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A letter sent, waiting to be received: queer correspondence, feminism and Black British art  
Catherine Grant

In 1990 the artist and poet Maud Sulter published her edited book *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, through the press she ran with the support of her partner, the artist Lubaina Himid. Two and a half decades later, this book was discovered by the artist Evan Ifekoya, not as part of an art school education, but through Ifekoya's research into the Black Arts Movement in Britain. Marking this discovery, Ifekoya wrote a letter to 'a future younger self', saying 'I'm writing this to you to let you know about a book I wish I'd known about when I was studying at Winchester.' (2016: np) (fig. 1). This letter joins others written by artists and students of colour to express their sense of isolation both within a mostly white art school system, and within an art history that rarely foregrounds the work of British artists of colour, published as part of an artist book in 2016. To find a peer group and a historical continuum are both acts of survival, something underlined by the title of this book: *Surviving Art School: An artist of colour toolkit* (Collective Creativity: 2016). Produced by Nottingham Contemporary and Nottingham Trent University, this publication is available online as a resource for future students. Produced through research and reflections by the QTIPOC (Queer, Trans\* and Intersex People of Colour) artist group Collective Creativity, of whom Ifekoya is a member along with Raisa Kabir, Rudy Lowe and Raju Rage, the publication draws on the rich legacy of queer and feminist artists of colour in Britain focusing on the 1980s and 1990s, looping generations of artists together through conversation, archival materials and personal reflections.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I focus on three examples to explore how artists of colour have used the published letter form as a way of connecting with and creating

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<sup>1</sup> The group describe themselves as aiming 'to create radical, grass roots space for queer artists of colour to interrogate the politics of art, in relation to queer identity, institutional racism, and anti-colonialism.' Raisa Kabir, *Surviving Art School*, np.

feminist and queer communities. I begin with Ifekoya's letter and the collective project from which it arose; then I track back to 1988 to discuss a special issue of *Feminist Arts News* (*FAN*) edited by Himid and Sulter, the precursor to the more well-known collection *Passion*; ending with Himid's recent reflections on her curation in the 1980s through a series of 'Letters to Susan' published in the 2011 catalogue for the exhibition *Thin Black Line(s)* at Tate Britain.

Writing about, and reading these letters from my perspective as a white art historian, the ways in which these published letters speak to different communities of readers is explored; particularly how the recounting of experiences and artistic practices becomes an important way of keeping artists of colour visible, both within feminist histories and the mainstream art world. Whilst this special issue is titled "Danger! Women Reading", here queer, trans and intersex readers are discussed as part of a community of feminists who are engaging with histories of women artists of colour. In the three published letters, artists evoke overlapping communities which include women readers, but also produce a series of identifications which are named variously as feminist, zami, queer, poc, trans and femme. The writers and readers are joined by the experience of marginalisation within mainstream histories of British art, and choice of the letter form is explored as a way of expressing this. I propose that the letter form encourages a reply, whether this is imagined or actual, and creates a space within a publication that is dialogic; sometimes intimate, sometimes confrontational. The three published letters explored here allow feminist, trans and queer artists of colour to present their experiences in a manner that encourages all their readers to take part in the conversation, whilst prioritising calls for other people of colour to respond.

These three published letters employ different formats and conventions: Ifekoya's letter to a 'future younger self' is the product of private reflection in a group workshop, published as part of a public act of consciousness-raising. Himid and Sulter's letter at the beginning of

their special issue of *FAN* takes up the form of the editor's letter, titled 'Issue Editorial', in which they propose that the whole issue is a 'passionate letter' to the reader. Finally, Himid's 'Letters to Susan' takes on the form of an extended series of letters to her then current partner and collaborator Susan Walsh, writing a history of her work as a curator, with the unseen letters *from* Susan providing prompts for her discussions and memories, and also proposing an imagined reader who is both interested and intimate.

The format of the three differ importantly as well: Ifekoya's letter is a scan of a type-written letter, part of a collage that emphasises the individually written, personal nature of the material. Seeing this letter as part of the visual flow of *Surviving Art School* brought to mind Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker's comments about their use of the facsimile form in their 1987 book *Framing Feminism* (xvi), saying that it 'allows us to discern in residual form the living movement of history'. Charting a history of women's art practice in relation to feminism in the UK between 1970-1985, this emphasis on the visual context of these documents provides the reader with an insight into the publications of the period, something which is lost when the texts are reset and homogenised.<sup>2</sup> This strategy is also found in Sulter's publication *Passion* (1990: 229-248), with a section called 'Testimony' reproducing exhibition posters, press releases and articles in their original format. Just under two decades later, the group Collective Creativity utilise the book format to present an array of visual materials, many of which are text-based, but rooted in their making through their presentation. The visualisation of the letter form takes part in a flow of collages and texts that are often collectively generated, presented as a trace of the workshop.

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<sup>2</sup> Lubaina Himid took part in a conversation with Griselda Pollock at the ICA to launch the collection *Framing Feminism*. In the recorded session, there is an intense debate around the way in which race and artists of colour are presented in this book, with Maud Sulter asking questions from the audience. See Himid and Pollock 1988.

In contrast to Ifekoya's scanned letter, the visual presentation of the editor's letter by Himid and Sulter is conventional: a single column of type alongside the contents page of the journal. At the top of the letter, a photograph of them underlines their collaboration on the project, and their identities as black women. This small photograph presents a visual to be held in the reader's mind as the letter is read. This convention is found in magazines, personalising the position of the editor, but in copies of *FAN* this stands out as only one of a few times this was done.<sup>3</sup> As I will explore later, this letter, and the accompanying photograph, begin to invite the reader into a community of women of colour, and also allowing for lesbian voices to be heard within this community.

Finally, Himid's 'Letters to Susan' is an epistolary essay, a text that covers a number of pages in the catalogue for her Tate Britain display *Thin Black Line(s)*, 2011-12. Importantly, it is Himid (probably with Walsh, who produced a show-reel for the Tate Britain display), who put together this publication, and published it through Himid's research centre 'Making Histories Visible', which Walsh had helped to establish. These letters take part in the documenting of a history of British women artists of colour that Himid has continually championed since the 1980s, and these letters allow her to speak to an interested reader in the face of institutional side-lining for many years. The Tate Britain display, whilst important, was a small acknowledgment of her series of exhibitions during the 1980s that went on to define a community of women artists of colour in the UK. Without this publication and accompanying documentation on Himid's website, the traces of these exhibitions, and the commemorative display at Tate Britain, would be much harder to find. Here Himid writes in a format that makes one think of a cache of personal letters, an uncovered personal history that has yet to be recorded in history books.

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<sup>3</sup> The only other example of an editor's letter being accompanied by a photograph that I could find was in a special issue entitled 'The Real Missing Culture', on Women and Disability Arts, edited by Elspeth Morrison (*FAN* Spring 1989). Here her image acts in a similar manner to that of Himid and Sulter – to make visible an often marginalised identity.

## **THERE IS NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL**

Ifekoya's (2016: np) letter continues by saying 'I think if you had known about it then, you wouldn't have felt so lonely. You would in a sense, because you would still have been surrounded by middle class whiteness but at least you would have known that artists with passion, energy and drive, who were coming from a similar place as you existed'. By publishing this letter, the 'future younger self' is both Ifekoya in the past, and future students who might be in a similar position. On the opposite page to this type-writer written letter is a collage, also by Ifekoya. On graph paper and squared paper a list of artists is written in pen with the first line reading: 'Lubaina Himid. Maud Sulter. Ingrid Pollard. Chila Kumari Burman' (fig. 2).

Three wheels are drawn over squares of coloured paper that partially obscure the list. In the centre there is a piece of lined paper on which has been typed 'THERE IS NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL'. This collage, and list of names of British artists of colour, continues work that is also found in the earlier publication edited by Sulter, with echoes across the decades between the two projects. In Himid's essay in *Passion* (1990: 63) she begins by saying how 'Being the first has its triumphs, keeping going is where the hard work begins. If we really believed we were the first black women to call ourselves artists we would have an excuse to give up, we were not, we are the continuum. We are part of an enormous international movement which stretches far back in time'. She also states (1990: 64) that her essay is necessary because: 'in order not to re/re/invent the wheel it is perhaps important to outline the chronology of the work and exhibitions of the black woman artist in the eighties. Not as a list but as a series of events and coincidences, of opportunities lost and taken, of careers made and destroyed'. Like the collage that is paired with Ifekoya's letter, Himid gives a detailed account of why these art histories need to be kept alive so that there is not a

continual need for them to be ‘un-archived’, to use the term in the introduction to *Surviving Art School* (Kabir 2016).<sup>4</sup> Twenty-five years after writing this essay, Himid repeats her concerns, this time to members of Collective Creativity, in an interview that was filmed at Himid’s archive at the University of Central Lancashire, ‘Making Histories Visible’. Himid describes one of the reasons for setting up the archive, a rich resource of British artists of colour from the 1980s onwards, saying: ‘I was very anxious that people of 25, 35 didn’t think they had to reinvent the wheel [CC members agree] because it’s depressing doing the same thing when you didn’t need to do that...’ (Collective Creativity 2015)<sup>5</sup>

### **A Survival Kit**

I came across the publication *Surviving Art School* whilst researching the collaborative work of Himid and Sulter in the 1980s and early 1990s. As part of this research I watched a video depicting the Collective Creativity (2015) members Kabir, Rage and Ifekoya traveling to Preston to visit Himid’s archive. The film joins footage of the shelves of books, vitrines of artworks and exhibition posters, along with the artists’ experience of looking through material from the archives. Ifekoya (2018) described their thinking behind the film as a way of making the archive accessible to others, discussing how archives are often difficult to access without the right institutional accreditation, or ability to make the journey. The filmed visit is edited alongside a number of scenes which focus on research and conversation: from a discussion about the Black Arts Movement at Iniva in London to an interview with Himid, discussed above. The section showing the artists looking through material in the archive is a

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<sup>4</sup> Raju Rage explained that they had initially come up with this term, and it had been discussed and used collectively. Email to author, 8 August 2018. Rage describes how ‘“un-archive” is a term I use for releasing work from the conventional archive and relating to it beyond the archive. Unarchiving becomes a tool for creating conversation and building a relationship with the archive, connecting the past and the present moment, releasing the content from just being buried in the archive but activating and applying it to the current contemporary moment.’ Email to author, 15 January 2019.

<sup>5</sup> This call is also found in the project Black Artists and Modernism, led by Professor Sonia Boyce, which has researched works by artists of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage that are in British public collections.

tactile montage of the ways in which archival encounters can be viscerally affecting (see figs 3 and 4).

After watching the film and reading the publication *Surviving Art School* I returned to Sulter's book *Passion*, which also deals in great detail with an artistic community that was marginalised, and demanded to be seen and heard. In the opening sections Sulter (1990: 10) (like Himid, and Ifekoya) says 'We must break the cycle of reinventing the wheel. Every year young women write to me asking to interview me for their dissertations'. Echoing the letters, lists and collages found in the publication *Surviving Art School* twenty-five years later, there is a palpable sense of creativity and experience being left out of historical record, and the urgent need to remedy this. This sentiment drives the group Collective Creativity, who say how 'Understanding and critiquing the Black arts movement and the hidden or nuanced queer threads within it, has allowed us to flourish in this knowledge of previous history as British artists and QTIPOC activists, to heal and grow' (Kabir 2016). This statement follows a detailed account of the difficulty and loneliness felt by students of colour in art schools, as presented in Ifekoya's letter, and how the group hope to 'share the ways in which we tried to survive art school and white arts institutions.' After asking 'How do we change this cycle, and reach out with intergenerational conversations, that re-situate the British narrative of Black art history and its knowledges?' The publication itself provides some of the strategies employed, including letter-writing, with the letters to younger selves having been written in a workshop with students from Nottingham Trent University in April 2015.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Letter**

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<sup>6</sup> The title of the publication, *Surviving Art School: An artist of colour tool kit*, brought to mind a text by Sara Ahmed, published in 2017 in *Living A Feminist Life*. In her short concluding essay 'A Killjoy Survival Kit', she lists the things she would put in a feminist survival kit, as well as describing feminism itself as a form of survival kit for feminists.



In Gloria Anzaldúa's famous epistolary essay 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers' ([1980] 1981: 165) she writes 'It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold... How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course'. This need to find a form that is adequate to the political need is something found across the use of letters in feminist publications. Her comments on the letter chime with more recent theorisations of the form, in both published and private realms. Liz Stanley (2004: 202-03) puts forward three features that are essential: that letters are dialogical, perspectival and emergent. The first feature, the dialogical, she describes as 'a communication or exchange between one person and another or others'. The second, the perspectival, is more complicated, but speaks to why the published letter has been used in the three examples explored here. She says that it is 'not that they contain fixed material from one viewpoint, nor that their content is directly referential, but that their structure and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time'. This idea of the recipient and the moment in which it is being read is something that I want to explore here through the idea that these published letters have been sent, and wait to be received. In Michael Warner's (2002: 68) influential discussion of how texts circulate and create communities, he presents an evocative account of how texts can be 'picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people', and this possibility constitutes a public.<sup>7</sup> He sets out an idea of counterpublics (focusing on queer world-making but also citing the women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement as examples), as elaborating 'new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to James Boaden and Gabby Moser for reminding me of Warner's important argument. Whilst Warner distinguishes between public and community, in my mind a community is not bound by the current members that are recognised as part of the group, as Warner would have it, and so I have not distinguished between these two terms in the way that he does.

care and pedagogy' (57). I see this ambitious list of possibilities evoked in the published letters explored in this article, letters that are designed to speak to, and continue to create, a counterpublic that brings together feminists, queers and people of colour. Importantly, it demands that the words of queer artists of colour are heard, often in conversation with one another.

These letters are not unique in doing the community-building I am proposing. In Margaretta Jolly's study of letters from the women's liberation movement (2008), she proposes that the letter form was an important feminist vehicle, both in published form and in private correspondence. She sees it as part of a move to incorporate insights from consciousness-raising and small group work, arguing that 'feminists' political self-consciousness turned private forms of writing toward a fantasised women's community. They personalised public forms such as newsletters, academic essays, and political argument through epistolary framing' (8). She gives an extensive overview of letter-writing in relation to feminist politics in the 1970s and 1980s, confirming my sense that letters participate in the production of a feminist and queer of colour counterpublic, or what Jolly terms 'a fantasised women's community' (see also Jolly and Stanley 2005 for an overview of approaches to theorising letters more generally). She cites (2008: 10) some key published letters – both between friends, and as open letters of 'petition and complaint' that explore women of colour's relationship to one another, and to white women. The letter form is found in many key feminist publications, including the famous collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, which features Anzaldúa's epistolary essay. In Anzaldúa's letter ([1980] 1981: 173), she ends by writing: '*Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censors snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on paper*'. This embodied practice of writing, drawing on multiple literary forms including the letter, continues in contemporary women of colour scholarship, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012: 59) explores in an article which includes

her letters to Audre Lorde and June Jordan, creating an intimate posthumous connection with these writers whose work provides sustenance for Gumbs' expansive educational project 'The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind'. Gumbs (59) explains how her project has 'a "by every means necessary" educational approach, accountable to the community' and gives a wide range of vehicles for doing so, including 'potlucks, partnerships with community organisations, social media networks, podcasts, buttons, t-shirts, videos, public access TV and sidewalk chalk'.

### **A Passionate Letter**

Like the community of women talking and writing across the pages of Anzaldúa's letter, in Warner's definition of publics and counterpublics, an important aspect is that they only exist in the moment of attention to them, rather than being embodied in an institution. Whether a letter written privately to one person, or in a publication, Warner argues that a text creates a public only when it is being read. He also argues not having access to a public, imagined as a space of discourse, leads to feelings of powerlessness and depression. These feelings are recognised in the *Surviving Art School* letters and texts, with the publication being one part of a counterpublic for artists of colour to build upon. Their process of 'un-archiving' echoes Warner's description of counterpublics as 'spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.' (Warner, 122). This description evoked for me all three of the published letters discussed here, as well as the creation of feminist communities from the women's liberation movement onwards:

communities that grew from small groups that met in person to international networks fuelled by publications written by and for feminists. These publications were profoundly influenced by the format of the small group, and present ways in which reading can become a dialogue, or even a form of consciousness-raising, both with a community of feminists in the present,

and with women's history (Tobin 2016). I will now turn to Himid and Sulter's co-edited issue of *FAN*, which comes directly out of this earlier feminist moment, continuing the practices of collective editing and publishing that defined many feminist publications of the 1970s.

Himid and Sulter's editor's letter introduces their special issue entitled 'Passion – Blackwomen's Creativity of the African Diaspora'. Their 'Issue Editorial' gives the date as Autumn 1988, and they begin, 'Sistahs,' (3).<sup>8</sup> They state that they want issue as a whole to 'go out into the world as a passionate letter.' This passionate letter is seen as 'Fragments reformed as notes from the underground.' They address their reader directly, saying 'As Blackwomen who are artists and curators we face like you pressures of economic survival, space to life and work, and the continuing onslaught which marginalises and trivialises our experiences.'<sup>9</sup> This address to other women artists of colour is then continued by specifying their experience as queer women of colour, saying 'As Zami's we try to help create a world where all women will have the right to choose and fulfil their creative potential in a beautiful and constructive, life affirming way.' Audre Lorde's book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, brought the term Zami into circulation after its publication in 1982. In the first chapter, she describes the island of Carriacou where her mother came from, and the matriarchal society from which the term Zami arose: '*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.*' (Lorde, 1982, 14) Like the term 'woman-identified woman' or the concept of the lesbian continuum, Zami is a term that seeks to specify a lesbian feminist intimacy and community, whilst highlighting the experience of women of colour, and the different histories that they have inherited (Radicalesbians 1970; Rich 1980).<sup>10</sup> Himid and Sulter's use of the term would not necessarily

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<sup>8</sup> All the quotes from their Issue Editorial are on page 3 of the issue.

<sup>9</sup> Blackwomen is the term that Sulter uses during this period to represent women of colour. This political use of the term Black to refer to all people of colour was common in the UK in the 1980s, although it was contested. See footnote 10.

<sup>10</sup> In the UK context the first Black lesbian conference, held in London in October 1985, was named Zami I, as well as various other events and organisations (Mason-John and Khambatta, 14; 58-9). Here the term 'Black' is

be registered by everyone reading their letter, but would invoke a counterpublic who would. In Sulter's (1990: 103) poem *Full Cycle* from her series *Zabat* (1989) and reproduced in *Passion*, she exhorts: 'love as only a woman can / take up the pen, the brush, / explosive, gun / and name / yes name / yourself / black / woman / zami / proud / name yourself / never forget / our herstory'. This call echoes that found in this editor's letter, as well as across her work as a poet, writer, artist, curator and publisher, both with Himid and on her own. Here, identifying as Zami is a way of acknowledging a community, history and politics, as well as a queer of colour sexuality.

Himid and Sulter's editorial, through only a few brief paragraphs, puts forward a manifesto for women artists of colour, including queer women, saying 'We must record our own herstories, span continents, go beyond fixed beliefs imposed by the dominant hegemony'. They insist on the importance of their diasporic heritage as needing attention, with the focus on 'a network of brave Blackwomen who want to communicate within a context of equality.' Their letter ends: 'Diasporan blues may appear on the horizon but our course is self-determined. As Family. No Maps.' The editorial letter echoes throughout the issue, particularly within their own contributions, with Himid contributing an essay entitled 'Fragments' that explores the artistic practice of 'gathering and reusing' as part of Black creativity, exploring examples across African, American and European history (1988: 8). Sulter's essay 'Call and Response', engages with communities of women of colour, both within the UK and Europe. In relation to queer sexuality she says there is 'a sort of smokescreen around the issue of sexuality. I know that several of the finest most radical artists back in London were lesbians but I also knew that much went unspoken' (1988: 15). Weaving together personal experiences with a political need for women of colour's voices to

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used to refer to people of African-Caribbean and Asian descent. See 'Black: whose term is it anyway' for a discussion of the contentions around this political use of the term (Mason-John and Khambatta, 32-37).

be heard, she states (15): ‘Across Europe in cities such as Derby, Berlin, Amsterdam, Leicester, Leeds, Blackwomen’s groups are organising. And all see cultural production as a vital element in the struggle’.

This desire to speak to a community of women of colour, and to make their creative practices visible and connected to feminist and mainstream art worlds, propels Himid and Sulter’s conceptualisation of this issue being ‘a passionate letter’. The issue contains images of women’s artistic practice, interviews, reviews, and information about various initiatives and exhibitions that foreground women artists of colour. In the context of *FAN*, Himid and Sulter were working with a collective that was primarily white women, something acknowledged in the next issue, when the collective’s editorial discusses meeting readers of Himid and Sulter’s guest-edited issue at the ICA in London (*FAN* 1989). To understand the position Himid and Sulter occupied in relation the magazine, it is important to sketch its history. *FAN* was a UK based feminist art magazine that ran from 1980-1993. Many of the issues were edited by guest editors: sometimes from within the collective that ran the magazine, sometimes by invited artists. The collective itself was very fluid, with most issues around the time of Himid and Sulter’s issue giving details of resignations and new participants, mapping a dialogic, and at times volatile history. As with publications that came out of the earlier period of the women’s liberation movement, such as the London-based *Shrew*, the appearance in print of differences of opinion between collective members and guest editors was not hidden, but staged as an important part of feminist community building. Like Warner’s notion of a counterpublic, the pages of *FAN* act as a place in which dialogue around what feminist art is, and who it represents, takes place with a range of voices, styles of writing and approaches to art criticism. Sulter was a member of the *FAN* collective for a number of years, and co-edited and contributed to many other issues, as did Himid. One of particular interest here is an issue that was co-edited by Himid, Sulter, Deborah Cherry and Jane Beckett. Cherry and Beckett

were members of the *FAN* collective during a similar period to Sulter, and the friendship between the four women is evidenced by many decades of scholarship, including an issue of *FAN* edited by them on ‘Women, Modernism, Modernity’ (Beckett et al 1990). From these traces of friendship, a world of feminist and queer art writing and making is marked. These traces continue to the present, as Beckett and Cherry, as white art historians, both continue to research and champion British artists of colour, including Himid and Sulter, with many of their texts providing key research for this article. For example, Cherry co-edited the posthumous celebration of Sulter’s work, also entitled *Passion*, in 2015, which led me to read Sulter’s original book *Passion*, and to wonder at these queer networks which included artists of colour that I knew of, but had not mapped in relation to queer art in Britain, and very rarely get mentioned as part of a queer community.

Sulter and Himid’s relationships with white women, and the publications they were part of, was not always unconflicted. In the book *Passion*, which followed on from the guest edited issue of *FAN*, Sulter bitterly recounts (1990: 9) failed attempts at getting the book published with a number of feminist presses, and in Himid’s (1990: 69) article in the publication, she tells how after the issue of *FAN* sold out ‘a reprint was promised, further funding was assured on the strength of it, but it is now out of print. The publications in which we are colourful footnotes run and run’. In a posthumous reflection on Sulter, her presence and legacy, Himid comments (2014 12): ‘she was always interested in preserving the archive and making sure things didn’t disappear’. This sentiment of preservation is one that I find through the issue of *FAN* that is seen as a ‘passionate letter’: a letter that is being sent both to the community of feminists and artists of colour that they know of, and speak to in the present, as well as being a time capsule to represent this community to future readers. While their ‘passionate letter’, has now widely been forgotten; the subsequent *Passion*, published by Sulter’s own Urban Fox Press, is what Ifekoya discovered decades later. Whilst a magazine issue may differ from

a book in terms of a sense of permanency, *FAN* produced an archive of diverse feminist art practices across its issues. What joins all these publications is this passion to leave a trace, to be visible, to grow stronger in the knowledge of each other, and the histories that underpin each one.

### **Passionate Research**

In an interview, Himid is asked by Jane Beckett (2010: 197) if she would see her work as doing what Frantz Fanon described as ‘passionate research’. Fanon uses the phrase when discussing the work of scholars researching their national cultures that have been denigrated and oppressed by the forces of colonialism. He speculates ([1961] 1963: 169) that ‘Perhaps this passionate research and this anger are kept up or at least directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.’ In the context of Himid’s history as an artist whose practice has long dealt with the consequences of colonialism, racism and slavery, particularly within the UK, this description of ‘passionate research’ seems apt. To this assertion by Beckett, who has been a longstanding interlocutor with both Himid and Sulter (as explored above), Himid (2010: 197) gives a conditional response, saying ‘Yes, if making visible colonial experiences is making visible everyday life in the twenty-first century for those of us drifting about the globe with a colonial rucksack on our backs.’ She continues by saying ‘I do not usually try to create an imagined life in the past with the work but rather attempt to make a space for a conversation.’ This response summarises the way in which the letters discussed here are presented as starting points for a conversation, something that Ifekoya also made explicit when interviewed about the *Surviving Art School* project (2018).



In Himid's essay 'Letters to Susan', this space for a conversation was published as part of an exhibition catalogue. In these letters, Himid writes responses to Susan, who is presumably Susan Walsh, Himid's partner and collaborator on the archive 'Making Histories Visible', as well as on the exhibition display *Thin Black Line(s)*. Himid (2011a: 8) begins her series of letters by saying 'Dear Susan, Thank you for asking such interesting questions. The business of answering all of them is going to be a test of my resolve, my memory and my pride' (fig. 6). With characteristic wit and attention to detail, Himid recounts the foundational exhibitions she curated during the 1980s which championed the work of British women of colour: 5 *Black Women* (1983); *Black Woman Time Now* (1983/4); and *The Thin Black Line* (1985). She describes (14) how 'I still remember and re imagine those three exhibitions in terms of artists and what they were trying to achieve, rather than a gathering or juxtaposition of aesthetically interesting objects displayed for pleasure or analysis.' This continues on from her description of the artists she curated: 'We were not a movement or a group or a sisterhood or even close friends but instead a fluid set of women who were not prepared to be herded into a single way of expressing ourselves.' (12). This 'fluid set of women' are brought into these letters through quotations and many anecdotes about friendships, as well as institutional support, disinterest and conflicts. As the letters progress, Himid responds to prompts from Susan about the reasons for curating the shows, issues of funding, installation, impact, future careers.

At the end Himid (2011a: 24) remarks: 'I cannot believe that we really have managed to bring together seven of the artists from the 1980s shows in such a beautiful room at Tate Britain. I am convinced that my letters to you have galvanised the goddess of exhibitions into action.' She discusses the process of curating the show with Paul Goodwin, the constraints of the institution, as well as the joy of seeing the work on the walls again, describing them as 'a series of magical and fantastical moments, of glimpsed looks and overheard whispers as the

women in the artworks meet again.’ (24) This delight is contrasted with her reflection on the ways in which ‘artists’ histories can still easily disappear amidst all this and often only a few re-emerge as awareness surges then fades, seemingly for no reason. Many are still making very good work indeed. / It causes pain.’(25)

This awareness of the ease with which these artists can fade from history underpins her publication, which was not produced by Tate Britain, but by Himid’s university centre. These letters reprise many of the key points made in Himid’s essay ‘Mapping: A Decade of Black Women Artists 1980-1990’ from *Passion*. Her letters, written over two decades later, speak to her collaborator, a white woman artist, who might also be seen to stand in for an artworld and feminist community that needs to keep these histories present. She concludes these letters by thanking Susan for her work in making the exhibition happen, saying: ‘The occasion of this piece of history, nestling as it does amongst the British displays, is not the end of something and it isn’t the beginning either, but maybe you could mark it as the middle of the middle of a strategy for the future – at last. / Thanks for all the work you did to make it happen’ (25). Reading these ‘Letters to Susan’, I feel the generosity, humour and weariness of Himid’s need to speak to this history over and over again, as well as feeling directly implicated in this history not being more known. As a white art historian whose education in late 1980s and early 1990s British art was dominated by the discourse around the so-called YBAs, the shift to centralise these vibrant histories and networks is something that is very necessary. During the 2010s, this seems to be finally taking place, with a critical mass of exhibitions, research projects, awards, and television shows on artists of colour in the UK, importantly focusing on communities rather than individual stars (see for example, Boyce et al 2015; Harding 2018; Mills 2016). This essay is a small contribution to returning to these histories, focusing on the often overlooked overlap between queer, feminist and artist of colour communities across the UK. I have been prompted to do so by groups such as

Collective Creativity, who are urging art institutions, educators, curators and writers to think about the histories they are foregrounding.<sup>11</sup> To think about strategies to do this, I have drawn on the generosity and desire for conversation found in all of these published letters, as well as the anger, sadness and determination that they map in the face of ongoing racism. It is no coincidence that the word ‘passion’ joins these projects, the passion to keep going, writing, making, organizing, researching, a passion that is then communicated to the reader. This passion is driven, in part, by the desire to survive, both in the present and in history.

Himid’s ‘Letters to Susan’, written in 2011, joins up with the present of Ifekoya’s letter, written to a ‘future younger self’ in 2015. In writing letters to feminist and queer communities that prioritises the experiences and artistic practices of women and queers of colour, that need for each other to survive is marked and continued. These letters might be seen to be part of a feminist survival kit, a ‘Killjoy Survival Kit’, as articulated by Ahmed (2017). To conclude, I will turn to Himid’s words about the determination to survive, from her essay ‘Mapping’ (1990: 72). She says ‘The thing not to do is give up. We have to keep making the work, somehow. Easy to say. The catch is that if you have no work to show you have no work to show. So, however small it is, however cheap it is, however cranky it is, keep making the work.’

The three published letters discussed here are all examples of artists of colour creating platforms for their own practices, communities and histories, maximising the impact of the small amounts of support given by arts and feminist organisations. Using the letter form as a way to, as Anzaldúa put it, ‘approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want’, they are directed towards slightly different audiences. Ifekoya’s addresses a ‘future younger self’, Himid and Sulter’s addresses ‘Blackwomen’ and ‘Sistahs’, whereas Himid’s address ‘Susan’,

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<sup>11</sup> At Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, the Women of Colour Index Reading Group has been an important focus for exploring women of colour in the Women’s Art Library, including Himid and Sulter. There are many other initiatives, including “Eat at the Same Table” and Thick/er Black Lines, who draw on some of the same histories discussed here.

whose name is left without further identification. Within each of these addressees, there are the traces of queer communities, artistic practices and relationships, ready to be understood by the reader who pays attention. As a white reader, these letters insist that I consider my privilege, and give space to these histories of artists of colour. They are written in a generous spirit, so I can take part in their project of returning to history these stories, whilst making sure these voices are heard. Himid's 'Letters to Susan' is most explicitly, although not unambiguously, addressed to a white reader. The other two letters speak to other artists of colour, but are presented in a public arena in the knowledge that white feminists, queers and art historians need to hear what they have to say. The passion that is threaded through these letters (as well as the projects and communities that centre on artists of colour that surround them) is fuelled by the desire not to be forgotten within histories of British art and feminism. These letters have been sent, and they are waiting for all of us to receive them.

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