

***Afrofuturistic dreams –
Soft steps towards revolution***
Sonya Lindfors and Maryan Abdulkarim

Maryan Abdulkarim, writer, and Sonya Lindfors, choreographer and artistic director, are friends, colleagues and co-conspirators brought together by fate. Since their meeting, they have been dreaming and working towards an intersectional feminist future. One of the many collaborations between Abdulkarim and Lindfors is an ongoing discursive platform called *We Should All Be Dreaming* to which this following conversation also belongs.

“Freedom? You’re asking me about freedom? You’re asking me about freedom? I’ll be honest with you. I know a whole more about what freedom isn’t, than about what it is, because I’ve never been free. I can only share my vision with you of the future, about what freedom is

The way I see it, freedom is – is the right to grow, is the right to Blossom. Freedom is – is the right to be yourself, to be who you are, to be who you wanna be, to do what you wanna do –”

Common, *A Song for Assata*

Afrofuturistic dreams – Soft steps towards revolution is a commissioned text, a conversation between Sonya Lindfors and Maryan Abdulkarim. Lindfors and Abdulkarim share *We Should All Be Dreaming* during the fall 2019 season of Black Box teater, presented in collaboration with CODA Oslo International Dance Festival and Oslo arkitekturtriennale.

Sonya Lindfors is a Helsinki based award winning choreographer and artistic director of UrbanApa arts platform. In her work, she seeks to shake and challenge existing power structures and empower the community.

Maryan Abdulkarim is based in Helsinki. She is a writer, social justice activist and artist. Lindfors and Abdulkarim are members of the Miracle Workers Collective, who exhibited in the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019.

SL — Why should we be dreaming? Or what is it you are dreaming of?

MA — Looking at the world today, what else can we do but dream? I dream of freedom, like actual freedom. What about you?

SL — I guess I have been practising dreaming before I was even able to name it as such. I was pulled towards dancing exactly because of a longing to feel free. A sensation of liberation from the structural obstacles and sorrows of the everyday. When I was dancing I felt free, but still connected. I could be anything, I could be many, and the world made sense. A horrible cliché of course, but at least when I was younger this feeling was very real.

MA — Right! I think the juxtaposition of different kinds of freedom, for example, the need for freedom from structural oppression and then the need for artistic freedom is interesting. Within the context of Finnish art, when there is often a demand for artistic freedom, it is used as a way of silencing critique from marginalized voices.

A few years ago there was a big controversy around a video installation called *GRIND* by Jenni Hiltunen¹

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¹ *GRIND* by Jenni Hiltunen, 2012. See the video here: <http://jennihiltunen.com/pieces/k88/grind/>

in Kiasma – Museum of Contemporary Art that appropriated the traditional Sapmi wear, Gåkti. The institution basically shut down a critique of cultural appropriation by simply claiming that this was “a false interpretation” and at the same time “artistic freedom”. Paradoxical right? In our Nordic welfare state it seems that “artistic freedom” is an attempt to maintain a hierarchical status quo instead of defying it.

SL — Words are sometimes confusing. We might be using the same word but we might mean totally different things. Freedom is, of course, always relative, so are we talking about freedom to do something or freedom from eg being excluded?

Whose freedom are we interested in?
Whose freedom matters in the end?

MA — For me, the freedom of one individual ends where the next individual’s freedom starts, so it’s not freedom to but rather freedom from. Free from definition from the outside, free from the demand to conform. Free from being complicit in normalizing the erasure of your own lived reality.

SL — In coming to Afrofuturism, I think the urge for freedom is a key element. For those who

are less familiar with the subject, Afrofuturism is a term coined by Mark Dery in his article *Black To The Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose* in 1994². Dery wrote:

“Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called “Afrfuturism”. The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy:

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”

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2 Dery, Marc, ed. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

Dery was defining a particular strain of science fiction, but in a wider sense, Afrofuturism can be described as a philosophy or cultural aesthetic that addresses themes and concerns of the African diaspora through technoculture and speculative fiction, encompassing a range of artists and intellectuals with a shared interest in envisioning black futures that stem from Afrodiasporic experiences. Readers might be familiar with, for example, Sun Ra, who stated that “Space is the place!”, Parliament, Funkadelic, Janelle Monae, Octavia Butler or Jean-Michel Basquiat who are all considered Afrofuturists? And if these names don’t ring a bell, then at least the movie *Black Panther* popularized the concept.

How is Afrofuturism relevant to us right now?

SL — Afrofuturism seems especially visible and relevant right now as we are faced with multiple global disasters. Climate change, the rise of extremist right wing politics, the mass extinction of fauna... Even thinking about all these things makes me feel hopeless and powerless. Dreaming of better futures helps me keep going.

MA — For me, Afrofuturism is collective dreaming.

Yes, it has the prefix ‘Afro’, but this does not mean exclusion but actually a radical inclusion. Inclusivity demands equality and the Afrofuture dreams of exactly this. During the civil rights movement, activist Fannie Lou Hamer³ stated: “Nobody is free, until everybody is free!” Historically, the African continent, and more specifically Black people from the continent have been dehumanized and systemically categorized as ‘less than’ individuals with body, mind and soul of their own.

SL — So imagining a future where people from the African diaspora can exist and one where that existence can be other than one of struggle, not defined by a subordinate position nor of whiteness, imagining a future where all those groups that have been dehumanized are no longer oppressed, then we would finally have equality.

MA — As is already probably visible, Afrofuturism is not one but many. There are different perspectives and visions and futures. It is complex and plural. Afrofuturism escapes stagnant definitions; it has a playful and collective yet fugitive nature. It is polycentral and polyphonic.

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3 A speech called *Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free* by Fannie Lou Hamer, delivered at the Founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus, in Washington, D.C., on 10 July 1971

SL — Afrofuturism has given us a framework for our dreaming that connects us with the long lineage of dreamers that came before us. We want to acknowledge them. We are not alone. Afrofuturism has also gained visibility in the fields of theater, performance, dance and choreography. Maybe this is proof that the arts are slowly becoming more diverse. For example, choreographer and scholar Thomas DeFrantz’s work and writings have been life changing in how they articulate Black experience.

“Black performance arises within and through contradictory flows of information that are ultimately unrecognizable; recognizable only through the posthuman condition produced centuries ago by the brutalities of the slave trade and its aftermaths. Slavery, Colonialism, and Apartheid; named by Mbembe as the three devastations that have shaped Black life and formed Black Reason, become the circumstance or situation from which Black performance proceeds. Conceived at its start to be outside the human, Black life epitomizes the posthuman, and its stretching beyond known and knowable characterizations of civil societies.

To imagine possibility in this circumstance of outsidersness and abjection, we turn to the afrofuture. A speculative

space that combines science fiction and fantasy, afrofuturism operates as an anecdote to the afropessimisms that define Black histories as disavowal, with a call to imaginative rendering of an afrofuturity with possibility and diversity.”⁴

Can we heal by dreaming?

SL — Afrofuturism imagines a new starting point.

Not only does it imagine futures, it imagines different pasts in order to have different presents. In fact, it denounces the whole linear understanding of time.

MA — Author and social justice commentator

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about this new starting point in her TedTalk, *The Danger of a single story*⁵. She asks what would happen if we

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4 Defrantz, Thomas. *afrofuturism*, New York 2015

5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TedTalk, *The danger of a single story* published on Youtube 7 October 2009. See the full video here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg&t=142s

6 Gieben, Bram & Hall, Stuart, ed. *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 1992

began the story of Africa not from the moment when Europeans first arrived, but from a starting point of cultural success and richness, where the ancient kingdoms of the continent were thriving and maybe when Europe was still in the dark ages. That would provide a totally different story of the African continent – a story of life, energy, great civilizations, histories, heroes and success and not one of sickness, war and misery.

SL — What if Africa wasn’t defined as the opposite of Europe, as everything Europe is not? Sociologist Stuart Hall explains in his text, *The West and The Rest*⁶, how this narrative of Africa as stagnated and uncivilized was created through its violent encounters with Europeans and was finally cemented in the era of enlightenment. At that time, Africa, as well as people of African descent, was categorized as inferior and non-human in order to justify the colonial project.

What if colonialism did not happen?
What if Africa was the center?

MA — Dehumanizing, being displaced, slavery, rape, murder. There is so much trauma carried within being black. How is it possible to heal from trauma? Afrofuture has provided a space for healing.

It is a powerful counterforce to this dehumanisation in giving us stories with black heroes, or sometimes just regular people living regular lives. It looks beyond the chains and colonialism, unearthing a history longer and richer than that which is taught in the West. Afrofuturism has given us back our memory. Black expression was never born out of distress, slavery and pain, Black expression survived despite – and thrived. That’s how deep the roots are.

SL — Maybe the freedom we are longing for is a freedom to exist without trauma. To heal. But how to move forward? This is where we come back to our practice of dreaming.

MA — I remember us having a discussion about reactionary practices some years ago. That we were both tired of just reacting to oppressive structures. Artists and activists around us were exhausted. We were afraid that we would never move past the fight; we felt we needed a new strategy, a restorative and subversive practice.

SL — This is also how we came up with the actual framework for dreaming, the ongoing project called *We Should All Be Dreaming*. We needed to facilitate actual spaces to come together to practice dreaming of collective utopian dreams.

The sessions have taken many forms, some have been open to everyone, some have been closed. We have had sound meditations, online sessions,

workshops, parties, dinners, and performances. I think one of the most shocking discoveries has been that many of us who are Black activists didn’t know who we were without this struggle. Our daily lives have been so informed by a racist society that we had not had the space of imagining an existence outside of it. Who would I be in a world that was not defined by a racist imperialist capitalist patriarchy?

If there would be no concept of race,
who would i be? Who would you be?

SL — And if the answer is “I don’t know”, how could I practice dreaming about that? It is a kind of double jump; dreaming of dreaming of things that I don’t yet know how to dream of, and trying to stay open to the unknown. This is very complex because we are kind of trying to shake the very ground under our feet.

MA — At first this might sound a bit controversial, a little bit like, “I don’t see colour, we are all equal”, which is, of course, dangerous. So we want to make this very clear: we acknowledge that the world is a violent and hierarchical place in which people suffer every day. Identity politics is a crucial driving force for social change, we need it. We root for it. That is our foundation. Structural oppression

is real, racism is real, sexism is real, homophobia is real, transphobia is real.

Audre Lorde said: “We cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools,”⁷ but even when we are inside the master’s house, dreams allow us to imagine different houses.

The dreaming practice doesn’t aim to devalue or diminish people’s struggles, but to acknowledge them AND make a space for dreaming of another kind of existence. This is especially important for marginalized groups, who don’t get any break from oppression. How do we move on from this place of constant struggle into a collective future where we can co-exist without the need for coherence? Well, if we can’t dream it, we sure can’t build towards it.

SL — And Sun Ra said: “The possible has been tried and failed, now it’s the time to try the impossible.”⁸ Dreaming inside the structures, inside the struggle, is vital, but we need to also practice dreaming outside the struggle.

Basically, the dreaming practice is an impossible attempt to learn how to think beyond. It is a strategic

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7 Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110- 114. 2007.

8 Szwed, John F. *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press. 1998.

deviation that uses the power of art as a platform for miracle making. These speculative fictions and mind games that we play become a part of our lived realities and they open up potentialities. I don’t know what true freedom feels like, but I can dream about it and that changes me. And then, maybe, the changed me can change something else in the world.

MA — Dreaming creates a break from the constant fight, but it is also hard work. We are trying to unlearn to make space for something else. Also dreaming doesn’t discharge us from the actual need to dismantle structural opponents. “Oh, we have been dreaming so we don’t need real measures to create structural change!” NO! We need both actual change AND we need a space for dreaming. Institutions and people in positions of power need to keep working towards inclusivity and equality.

Try to imagine a space where there is no center and no margins!

SL — Afrofuturism and the practice of dreaming has influenced and actually changed the way I approach my artistic work. The Finnish art field is extremely homogenic, exclusive and white, to the extent that a few years ago I felt I was somewhat losing my faith. But now I feel that the stage is a

platform for utopian dreaming where I can imagine things that don't yet exist. *Cosmic Latte*, made in 2018, tried to imagine the year 3019, where oppression would no longer exist, where a black body on the stage would no longer signify difference. This was a very abstract work, and sometimes the dreams are more concrete. In a previous work, *Noble Savage*, made in 2016, one of the dreams asked the question, *What if there would be people in the audience who would look like me?* For a white colleague this might feel absurd, but I have been working as an artist for almost 20 years and most of the times the spaces I work in are all white. So, starting to make work from a dream where art institutions would be inclusive and diverse was revolutionary; working from these dreams changed me.

MA — I feel that! I often feel many art spaces do not expect me to be there. This is how norms work. The whole European art field is based on a very narrow white Eurocentric point of view that excludes even Europe's own vast cultural diversity. Art spaces are made to measure for a very exclusive and homogenic group of people. This is a vicious circle. Since there are no diverse representations in the art field, people with diverse backgrounds don't feel welcome and thus the institutions can justify their exclusivity with a "*hey anybody can come, but they are just not that interested.*" Art becomes shrunk into what is recognizable as art by a very narrow definition. So, maybe we could redefine art by dreaming?

What if all you have read are texts by African, Asian, South American and Indigenous writers? What kind of worldview would you have? What kind of art would you make? What would you recognize as good or interesting art?

SL — Let me rephrase this. For me, dreaming is a practice of both recentralizing and decentralizing. Trying to first recentralize Blackness and thus include it. To come out of the margins and claim space. This is dreaming inside the structures. And then trying to practice decentralizing, of understanding that the center is a social construct. Race is a social construct. Whiteness, Europeanness and Westernity are not centers nor opposite to Blackness. Meanings mix like liquids. There is no center.

MA — The practice of dreaming, as well as Afrofuturism, actually proposes a radical collectivity. They do not work with the logic of exclusion, they aim for polycentralism. Dreaming together, collectively, allows us to dream of a reality, a future where there is not one, but many, a tomorrow that would be inclusive, equal and free of hierarchies.