by his. You end up working for the madam anyway and Zacharia comes to visit. You are caught and he is arrested. One of the policemen tries to rape you but is dissuaded by his colleague. You return home to wait for Zacharia.



Still from *Reverie* (2023) citing *Come Back Africa* (1959)

In a tableau we see you singing wistfully, waiting for Zacharia. This is the first image we see in *Reverie*, and you

become emblematic of this state of waiting. Joining a litany of women who waited, including ourselves. Your waiting is different to ours and characteristic of the many black women who were made to wait due to Apartheid's strictures, dispossessions and laws.^[33]

In this tableau of you singing, we are drawn to you, not only by melancholy and recognition, but by the spectacular beauty of your face, singing a hymn to yourself, an almost lullaby. In *Come Back Africa*, soon after this moment of your longing, you are killed by a man in dispute with Zacharia.

"What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death?"^[34] These are people we know too.

They'll speak of the "big" things, we imagine different romances and tragedies.^[35] But perhaps also of their desire for repose or the quietness of a walk unencumbered by imminent destruction.

In *Reverie*, you are both historical fact a black woman of your time burdened by your time and unmoored and resonant. You exist in your absences in *Come Back Africa*, and this is where you are unmoored and where we have tried to find you, "working with that [...] in-between-the-naming space", in reverie.^[36] We wished to imagine you as someone who is conjured, not invented, who comes and goes of your own accord, and decides your own meaning. For, sometimes in a dream, "one does not see made up things but rather recognises".^[37]



Still from *Reverie* (2023) citing *Come Back Africa* (1959)

We looked for you in *Come Back Africa*, dear Vinah, and in your absences we re-created you in reverie through reverie. We looked for you in a moment of rest or repose but did not find you. What does it mean to be at rest rather than waiting? When you wait, you add to the event of longing, whilst when in repose you subtract from the event^[38] and produce time for oneself. Black African women's bodies in film are rarely at rest; more often they are in crisis and thus in surplus action towards a production of time that serves to enclose them in the temporality of the crisis. We found you in many moments of stillness, Vinah, a stillness enclosed in the temporality of crisis still but still waiting. We dreamt of you in one way already and we dream of you further now. In one moment in our excavation also featured in *Reverie* you reach the edge of the street, and you look towards the horizon...

Speculation

Letter 2:

Dear Vinah,

We'd like to return to the moment at which we ended our last letter to you, with you at the edge of the street looking out towards the horizon. We see this horizon as an invitation and we'd like to find you there, again and again, looking outward, casting your gaze to something we do not see. We're thinking about when despair acts as a prelude to crossing.^[39] And we begin to ask the question:

What might you dream of, Vinah?

Here, we enter into a form of speculation that exploits the capacities of the subjunctive to express wishes and possibilities for you, through our filmic dreaming, to imagine what you might dream.^[40] Invoking a spirit of "what ifs?" a precursor to the "complex transformation of dream and imagination into political struggle, into an optimism" that dreams with you, of you and of a better world for you.^[41]

What might you dream of, Vinah?

Perhaps, you cross the threshold and move from the street into the horizon, a limit set by multiple injunctions: the laws that govern your movements, waiting for Zacharia, and the film's own commitments to realism. Perhaps you cross the horizon and find yourself in a shebeen at night, in a moment of leisure, listening to Miriam Makeba sing. We see you in repose, in rapture to Miriam. And we hold and delay this moment through slow motion, stay on the shot "a minute too long", as you sway your head, eyes closed, in reverie and in repose. Another "pensive image" that subverts through duration and intensity to free you from a certain way of being looked at.^[42] Like the woman floating in the pool who creates a poem of herself for herself while in repose-reverie.

Or perhaps we wish you would continue walking. Past that row of houses, to find yourself in Félicité's inexplicable forest, where both she and you have escaped the demands of narrative causation and entered "*nepantla*, a Nahuatl word", as Erin Cory citing Gloria Anzaldúa explains, "that means *tierra entre medio*, or in-between space", a space "flexible in its possibilities".^[43] A space of displacement.

But all transformation is accompanied by displacement.

Perhaps you might dream of desire itself, beyond the crisis, metaphorically embodied in crossing the threshold you stand at. Like Nomalanga, from Palesa's film *uNomalanga and the Witch*, whose fragments can be found in *Reverie*, you both stood at a precipice:



Stills from *Come Back Africa* (1959) and *uNomalanga and the Witch* (2015)

Nomalanga's gaze was directed towards the house of the widow, Salome, who was rumoured to have killed her husband and suspected of witchcraft. Nomalanga dreamt of the widow; in her dreams, the border between her, a respectable woman, whose movements happened only in the company of her husband, and the world of the widow dissolved.

Nomalanga crossed the precipice towards Salome.



Still from *Reverie* (2023)

We wish the same for you, dearest Vinah: that in reverie you imagine whatever freedom and pleasure you desire through dreaming of desire itself.

All our Love,

Nobunye and Palesa

Epilogue

NOBUNYE: An unfinished film...

PALESA: To begin again.

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Excerpt from *Reverie*, Nobunye Levin and Palesa Shongwe, 2023.

Footnotes

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