

Collective Dialogic Care with Sonali Menezes

By Geneviève Wallen

I met Sonali in 2015 as a Graduate Representative at OCAD University's Student Union while she was the External Affairs Commissioner for the Central Student Association (CSA) and worked on environmental justice campaigns at Guelph University. Connected through a mutual interest in collective care as well as an investment in actionable and supportive initiatives, we have collaborated in different capacities over the past seven years. I must admit that, as a curator, I find it soul-nourishing to work with someone over an extended period; each instance of collaboration is a poetic return where familiarity and novelty intertwine. Multidisciplinary in her approach, Sonali generates a holistic practice wherein each piece is in dialogue with another; a seed of an idea is examined through various mediums, responding to the impulse to see it through and developing a wholesome microcosm. As the author, Ashton T. Crawley notices about his writing practice: (...) repetition [is] a means for discovering something that is below and beneath and behind what appear to be flat surfaces.¹ Showcasing mainly screen prints, zines, video performances and sculptural installations, Sonali seamlessly transitions from one materiality to another, expanding the edges of a chosen subject.

Whereas she embraces transdisciplinarity as a mode of creation, her self-published zines anchor her artistic engagement. The format of zine-making allows for the rooting of a dialogue which can form a rhizome extending into a complete body of work. This creative process is notably present in works investigating body hair as a vessel to closely examine colonial hauntings leaching onto our personhood and manifesting in our relationships with others. Starting with the 10-pager *You're So Exotic* in 2014, she carefully unpacks how racialization, gender performance, and sexuality overlap. In an ever-unfolding tale of self-reclamation, readers and gallery goers alike are invited to witness and take her investigations inward. As demonstrated in the video performance

¹ Ashton T. Crawley, *Lonely Letters* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Weeds for Harvest (2015), where she waxes her legs in overgrown asparagus field and a small wooden to finding bliss and fierce tenderness in the screenprint and lithograph series *to run my fingers through you baby pt1 to 4* (2022), the artist transitions from contemplating desirable and manicured representations of femininity to letting her hair gradually thicken as a public act of self and collective love. Nuanced, her journey to corporeal agency and every step in-between, tender-heartedly ushers us to carefully peel the layers of our subjectivity.

In tracing the genealogy of Sonali's practice, one can observe that her CSA days continue to inform her artistic interests as seen in her latest limited print series *People Before Profits* (2022), titled after a well-known adage found in communist and socialist writings, manifestos, and art. Furthermore, in Sonali's care practice, zines occupy the role of social lubricant. In a continuous effort to rally communities on pressing political issues and leading disarming conversations around mental health, she contributes to a cosmology of works asking: what is art if not an active conduit of knowledge transfer? Since DIY publications straddle the domestic and public spheres, they allow her to equally explore the question: how can I serve my community while contributing to their well-being? It is in the spirit of facilitating access to knowledge and communal creative outlets, that she co-initiated with mariel rutherford the Hamilton Zine Club in 2019. This volunteer-based initiative provides a monthly free drop-in space to read and exchange around zine and zine-making. Calls for action are part of her creative language as an artist and activist, and more recently as a curator. The exhibition *Proofed: Print Media and Working People* explores pamphlets and posters as an archive of varying forms that not only divulges information about the terms of work, workers' news, and theory relating to workers' place in the world but also as retainers of aesthetical values.²

Because of their dissemination process, zines are an outstanding placeholder for undertakings tackling local and global lobbying while putting art directly into working people's hands³. The recent zine *Canada Stop Arming Saudi Arabia* is a continuation of

² Sonali Menezes, "Proofed: Print Media and Working People," Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, June 10, 2022, <https://wahc-museum.ca/event/proofed-print-media-and-working-people/>.

³ Sonali Menezes in conversation with author, February 2023.

projects grappling with workers' rights, collective care, and immediate interdependency. For example, in 2016, Sonali made an offering of lavender simple syrup from a lavender patch growing on the University of Guelph campus and gifted it to the Trades, Maintenance and Service workers on the main Campus at the University of Guelph.⁴

In the case of this collaborative work with Labour Against the Arms Trade (LAAT) and the Hamilton Coalition Against War, Sonali's position as an artist is about creating a conceptually sensitive literary environment where art and politics intertwine. March 26th, 2023 marked the grim Canada-Wide Peace and Justice Movement (CWPJN) a Canada-wide day of action and awareness to denounce the Saudi Coalition war on Yemen (#CanadaStopArmingSaudi and #YemenCantWait)⁵. Eight years of political strife causing staggering numbers of premature deaths, population displacements, and deprivation of safety and basic needs. Eight years of individuals going through the current largest humanitarian crisis. Sonali's zine for Mayworks Festival comprises of an essay by the Hamilton Coalition Against War which does the work of providing accessible information to contextualize the war in Yemen and Canada's responsibilities in fueling and prolonging it. This text is necessary in generating an informed dialogue on the mobilization that has been done so far and comprehending the scope of this global conflict which causes immense suffering for political and economic gain on the backs of civilians. Following this introductory essay, an interview with Simon Black from Labour Against the Arms Trade highlights the history of Canadian unions against war efforts. Moreover, Black draws connections between the factory workers in London, ON and the arms conflict in Yemen thus eliminating the illusion of remoteness. He also explore options to divest Saudi Arabia such as arms conversion as a means to fairly transition and use existing arms facilities for environmentally driven projects. Punctuated with colorful digital artworks mainly, featuring vibrant hues of purple, green, blue, and yellow, the information campaign and lobbying done by Labour Against the Arms Trade and the Hamilton Coalition Against War is instrumental in keeping the collective awareness

⁴ Sonali Menezes, *Alexander Hall Lavender Simple Syrup*, artist statement, 2016, <https://sonali-menezes.com/work/video-crfmj>

⁵ Information on this year's statement, online actions and more are available here, <https://peaceandjusticenetwork.ca/canadastoparmingsaudi2023/>

alive, so that the casualty of economic and embedded anti-Black racism don't get buried.

Sonali's work is rooted in softening collective coalescence while breaking down the mysticism of artmaking, rendering obsolete the ethos of the artist's genius, and rebuking neo-liberal individualism. Her gift for storytelling and artistic direction are underlined in the printed pages of a zine where streams of consciousness unfold as a beacon of light for communal emotional excavations as seen in the zines *A Feminist's Guide to Self-Care and Self Doubt* (2014), *One Hundred Things which have given me Panic Attacks* (2015), *So You're Anxious as Fuck* (1st edition, 2016, 2nd edition, 2018), and the award-winning *Depression Cooking* (2022). The precious quality of zines resides in their tactility, proximity to the maker and the subject explored; they consist of a threshold to new possibilities. In response to the increasing concern about the barriers that prevent community members from accessing her publication, Sonali is moving toward the copy-left distribution format. This way of dissemination allows for the zine beholder to make their copy of the purchased publication for free dissemination. Therefore, in this case with the zine *Canada Stop Arming Saudi Arabia*, not only Labour Against the Arms Trade can distribute it, but as a reader, you are encouraged to do the same. Grab a copy, print it, and foster a broader awareness of the devastating effects of Canada's arms dealing.