

# Crafting Convivial Cultures

## A Conversation

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### Abstract

This conversation took place as part of the launch event of the “Conviviality and Contamination” project on 28 September 2022, at Malmö University, with guests Teta Diana and Laura Balboa, moderated by Lucy Cathcart Frödén. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

[*Iwanyu* by Teta Diana is playing as the panel take their seats]<sup>[1]</sup>

**Lucy Cathcart Frödén (LCF)**: That was just a little taster for you, but if you’d like to hear Teta perform live, she’ll be playing at Inkunst in Malmö this Friday. So, a warm welcome to Teta and Laura. I will introduce them both more fully in a moment, but for now I want to frame the conversation we’re about to have. Oscar has set the scene with regard to the concepts of conviviality and contamination, and now we will try to illustrate some of the theoretical work in a practice sense, through a conversation on the theme of “crafting convivial cultures”.

British author and activist Luke de Noronha argues that conviviality happens “against the odds” in societies structured by racial division and hierarchy.<sup>[2]</sup> That resonates with Zimitri Erasmus’s words in her book *Race Otherwise: Forging a new humanism for South Africa* (2017). In the book she describes “an ethos of contesting inequality and living together in difference.”<sup>[3]</sup> As we explore this idea of conviviality it is important to recognise that it is not a naïve idea about just being nice to each other, but about the obstacles that stand in the way of connection, and how we overcome those.

In this conversation I’m delighted to welcome two powerful women whose creative practices cultivate conviviality in that sense of the word their work crosses all sorts of borders, geographical, linguistic and cultural.

**Teta Diana (TD)** is a musician and songwriter based between Sweden and Rwanda.<sup>[4]</sup> She has performed all over the world, and her songwriting blends her mother tongue Kinyarwanda with English and Swahili. She fuses musical styles, such as Rwandan folk music with jazz and Afropop, and in 2015 received the Young Rwandan Achiever Award for creating cultural connections with diaspora communities around the globe. Teta also runs a project called RAW Music, which builds supportive connections and networks between female musicians in Rwanda and Sweden.<sup>[5]</sup>

I’m delighted to also introduce **Laura Balboa (LB)**, who is an interaction designer, radio producer, media artist and linguist.<sup>[6]</sup> Alongside doing research and development at open-source tech company Arduino, she conducts independent research into experimental music and sound in Mexico and across Latin America.<sup>[7]</sup> She hosts and

produces a radio show called *Bulla* on Radio Nopal,<sup>[8]</sup> a Mexican community radio station.<sup>[9]</sup> Her research and radio work have a particular focus on gender, giving a platform to the work of female-identifying and non-binary musicians and cultural creators. Laura is also active as a media artist, doing everything from code poetry to sound art and teaching art in prisons.

These short introductions give you a taster of how much the work represented here is situated between different languages and cultures and naturally engages with the concepts of conviviality and contamination. So welcome, we're very glad you're here!

Firstly, tell us a little bit about your creative practice. You obviously both do lots of different things, but is there one thing in particular you are working on at the moment that you are excited about?

**TD:** What is exciting in my work at the moment is the upcoming concert that you have mentioned! It will happen on Friday and has a concept I came up with called "Meet my Culture".<sup>[10]</sup> Because I left Rwanda and came to Sweden it is important to me that what I call "my community" in Malmö gets to discover me through my culture. So that is exciting!

**LCF:** While you are on that subject, do you want to talk a little bit about the collaboration with Malmö Live, where you are curating a series of events?

**TD:** I am a singer-songwriter, but I'm also a curator, and I'm currently curating events for Malmö Live, a major music venue in the city. The events are called *Malmöiter* (Malmö-ites).<sup>[11]</sup> It is a series of concerts that create space for sharing music from different parts of the world, starting with musicians based in Malmö. We have another concert on Saturday, which will showcase Kenyan musicians in collaboration with a Malmö-based DJ. It is a blend of music, genres and colours. It is amazing!

**LCF:** Fantastic! And you, Laura?

**LB:** I have been doing a lot of things, but I'm excited about the next radio shows I'm going to do on Radio Nopal. I am especially excited about some podcasts and this is the first time I mention them in which I am including the work of women in their seventies in Latin America. These women have been doing experimental sound and are completely forgotten and not visible. An example is a Venezuelan artist called Oksana Linde, with whom I had a chance to do an interview in March of this year.<sup>[12]</sup>

But it is a rabbit-hole, because every time I find something I end up becoming friends with these women at some point! They share a lot of information about their lives, about how Latin America was at that time, how it was to be a woman, how it was to be working with technology, and what happened with their visibility. We have a lot of documentaries about Delia Derbyshire and some other people from Europe, but what happened with women in Latin America? There are several who are my mum's age, who are really important in the history of that culture. It is important that they are visible. I'm working on that, and I have another event that will happen in December in Mexico, focusing on women and non-binary people who do live-coding and programming. This is a way of making sound and using technology that is very community-based.

**LCF:** Can you tell us what live-coding is?

**LB:** It is a practice that is mainly based on producing sound by crafting instructions through code, through a

computer program. But the trick is that while you play, you project your screen, so everyone sees what you are doing. When you make a mistake in the code or something goes wrong, everyone sees it. It is a very interesting practice, because it is also a way to open up access to technology and programming to everyone, so people are less afraid.

I remember this experience from an interview I did with Alexandra Cárdenas, a Colombian sound artist.<sup>[13]</sup> She told me about a performance during which a comma was missing from the syntax of her code, and as a result the sound wasn't working resulting in complete silence for nine minutes. She did not know what to do, freaked out, and a man who is very important in the community was in the audience, so she was terrified! At some point someone from the audience called out "there's a comma missing in that line." She put the comma in, and things started to make sound. This person from the community approached her and told her "you know your performance was really good, it was good because silence is also music and it showed people how programming works." So, that was a completely different way of seeing mistakes and errors.

**LCF:** I love that! It is such a great illustration of collaboration. I'm really interested in collaboration and what that does between people, because to open yourself up to collaboration is to become vulnerable, right? The idea of putting the screen up so people can see every mistake, every comma that is missing, is difficult. It is like sharing work in progress, which we are doing in this project sharing these unfinished things tentatively with each other. It is hard to do that, especially if you are used to working in quite a solitary way.

Oscar sketched out a connection between collaboration and contamination. I think that is a really interesting way of viewing collaboration, as a kind of openness to being "contaminated". A kind of letting go of power. In order to experience collaboration we have to open up to something unpredictable.

**TD:** ... and be nice to each other!

**LCF:** Yes, that too, absolutely! Tell me about experiences of collaboration where you sensed that you were not sure what was coming next. Have you experienced that, when you maybe felt a sense of vulnerability?

**TD:** Yes, when I first heard about the word *conviviality*, I had to stop and think about it. It is not a very common vocabulary in today's English or the language we use, and it made me think of a word we have in Kinyarwanda, which is *ubumuntu*. I think it is a common word in most African countries, which simply means "I am because you are", and it is a deep belief in community, the belief that I rely on you as much as you on me.

To answer your question about being in collaboration: yes, I work with musicians from different cultural backgrounds. I have a band of five musicians with four nationalities, so every first meeting you can't predict what will come out of it! He will probably play a sound that is originally from South America, I'm singing traditional Rwandan songs, while someone else is playing classical guitar. And that is just beautiful, because it blends so many cultures and colours into one thing, which is never predictable. I think that is the whole excitement about collaboration, at least in my work as a musician.

**LB:** I am a Spanish speaker, so *convivencia* (conviviality) to me does not have the connotation of being positive. It simply describes the activity, of living-with, rather than making a statement on whether it is good or bad. But in the indigenous language of the people I come from I am from the Binnizá or Ben 'Zaa people we have a word similar to yours. We use *guendaliza'a*, which describes an assembly but also family, or relative relationships. Assemblies can be conflicted sometimes there are discussions. And we have the same word for assembly as

being part of a family, and also being in a community as neighbours. It's the same word for being together, part of a togetherness. So I think that collaboration does not always or automatically entail something positive from the start. It is a dialogue, as you said, that you have with your musicians, Teta. Which is unpredictable, surprising. Sometimes you think "oh what's happening?"... but then it just moves.

**TD:** It makes me think of accommodation, accommodating another's sound, culture, language. It is being able to accommodate each other.

**LCF:** That is a good word for it, because to do that you have to get out of the way a bit and make space. I think that is a big part of collaboration, don't you think? Both of you have already made reference to other languages you speak, which leads me to another question: when you make something, how do you decide what language to create in? How do you make those decisions? Is there a conscious sense that there is something political, that you're making a statement? Or is it more what feels right in the moment? I am interested in the idea of multilingual creativity and how that's also a space for contamination.

**LB:** I don't know, in my case I have a complicated relationship with Spanish, even though it is my mother tongue. Because this whole idea of *mestizaje* washes away my origin in several ways; I have always had this conflict with saying that I'm Mexican, saying that I speak Spanish, or that Spanish is my language.<sup>[14]</sup> For example, the radio show that I host and produce is called *Bulla*, which means to make noise together. I host it in Spanish exclusively, which is a political choice because even though I am proficient in English, I have been refusing to make the show in English for the last two years. At some point we may have to do some parts in English, for dissemination purposes. But I always think about it consciously, about my language use. I really want to be completely proficient in Diidxazá or Zapotec, my original language.

**TD:** In my case, I think at this point I speak seven languages, four of which are African and two are French and English, and maybe I can add a little bit of Swedish soon. But my seventh language is music! Music is a language. I have been at concerts where they were singing in Wolof, and I felt "wow this really speaks to me", even though I don't know a word of Wolof, or a word of Arabic, and it still speaks to my soul. I can be happy, I can cry, and I am sure every one of you has felt that. Music is really powerful, it is a universal language.

When I create, if the choice is a political choice? I don't think it is a choice to begin with. I think in Kinyarwanda, my mother tongue. It is who I am, I am Rwandese. Then sometimes I try to explore and make one verse in Kinyarwanda, one verse in Swahili, one in English... I try to explore that because for me music is really a form of storytelling. I am telling stories about different places I have been to, and where I have collected languages. I explore language and place together. So, I would say it is more of a creative choice, but also a natural choice, being a Rwandese woman.

**LCF:** But even if it is not an explicitly political choice, I think it is doing something in the world. It is exposing people to songs and words, to sounds that many of us have not heard before. Which brings us back to this idea of contamination and mixing.

**TD:** This word contamination is interesting, because when you use it, you think of it as a negative word. I guess when you look at fruit, the bad one supposedly contaminates the good ones, but you can wonder why not the other way around?

**LCF:** Yes, that is definitely what we are exploring in this project, that idea of trying to find positive forms of

contamination!

The quotes that we started with remind us that conviviality is about overcoming barriers and obstacles as much as it is about building community. It prompts us towards thinking about which voices (and languages) are heard in society and which go unheard or are silenced. I wonder if you have encountered any barriers personally in your work, or the work of others that you have collaborated with, and how you've dealt with that?

**LB:** I mentioned Oksana Linde, who I did the interview with. I have found that conversations are a radical act, especially in how I do the show. Early on, I used to do very structured interviews, ethnographic or even journalistic, but in the end the juicy stuff was always in the unstructured conversations! The structure was a barrier. I had to throw away everything and say "let's just have a coffee together and talk." That works amazingly well. I do the show live usually everything that is said becomes part of it, and it becomes a space for trust. The fact that people are telling me about their lives is because they trust me. That relational space has to be built.

I have recorded interviews with Oksana when we could have been live streaming, but we weren't. She told me some very personal things, and she said explicitly to me "I don't want this to be on air." It was very interesting to hear her stories though they brought us closer together. Some people need to be listened to, need to be heard.

**TD:** I think the barriers are many, and many of us meet barriers. As a musician I think of being a woman in an industry that is still very much the domain of men. In my personal experience it is not so much to do with race the primary barrier I encounter is that all over the world, the music industry is dominated by men. As women we have to sneak around, fight every day, carve out new paths. That is a big barrier I have gone through, in Rwanda but also here in Sweden to some extent. Being an established musician in Rwanda, I went through a lot to build the small things that I managed to build.

Another barrier that I have encountered was through the decision to move from Rwanda, to Malmö, to Sweden, a country that has welcomed me now for six years. And it is nice, it is an amazing place, but the challenge is how to integrate my music, my identity without changing it so much. How do I integrate my music and culture into this new home? I found a home away from home, I want this place to be my home, so how can I be accepted fully in my culture, my identity? That is a constant, never-ending work. To think of innovation but to also stay true to myself and be accepted for the person that I am, who I have been for thirty years.

Those are two challenges that I can point out. To overcome them, the good thing about us musicians is that we can put them in writing and sing about them that helps us cope with and raise awareness of these challenges. Another way is to come up with projects like the one I launched, called RAW music. The purpose of this project is to create self-sustaining musical careers for women in Rwanda. Again, I am a woman, I am a musician, I have been through all of that so I can mentor others. I am also creating a bridge between female musicians in Sweden and Rwanda, exploring how they can share knowledge, how we can create a safe space when some things are so hard to share. Some situations women go through in navigating the music industry are so tough, so the aim is to create a safe space where you can share and fully be who you are, and hopefully exchange with others.

It is a small step towards solutions in the future, where a woman can be empowered to hold leading positions, such as producer. In Rwanda we do not have a single female music producer! In Sweden there are a few; I am excited to collaborate with them and see how they can bring their knowledge to women in Rwanda. It is a long process, but hopefully we have started somewhere.

**LCF:** That is amazing Teta creating that space to share, and the infrastructure and emotional support that is needed to face this quite hostile environment.

You talked a bit about Malmö there, about arriving and making a home here, and I wanted to ask you both a bit about the city and how you find it living and creating here? It is a small city but so diverse: 180 languages are spoken in a city of less than half a million, which I love. Do you think that living in this city has contaminated you in any way?

**LB:** I think I contaminated the city! One of the things that drew me to Malmö was that there are a lot of different cultures. But as soon as I moved here, and even now and I have been living here for ten years I see a lot of segregation, which interests me a lot. I am curious about why and how that happens. I see it in a simple way when I tell people where I live and they don't know where it is! I am interested in segregation and how it works in terms of cross-cultural interactions, which sometimes are really difficult. There is a lot of work to be done in terms of meeting other cultures. We are in *convivencia*, you could say, in the same location but not yet in true *convivencia*. That tension is interesting to me, and I like Malmö for that.

**TD:** I like that you say that you are contaminating Malmö! I have never thought about it like that, but it is true, that is how I feel, that I am contaminating Malmö. But Malmö also contaminates me musically. As a city it is full of creative people who inspire me daily. I agree with you about the segregation, I have felt it. This has been a conversation I have had with my friends. But how it contaminates me, if I can think of one example, it is just getting out of the house, crossing Möllevångs square, the market where they sell fruit and vegetables. I see the man with a table, and I say "hello, hello habibi" and he says "hello habibt!" and I understand the difference there, that is the language that I am learning! That is a small way in which I am being contaminated, maybe it is with one or two words, but it lightens my day and it inspires me.

## Footnotes

1. You can hear the recording at <https://tetadiana.bandcamp.com/album/iwanyu> (accessed 2023-02-15).
2. De Noronha, Luke. "The conviviality of the overpoliced, detained and expelled: refusing race and salvaging the human at the borders of Britain". *The Sociological Review*. Vol. 70. No. 1. January 2022. pp. 159-77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211048888>.
3. Erasmus, Zimitri. *Race Otherwise: Forging a new humanism for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 2017. p. 23-24
4. See <https://www.tetadiana.com/welcome> (accessed 2023-02-15).
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGVAbx8POIq> (accessed 2023-02-15).
6. See <https://laurabalboa.com/> (accessed 2023-02-15).
7. See <https://www.arduino.cc/> (accessed 2023-02-15).
8. See <https://laurabalboa.com/Archive> (accessed 2023-02-15).
9. See <https://radionopal.com/> (accessed 2023-02-15).
10. See <https://inkonst.com/en/event/mixmusik-teta-diana-mot-min-kultur-2/> (accessed 2023-02-15).

11. See <https://malmolive.se/biografi/teta-diana> (accessed 2023-02-15).
12. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oksana\\_Linde](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oksana_Linde) (accessed 2023-02-15).
13. See <https://alexandracardenas.com/> (accessed 2023-02-15).
14. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mestizo> (accessed 2023-02-15).