

Freedom

is

*Speaking with Ladin Awad
about photographic gaze and
freedom in community.*

no

Fear



Kimi Hanauer: What is your relationship to immigration or cultural passage?

Ladin Awad: Sometimes they feel like the same thing, and other times they feel like really different things. I'm the daughter of two immigrants. I have grown up around and in immigrant communities all my life. I'm really involved in the ins and outs of the effects of being an immigrant in the United States or anywhere. It's never felt like an observing type of relationship, rather I feel like I've been oscillating between different ways of what cultural passage feels like. Both of these relationships are real, complicated, and very nuanced. When I think about cultural passage, I have an idea of what I've wanted that to be, and then what it's actually been. Any time I go home to Sudan, it's kind of like a cultural passage inherently, but it comes with a lot of complications in relationship to what it means to be a part of my culture. It's something that feels very apparent in my life.

What is the difference between what you expect that experience to be like and what it actually turns out to be when you go home?

It's like a desire for it to feel a certain way when I go back. I don't have an experience I expect it to be all the time, it's just to know that there is some freedom and comfort that comes with that experience of going home. And that is an expectation that is met with very particular contingencies. What I mean is, being able to connect and immerse myself in what once existed in Sudan, and know that doesn't really exist anymore. It always alludes to a type of freedom and a feeling of pride of being there. I've really been trying to change how I view my relationship to going back home. I don't want to contribute to a spectacle. I try not to have any expectations, but I'm still somehow disappointed to some degree. Not as far as experience, but just as far as realizing there are still some values that haven't changed, and that makes my relationship to home a bit more difficult.

How do you approach thinking about the idea of home in your work?

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I've been trying to deviate away from that. I realize that when I talk about these things—maybe it's my perpetual crisis of what kind of work I want to be defined by—but inherently, being where I'm from, where I grew up, all the parts of my identity, it's hard for me to not think about these things in anything I do. It's beyond a responsibility, but it's sometimes as simple as it's just what I think about often, it's what I'm facing in my life often. Being positioned in the way I am in society, sometimes I do have to talk about where I'm from, probably more often than I want to. So when I do talk about it, I'm like, where am I from? I've talked about being this person, being from Sudan and the Bay, and all these things, but what is my relationship to these places and do I even have one? It's not a really calculated thing I think about, but more so an organic thing that just comes up a lot in my life.

Yeah. I think that feeling of home or a relationship to place gets convoluted when you're an immigrant or immigrant-adjacent because you may have multiple deep relationships to places. Because place is a big part of how others identify you, it can seem complicated to others outside of the experience.

When that conversation starts—not that it's always a conversation between people, but more so it's how you navigate the world—so for me it's like, after I share that I can't take it back. Being Black and Muslim, and then on top of that I also don't have one home, it can come off as extraterrestrial. I don't want to position myself as the only person who's going through this, but really what I'm trying to do is to make this experience less of a spectacle. That's what I'm challenging myself to do.

Even with my work, in the earlier stages of my film, [*In the Name of Identity*], I did talk about it as a documentary about identity politics. Obviously that's a big topic, but it's also expected in a way. Growing the work over time and seeing how my relationship to the work has changed, seeing how the work was digested and consumed—for me, that was really concerning. Am I playing into a stereotype? Like, "This Sudanese-American artist is going to make art about her home and her complicated relationship to it."

So, now I am in this place, where I'm like, actually no, it's not just about this state-sanctioned experience. It's not about borders and nations. It's very personal. It's not about being within the confines of the lines in the sand. It's a really personal experience.

How has *In the Name of Identity* evolved over time?

It's a growing, ongoing project, it's not complete; I don't think it ever will be. The latest iteration of it was an experimental film. It started as a research project. It had a really particular framework, and over time, as I kind of burned out of that process, I decided to revisit it at another point. When it was happening, I think I was really just trying to give a glimpse of what it felt like when I went home. When I screened it last summer, it was a very experimental version of what I created initially. It was really filled with my experience of upbringing in the Bay and how my family would preserve our culture growing up, what it was like to go home and see people I look up to in my community. It was a lot of moving parts. It started as this project that aimed to "change a narrative" and now that's not so much how I feel. Like, I can't do that fully—change the narrative. So now, it's more about sharing where I'm at and what this journey has been like for me. I do hope it changes something, but I also recognize I can't bear that whole responsibility. This perspective gives me more freedom to show more and go further, sharing my own narrative.

What you're saying about responsibility feels important—what is your responsibility to yourself and to the viewers of your work? You are making the decision to prioritize yourself and your experience, rather than prioritizing the responsibility an audience might assign to you in a very superficial way. And that's a big shift in power; it feels like a strategy for navigating a context that asks of us to often simplify our experiences and identities.

I think it also challenged me to think about different ways of how I want to express my experiences. Even now, although it's kind of on pause, my goal is to express some truth in the moment. It's not my responsibility to make sure everyone understands. But I

would love if it did have that effect, if it contributed to people not having such a monolithic understanding of my experience. It's definitely in process and in progress.

I think the power shift also affects a viewer, in the sense that your experience is prioritized rather than someone else's.

When I do create film photos, maybe in the moment it doesn't feel as heavy, it just happens really organically and it's just the truth in the moment. I do not go home to take these images to show people that Sudan is safe and nice. It's just, this is what I know this to be, I want to hold this moment and keep this moment, and I feel compelled to share it. I'm not going there to take photos to change people's minds.

Your approach is really counter to what would be a photojournalistic approach, in the sense that your work is really mediated by your perspective and your experience and that is the priority, as it should be.

When I go to these places, I also have to check my own privilege and positioning to it. Of course, this is where I grew up, but I don't share the day-to-day experience as other members of my community. The difference is the gaze, how does it feel for me to go home and take these images as opposed to a white person going in and doing this? I do kind of, unintentionally, contribute to a spectacle of a moment, but I think it's very apparent when someone who is not from a place is capturing images. Gaze is very apparent to me. It's not hard to figure out who is behind the lens. In the images that I create, the experience behind the camera is not the same for me as it would be for an outsider. I'm always perpetually negotiating my relationship to the place. I especially felt that when I just went back.

How do you negotiate being an insider and outsider when you go home? Do others in your community recognize that as well?

It's not really an explicit conversation. I try to not make myself a spectacle, but I don't think I have had explicit conversations, ex-

Photograph by Ladin Awad.







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cept for in the sense of explaining why I brought my camera on the trip. But it's not like, let's sit down and talk about how we are different. I'm not necessarily having the conversation I'm having with you right now with people when I go back home. Not that I don't want to, it's just not a burden I want to place on anyone. It feels necessary when we talk about class or my family's privilege in Sudan, but when it comes to these other parts of the conversation, I don't treat this experience as something I want to bear all the time. It makes it more sacred for me if I'm the one who is having this dialogue with myself.

What does sanctuary mean to you?

I'm always thinking about how sometimes a moment of sanctuary is not always consistent, it is fleeting; I've never really defined it as a physical space. I think there is a complicated relationship I have in regards to spaces that present themselves to be that way, like safe spaces. It puts a pressure on getting that experience when often times you don't.

Sanctuary, it was this trip I just had. There were moments where I really felt free and comfortable. Being a tourist in a way, and being surrounded by femme energy, and not feeling obligated to do anything. It was like a shedding of responsibility and being present; that felt like sanctuary. A lot of times for me, it's about being in community, and other times it's about an understanding that things aren't forever. The moment will come and it will pass. There is something comforting to me about that. Sanctuary redefines itself for me all the time. I have an idea of how to attain the feeling, but it's always different. More times than not, it has to be something that unfolds for me organically.

I really appreciate having the space to talk about these things in less conforming ways. There is this weird, sudden obsession with these terms and experiences that doesn't feel as authentic or genuine. So I really appreciate this effort to change or challenge these visions of sanctuary or home, or our relationship to buzzwords like "immigrant." It's an ever growing and changing

experience. And I'm really happy to contribute to that changing definition.

Us [Press Press] wanting to do this really came from feeling frustrated with how words like "immigrant" or "sanctuary" are often used and oversimplified in popular media. We wanted to talk to others who can challenge these ideas with us through reflection on our own experiences. It's really rad to learn about the thinking behind what you do, how you are thinking about ways of shifting power and the way responsibility plays out in that.

When you are shifting a power dynamic you are taking on another responsibility. I'm part of this initiative called Chroma, and we had our first iteration of a podcast series we have coming up called The Working Woman of Color. Even though that title evokes a certain experience, it is more to allude to the many different versions of the working woman, outside of just the career model. We aren't trying to say we have the answers in any way, we just want to create a real platform. This is our attempt at making a sustainable blueprint or access point to have these kinds of conversations. That's something that feels like a huge responsibility. We also recognize that being a woman of color is a spectrum of experience and there are so many layers and differences. So, we at least want to create a space that can speak to that spectrum. We are trying to shift a power dynamic and take space. I do agree that is difficult but it is possible.

One of the weaknesses of bigger brands or institutions is that they aren't malleable and they often aren't created by the people they claim they are made are for. There seems to be a huge distinction between that and how you are working in a more reflexive, organic, and open way.

There is an intention of trying to be big or have that weight of these bigger initiatives, but we are learning as we go. We are not positioning ourselves as experts; we are coming from an authentic and raw place. There is no expectation to be a certain version of yourself. For example, in our upcoming conference, we're trying to change up the model a bit and have it be more engaging

and just about creating a space [where] we can make sense of certain experiences. We are trying to highlight certain experiences within industries and think about ways of navigating them. It's not just about creating content and recording it and putting it out; we don't want to just have these conversations that don't go anywhere.

What do you do to sustain your health, spirit, and livelihood?

I don't have one way of sustaining, but I know there are things that make my spirit feel good. I really genuinely think there is so much freedom in community. Really close friends, my sisterhoods, and the people I really respect and hold dear help me sustain my spirit. I know the things that feed me are my community and the things that can come out of that. I really do feel fed in that way; it's a privilege and a blessing. I also do enjoy my solitude and knowing I have the option of stepping back and being myself. At the end of the day, I have myself and sometimes that's what I need. I always talk to my friends about this—there is so much power in choice, even in small decisions we make. Just recognizing that feels like I'm contributing to some sustainable version of myself.

What makes you feel free?

I think a lot about this Nina Simone interview. I am someone who is often driven by fear. I feel a lot of imposter syndrome sometimes, even in my identity. I feel really fearful. And when I drop that fear, I feel free and more able and more full. In the interview with Nina Simone, she says is "Freedom is no fear." That's what makes me feel free. When I do have that fear, it's a reminder that I am alive.

I have this other artwork in my room, I remember getting a couple years back, from this woman who creates these flags—[the brand is] called Rayo & Honey. It says "Get Free." It's on my wall, and it's what I wake up to every day. Releasing myself from expectations and from toxic dynamics or responsibilities, these things



Photograph by Ladin Awad.

make me feel free. That's what I'm subconsciously always thinking about: dropping fear.

I also have this piece of art that says, "This Blackness is just for you." I think about that too often, I don't ever want to position myself as exhibiting a version of my Blackness to someone else. It feels really intimate for me to have all these affirmations all around me, and it does kind of point to my way of getting free, being free.